



*Velvet*

A Russian  
Mafia  
Romance

# DEVIL

— VOROBEV BRATVA BOOK 1 —

NICOLE FOX

# VELVET DEVIL

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A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

NICOLE FOX

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# VELVET DEVIL

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BOOK 1 OF THE VOROBEV BRATVA DUET

It's the first look on my wedding day.

I turn... but my husband isn't there.

Instead, I see the stranger who ruined my life.

Here's the story:

Six years ago, I was on the worst first date in history.

A blind date with some jerk who wouldn't take no for an answer.

The handsome stranger swooped in.

Saved me.

And sat down to finish the date.

I thought it was crazy.

But we had insane chemistry.

We got to talking, one thing led to another, we ended up in the restaurant bathroom, and...

You know.

I got pregnant.

He disappeared.

Life: ruined.

I tried to move on.

For six years, I thought I succeeded.

But now, out of nowhere, he's back—on my wedding day, of all days.

Saying things that don't make any sense.

*"Your fiancé isn't who you thought he was..."*

*I'm not letting you marry him..."*

And, worst of all...

*"You're marrying me instead."*

**VELVET DEVIL** is Book One of the Vorobev Bratva duet. Isaak and Cami's story concludes in Book 2, **VELVET ANGEL**.

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## CAMILA

I'm ninety nine percent sure this is the worst date in history.

"You said you studied literature?" Reggie asks in the voice of a man who wasn't aware that women can in fact read. "Isn't that pretty useless? Did you just dream of being a McDonald's cashier, or what?"

Make that one hundred percent sure.

Since we sat down, Reggie's eyes have spent roughly equal time divided between my cleavage and the ass of the girl refreshing our water glasses. I heave a bitter sigh. I shouldn't have listened to Brianna when she told me to go with the little black dress.

I shouldn't have listened to her about the choice of venue, either. This restaurant is fancy, which means the service is slow, which means I'm stuck here for way longer than I'd like with Prince Not-So-Charming. Strike two for my dear sister.

"There are plenty of good jobs out there," I say to Reggie. "Teaching, for one—"

"Yeah, but who in their right mind wants to be a teacher?"

I bristle instantly. "Well, I do."

He laughs out loud. At least he has the decency to realize—a few seconds late, but better late than never—that I'm actually being serious. And also that laughing in the face of someone's hopes and dreams is a pretty dickish thing to do.

I glance at my fingernails and sigh again. Thirty-five bucks plus tip wasted on a manicure for a guy who pronounces “Françoise” the same way you say “Boise, Idaho.” My life is a cosmic joke.

“You look really sexy tonight,” Reggie says, changing the subject abruptly. He grins with wine-stained teeth. “No, seriously. That dress is, y’know... God fuckin’ damn!”

The older woman with the pearl necklace at the next table over snaps a disapproving glance in our direction. I duck her eye contact—and as I do, I catch sight of someone reclining in the corner booth over her shoulder.

Instantly, it’s like being hit by a lightning bolt. A head-to-toe jolt of crackling heat.

Even though the man is sitting down, he’s obviously tall. And that face—all angular and cruel, with sharp cheekbones like a fashion model, plus a Superman jaw. His suit moves fluidly with his languid motions. It’s not hard to tell that the fabric is ludicrously expensive. He has the gleaming watch to match.

I can’t look away. That is, until he glances over at me and catches me gawking.

*Shit-shit-shit!* Turning away a little too fast, I feel like a complete moron. I can only hope that the blush on my cheeks isn’t too obvious.

“You okay?” Reggie asks.

“I’m fine!” I screech, way louder than I mean to. Luckily, I’m saved when the waiter comes over with our meals.

He sets the plates down in front of us. I stare down at my squid ink ravioli with no appetite and the strange inkling that someone is watching me.

“Smells great, eh?” Reggie asks, digging into his steak immediately. He saws off a big piece and devours it before I’ve even picked up my fork, then continues chattering with a mouth full of food.

I take the moment to glance across the restaurant. Partly so I don’t have to watch Reggie’s molars at work, and partly so I

can sneak another surreptitious glance at the man in the booth.

But it doesn't turn out to be so surreptitious after all. A fissure of electricity rushes up my spine when I realize he's still looking over here at me.

His gaze is direct. Unapologetic. Unmerciful.

I turn away with a shudder and try to concentrate on my pasta. Reggie is yammering on about the hardware store he co-owns with his two older brothers. I nod and smile, hoping he doesn't catch onto the fact that I'm not paying the slightest bit of attention.

*You're acting like a lovestruck teenage girl*, I scold myself. *Get it together*. The ghost of Susan B. Anthony is probably going to haunt me for the rest of my life for giving up on all my feminist leanings the moment a handsome guy deemed to glance in my general direction.

But what he's doing to me isn't ideological—it's biological. It's bypassing every part of my brain that knows how to think. Talking straight to the heat low in my belly.

It's strangely thrilling. Oddly unsettling.

And very, very annoying.

"Cami?"

I turn to Reggie. I don't like the fact that he's used the pet name my sister and her family call me by. It feels way too intimate and familiar coming from him. But I'm too focused on finishing this dinner as quickly as possible to bother offering a correction.

"Sorry. What was that again?"

He sets his fork down with an irritated clank. "Is something distracting you?" he asks. "It's pretty rude to ignore your date, you know."

"No, sorry, nothing," I reply quickly. "Just... tired."

"Oh?"

"I had a couple of job interviews I was preparing for." Which is not exactly a lie. "And I was up late last night." Also not

exactly a lie. Although “late” in this instance just means “late for me,” which means 9:05 instead of 9:00 on the dot.

“Job interviews, huh?” he asks. “Cool. Anyway, like I was saying, I...”

I retreat beneath the surface of a perpetual smile-and-nod. “Putting my screensaver on,” as Brianna calls it. It’s easier that way, and Reggie doesn’t need much input from me to keep prattling on.

“You know, I’ve always thought you were hot as hell,” he says, burping to punctuate his attempt at a compliment. “Real fuckin’ smokeshow. Girl like you needs a guy like me. Self-made businessman, you know? A go-getter. And I’m pretty good in the sack, too.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. It’s at least the dozenth time tonight he’s mentioned how “self-made” he is. Although I’m pretty sure he inherited the hardware store from his dad.

Before I can figure out how to wriggle my way out of this particular conversational impasse, Reggie looks up and snaps his fingers for the waiter. When no one notices him in the zero-point-two seconds he’s willing to wait, he raises his hand to his lip and whistles.

“Hey!” I hiss, mortified at his behavior. “You can’t whistle.”

He looks positively dumbfounded that I seem to have a problem with it. “Why?”

“It’s rude!”

“Rude?” Reggie repeats, as though I’m speaking a foreign language. “Nah, babe, it’s friendly. You just aren’t used to guys taking you to nice places like this.”

I slink down in my seat, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. Maybe if I scrunch my eyes closed really hard, I’ll turn invisible. Worth a shot, at least.

“You can clear our plates, hon,” Reggie orders the waiter when she comes to our tableside. “And get us the dessert menus.”

“Actually, that’s not necessary,” I say quickly, giving the waiter an apologetic smile. *Please don’t hate me*, I’m saying to



her with my eyes. *I want this to be over just as badly as you do.* “Just the bill, please.”

“What?” Reggie asks. “C’mon, party’s just getting started!”

“I’m tired,” I explain with rapidly waning patience. “And I’m too stuffed to have dessert.”

He glances at his watch. “It’s only eleven,” he says. “Fine, forget the dessert menus then. Bring us another round of drinks.”

The waiter nods and makes her escape from the dreaded Reggie Zone before I can protest. I cringe at the prospect of spending another half an hour in this man’s company.

“Hey, I’m gonna go hit the can, okay?” He burps again. “Don’t think that steak sat right with me.”

I give him a wooden nod. The moment he clears the table, I sigh with relief and whip out my phone to dial Brianna’s number.

She answers immediately. “Hey, sis, how’s the date going?”

“I am going to kill you!”

“Woah there, hold your horses. What happened?”

“He’s dull and boring and boorish and I’m going to end it all with the butter knife if I have to spend another minute stuck here with him.”

Brianna giggles out loud. “You’re not using words like ‘boorish’ on him, are you?”

“We have nothing in common, Bree.”

“Opposites attract.”

“The physics of magnetism aside, I beg to disagree.”

Brianna groans. “You’re not even giving him a chance. When was the last time you were attracted to any man?”

The question feels unfair, especially given the very real and very visceral reaction I’d just had to the man in the booth. Not that I’m about to admit to Brianna that I was just eye-fucking

some smug Wall Street douche in a pricey suit. She'd never let me hear the end of it.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you treat men like an invasive species."

"With good reason! Having a man in your life isn't everything, you know."

"Life is not *Little Women*, Cami," says Brianna with a long-suffering sigh. "You don't have to get all Jo March idealist on me. I'm not saying Reggie is your fairytale prince, but at least he's... I dunno, call it 'practice.'"

"I don't want practice. Right now, all I want is a cab out of here."

"Back to his place?" she teases.

I shudder. "Not a snowball's chance in hell. Ah, shoot, he's coming back. Gotta go. Love you, bye!"

I hear her saying something like, "Just smooch him and see if you like—" before I smash the "End Call" button and tuck my phone back under the table.

"Talking about me?" Reggie asks with a waggle of the eyebrows that I'm pretty sure is meant to be seductive.

As he sits back down, I try and look at him objectively without the prism of disinterest tainting my perception.

Maybe Bree is right and I'm being too harsh. He's not a bad-looking guy. Sure, his three-day beard is more "gamer who forgot to shower" than it is "GQ cover model."

And sure, he talks about himself a lot and starts way too many sentences with "In my industry..."

But he's nice enough, I guess.

So why does a night spent with Reggie pale in comparison to a single glance from the man in the expensive suit?

One of them makes my skin crawl.

The other sets my skin on fire.

“In part,” I reply eventually. “Just wanted to let Brianna know I’d be home soon.”

His eyebrows rise. “Not too soon.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“The night’s not over. I have something else planned for us. My friend’s playing a gig at a bar down the street, so I told him we’d stop in.”

I swallow my annoyance. “You didn’t tell *me*, though.”

“I’m telling you now. It’ll be fun.”

I hate being cornered into things. “Reggie, tonight’s not good.”

“Do you have other plans?” he asks bluntly.

“Well, no.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

“Look, Reggie,” I say, starting to panic a little, “you’re a nice guy, and I really appreciate the invite to hang. But like I said, I’ve gotta get home, so I think I’m gonna just head—”

I’m standing as I say this, but before I can even get all the way upright, Reggie’s hand shoots out and snares my wrist, hard.

“Reggie, you’re hurting me.”

His face is purpling with anger. “Don’t be a bitch. I invited you out, and I’m a cool guy, so you really need to just stop being so difficult and come where I tell you to—”

This time, it’s Reggie’s voice that dies suddenly.

Because another hand has joined the fray.

A very big, very strong, very unfamiliar hand.

It latches onto Reggie’s wrist and peels his fingers off of me one by one with terrifying strength.

A voice accompanies it, deep and chilling.

“She told you no.”

I turn to see who spoke, freezing instantly. The handsome man from across the restaurant is no longer at his booth.

No, he's standing right in front of my table, looking at me as though he knows me.

"Uh..." I sink into my seat.

His face is a dark, impassive mask. But those eyes are full of—well, *something*. Black ice? Raging fire? Midnight shadow? I'm being melodramatic, but he has the kind of stare that makes me feel a little untethered from reality.

My mouth is fumbling to form words, as if the English language is a brand-new thing for me. There's a weird buzzing in my ears, too. Like the alarm system of my body is going off on DEFCON 1.

I was right about one thing: the man is tall. And he's even hotter up close. His vivid blue eyes set a stark contrast to his dark, effortlessly tousled hair. That jawline could cut glass.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Reggie interrupts.

The handsome stranger doesn't take his eyes off mine for a single second. "Cami and I are childhood friends," he explains. "We go a long way back."

Reggie frowns suspiciously. "Seriously? You don't look like you're from the Midwest."

He whirls to face Reggie. "Are you calling me a liar?"

He's not even talking to me and yet I recoil in fear. Reggie, by contrast, looks like he just shit his pants. His eyes bulge out of their sockets and he leans back as far as he can go, given that his hand is still in the man's grasp. Anything to get farther away from the fire-breathing titan who's crash-landed on our date.

"N-no," Reggie stammers, "I'm just saying, that, like, uh—"

"Good," the man cuts in brusquely. "I don't like being called a liar."

"Right. Uh, yeah. Of course not. No, that's not what I was saying. I was only asking Camila if—"

"I heard what you asked her. And I heard what she told you. What part of 'no' was difficult to understand?"

This time, Reggie can't even muster up a stutter.

The man steps aside and points towards the exit. "Get the fuck out of here." His voice is a whip. Every time he speaks, that heat goes racing through me again, popping off like firecrackers in my thighs.

Reggie looks shaky. "I, uh, guess I better be going then...?" he mumbles, not even daring to meet my eyes.

I nod. "Thanks so much for tonight. It was good to get out of the house."

He turns to leave, then pivots back like he wants to say something. Then turns to leave again. He looks like he's walking the plank off a pirate ship as he shuffles towards the exit.

The bell over the door chimes. Like one chapter is closing and another one is now beginning.

I'm aware of the stranger still standing next to me. Suddenly, he bends in my direction.

For one wild second, I swear he's going to kiss me. His cologne rushes over me. Cool and spicy. I have to clench my thighs together immediately. If Brianna only knew what I was feeling right now, she'd be ecstatic that her little sister isn't some unfeeling robot.

Then, instead, he keeps on bending, reaching past me to pick up my fallen napkin from the floor.

"You dropped this," he murmurs in my ear.

He straightens up. When he sees the fire-hydrant-red blush in my cheeks, I catch the tiniest glimmer of a smirk in the corner of his mouth. It's gone as soon as it appeared.

The man in the suit slides gracefully into Reggie's vacated seat. My stomach does a backflip as his gaze rakes over me.

It's so strange—when Reggie glanced at my cleavage, I felt creeped out. But when this man does the exact same thing, I clench up from head to toe like I just stuck a fork in a wall socket.

“He’s gone,” I sigh. “Thank you for that.”

“My pleasure.”

I shuffle my feet under the table, feeling extremely self-conscious. Everything about him screams “sex appeal.” Even the way his lips form the word “pleasure” feels like foreplay.

“Were you eavesdropping on me?” I ask. The silence is too much to bear.

He nods solemnly. “Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because you caught my attention, *kiska*.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

He nods, his expression growing thoughtful. “That makes two of us.”

After about five seconds of another very pregnant silence, I clear my throat. “Well, thank you again for rescuing me. But I should, you know, head back now...”

Of course, that exact moment is when the waiter arrives with the drinks Reggie had ordered for us. “Sorry for the delay, ma’am,” she says, setting the drinks down on the table.

“Head back? It would be a shame to waste a good drink,” the man in the suit remarks.

Brianna’s words flash through my head again. *You’re not even giving him a chance. When was the last time you were attracted to any man?*

One thing is very obvious: this man does it for me. And she’s right—I’ve spent years hiding from everyone with a Y chromosome.

This guy is here. He’s hot. And he’s looking at me like he wants to swallow me whole.

“Okay,” I concede guiltily. “One drink. But first, tell me your name.”

He grins and leans forward. “My name is Isaak,” he says. “Isaak Vorobev.”

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## ISAAK

“Your turn,” I say.

“Huh?” She wrinkles her nose in confusion. It’s an adorable quirk, and so utterly unfamiliar to me that I almost laugh out loud.

The women I usually fuck don’t wrinkle their noses. They purr, they smile, they stroke your arm seductively. They know their power and how to use it.

This girl? She doesn’t have a fucking clue.

But maybe that’s why I’m here with her, instead of in bed with any of the other dozens of playthings at my disposal.

“Tell me your name,” I explain. “I heard ‘Cami.’ I want to know all of it.”

“Oh.” She blushes. Again, fucking adorable. “Right. Cami. Short for Camila. Camila Ferrara.”

“You prefer Camila?”

The dress she’s wearing is simple but it hugs her figure deliciously. Her cleavage is subtle, almost teasing. I’d already imagined ripping down the neckline numerous times during my business meeting. The one I bailed on to come over here and rescue her from her idiot date.

“My family and friends call me Cami,” she mumbles.

“Cami it is. After all, we did grow up next to each other.”



She smiles. That's when I notice the dimple on her right cheek. *Such an innocent little kiska*, I think to myself. *Kiska*—Russian for kitten. A tiny, helpless little creature begging to be devoured. The name suits her.

I lean back in my seat and adjust my pants—mostly because my throbbing erection is starting to get distracting.

“You really didn't have to do that,” she says. “Save me, I mean.”

“As I said, it was my pleasure.”

She cocks her head to the side. A spray of glossy blonde hair falls across one shoulder. “Do you make a habit of saving every stranger who looks like they're having a miserable time?”

“Only the beautiful ones.”

She blushes and looks down nervously in her lap.

“You must've known what you were getting into the second he asked you out,” I chuckle. “Based on the way he slinked to the exit, I'm surprised he had the balls to ask in the first place.”

“He didn't ask,” she says. “Not exactly.”

I arch my eyebrow. “Explain.”

“Well, what I mean is, he's been interested for a while and he kept asking my brother-in-law if I'd go out with him—”

“He sent a messenger boy to ask you on a date?”

I can't hide my disgust.

“He didn't want to make things awkward in case I said no.”

“That's a coward's way out.”

“I thought it was thoughtful.”

“Then you need to raise your standards.”

She recoils. “You realize we only met five minutes ago, right?”

I shrug, unfazed. “Good advice is good advice.”

“What a gentleman you are,” she sneers.

I chuckle and take a sip of the wine her date ordered. All things considered, it's not the worst selection in the world. "I've been accused of many things, *kiska*. But never that."

Her laughter is nervous. "I get the feeling you're not kidding."

"You deserve a man. Not a fucking fool who can't even pick up the bill."

She bristles at that. "I can pay my own way perfectly fine. Not every damsel is in distress, you know."

"No," I murmur with a smirk. "Some are in denial."

Her lips move silently for a moment like she can't think of a retort. But the blush on her cheeks is persistent.

As is my throbbing cock.

"If I've insulted you, I can always have Reggie brought back here," I suggest after a moment has passed. "You can finish your drink with him instead. Maybe even get dessert. I hear the *crème brûlée* is to die for."

"You wouldn't dare."

"You're wrong about that, *kiska*," I laugh. "I'd dare to do things you've never even dreamed of."

"You're not kidding about that either, are you?"

"No. Not in the slightest." I lean forward instinctively. Her lips are pursed and full. I want them wrapped around my cock. "Does that frighten you, Cami?"

"Oh, gee, am I that easy to read?" she retorts sarcastically.

"I'll tell you at the end of the night."

"Do you always speak in riddles?" Cami snaps. "Or are you just really leaning in to the whole 'handsome, mysterious stranger' deal?"

I chuckle and swirl the wine in the glass. "Did you just say I'm handsome?"

She rolls her eyes. "Don't do that. Don't pretend like you don't know you're handsome."

"Fair enough. No woman has ever complained."

“She’d have to be blind.”

The energy between us has grown prickly and dangerous now. I wonder if she can feel it the way I can. Based on the way she clears her throat and stiffens her posture, I’m guessing the answer is yes.

I lean back in my seat and study her. “What do you like to do, Cami?”

“You mean besides go tit-for-tat with arrogant men in expensive suits?”

I shrug. “Everyone has a hobby.”

“Let me assure you that this is not mine,” she says solemnly. “This is very much a first time thing for me, you know.”

“You’ve never been on a date before?”

“I’ve never abandoned one bad date for another, wise guy,” she says, though she can’t help but giggle. The sound is enough to drive a man crazy with lust. I have to adjust my cock again where it’s straining at the zipper of my pants.

“And here I was, thinking we were getting along well,” I drawl.

“Sorry to burst your bubble.”

“You can make it up to me,” I say coolly.

She wrinkles her nose again. It’s bizarre how much that tiny little motion affects me. Like hooking up jumper cables to my balls. It makes me want to see what other faces she makes.

“How do you suggest I do that? No, better question: *why* would I do that?”

“You can do it like this—” I wave a hand over my shoulder and the bartender whose eyes have followed me all evening long comes scurrying over immediately with another pair of drinks. “And you should because I’m not the kind of man who likes being told no.”

Cami’s eyes widen when she sees the bartender set the drinks down on our table. “Oh, no, no, no,” she stammers. “I said one drink. Now you’re gonna start getting ideas.”

“You were telling me about your hobbies,” I say. “Continue.”

She eyes the drink then me, back and forth, back and forth. Eventually, she sighs and her shoulders slump forward. “One more,” she says. “But that’s really it. I’m deadly serious.”

I clink my glass to the edge of hers. “To the last drink we’ll ever have, then.”

The bartender has brought me whiskey neat this time. Twelve-year Glenlivet, one of the best bottles they keep in stock. I take a sip and relish the crisp edge and smooth burn as it slides down my throat.

Cami takes a tiny sip of her white wine and sets it back down on the table with trembling fingertips. “I read,” she blurts suddenly.

“Books?”

“No, postcards,” she snaps. “Yes, of course books.”

“What kind of books?”

“Good books. Classics. Austen, Dickens, Du Maurier, Shakespeare. That kind of thing.”

“Shakespeare, huh?” I muse. I stroke my clean-shaven jaw. “You strike me as a *King Lear* kind of girl. I always preferred *Hamlet*.”

Her eyes leap up on her forehead. “You’ve read *Hamlet*?”

“Should I be offended by your surprise?”

She blushes guiltily. “Sorry. I just... You don’t seem like a big reader.”

“So yes, I should be offended.”

Laughter bubbles through her lips. I can’t take my eyes off her fucking smile. So goddamn innocent.

I eye her unapologetically. The flush has extended past her cheeks and down to her chest. The tops of her breasts are rosy now. Begging for attention.

Her green eyes are bright, shimmering with excitement, with the adrenaline of stepping outside of the neat lines of her life.

She's bookish and quiet, a wallflower, a stay-out-of-the-way kind of girl. My polar fucking opposite.

And I notice that she's leaning towards me. Same as how I can't help leaning in towards her.

Our bodies seeking one another out.

The fact that I haven't yet touched her, apart from that fleeting kiss on the cheek, seems ridiculous. Damn near offensive. I'm itching to tear that dress off her and lick all the way down to her thighs.

"What else have you read?" she prods. "Or do you just throw out the *Hamlet* line to impress women?"

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm being tested?"

She picks up her wine glass and shrugs her shoulders in a gesture that's very femme fatale. I like her fire, her feistiness. "Am I making you nervous?" she teases.

"I'm never nervous. Merely intrigued."

"By the question?"

"By you."

She almost wilts under the intensity of my stare. Maybe this is all too much for a girl like her. She's not used to a man like me. A man who isn't afraid to take what he wants.

But then, at the last moment, she sucks in a frantic breath and straightens up. Shoulders back, eyes forward, spine tall, she looks me in the eyes and meets fire with fire.

I've never been harder.

"To answer your question, I've read a fair amount. Dostoevsky. Tolstoy. Bulgakov. Pushkin. Gogol. To name a few."

"All Russian authors," she says. "Am I right in assuming you are, too?"

I nod.

"Vorobev," she murmurs, her eyebrows knotting together thoughtfully. "Why do I feel like I've heard that name

before?”

I give nothing away. The Bratva isn't exactly a commonly discussed topic in this city. Mostly because the cops don't like admitting they have no control over me or my men.

But we're not a secret, either.

“I couldn't say.”

She smiles. “Is this you being mysterious again?”

“Maybe you should ask another question.”

She purses her lips. “Fine. What do you do?”

“A lot,” I reply vaguely. “I own many different businesses.”

“Please don't say you're a ‘self-made man,’” she says. “Reggie said it about thirty times tonight, and the phrase alone makes me want to throw up in my mouth.”

I grin. “In some ways, yes; in others, no,” I say. “But I've worked hard to build and expand them. So you shouldn't think I'm a—”

“A trust fund kid?”

I smirk. “I haven't been a kid for a long time.”

Her smile slowly fades away. “I believe that.”

As we lapse into silence, the eye contact between us takes on a different rhythm. The static in the air is more charged than ever.

I've seen green eyes before. But not like hers. The color is soft, mellow. The kind of green that you spy in the folds of the ocean, rippling between the deep blues and murky greys.

She jerks her gaze away from mine, breaking the eye contact. “The restaurant has cleared out,” she points out.

I look around, realizing she's right. We're the only two still sitting at a table, though the staff is still milling around, cleaning up.

The streets have emptied out, too. Except for my armored G-Wagon, which is parked across the street, right in front of the SUV that holds my personal security detail.

As I'm looking out the window, something catches my eye. A man standing almost out of sight. He's average in height, balding at the top of his head, and wearing clothes that look like he's pilfered them off a homeless shelter.

But the direction of his gaze catches my eye.

Because it's not me he's looking at.

It's Cami.

And it's not the casual leer of a creep checking out a beautiful woman in a little black dress. It's more than that. There's intent behind his gaze.

I don't fucking like it.

But I wave the thought away, and as I do, the man straightens up and vanishes into the night. I'm being paranoid for no reason. My meeting still has me on edge.

"Isaak?"

The sound of my name tripping off her tongue feels strangely fucking erotic. My cock has been hard for a full hour now, and it's starting to become painful.

"Are you okay?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You just look like you're concentrating really hard right now."

I smile. "It's nothing to worry yourself about. Just business."

"You still haven't told me what these businesses of yours do," she points out.

"Because it's not important."

She shrugs. "I suppose we don't have time for that anyway," she says. "It's late. They'll want to close up."

"They'll stay open as long as I need them to."

She considers that for a moment. "Is that your way of telling me you're important?"

"Infer what you will."

She eyes me carefully, taking in my Dolce suit and the Hublot on my wrist. “You are important,” she guesses. “And dangerous.”

I lean in. “Not to you,” I tell her. “Not now.”

She lets out a little breath and leans away from me with a barely repressed shiver. “I... I should get back home.” She jerks out of her seat to her feet.

“If you must,” I say, rising to meet her. “But do you really want to?”

“It’s late,” she says. “What I want right now is to go home.”

I nod and snap my fingers. The maître d’ comes rushing forward with Cami’s coat held out. I take it from him and offer it to her. She hesitates for a long moment, but eventually she turns and lets me slide it onto her arms.

I’m treated to a view of her backless dress. The graceful curve of her spine. All that beautiful skin, tanned and smooth. My fingers tingle with the need to touch every inch of her.

When the coat is settled on her shoulders, I leave my hands there to pin her in place. I can feel her stiffen.

Leaning down, I brush my lips against her earlobe and whisper, “Well, *kiska*, what I want right now is to take you into the bathroom and fuck you on the counter until you come screaming in my ear.”

She rips away from me and whirls around as soon as the words have left my mouth. Her eyes are wide and her cheeks are flushed. She’s trying to look offended.

But I can see it on her face: she wants the same fucking thing.



## CAMILA

He's not joking.

Eyes like his don't joke.

Steel-edged, hauntingly blue, they gaze calmly at me, completely unrepentant after whispering *that* in my ear.

Scorching heat blazes through my body as I try to sort through my frantic thoughts.

I ought to slap him, right? I ought to throw a drink in his face and storm out? Aren't I supposed to demand more for myself?

So why does it feel like Isaak has ripped all those choices away from me?

And why can't I hate him for it?

"Stop," he says, regarding me coolly.

"Stop what?"

"Stop overthinking," he replies. "Life is not a book. It happens here. Now. In the blink of an eye."

"Thanks for the philosophy lesson," I scowl. But my joke falls flat and stale in the crackling air between us.

Isaak stalks a step closer. "It's a simple question, *kiska*. What. Do. You. Want?" He enunciates each word slowly and clearly. I watch his lips move. Mesmerized, hypnotized, completely and utterly out of my element.

Whatever "this" is, it can't be happening. The fact that I am even considering giving into the heat building in my belly is

insane. It's not me.

I'm a quiet bookworm. I've read *Little Women* enough times that I could recite it from memory. I don't own a single set of matching underwear. I don't do... this.

But maybe I could?

Isaak cocks his head to the side and smirks. Goddamn, it's such an intoxicating expression on him. Arrogant enough to make my blood boil. Sexy enough to make my center throb.

He closes the last distance between us. I'm out of room to retreat. I bump into a wall and yelp, though it dies quickly on my lips.

His hand finds my hip. That simple little contact is enough to make me even more flustered. My eyes dart around the empty restaurant beyond Isaak's shoulder. But all the waiters and bartenders seem to have disappeared.

"We... I can't," I mumble. "There are people."

Isaak laughs cruelly. "You know as well as I do that they're gone."

"We still can't. There are... there are rules."

"Rules?" he echoes, as though he doesn't understand the word.

His hand slips inside my coat. Finds the hem of my dress. Slowly, slowly, slowly, he teases it up. Fingertips tracing tiny spirals up my thigh.

"We can't," I tell him, trying to pull down my skirt. "Someone will see." I hate how my voice sounds: I'm not telling him no, I'm just pleading with him for mercy. Throw me an excuse, any excuse, and I'll take it and run out of here.

But he's not biting. He's not giving me an out.

Those sparkling blue eyes are all I can see as he presses his bulk into mine. That cool, fragrant cologne is all I can smell, like an alpine forest. He's pinning me between the wall. Consuming me already.

His fingertip keeps inching up my dress. My hands won't move from my sides.

*Say no*, I'm begging myself silently. As confident and forward as Isaak is, I have a good feeling that he'll relent if I can just summon up that one little syllable.

But it's caught in my throat. Won't budge. Won't move.

I try and try and try to say it and for a moment, it feels like it's almost there, right on the tip of my tongue...

And then Isaak grazes my clit over the thin material of my Victoria's Secret panties, and the word *No* disappears like a wisp of smoke.

I gasp and shudder and clench Isaak's shoulders so I don't collapse to my knees. It's been a long time since a man touched me.

And even then, it was never like this.

"You're wet," he rumbles in my ear.

I tremble. But I'm past the point of embarrassment now. The only thing I can focus on is the feeling of his fingers, tap-dancing against my lips.

I shake my head, but I have no idea what I'm meant to say. Another man might have earned a slap.

But this man... If he wanted the fucking moon, he'd probably find a way to wrangle it from the sky.

I gasp again as he pulls aside the crotch of my panties and gives one teasing caress up my slit. My mouth rounds into a perfect, silent O when he parts me and slides a finger inside.

He moves painfully slowly. More patient than I would've ever thought possible. I nearly black out, and when I come to again one breath later, I realize I'm grinding my hips into his palm. My forehead is pressed against his muscled chest.

His name falls from my lips like a prayer. "Isaak..."

Chuckling, he pulls out slowly. Removes his hand from underneath my skirt.

And licks my juices right off the tips of his fingers.

"Sweet," he says. "Just as I suspected."

My jaw drops. “Who the hell are you?” I manage to gasp.

He smirks secretively. “Come with me and maybe you’ll find out.”

“I may read about heroines,” I say quietly. “But that doesn’t make me one.”

“Then isn’t it about time you changed that?”

He takes half a step backwards and holds out his hand to me. I miss his closeness, his warmth, his scent.

But it’s right there. He’s right there for the taking.

If I just let myself be brave.

So I eye his waiting hand for a moment before I slip my fingers into his palm.

He starts to pull me away, but a sudden thought crosses my mind. I dig my heels in. Isaak stops, turns to face me. “Why do you want this?” I blurt out. “Why me?”

His eyes shimmer. “I’ve never had much willpower when it comes to my vices.”

I frown. “So I’m a vice now?”

“Without a fucking doubt.”

Before I can ask for an explanation, he pulls me through the door of the restroom in the hall just behind him.

It’s awash in white and gold. Marble countertops, golden inlay and taps, copper accents everywhere you look. The light comes from flickering candles set into sconces along the walls. The scent of lilac dances through the air.

Isaak strides into the middle of the space, then turns and surveys me. He strokes my cheek with the back of his hand.

“Those eyes,” he murmurs to himself.

“My parents both have brown eyes,” I say for some stupid reason. “So no one knows how I inherited this color. Mom claims that her mother had greenish eyes, but I never met her so I can’t say for sure.”

I know I'm rambling. But all the nervous energy inside me needs an outlet. It needs to devour the silence so that there won't be room for him to do something I won't be able to stop.

He had admitted to being important.

He had admitted to being dangerous.

And I'm the horny fool who walked into an empty bathroom in a deserted restaurant to be with him.

"She was the only grandparent I never met," I continue with my babbling. "She died when my mother was a little girl."

"Do you always chatter when you're nervous?" he asks, his fingers running through the locks of my hair.

"To be honest, I don't think I've ever been this nervous before."

He raises his eyebrows. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Then he leans in and presses his lips to mine.

Even though I'm expecting it, the kiss comes as a shock. His lips are full-bodied but gentle, still faint. He lingers for a moment before pulling me against his body and deepening it. His tongue flicks past mine. He tastes like whiskey and mint.

Isaak pulls away slightly. "If you want to walk away now, you can," he tells me.

"Would you even offer if you thought I'd take you up on it?"

His eyebrows arrow downward into a frowning V. "The choice is always yours, Camila."

The way he says my full name in that faint Russian accent of his makes me shudder. No one has ever said it quite like that. He makes it his own. He makes *me* his own.

"Are you always so sure of yourself?" I ask.

"Always."

"Must be nice."

He grins. But he knows one thing: I'm not going anywhere.

Gripping my hip with one huge hand, he reels me into him again. This time, the kiss is more passionate, more aggressive. His lips plunder mine as he paws at my waist. He walks me backward. I stop only when my back hits the cool marble of the countertop.

I've never been so turned on by a kiss. Then, before I can catch my breath, he's spun me around so that my back is to him. Our reflections staring back at us.

Isaak towers over me. His face is cast in shadow, but those eyes shine through anyways like they're lit from within. It's hard to look away.

I watch with bated breath as his hands trail over my figure, tracing my shape slowly. He peels my coat off and lets it fall at our feet. Then his fingers are at my side, pulling down the zipper holding me in this dress.

I couldn't wear a bra with it, so when the last of the zipper gives way and the dress peels down, my breasts spring free. Isaak cups one in his palm and tweaks my nipple. I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

My panties are completely soaked through. I might be embarrassed if I weren't so desperate for him.

When he starts pinching my nipples between his fingers, my spine arches of its own accord and the back of my head hits his chest.

One hand finds my throat and squeezes gently. Enough to threaten danger. The other hand slides leisurely down my front. Dips past the hem of my panties.

And finds the part of me that wants him most.

He fingers me gently, eliciting hard-won moans as I struggle to keep quiet. I grip the edge of the counter for stability. My legs are turning to jelly with every passing second.

I feel the shift in the air at the same time he does. *This isn't enough*, it's saying. *We need more*.

With a feral growl, Isaak grabs my panties in one hand and jerks them halfway down my thighs. Then he plants a heavy

palm on the back of my neck and shoves me forward.

That stupid, preachy voice cries out in my head again. *Shouldn't you slap him? Shouldn't you be offended? Shouldn't you say no?*

I always would've said I'm not the type of girl who has sex like this.

But maybe there's more to us than we ever realize.

And it takes a man like Isaak to bring that part to light.

I can't see his hand with my cheek pressed flush against the cold marble, but I can feel him moving behind me. Can hear the sound of his zipper rustling.

And then, when his hardness brushes up against my opening, I cry out.

There's a slight nagging in the back of my head. A gentle reminder that's alerting me to the fact that I might be forgetting something. He might be forgetting something.

But in the next second, he pushes inside me, filling me with one deep thrust, and I forget everything.

My own name vanishes and my control over my cries goes with it as he starts fucking me.

He's going so slow, though. Even as every grind of his hips fills me more than I've ever been filled before, it's not enough to feed the fire.

I start to push myself back onto his cock, but he stops me by gripping my hips in place.

"No, *kiska*," he growls ferociously. "You'll move when I say you can move. Moan when I say you can moan. Is that understood?"

He's still pinning me down to the expanse of marble between the gilded sinks. I try to nod, but Isaak's fingers tamp down on the back of my neck. At the same time, he slaps my bare ass hard. I cry out.

"Use your words," he orders. His face is a mask of cruel and savage lust.

“Yes,” I whisper back. Hating myself for saying it. Loving him for making me.

I glance up and catch sight of myself in the mirror. I’m splayed out before him, and he dominates the mirror, his reflection larger than life and intensely powerful. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

Then, satisfied, he starts pounding into me, fucking me hard. Each thrust forces out a moan. Louder and louder.

I’m wide open and soaking wet for him. He’s so deep that he’s making my eyes roll back in my head.

And it’s still not enough.

“That’s a good girl,” he murmurs, leaning down to nip my ear between his teeth. His fucking gets harder and harder. Our hips crash together. My hair dances in a frenetic halo around my head.

I feel the orgasm coming from a long way off. The tempo increases, bringing it closer, closer, closer...

Until it’s almost on me. Until I’m scratching and clawing at the marble. Until my throat is raw from moaning and my legs are shaking from supporting my weight and Isaak still hasn’t stopped fucking me harder, as hard as he can, as hard as I can take it.

Until it breaks over me and drowns me in its waves.

The first clench has me spasming. Isaak keeps me pinned in place. His body flush over mine. I need that solidity. That comfort. That smell.

Otherwise, this orgasm might break me.

He fucks me again. Again. Again.

Then, just as the most intense contractions pass, he takes his turn. He grabs my hair into a makeshift ponytail and uses it to jerk me upright.

Then, with his hand on my throat, he empties himself with a roar.



I almost come again at the sight of his face in the mirror as he erupts. A single bead of sweat trickles down his perfect cheekbone.

I'm breathing hard. Sweat gathers at the base of my neck and across my collarbone. Isaak pulls out and grabs a pair of the ivory hand towels from the rack on the counter.

He offers me one. I take it, though I keep one hand planted on the marble so I don't fall over. My legs are mush and the rest of me isn't much stronger.

My thoughts are slowly drifting back to earth as I clean myself up.

And then it hits me.

The nagging feeling I'd had just before he'd entered me wasn't irrational. I'm not on the pill. And he didn't use a condom.

I turn to him, my eyes going wide with panic.

“What did we—”

But my words are drowned out by something that I feel as much as I hear. An explosion. A wall of sound and air that hits me like a fist in the chest.

The walls buckle.

“Oh my God,” I gasp, but I can't even hear myself over the aftermath of the explosion.

I turn around just in time to see Isaak pull out a gun that he'd been concealing somewhere in his expertly tailored suit.

And all I can think is...

*What have I gotten myself into?*

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## ISAAK

I cock the gun and focus my attention on the door.

I'd been foolish to think I could afford one night of escape.

There's no room for respite in my world.

There's no chance of forgetting.

"Isaak?"

I glance towards Camila, but I refuse to take my eyes off the door.

It's our only way out of here and I don't want to be forced into a corner by Maxim and his fucking goons.

I grab her hand and pull her behind me. "Get dressed," I tell her urgently. "We don't have time."

"Time? Time for w... what? What's going on?"

"The restaurant has been attacked. They're here for me."

"How do you know?"

"That explosion wasn't for show."

"I mean, how do you know whoever is out there is here for you?" she asks, stumbling into her dress. She's struggling with the zipper, but it's stuck on something and won't budge.

"I told you," I say. "I'm an important person. Which means I have a lot of enemies."

The walls shake again. Another crack fissures through the wall we're facing.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God...” Camila repeats again and again.

“Camila,” I say, forcing her eyes to mine. “Do you trust me?”

She hesitates, but the nod that follows is confident. “Yes.”

“I’m going to get you out of here in one piece, okay?”

She trembles a little, but gives me another nod.

My phone starts to vibrate, and I pull it out and pick up immediately. “Vlad, is it him?”

“It’s him, boss. I’m sorry, we should have—”

“There’s no point in ‘should have’ now. How many men?”

“At least twenty. We’re outnumbered two to one. But backup is on the way.”

“How long?”

“Six minutes, tops.”

I glance towards the door as the sound of conflict gets louder.

We don’t have six minutes.

We might not even have one.

I hear a grunt on the phone. Vlad is on the move. The *pop-pop* of a pair of guns trading fire follows.

“Boss, where are you?”

“Bathroom.”

“Is the girl with you?”

“Yes,” I say. “Get her to safety the moment you can.”

I hang up and put my phone away. Camila is looking at me with wide eyes, brimming with disbelief and panic.

“Stay behind me at all times,” I instruct her. “Understood?”

I’m fairly sure she nods, but it’s hard to say with how hard she’s trembling.

It’ll have to do.

I head for the door, crack it open, and keep my gun at the ready. I hold up my hand, so that Camila knows not to follow

me yet.

Peering out into the hall, I listen. The sound of fighting boils over in the main dining room. We need another way out.

I fucking despise running from a fight, but I need to get Camila to safety first. Only then will I be able to come back in here and give my cousin the fight he's asking for.

Two of Maxim's stooges round the corner of the hallway and catch sight of me in the threshold.

One is smart enough to duck for immediate cover.

The other is not so lucky.

I put a bullet between his eyes before he even realizes what's happening. He slumps to the ground, instantly dead. I charge forward and keep the second goon pinned in place behind the massive turquoise vase with a barrage of gunfire.

When I get close enough, I shatter the vase with a well-placed kick.

Then I grab the man by the scuff of his neck, knock the gun out of his hand, and hurl him to his knees in front of me.

One look at his face, and his name springs to my lips. "Isaak..."

"Arseny," I growl in recognition.

His eyes widen with fear, but he still tries hard to maintain a brave face. "*Ty ne moy khozyain,*" he says.

*You are not my master.*

I nod. He's right. "*I teper' ty umresh' za eto.*"

*And now, you will die for it.*

Then I snap his neck.

When I hear a stifled gasp behind me, I turn to see that Camila has stepped out of the bathroom—just in time to see me end this bastard's miserable life.

She's staring at the dead man at my feet, her green eyes limpid with fearful tears that have yet to fall.

I step towards her, but she backs away instantly. When her gaze lifts to my face, I see something different in her eyes.

I'm no longer the mysterious stranger who seduced her into doing something spontaneous.

I'm a motherfucking killer.

"Camila," I say gently. "I need you to stay calm and trust me."

"Trust you?" she repeats shakily. "Trust you?"

Several more gunshots blast through the restaurant. We don't have time for this shit. Lunging forward, I seize her arm and tow her deeper into the back of the restaurant, looking for an alternate way out.

To my irritation, she starts thrashing around in my grasp.

"Stop," I growl as I give her a shake. "We don't have the fucking time for this."

"Let me go!" she screams.

Twisting her wrist, I pull her to me so hard she slams into my chest. "This is not a fucking game," I snarl in her face. "Those men out there? They will kill you. You'll be nothing but a necessary causality. Your only hope of surviving this is with me."

She looks down at my hand wrapped around her wrist. Fear and anger war in her eyes. In the end, she eases up and shivers. The first tear trickles down her cheek.

"Good," I say. "Now let's fucking go."

The lights shiver with yet another explosion as we make our way through the staff quarters. I'm wary of using the back door as an escape. Maxim isn't stupid enough to attack without covering the primary means of entry.

What I need is a less obvious exit route.

I rattle the handle of a door to the left. It's locked. The sign hanging off the door says "Staff Lockers." Keeping a tight grip on Camila, I take a step back and fire two bullets into the handle. Then I kick open the door.

It swings back on its hinges. I stride inside to find three of the waitstaff cowering behind a thin table they've upturned for cover. They scream as I enter, but I ignore their terror.

"Is there a window or a door out of this room?" I ask.

No one answers.

"Somebody start fucking talking!"

One of the waiters peeps out from behind the table. "Th-there is... a-a-a..." His stutter dissolves the sentence into meaninglessness.

"There's another entrance through the kitchen," one of the bartenders says. "For deliveries."

"We can't use that," I say. "They'll have men on it."

Another blast sounds through the restaurant. The whole building rocks on its foundation. Camila stumbles back, right into me. Encircling her with one arm, I turn to go hunt for another option—

When three men appear at the door.

One I recognize.

Two I don't.

But their names are immaterial now. They're all traitors. That means they're all going to die.

I raise my gun at the same time they do. Unfortunately for them, I'm faster. Much faster.

Two of the men drop to the floor immediately, gurgling and choking on their own blood. The third manages to take the bullet in the shoulder. He ducks out of the line of fire, but he keeps a grip on his gun.

"Get out of sight," I order as I shove Cami behind me and take a cautious step forward. One of us—the wounded man or myself—has to make the first move.

It's going to be me.

I get low and propel myself through the doorway. At the same time, I turn and unload the clip into the bastard's gut. He dies

with his eyes open wide.

But when I land, my shoulder crunches awkwardly under me. The gun goes skittering from my grasp.

“Fuck!” I bellow. Because just then, I hear the thump of boots and more of Maxim’s troops appear at the mouth of the hallway.

My eyes flit to the Staff Lockers room. Cami is standing right in the doorway.

“I thought I told you to take cover,” I growl.

“Isaak...”

“Do as I tell you,” I snap.

Anger flashes across her eyes. But before I can make it clear that I mean business, the men at the opening of the corridor cock their guns and point them at me.

“Don’t fucking move, Vorobev,” one of the masked goons barks.

“Igor, is that you?” I say. “Go ahead and shoot. I’ve seen you at the firing range. You couldn’t hit me from there if your fucking life depended on it.”

He opens his mouth to retort. Seeing as how he’s a fucking moron, I’m sure it was going to be moronic. But I’m spared from hearing what he has to say when a hail of automatic gunfire cuts down Igor and the two men backing him up.

And then Bogdan comes sprinting into view. “Jesus, there you are,” he says. “Thank fucking God.”

“Get her out of here,” I tell him.

A ripple of confusion flits across Bogdan’s face. “Who?”

Cami chooses that moment to step fearfully into the bloodstained hallway. Perfect dramatic timing. I almost want to applaud.

“Who’s this?” Bogdan asks in alarm.

“No one,” I say. “She’s no one.”

Bogdan’s gaze shifts past me towards Camila.

“And we don’t have time for a fucking conversation,” I tell my brother impatiently. “Just get her and the rest of them out of here.”

“Me? Where are you going?”

“Yes, you.” I stand up with a wince, set my shoulder in place, and pop a new clip of ammunition into my weapon. “It’s time I end this.”

I don’t wait for Bogdan to protest. Instead, I move quickly out of the back room and head into the main body of the restaurant.

The fighting has broken off into little pockets of men struggling for the upper hand.

It looks evenly matched.

But that was before I joined the fray.

I’ve taken out two of Maxim’s men before I even step into the space. Another comes towards me, but my fist meets his face before he can raise his gun. I spin around, grabbing him in a chokehold and holding him in front of me as a human shield.

His body takes the bullets that are meant for me as I stride into the thick of things, cutting down more of these traitors with every step.

Every man in here can feel the tide turning.

That’s when I see him. My cousin Maxim. The fucking backstabber.

He’s standing on the other side of the restaurant, looking bizarrely nonchalant. Two men flank him with huge automatic rifles in their grasp. His pale blonde hair has a silver tint underneath the chandelier.

And his eyes are fixed on me.

Before I can decide what to do, I hear a scream. A feminine scream.

“Camila!” I roar instinctively. I turn my back on Maxim and launch myself down the hallway I just emerged from.



I get there just in time to save Bogdan from a bullet to the head. He's on his knees, being held back by two soldiers. The third one is standing in front of him, ready to shoot.

I fire before he does.

Bogdan takes advantage of their distraction and sends both his elbows slamming into the men on either side of him.

One lurches forward. The other crumples back.

He spins around and gets to his feet, stealing the gun off the man on his right and ending them both with one clean shot.

"Where is she?" I yell as the crack of gunfire rings in my ears.

"I'm sorry, Isaak," Bogdan says, looking ashamed. "They came in through the back. There were five or six of them."

I quickly glance behind him. The waiters are all clustered together at the door to the kitchen. The blonde boy with the stutter is slumped against a wall, bleeding from a shot in the thigh.

The others looked shell-shocked, though uninjured.

But they're all here. All left behind.

Which means they came after her specifically.

And I know why.

"Which way did they go?" I demand. "Bogdan, which fucking way did they go?"

"That way," he sighs, pointing to the delivery entrance. His voice crackles with failure. The kind we were both taught never to accept.

I don't waste any time. But when I burst out into the trash-strewn alleyway behind the restaurant, I know I'm too late.

The car at the mouth of the alley revs its engine. Tires squeal. And then it's gone, ripping away into the night.

At the very edge of my perception, I could swear I hear a woman's scream.

"Fuck," I yell over the sound of incoming sirens. "Fuck!"

Vlad appears at the steps of the restaurant. “We gotta get outta here, boss,” he says urgently. “The cops will be here soon.”

I bite back my fury. But he’s right—we have to go.

As I run back to my G-Wagon and peel off into the night, it takes everything I have not to go fucking apoplectic.

Maxim doesn’t realize what he’s started now. He doesn’t realize the doom he’s unleashed on his own head.

In taking her, he’s just signed his own death warrant.

Isaak Vorobev does not forget.

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## CAMILA

I hear something being dragged across the floor. It pierces my ears like nails on a chalkboard.

I wriggle around on my back, trying to find a comfortable position without any real hope. The mattress is too thin. It reeks like rotten cabbage and decay.

I swallow hard against the dryness of my throat. It's been hours since I was last offered water. The tall glass I'd chugged felt more like a thimble.

And food... When was the last time I ate? The dull gnawing in my stomach has turned from painful to desperate.

The only consolation is that I don't need to use the toilet. Because the odor emanating from the forlorn commode in the corner of the cell makes the mattress scent seem like perfume.

Who knows how much longer that little holdout will last, though? It's been at least a day and a half since I was dragged out of the restaurant by armed thugs. The only way I can track the passage of time is through the tiny slit at the upper corner of the cell. I've watched the sun come up and then die twice now, with no one interrupting my solitude.

No matter how much I scream.

I'm still wearing the black dress I'd picked for my date with Reggie. I almost want to laugh when his name pops up in my head. It feels like another lifetime, a half-forgotten dream. I thought I had problems then? Hilarious. Ridiculous. Depressing.

I close my eyes and rest my head on my forearms. The blur of light and shadow on the back of my eyelids takes shape.

And of course, it forms him.

Blue eyes. Broad shoulders. Dark, tousled hair.

It makes me angry. Did the man who got me here have to be so fucking sexy?

The crank of a lock sends me bolting upright. But the sudden movement makes my head whirl. I'm forced to put my face back in my hands and wait for the dizziness to pass.

I hear a shuffle of movement. There's the faint *click-click-click* of heels on tile.

I raise my gaze and try to blink through the dizzy spell, but the morning light is making everything blurry. Or maybe each of my senses is giving up on me one by one.

"You don't look great."

I freeze at the unexpected voice. Not a man's. But a woman, with an exaggerated sense of calm.

"W... who are you?" I stammer. I can make out her vague, distorted outline.

"A friend," she answers mildly. "Goodness, it stinks in here."

She stays pressed against the back wall as far away from me and the stench of the disgusting toilet as she can get. I'm blinking away the last of the dark spots in my vision when she wraps a silk scarf around her face to ward off the stench.

My stomach gives a rumble so loud that she hears it, too. "You must be hungry," she remarks with a chuckle. Despite my best efforts, I start to hope. Is she here to help me? "Thirsty, too, I imagine?"

But even if it weren't for the sunlight filtering through the slatted opening, she's too far back, hidden among the shadows, and the scarf is tucked around her face. All I can see are her eyes.

She's wearing a flowing blouse in a soft lavender. Her pants are dark, but they too flow like silk. The overall impression is

someone refined, someone wealthy.

One thing I know for sure: she doesn't belong here.

But then again, neither do I.

"Please," I whisper, licking my cracked lips. I taste blood, but I ignore that. "Please let me go."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

My heart plummets even though I'd been preparing for that answer.

"I can, however, offer you something to eat and drink."

It's not freedom. But it's not death, either. I'll take it.

"Please," I say with a desperate nod. "Please..."

"I'll get those things for you in a moment," she says. Her voice grows cold. "But first, I'd like to have a little conversation with you." She must notice me shrink back, because she adds, "You don't have to be scared."

"Look at me," I tell her, feeling my anger spark despite my fatigue. "Look at where I am. Of course I'm scared."

"I won't hurt you. I just have a few questions."

If answering a few questions is all it takes to get me out of here, then I'll answer as many as she wants to ask.

"Good girl," she says when I nod and relax slightly. Her voice is soft, almost maternal. And yet it fills me with dread. Some vaguely inhuman quality skimming just beneath the surface.

"Do you remember what happened the night you were brought here?"

I bark out ironic laughter. "Yes," I say. "I'll never be able to forget it."

*For more reasons than one.*

"Good. The man you were having dinner with. What was his name?"

"Isaak Vorobev," I say instinctively, knowing his name will forever be imprinted on the inside of my brain.

“The two of you make a beautiful couple.”

I frown, but I don't even think to correct her. I'm concentrating only on getting into her good graces so that I can drink a gallon of water and put out the fire in my parched throat.

“Sure. Thanks.”

“It must have been frustrating to have your dinner ruined.”

That's such a laughable understatement of what happened that I can only shake my head in dismay. I don't know who these people are or what they want or why they took me. All I know is that I want out. It's like my head is capable of holding onto only one thought at a time, and that's what it's chosen.

*Out. Out. Out.*

“It was a shock,” I mutter eventually.

“Surely, you knew what you were getting into. Isaak Vorobev is a dangerous man.”

Again, I can't help laughing. I knew that from the moment I saw him. But I was dumb enough to trip head over heels into his world anyway.

“I didn't know what I was getting into.”

“Where were you?” she asks. “When the explosion went off?”

I frown. I can't really understand her questions. I'm not sure what she hopes to get out of me. But maybe that shouldn't be my concern.

“In the bathroom.”

“Alone?”

I tense. “Who are you?” I ask, realizing that probably should have been my opening line.

Her eyes crinkle like she's smiling. “Who I am is not important,” she says. “What matters is, who are you?”

“I'm no one.”

“You were with Isaak Vorobev,” she says. “By virtue of association, that makes you someone.”

A shiver runs down my spine. They'd taken me because I was with him? Nothing makes sense.

I just want out.

*Out. Out. Out.*

I shake my head. "No, you don't understand. I don't know him, not really. I've never met him before—"

"Never met him?" she asks, cutting me off. "You were with him at the restaurant. And he was with you in the bathroom when the explosion went off, wasn't he?"

My heart is beating fast. In a way, it's nice to know that it's still kicking. That I'm not dead. Not yet, at least.

"I—"

"Lying will only make things worse for you. I suggest you act in your own best interests and tell me the truth."

"He was in the bathroom with me," I admit. "But we... we're strangers."

"Did you have sex with him?"

The trembling in my hands is getting worse. I try to squelch the reaction by wringing them together. I'm positive that if I lie, she'll see through me.

"Yes," I say. "But... it was a... a... a one-time thing." I hate how dirty I feel just saying those words.

I'm not that kind of girl. But Isaak Vorobev made me one.

He bent me over a sink and made me beg for all of him.

"Please," I say desperately when she doesn't say anything. "I have nothing to do with the man. I just want to go home."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," the woman in the scarf says icily. "Not now."

The sob pushes out through my teeth. "Why are you doing this to me?" I ask. "What have I done?"

"How do you hit a man without any weaknesses?" she asks me. It sounds like a riddle. My starved brain doesn't know how to make sense of it. "You find one."

I shake my head, starting to understand. “You’ve made a mistake,” I say, nearly tripping over my words. “You took me because you think I’m important to him. But I’m not.”

“Then why has he been trying so hard to negotiate your freedom?”

That causes my open mouth to snap shut. “He... he has?”

“He seems to want you back very badly. Perhaps you’re more important than you realize.”

I don’t know what to say to that. So I don’t say anything. Sighing in disappointment, the woman turns for the door. I notice the way her silk pants flow like water.

“Please,” I gasp, reaching out for her weakly. “Some water. I’m begging you.”

“You weren’t very honest with me, Camila,” she says, her tone curling around my name. I don’t bother asking how she knows it. “I don’t think you deserve it.”

“Please!” I cry as she walks out the door.

She doesn’t stop or look back.



At some point after the woman in silk leaves, I fall asleep on the filthy mattress. I wake up to a new noise. Feet pounding. Voices raised in panic.

Something is happening.

I sit up hurriedly and clutch my knees to my chest. Thoughts race through my head. Is it Isaak? Do I even want it to be? She said he was negotiating for my release. But what does that mean?

I don’t want to hope. But hope is all I have at this point.

The sound of heavy footsteps gets louder and louder. Then the rusty grind of a door being forced open. More gruff voices follow, but I can’t make out what they’re saying.



The footsteps congregate outside of my cell. I hear the thump of something big and heavy colliding with the door. Two thumps, three, and then *BOOM*, the door goes crashing to the ground.

I scamper backwards into the corner. But when I look up, it's not Isaak. It's not the woman in silk.

It's a trio of cops in tactical gear.

"It's okay, ma'am," one of them says to me. "You're safe now. We've got you."

Only then do I allow myself to cry.

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ISAAK

“Well?”

Bogdan eyes me from across the room. He’s looking at me like cornered prey who’s just realized that there’s nothing holding the lion back.

“They’ve put her in the Witness Protection Program,” he admits finally.

“Fuck.”

Bogdan pushes himself off the wall and walks over to me. There’s an armchair right opposite mine, but he doesn’t sit down. He knows better.

“If you want me to locate her, I can.”

He’s been trying to make up the loss of the girl to me for days. The guilt is chewing away at him.

I weigh my options. Do I want her found? And if I do get her location, what then? Do I swoop in and rescue her for a second time like a knight in shining fucking armor? That’s not who I am. That’s not what I do.

Bogdan adds, “But we have to decide quickly. She’s just been handed over to the agency. Which means she’s still on U.S. soil. But once she’s placed, it’s going to be hard to track her.”

I already know this. That doesn’t make the decision any easier.

“Who’s the source?”

“MacMillan,” Bogdan replies. “But he’s in the police division. He has no jurisdiction over the Marshals Service.”

“We don’t have a source in there?”

“No.”

I nod. “Maybe that’s for the best.”

Bogdan’s eyebrows rise.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I snarl.

“Can I ask you something?” he says.

I glance up at him. Bogdan never pries, never second-guesses me. For him to even venture a question is unusual. I nod.

“What was it about her?”

Had the question come from anyone else, I would have refused to answer. But Bogdan is more than just my right hand. He’s my brother. I can tell him the truth. God knows he’s earned it in sweat and blood.

But the truth is I don’t fucking know what it was about Cami that’s stuck like a splinter in my mind.

“She was different,” I say curtly. “That’s all.”

“It’s just that I’ve never known you to fall for a woman that quickly. In fact, I’ve never known you to fall at all.”

I snort derisively. “You get away with a lot because of your last name. You realize that, don’t you?”

He manages a grin. “I do.” The smile slides off his face almost immediately. “But that’s not true for everyone with our last name, is it?”

My tendons feel taut. My muscles throb with the urge to jump into action. Maxim has been lying low for days now. With good reason—because if I get my hands on him, I’m going to make him suffer.

“I saw him at the restaurant, Bogdan,” I growl. “It was definitely him.”

“I know. I believe you.”

“He shares our name. He shares our blood. And that gave him a certain level of immunity. At least, it used to. I’ve been patient with him. Lenient. But he’s taken things too far now.”

“He can’t have known she meant something to you.”

“On the contrary, I think he took her purely *because* he thought she meant something to me.”

Bogdan frowns. “Why would he do that?”

“To make a statement,” I say. “To let me know that he’s coming for what he believes is his birthright. Yakov was the first son; he was the *Krestnyy Otets*. And if Maxim’s father had lived, Maxim would have taken over the Vorobev Bratva. Instead, it’s mine.”

Bogdan sighs. “You don’t need to recount family history to me, brother. I know it as well as you do. I just never thought he’d have the balls to actually move against you.”

“We need to weed out his loyalists,” I say firmly. “If I know Maxim, he’ll have made sure to plant a few rats in the ranks before he split out on his own.”

Bogdan looks offended. “I’ve carried out extensive checks on all the men. No one who reports to me is wavering.”

I glance at my little brother. He’s young, yes. But I was twice as ruthless and three times as shrewd by the time I was his age.

Then again, I knew I was going to inherit. Bogdan has never had to live under that kind of pressure. He doesn’t know what it’s like to be molded by it. Shaped by it.

“What about Oleg?”

Bogdan’s eyes go wide. “Oleg? Come on, Isaak. He’s clean. The check showed nothing.”

“Means nothing,” I say. “The fucker is hiding something.”

“Oleg has been with us for years. Before Maxim came back here, in fact.”

“Immaterial,” I bite back. “He has always been Yakov’s man.”

“And when Yakov died, Oleg followed your father, the same as the rest of our men. Isaak, you’re looking for demons where there aren’t any to be found.”

“Every year since Yakov died, Oleg has paid regular visits to Svetlana in her mansion out west,” I point out. “Think, little brother. Sometimes, the people that are capable of betrayal are the ones we’re least likely to suspect. That’s why they can get away with it.”

Bogdan’s eyes dart from side to side. In a lot of ways, he’s just like Mother. Smart, capable, and resilient. But loyalty had been ingrained into us since we could walk and talk. He’s still young enough that he takes for granted that our men are ours in mind, body, and spirit.

He doesn’t know how easy it is to poison a man’s mind.

There’s a sharp rap on the door, but before I can answer, it swings open.

“What the—” I growl, rising to my feet angrily. No one walks into my personal space without my permission first.

But my words die on my lips the moment I see Vlad.

He’s pale. The haunted distance in his eyes is more telling than anything he could say right now.

“Is it Father?” I ask.

Vlad nods.

Bogdan and I rush through the door immediately.

Our father’s rooms are located on the second floor, facing the gardens. I burst through the door first, with Bogdan hot on my heels.

The details are the same as they’ve always been. High, arched ceilings. Huge windows with a sprawling view of the city. Gilded portraits of previous Bratva dons lining the walls with dour expressions.

But the middle of the scene is painfully raw and new.

Our mother is sitting on the edge of his bed, her face turned away from us. Her shoulders are hunched, her hands knotted

together as though she's already in mourning.

And behind her is...

"Father," I say grimly.

My mother gets off the bed and steps back so the two of us can flank our father. He's lying propped up on a mountain of pillows. For the first time I can remember, he looks small. Not the grizzled warrior who's led the Bratva for decades. But a weak old man, fighting a battle he cannot win.

"My sons," he rumbles, his voice raspy and weak. He tries to add something else, but his words fail him.

His skin has turned grey. Flecks of blood dot the corners of his mouth. Even his eyes seem smaller, rheumy, bloodshot with fatigue.

"Where is Andrei?" I rage, turning towards the door where two guards are standing like mute statues. "Get the fucking doctor. Why isn't he in here?"

"He's been called," Mama tells me. "But..."

"Fuck the doctor," Father coughs. Spittle and blood flies from his mouth and peppers the white comforter pulled up over his bloated stomach. "I'm not going to make it to the next sun... sunrise..."

I notice everything. The whites of Mama's knuckles where she's clinging to the cuffs of her cashmere cardigan. The resigned slump in Papa's shoulders. The smell of death in the air.

Papa starts speaking again. I have to lean forward to catch his words.

"... He did it... I didn't think... I never thought... he had the balls..."

"Papa?" Bogdan asks. "Who are you talking about?"

"That little fucker... my own nephew... Maxim."

Bogdan and I exchange a glance over our father's death bed. Is he saying what I think he is?

“It’s not a fucking... a fucking coin... coincidence... that I’m dying the same... the same way... he did.”

I can feel the air in the room change. Before, it was funereal. Depressing. Now, there’s a surging rage percolating between Bogdan and me.

If what he’s saying is true, it’s not just war I’m waging against my cousin Maxim.

It’s fucking Armageddon.

“*Otets*, rest now,” I tell my father. “Andrei will be here soon.”

He shakes his head. “He... he kill...” He coughs again. More blood comes out. Thicker. Nastier.

My mother clicks her fingers for the maids, but he lets out a bark that has her freezing. “Leave it, woman,” he says, his voice strong when he addresses her. “It doesn’t fucking... matter...”

I glance behind at my mother. As usual, there’s not a hair out of place. The only flaw in her appearance is the spray of blood staining the front of her cardigan.

Stone-faced, she gives me a nod. “I will leave you both to say your goodbyes to your father.”

Then she walks out, the confident click-clack of her heels hitting the wooden floors like a fast-paced dirge.

When I turn back to my father, he’s staring at the door with his bloodshot eyes. I feel Bogdan move to my side. He kneels down in front of the bed, next to *Otets* and leans in.

“This isn’t the end, Papa.”

*Otets* smacks Bogdan’s face lightly. A gesture that’s more affectionate than anything he’s ever done before.

“You,” he rasps. “Become stronger. And acc... accept reality, instead of... running from... it.”

Then he pushes Bogdan’s face away in a clear sign of dismissal. Chastened, Bogdan moves aside and allows me to inch closer.

I don't kneel like he did. Instead, I stand at my dying father's bedside and look down at him.

He's looked down on me my whole life.

But in the final moments, I'm the one looking down at him.

Funny how savage the end of the circle can be.

"I know," he sighs. "I've earned your... h...hatred. But it was... necessary... to make you...str... strong."

I glance down at the line of neat silver scars that line my right forearm. Thirty-seven in total. One for every lesson I failed to learn.

"Love is unimportant," I tell him. "*Moye uvazheniye I moya predannost'.*"

*You have my respect—and my loyalty.*

Father nods, his hazy eyes glowing with something that looks suspiciously like pride.

Then, Bogdan and I step back and we watch our father die.



When I leave his room, Father's men are standing in a line, their heads bowed in respect.

No, not his men.

Not anymore.

Now, they're mine.

"Call Andrei. Tell him his presence is no longer required," I order the man closest to me. "And you two, see to his body."

Vlad steps forward, waiting for his instructions. I survey the line of men. Of course, the one I'm looking for is not here.

"Find Oleg and bring him down to the cellar," I tell Vlad. "If he fights back, break his knees."

If he's surprised, he hides it well.



Bogdan flanks my right. “What do we do now?” he asks as I turn and stride away.

“We take the reins, just like Father trained us to do,” I say. “But first, we have to avenge his death.”

I head straight to the cellar. Bogdan shadows my footsteps. On the way there, we pass the open door of the second floor living room. Mama is standing in front of the window, her arms wrapped around her slim frame.

I stop short in the threshold. Bogdan brushes past me and joins her at the window.

She turns to him with a weak smile. “I’m a widow, then?”

Bogdan nods, resting a comforting hand on her shoulders.

She heaves a sigh so big that her whole body shivers.

“Mama, you should change,” he says gently. “You’ve got his blood on your hands.”

She glances down at her trembling fingers. “He coughed up so much blood,” she murmurs. “I thought I got it all off...”

“I’ll take you to your room,” Bogdan says, glancing at me for approval.

I nod.

They turn and approach the doorway I’m standing in. I try to summon up some words of comfort. Something to comfort a grieving old woman.

But I can’t find any that would make a difference now.

As she walks past me, her eyes flicker over my face. “Isaak...”

“It’s okay, Mama,” I say stiffly. “We can talk later.”

She swallows back something.

Grief?

Uncertainty?

Relief?

Fuck if I know. Those emotions have never meant much to me. Father made sure of that.

“I just want you to know that this Bratva is yours,” she says. “It’s what your father would have wanted. It was always meant to be.”

“Maxim disagrees.”

“Then prove him wrong,” she says with a nod that reminds me why she made such a fierce Bratva wife all these years.

She grazes my arm with her fingers. Then she allows Bogdan to usher her out of the living room.

I head straight for the cellar. It’s empty when I get there. Flicking on the lights, I pluck a wrought iron chair from its resting place along the back wall and drag it to the center of the room.

Then I wait.

The minutes tick by, and I wonder if the fucker managed to escape. I’m not upset by the prospect. In fact, the adrenaline pumping through my veins would relish the chance to chase him down and slit him open from balls to chin.

Then I hear the creak of the cellar door. Shuffling feet. Muffled protests.

Three pairs of legs appear on the staircase—Vlad and Nikolai, with Oleg caught between them. I notice that Oleg’s knees still seem to be in working order. So he didn’t try to flee. Perhaps he’s braver than I thought—or stupider.

As they come into view, I see that he’s been gagged. He’s struggling hard against the flexicuffs that bind his hands behind his back.

I pull out the custom-made blade that Otets gifted me on my thirteenth birthday. I tap the tip between my fingers as Vlad and Nikolai force Oleg into the empty space in front of me.

Then Nikolai kicks at him from behind, and Oleg collapses to a kneeling position at my feet.

“Remove the gag,” I order.

Vlad cuts it off immediately.

“Isaak, what is this?” Oleg gasps, his eyes bulging and whirling in their sockets.

“This is the day of judgement,” I tell him coldly. “It’s time to own up to your sins.”

“I don’t... I don’t understand...”

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “You know how my uncle Yakov died, don’t you, Oleg?” I ask.

He just stares at me.

“Of course you do. You were there,” I continue. “It was heart failure. That’s the story.”

“Someone murdered him,” Oleg says. “It was just made to look like a congenital heart defect.”

I nod. “Correct. And who got the blame for it?”

Oleg’s expression wavers. He’s not sure whether to own up to his true allegiances or make me beat it out of him. “Isaak...”

“You will address me properly,” I interrupt harshly. “In the manner owed to your don and master.”

*Don.* That’s what I am now. It feels right.

His face falters. He’ll break sooner rather than later. He’s already on the cusp of falling to sobbing pieces. “Yes, Don Vorobev,” he murmurs.

“Good. Now, back to the story. My uncle’s widow Svetlana spread the lie that it was my father who killed Yakov. She—”

“She didn’t lie,” Oleg spits out, dropping the pretense.

I notice a shadow on the staircase. Bogdan emerges. He doesn’t announce his presence. Simply walks around Oleg, until he’s standing next to me, just behind my chair.

Oleg’s eyes flit between the two of us, wondering what this new appearance might mean for him. I know my brother had shared a friendship with the man.

But I also know Bogdan. Disloyalty is not a crime he will ever forgive.

If I hand him the knife, he'll cut Oleg's throat without so much as blinking.

That's true loyalty.

"Your father wanted to be don," Oleg snarls. "So he killed his own brother and took what was never meant to be his."

"A strong don takes what he wants," Bogdan intones.

"And a weak one bleats about what he feels he's owed," I add. "Claims mean nothing. Strength means everything. Svetlana filled Maxim's head with lies."

"She was the wife of the true don," Oleg snaps. "And Maxim is Yakov's heir. You're sitting on his throne, *mudak*."

"So this was his revenge?" I ask. "He wanted to murder our father and he used you to do it."

Oleg's lip curls. "Wrong."

"Wrong?" I echo. I frown. I was so sure that that was the right analysis of the situation. Oleg swore his allegiance to Maxim. Maxim wants the Vorobev Bratva. Therefore, Oleg killed my father so Maxim could take it from me.

"Wrong," Oleg repeats with finality. "I was going to strangle the old fucker in his bed. But someone beat me to it."

"You expect us to believe that?" Bogdan scoffs.

"It's the truth," says Oleg. "Why would I lie now?"

"Many reasons," I say, getting to my feet. "None of which I care to concern myself with."

I've had enough. I don't want to hear anymore bullshit from this traitor's mouth. I press the blade to his carotid, but I pause before I deliver the killing blow.

He cringes away from me, but he doesn't shy away from death.

"Any last words?" I drawl.

Oleg looks up at me, bearing his hatred in his eyes so that I can see it purely for the first time. "I wish I had been able to do it myself."

“You’re still sticking with that story?” I ask with disgust. “So be it.”

He closes his eyes, ready for me to slice him open and be done with it.

But I have a better idea. “Hold him still,” I order Nikolai and Vlad. Flipping the knife around so the point is digging into his neck, I apply pressure. It splits the layers of his skin slowly. It hurts the whole fucking time. He screams and writhes in my men’s arms.

When I’ve hit my mark, I withdraw the blade as slowly as I drove it in. With my hand on his shoulder, I bend down so that he can see my face.

“You’ll die slowly,” I inform him. “It’ll take an hour. Maybe two. It will be agonizing. You backed a lame horse, Oleg. Maxim will never lead the Vorobev Bratva.”

Then I release him and he falls to the ground face first, flopping like a fish.

I turn to Bogdan. “Maxim Vorobev is no longer kin to me.”

“Nor me,” Bogdan says, raising his eyes to mine.

I nod. “Then there’s nothing left to do but prepare. He wanted a war. Now, he’s got one.”

**CAMILA**

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LONDON—SIX YEARS LATER

I'm staring at the ceiling, trying to avoid looking at the off-white silk dress that I'd laid over on my dressing table chair the night before. It doesn't feel like it belongs to me.

But then, my life doesn't really feel like it belongs to me.

Maybe the dress will change that.

A bubble of laughter bursts through my lips. I close my eyes and try to breathe through the nerves. *Jo March would never do what I'm about to do*, I think.

The thought makes me laugh harder for some reason. And then the ridiculousness of me laughing like a maniac, all alone on my wedding day, makes me laugh even harder. I keep laughing and laughing—until, suddenly, tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I'm honestly not sure where those came from.

I wipe them away hastily when my phone starts to ring. It tapdances its way to the edge of the bureau and tips over. I lunge and barely manage to snag it from the air.

"Hello? Bree?"

"You sound out of breath," she remarks. "It's not time yet, is it?"

"No," I say, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Not quite yet."

I hear her sigh with relief. I can also hear the sound of a child's giggle from somewhere in the background of Bree's life. It's so cute, so wholesome.

When I think of the sounds that have punctuated the background of my life, all I can hear is silence and regret.

“Where are the kids?” I ask, my voice choking around the last word.

“Playing in the garden. Would you like to speak to—”

“No!” I blurt. “No, I, um... I’ll speak to them afterwards.”

“Are you sure?” Bree asks. “She’s right here.”

“Just tell me how she’s doing.”

“The same. Happy, healthy. And missing you, of course.”

I bite my lip and sit up, careful not to disturb the armada of pins keeping my hair in place.

“Does she?” I whisper. “Does she really miss me?”

“You know she does, Cami.”

A tear slips down my cheek, but I keep my voice steady when I speak. “It’s been two years,” I say. “Two years since I’ve seen her. Two years since I’ve seen you.”

“Cami...” Bree warns, her tone changing.

It’s the voice she uses when she knows I need a mother. Our real mother is probably sitting on the porch swing of the house we grew up in right now. Dad’s probably gardening, happy as a clam to be digging away in his little plot of soil.

“Cami, listen to me. You made a choice. And it was a good one.”

“I know...”

“She needs stability and safety.”

I nod.

“You gave her that.”

“No,” I correct. “Actually, you did.”

“Because you trusted me with her.”

I smile sadly. “Who else would I have trusted?”

“No one. You have excellent taste in sisters.”



I can't help a snotty laugh. "All the other ones were taken," I tease back.

"Anyway, how are you feeling?" she presses. I exhale noisily. Bree laughs. "That good, huh?"

"He's a good man, Bree," I say. "He's good to me. Maybe not always the most attentive, but still—"

I can practically hear her frown. "What do you mean?" I don't know why I let that slip. Brianna is sharp—she'd never miss a subtle tell like that.

"Nothing," I say quickly. "Nothing at all. It's just, he's a busy man."

"Too busy for you?"

"Bree," I say, rapidly backpedaling for damage control, "I'm just a little nervous, okay? I didn't mean that. He's been better to me than I deserve."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means I... I didn't tell him," I finally admit. I cringe as soon as the words pass my lips. I'm a coward. A weak, pathetic coward.

"Oh."

"Oh?" I say. "That's it?"

"Cami, there's a reason you were told to keep Jo a secret," she says. "Of course you'd be nervous to tell anyone about her."

"We're not talking about just anyone, Bree," I remind her. "This is Alex. In less than four hours, he's going to be my husband."

"And once he's your husband, you can tell him."

"It's going to feel like a betrayal. He's going to hate me for keeping a secret this big from him."

"He knows you're in the Witness Protection Program. That was a pretty big secret you trusted him with."

"It's not the same thing, Bree."

“Cami, it comes down to one thing: do you think Alex is a good man?”

I shouldn't hesitate. It's way too late for that.

But I do.

“... Cami?”

“Of course I think he's a good man,” I say. “It's just, I've only known him for a year and a half. Is that long enough to know anyone? Much less someone you're planning to commit to for the rest of your life?”

“You've been overthinking again.”

“Always.”

“Then let me ask you another question: do you believe he loves you?”

I think about the last eighteen months with Alex. How aggressively he wooed me. How lavishly he showered me with one expensive present after the next. He was generous and intent and charming.

But were any of those things *love*?

Three months after we first met, he told me he was falling in love with me. He'd held my hand over dinner, and said that no woman had ever made him feel like all his dreams and goals were finally within reach.

It was a beautiful sentiment. I'd gotten caught up in the moment, and it was easy to fall for him. Easier still after more than four years of isolation and loneliness since my old life was wrenched away from me in the blink of an eye.

Being with Alex Royston felt like I was getting a small part of my life back.

I guess I just never expected things to move so fast. I never believed I would be enough to hold his attention. Not long-term. Is that self-hatred of some kind? Self-sabotage? Self-something-not-so-nice, at the very least.

Maybe that's why I shared the first secret when I told him my real name—because I thought it would bring down the whole

house of cards. I wasn't Emily Kunis. I was Camila Ferrara. And I had lied to him for as long as we'd known each other.

I was so sure he'd run in the other direction. But he stood his ground. Insisted he still wanted to marry me. Not just that, he swore he would give me the protection that was currently provided by the United States Marshals Service. He was rich and powerful and he could do what he said.

He could keep me safe.

We could move back to the States.

We could be happy.

After that, how could I have turned him down? More to the point—how could I risk all of that by telling him about Jo? No, it wasn't worth it. That secret would stay buried until I could figure out what to do next.

"I think he does love me," I say into the long silence.

"Okay then. So he'll understand."

But I'm not so sure.

Alex has never been anything but amazing with me. But I know he has a temper. I know he has high standards. I know he values loyalty above all else.

I've eavesdropped on enough of his business calls to understand that he has some darkness in him. He's never shown it to me, but I know it's there. I fear what will happen if I drag it to the surface.

Being in the Witness Protection Program is one thing.

Having a secret daughter is another.

"Just asking here, so feel free to ignore me," Bree says, "but what happened? I thought you were going to tell him last week."

"I chickened out," I admit. "I just kept thinking about all the other questions I'll be forced to answer."

"I know, honey. It's hard."

"He's going to want to know who her father is, Bree."

“That secret you need to take to your grave,” she says immediately. “You know that, right? He can’t ever know. No one can.”

I nod, then I realize that Bree can’t see me. “I know,” I say. “But it means another lie.”

“A necessary one.”

“Yeah, a necessary one,” I repeat, but it doesn’t lessen my guilt. “Bree?”

“Yes, love?”

“You don’t think I’m making a mistake, do you?”

She hesitates for a moment, and I wish more than anything that she were with me now. I need a Bree hug. No one loves you like a sister. “Does it feel like a mistake?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe sometimes. Maybe not.”

I smile sadly. “I wish you could be here today. I wish you were all here.”

“I know. I can’t believe my baby sister is getting married and I won’t be there.”

“Have you spoken to Mom and Dad recently?” I ask.

“Last weekend. They’re doing good. Same as always.”

“Have they got used to the new neighbors yet?”

“Mr. Agrawal fixed the stove for Mom last week, so that’s changed their opinion a little. Apparently, Indian people are just like us, it turns out.”

I roll my eyes. “Dear God.”

“Don’t worry. I think they’re inching towards the twenty-first century. Just give them time. They asked about you, by the way. You need to call them more often.”

“I resolve to do exactly that every month.”

“Then what happens?”

“I speak to them and realize why it was a bad idea.”

Bree bursts out laughing. “Fair enough.”

“I’ll give them a call when we’re back in the States,” I say, letting the tentative hope spread through me for one self-indulgent moment. “Maybe we can even visit them at some point.”

“One step at a time, baby sister. Focus on you today. You deserve it.”

“No promises, but I’ll do my best. I have to say goodbye now,” I tell her. “Time to start getting dressed.”

“You won’t be alone though, right?” she asks. “Eric will be there?”

“He needed special permission. But yes, he will be there.”

“And Andrew?”

I wrinkle my nose with distaste. “Urgh... Andrew.”

Bree laughs. “So you still haven’t warmed to him, huh?”

“Not by a long shot,” I reply. “He’s just so cold and brusque with me. But whatever. Once I’m married, I won’t have to deal with him anymore.”

“Why did Eric need special permission, by the way?” Bree asks, with the exact amount of irritation that I feel.

“Probably for the same reason they removed him as my handler and replaced him with Andrew. They feel that he’s too close to my case.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

I shrug. “Who knows? Anyway, it doesn’t really matter. Now that Andrew’s taking over my security and I’m officially going to be leaving the Witness Protection Program, they can’t exactly tell me who I can and can’t keep in touch with.”

“I’ll drink to that,” she mutters.

I laugh, glancing towards the clock. “It’s a little earlier in your part of the world to be drinking, Bree. And speaking of time...”

“Right, of course. You have to go.” She sounds flustered and nervous now.

“Kiss Jo for me,” I say.

“Always do.”

“Tell her I love her and that I’ll call her tonight.”

“Will do.”

“And hopefully, I’ll see you all soon.”

Bree’s holding her breath, just like I am. “I wish you all the luck in the world, little sister. I love you.”

I smile. “You know, I may be marrying Alex today—but you’re always going to be my soulmate.”

“I better be,” she laughs. “You’re stuck with me, Cami. For better or for worse.”

We hang up. The raging silence of my life rushes up to meet me.

I’ve talked to Bree too long. Now, I’ll have to hustle to make it on time. The car will be here to pick me up in half an hour. Better get started.

I shrug out of my fluffy white robe and slip on the dress. It’s undeniably beautiful, and yet I’m extremely uncomfortable in it.

But then, I was never going to be comfortable today.

The hemline falls to my knees, the detailing is subtle and elegant. We’re just going to a courthouse, per Alex’s insistence, but the little girl in me still clung to the idea of getting married in a gorgeous white dress. Who cares if I’m overdressed?

It takes me a few frenzied minutes to dress and put my makeup on. I’ve just slipped into the brand-new pair of silver pumps that Alex brought for me when I get a call from the front desk.

“The car’s here, ma’am.”

“I’ll be right down.”

I walk down, conscious of the fact that I’m completely alone. I console myself with the knowledge that Eric will be at the

courthouse, waiting to walk me in.

Except that when the car pulls up to the marbled steps, he's not there like he promised he would be.

I frown. Eric's never missed an appointment with me. He's courteous, timely, a gentleman through and through. Maybe he just had to step aside to take a call or something.

The door opens and the driver offers me his hand. He's strange-looking for a chauffeur. Six and a half feet tall and burly, with sort of a menacing aura to him. Like he'd be better suited as a cage fighter or something.

I shrug it off and focus my full attention on the steps. Just navigating these bad boys in the heels and long skirt will be a challenge in itself. I'm glad I don't have a bouquet in hand to complicate things.

I manage to reach the top of the landing without falling ass over heels. I peer around the big pillars, but Eric is nowhere to be found.

My frown deepens.

One of the double bronze doors swings open and a tall, thin man in a suit whisks out. He looks like he works for Alex, but I don't recognize him.

"Good morning, ma'am," he greets politely. "Let me take you to Harrison Hall, where the signing will take place."

I glance around nervously. "Is Alex here?"

"He's inside waiting for you."

"And Eric?" I ask. "Has he arrived yet?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Eric Keller. He's one of the witnesses," I say. "An older gentleman, grey hair..." I trail off at the blank look on the man's face.

"He might be in Harrison Hall, ma'am. I was instructed to escort you."

“Okay,” I nod uncertainly as I follow him through the gargantuan labyrinth of the courthouse. It’s really quite beautiful. Ornate and ancient. I miss the U.S. a lot, but Britain has its moments.

“Right this way, ma’am.” He holds open an iron door for me and ushers me through.

Harrison Hall is larger than I expect, with lovely arched windows on either side and black-and-white checkered tiles on the floor.

One man waits at the far end of the hall with his back to me. He’s tall and broad-shouldered—Alex.

On second thought, he’s maybe a little too tall, actually? I giggle under my breath, already planning to make fun of him for putting lifts in his shoes to ensure he towers over me. Men can be so petty.

I hear a clank and look over my shoulder to see that the thin man who brought me here has retreated back out into the atrium of the courthouse and shut the door behind him.

It’s just me and my soon-to-be husband. The judge must be on his way.

“Alex!” I call. I cringe and giggle nervously as my voice echoes throughout the empty hall. It’s a little spooky how quiet and empty this place is.

He doesn’t turn. Doesn’t answer.

Weird.

I shrug and cross the distance to him. My heels click and my dress whispers across the tile.

The closer I get, the more I feel like Alex isn’t just taller—he’s broader, too. More muscled than I remember. And his hair seems sort of darker. Are my eyes playing tricks on me, or have I forgotten what my fiancé looks like?

“Alex!” I say again.

Still no answer. He keeps his back to me. I step up onto the dais where he’s waiting.



“Alex?” I whisper.

Then he turns.

And my body goes cold.

Isaak Vorobev gives me a soft smile. The same smile that ruined my life in the first place.

“Hello, Camila,” he murmurs. “It’s been a long time.”

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ISAAK

Six years to get to this moment.

She's fucking worth it.

"You look beautiful," I tell her. I mean it—she's a fucking revelation in that dress. I want to tear it off of her here and now and lick between her legs until the hall echoes with her moans.

Six years and I still haven't forgotten what that sound does to me.

Six years and I still haven't forgotten what that taste does to me.

Six long, endless fucking years, and I still haven't forgotten what those eyes do to me.

"There's another ceremony in an hour," I drawl, "so we better get a move on."

That manages to job her out of her reverie. "What the hell is going on?" she demands. "Are you—who—what—how..."

She's looking up, down, and all around, like the answers to the billion questions wracking her brain right now are hidden somewhere in the wainscoting.

I give her an insolent smirk. "Your fiancé is indisposed at the moment," I say. "But don't worry; you're still getting married today."

Her eyes flare in a gesture that feels strangely familiar despite how little we actually know each other. "Excuse me? To

whom, if you don't mind me asking?"

I make a show of sweeping my eyes around the empty hall. "Do you see anyone else here besides me, Cami?" I taunt.

"You think we're getting married," she says flatly. "As in you and me."

I grin. "Now you're starting to get it."

She whirls around, skirts flaring wide—clearly looking for the fucker she was about to waste her life on

"Where is Eric?" she demands.

Or maybe not.

"Eric?"

"My agent," she snaps. "The one who's supposed to keep me safe from assholes like you. Actually, from you in particular."

I cock my head to the side. "Your agent's name is Andrew Wentworth."

She frowns, flustered. "I... right. Well, I meant my former agent."

"He's indisposed, too."

The shock gives way instantly to fury. "You better not have hurt him," she gasps.

"Which one?"

Her cheeks flush with color. "... Both," she stammers eventually. "What have you done with them?"

"Nothing you need to worry about right now," I assure her. "Your attention should be here. It's your big day, after all."

She takes an angry step toward me, fists balled and eyes fierce. Standing stationary, she managed to look effortlessly beautiful.

But when she moves, she looks like she's about to tip over.

"Where. Is. My. Fiancé?" she hisses one word at a time.

"Detained," I retort curtly. "I'll give you the details later. For now, we're on a time crunch."

Sighing, I step one foot down off the dais, snare Cami's wrist, and tow her towards me. She talks three tottering steps, too shocked to react, before she shakes me off angrily.

"Don't touch me!"

"As you wish."

When I drop her wrist, her balance shifts and she starts to timber over. Only planting both hands on the surface of the desk saves her from faceplanting. I suppress a chuckle.

She glares at me with fury in her eyes and puffs a loose strand of hair out of her face. "You're an asshole."

"We have a lifetime to call each other names," I say wryly. "In the meantime, you need to sign."

I point to the desk. She stares down at the registration papers awaiting her signature.

"You can't be serious," she gapes at me.

"And yet here we are."

"You can't make me marry you."

I arch an eyebrow. "Actually, you'll find that I can."

Striding over to her, I snag the golden pen from the holder on the table and scrawl my name at the bottom of paper. Then I hand the pen over to Camila.

"Your turn."

"You're insane."

"Sign."

Rather than bother with an answer, she grabs the pen and promptly hurls it across the room. The only sound is her huffing and the metallic skittering of the pen as it dances down the floor.

I've never experienced this side of her. Not in full force like this, at least I remember seeing flashes of it during our one night together. Enough heat to suggest a roaring fire somewhere deep inside her soul.

Seeing it in action certainly doesn't disappoint.

A side door opens and shuts. Bogdan steps in, just in time for the pen to come to a rest at his feet. He picks it up and joins us at the altar.

As he hands it back to Cami, her eyes lock onto his face and recognition washes over her.

“You...”

He smiles mournfully. “I’m the guy who screwed up six years ago,” he says.

I expect her to hit back with some sarcastic retort. But instead, she shakes her head. “It was five against one. You couldn’t have stopped them all.”

“But I should have.”

She frowns. “Where’s the logic in that?”

“If you knew our father, you’d understand.”

She glances at me, making note of the relationship.

“Listen, Camila,” Bogdan says gently, “this is happening. It’s going to be a lot easier if you just sign on the dotted line.”

I grit my teeth. Of course he would try and reason with her, whereas I want to bend the brat over the desk and spank her into compliance.

My first instinct is always force.

Bogdan’s is diplomacy.

“I’m not going to be forced into marriage,” she says sharply. “This isn’t right.”

“My brother can protect you.”

“Your brother?” she scoffs. “Your brother ruined my life six years ago. And just when I’m on the verge of getting it back, here he is again. Excuse me for not jumping for joy.”

My patience is wearing thin. Bogdan can sense it.

“Camila—”

“Enough!” I roar.

Camila jumps and screams. She's only ever seen the charming side of me. The smooth-talking velvet devil, the billionaire playboy who gave her the night she could never forget.

She doesn't know how deep the darkness runs.

But she will. One shadow at a time.

"This is not up for discussion," I snarl when the echoes of my voice have faded. "If you don't sign, I'll be forced to make you."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "I guess you'll have to make me then."

Fuck if the woman doesn't know exactly how to get me hard.

"So be it."

I move fast. Before Camila can even react, I'm on her. Hips pressed against hers from behind, her scent in my nose, I wrench her left hand behind her back like I'm cuffing her and envelop her right hand in my own.

"Let me go!" she yells, thrashing wildly.

She doesn't stand a fucking chance.

I grab her right hand and force it down towards the paper. *CLICK* goes the pen, and then I scribble it over the blank line and release her instantly.

She stumbles away from me, nearly losing her balance again. Her hair is a wild lioness's mane around her head. Her dress is sagging off one shoulder, revealing that delicate little collarbone.

The same thought crosses my mind that popped up the moment she walked in: this little *kiska* is a fucking revelation.

As if it just occurred to her, Cami turns and tries to flee for the exit. She makes it about two steps before Bogdan coolly slides into her path. I hear the breath rush from her lungs as she collides with him.

She falls. He stays still as a statue.

“I thought you’d be the nicer brother,” she growls up at him from the floor.

He chuckles. “I’m not surprised. Everyone makes that assumption. I’m flattered, though, really.”

“It’s not a compliment if it’s not true!”

“Oh, but it is true,” he insists as he lifts her up from the ground. “You’ll see that soon enough.”

“Or how about now?” I suggest.

I’m done with the games. Time’s wasting. Coming here like this was a risk anyway, and now I’m ready to get the fuck out.

So I step forward as Cami is still regaining her balance, scoop her up, and throw her over my shoulders like a sack of potatoes. She starts to scream and pound my pack with her flailing fists. I barely feel it.

We burst through the main doors and out into the lobby. People look, but if anyone was considering intervening in this debacle, they change their mind as soon as they see the ice-cold cruelty in my eyes.

I’m not a man to be fucked with.

Cami will learn that soon enough.

My Trasco armored Mercedes-Benz is parked right outside, flanked by a handful of my men. One of them opens the door to the rear compartment.

“Where are you taking me?” Camila cries from somewhere over my shoulder.

“Home,” I answer simply.

The boys snicker as I toss her down on the cushioned reclinable seat and quickly fasten the seat belt across her chest. I’d be lying if I don’t admit that I enjoy that part quite a bit.

When she’s buckled in, I grab her face in my hand and turn her towards me. “Sit quiet and enjoy the ride, *kiska*,” I snarl.

Then I step back and slam the door in her face.

Bogdan is waiting for me on the other side of the vehicle. “Congrats, *sobrat*,” he says.

“Shut up.”

His smile only gets wider. “She’s gotten even more beautiful over the last six years,” he points out.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Do you have a point?”

He shrugs. “Just saying. As far as forced marriages go, you lucked out.”

“You can ride in the second Wrangler.”

“Oh, come on, don’t be an asshole!”

I shove him towards it. “It’ll leave without you if you’re not careful.”

“Ah, I see what it is. You want some alone time with your beloved. I’ll get out of your way. Still laughing, Bogdan walks off towards the Wrangler parked right behind the Benz.

Scowling, I get into the back beside Camila and tap the driver’s seat in front of me. The partition rolls up at once, cutting us off from the front of the vehicle and ensconcing us in the soundproof compartment.

“You realize this is abduction, right?” she asks as soon as we start moving.

“Abduction? I think you’re confused. You’re my wife. Where I go, you go.”

Her green eyes are bright with denial. “I am no such thing. If I go before any court of law and say that I was forced into marrying you, that makes this—whatever this is—null and void.”

“Good luck getting to any court,” I chuckle.

“You bastard!”

I smile at her passion. “You’re feistier than I remember.”

“Don’t you dare smile at me,” she hisses. “I may have fallen for your charm once, but it won’t happen again.”

“That sounds like a challenge, *kiska*.”



“You’re used to getting your own way, aren’t you?”

I shrug. “Men like me usually end up with what they want.”

“Figures.” She huffs and looks out her tinted windows. “If I scream, will anyone even hear me?”

“Afraid not.”

She sighs and relaxes into her seat. Fine by me. I pour myself a whiskey from the drink drawer and do the same, idly sipping as we meander through London towards my estate.

“Is it true?” Cami asks suddenly after a long silence.

“Is what true?”

“When the cops rescued me from that godawful cell in that horrible building, they told me that you were the don of the Vorobev Mafia.”

I glance at her. “It’s true. But you already knew that.”

She’s lost some color since walking into the courthouse. But apart from that, she’s taking it all in stride. A weaker woman would have been in hysterics at this point. But Camila just sits there, asking cogent questions and processing slowly.

It’s a little unsettling.

And also a little arousing.

“They told me you’ve killed countless men. Some women, too.”

I could explain and justify, but I don’t do either. “Both true.”

“They told me that you took over for your father, who was just as ruthless a don as you are.”

“True again.”

“They told me you make your money on illegal businesses that make billions every year.”

“That’s a bold-faced fucking lie,” I snarl. Then I relent and smirk. “Some of them are legal.”

She crosses her arms and broods. I continue drinking my whiskey.

“The men who took me that night... They took me because they thought I meant something to you,” she says.

My eyes snap to hers. “The cops did a lot of talking, huh?”

“The cops didn’t tell me that,” she says. “*She* did.”

I’m instantly activated, instantly alert, but I don’t change my demeanor or my expression. I just keep my body relaxed and disassociated. I wouldn’t be fit to be don if you could read all my emotions in my eyes.

I keep that shit buried deep.

“She?”

“The woman who visited me in my cell the day the cops broke in and rescued me.”

Her eyes go hazy, like she’s looking back on that day in her memory. She clamps the trembling fingers of her hands beneath her thighs. I wonder how badly she suffered. It’s been six years since then, but the thought of anyone touching her, hurting her, depriving her?

It makes me fucking furious.

“I wouldn’t trust my memory if I were you,” I tell her. “You were starved and near delirious when they found you.”

She looks at me, confused. “How do you know all that?”

“Because I’m the one who told them where you were.”

Cami does a double take. “What?”

“I tipped off my sources in the police department. They went where I told them to go. Found what I told them to find.”

Her eyebrows knot together. “You expect me to believe that bullshit?”

“They never should have been able to take you from the restaurant that night,” I tell her. “I should have stopped them.”

It’s the closest thing to an apology she’ll ever get from me.

“The only reason they took me is because I was with you.”

“Yes,” I admit. “That’s why he took you.”

“He?”

“Maxim Vorobev,” I explain. “My cousin.”

Her frown deepens as she tries to put together the pieces herself. “Your cousin has issues with you and he tried to hurt you by taking me?”

“I believe he assumed that—”

“That I meant more to you than I really did,” she finishes for me. “Well, he’s extremely wrong about that.”

I glance at her, stirring around the ice in my whiskey. “I never meant to involve you in all this.”

“Does it matter?” she asks. “I was involved. I am involved.”

“For better or for worse,” I joke.

She glares instead of laughing. Then she relents and drops her head back against the seat behind her. “And I thought *my* family was complicated.”

I almost smile. But there’s still so much she doesn’t know. And I’m not about to let myself get dragged in like I did the last time.

There is no room for weakness in my world.

“So you thought you’d get to me before he did?” she asks. “Is that it?”

I pause before answering. In the gap of that silence, I drink her in. Her eyes are greener than I remember. Her lips are fuller. And she still hasn’t fixed the fallen strap of her gown or the wild frenzy of her hair.

Good—I like her better this way. Unrestrained. Wild. Fiery.

“Camila…” I begin. “He did find you. He found you over a year ago.”

Confusions washes over her face as she struggles to understand what I’m telling her. “I don’t understand. He’s been following me for the last year and a half?”

“No, not following you,” I tell her. “He never had to resort to that. Because you let him into your life.”

Whatever color she did have, drains instantly. “No... no...”

She understands now.

But I have to say it out loud anyway.

“You were going to marry him today.”

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## CAMILA

“You were going to marry him today.”

The words keep echoing in my ears. Louder and louder with each repetition, until I can't hear my own fucking thoughts. Until my panic grows so large that there's no room to breathe.

“Oh God,” I gasp, turning towards the window and slamming on the button to get it to open. I feel like puking.

It doesn't budge.

“Oh God, I... I can't breathe.”

He's saying my name. But it sounds like he's miles away from me.

“How do I open this fucking window?!”

*You were going to marry him today...*

I'm flailing frantically. Mashing buttons, my eyes won't focus and my hands won't work right and the lack of oxygen is a dagger in my chest.

Somehow, something connects. The window slides down. Not all the way. Just a tiny crack at the top. But it's enough that sweet British air filters in through the top.

Enough to give me some space.

Enough to give me some perspective.

“Camila.”

I'm not used to hearing my real name anymore. I've been Emily Kunis for so long that it started to feel like who I truly

am. Or who I truly wanted to be, at least.

So why doesn't it sound strange when he says it?

When I've finally drawn a full breath, I steal a glance at Isaak as I grip the sides of my seat for support. He's looking back at me coolly, a glass of whiskey in his hand.

"You're wrong," I say at last. I wipe the spit from my lips. "Wrong about everything. My fiancé's name is Alex Royston."

The pity in Isaak's eyes makes me want to scream. "That's his alias. The persona he created to lure you into his trap. His real name is Maxim Vorobev. He's my cousin. His father was my father's older brother."

It makes sense, logically speaking. But it doesn't compute. Not truly.

"Alex is—"

"Maxim," he corrects instantly.

I stop short, trying to swallow back the bile at the back of my throat. "He... he's been lying to me this entire time?"

"Since the beginning."

"I don't understand," I protest weakly. "Why? What was the point of finding me, of proposing to me, of marrying me?"

"The point?" Isaak asks, his gaze sweeping over my face. "The point was to get revenge on me."

My mouth drops open a fraction.

"My cousin believes that I've stolen his life," he continues. "Marrying you was going to be his way of taking something of mine."

Despite the haze of shock and disbelief I'm still battling through, that strikes at the heart of my pride.

"I'm not yours," I snap fiercely. "I never was."

One corner of his mouth tilts upwards. Before he can respond, though, the window partition rolls down smoothly, revealing the suited driver in the front seat. "We're here, sir."

Isaak nods. "Thank you, Sven."

He gets out of the car and slams the door, leaving me in the silence for a few frantic heartbeats while my mind tries to process my world being flipped on its head.

A second later—long before I'm ready, before I've accepted even one tiny morsel of what's happening to me—my door swings open. And he's right there. All six foot however many he is.

For six years, it's been easy to curse Isaak Vorobev's name. To make him out to be a bad guy. The villain who ruined my life.

It's harder now. With those piercing blue eyes flaying me open, I feel the same wild things I felt the very first time he ever looked at me.

I remind myself what succumbing to him six years ago had cost me.

Isaak reaches out. I cringe away, but then I realize he's only unbuckling me from the seatbelt. His shoulder brushes against my chest and his hand grazes my hip as he frees me. At every point of contact, my body burns with tension.

It never felt this when Alex—Maxim, I mean; I may never get used to that—touched me. Truth be told, it's never felt like this when anyone touched me.

Anyone but Isaak.

When I'm free, he backs away instantly. Like the touch that burned me electrocuted him instead. "Follow me."

I swing my legs out of the car. Isaak is already striding away. My heels hit the graveled earth with a crunching sound. Using the car door for leverage, I push myself upright. Walking has never been harder.

I take a deep breath to steady myself. *Get it together, Cami*, I scold myself. *You're in the lion's den now. The only one you can trust is you.*

Once I'm reasonably sure I'm not going to tip over, I look up...

And promptly forget my entire pep talk.

Despite my determination to maintain a façade of dignified detachment, my eyes go wide when I look at the gorgeous three-story manor I'm standing in front of.

The main façade is intricately carved from weathered gray marble—the parts of it that I can see, at least. Most of it is cloaked in a wealth of crisscrossing ivy. The creepers ascend the trellises affixed to the walls, curl through the wrought-iron balconies, and then cascade downward like living waterfalls.

Chimney stacks stud the ceiling. A raven sits on the lip of the tallest one. When it sees me, it caws loudly.

“A little melodramatic, don't you think?” I mutter to it.

I turn my attention towards the direction Isaak went. A cobbled path leads directly to a gabled porch bay and an arched doorway with a family crest etched into the stone over the entrance.

“Jesus,” I breathe.

“See, it's not so bad, is it?”

I give a start of surprise when I realize that Isaak's brother is standing right next to me.

“Looks like a scene straight out of Downton Abbey,” he adds.

I roll my eyes. “That was an abbey. This is a manor.”

Bogdan gives me an eyeful. “Potato, po-tah-toe. It's big, is my point.”

I'm on the verge of laughing when I squash the instinct. He's not my friend. None of these people are.

It may be a pretty prison. Beautiful, in fact. But that doesn't mean it won't hold me captive all the same.

“Better hurry in,” Bogdan says, nudging me forward. “It looks like rain.”

I turn my gaze up towards the somber gray sky. Gray clouds are swooping in, almost low enough to graze the chimney peaks.



Taking a deep breath, I march down the cobbled pathway and through the gorgeous arch. Bogdan holds the door for me and ushers me inside.

It's just as beautiful in here as it is out there. Medieval tapestries hang over the rugged stone walls and the floor is clothed with lusciously thick rugs everywhere I look. The kind of rugs that look too expensive to step on, new shoes or not.

I hear voices and turn to see Isaak standing in an alcove, talking to a man who's almost as tall as he is.

Are all Russians tall? Or maybe it's just the Russians I'm unlucky enough to come into contact with.

Isaak, yes.

Bogdan, yes.

Al—*No*. Maxim. I say it under my breath three times fast: "Maxim, Maxim, Maxim." It still feels weird and clunky in my mouth.

He'd told me that he was an American with investment interests in Britain. But if Isaak is right, then my fiancé was as Russian as the rest of them. Apparently, I have a type: foreign and deadly.

The laugh that springs out shocks even me. Everyone turns to stare as though I've just grown another head.

"Camila?"

I shake my head and put my face in my palms. If I don't stop laughing now, I'll start to cry.

"Camila."

I swallow the desperate laughter. I look up, searching for a way out.

But all I see is Isaak.

He's looking over at me with an expression that's close to sympathetic—but not quite. I honestly don't think he's capable of emotions like that. Pity, yes. Rage, of course. But sympathy?

That would require him to be human.

“Why don’t you go up to your room and rest?” Bogdan murmurs from my side.

I raise my eyebrows. “My room?”

He nods. “Of course. Edith will show you up.”

Bogdan steps aside to reveal a young woman in a navy blue maid’s uniform, complete with a white apron. She’s blonde, too, but her hair is more honey than gold.

“Welcome to Pembroke Manor, Mrs. Vorobev,” she says with a completely straight face, and a very British accent.

“Who are you talking to?” I snap irritably.

She looks so startled that I actually feel a little guilty for being so rude. “Please forgive me, madam. I didn’t mean to cause offense.”

“Edith,” Isaak interrupts, his voice calm but lashing, “why don’t you just show our guest up to her room?”

She gives him a grateful nod and turns towards the semi-spiral staircase that leads up to the second floor. “Right this way, if you will.”

I would have refused to follow—if it hadn’t been for the fact that I want them all to stop staring at me. So I head towards the staircase in the maid’s wake.

We reach the landing, which opens out onto a maze of sumptuous carpeted hallways. Portraits line the walls. The men and women in them all look eerily like Isaak—and, I note with a shudder, like my fiancé.

Edith takes the leftmost corridor, shuffles halfway down, and gestures to a room. “Here you are, madam,” she says, holding the door open for me.

I step into the room in a daze.

Why should I expect anything less than magnificence? After the grandeur of the entrance and the foyer, you’d think the shock would have passed, but the room takes my breath away all the same.

This is the difference between riches and wealth.

It's a colossal, circular room. The walls are lined with Victorian paneling, each of the edges crisp and painted over in a deep sea green that seems to swim before my eyes. The fireplace is carved from the purest white marble. In front of it sits a pair of leather wingback armchairs, and above it is a mantelpiece stacked high with gilt-edged books. Looking down over everything from above the mantle is a sprawling oil landscape of the moors. It's cloudy, moody, dreamy. Almost certainly the lifetime achievement of some famous master artist whose name I could never pronounce.

The bed has a canopy draped with sheer tulle, though the hangings are tied back with golden rope to reveal the embroidered duvet and enough pillows to use a different one every night for months on end.

Directly across from the fireplace, the wall breaks again to ensconce a pair of windows and a Juliet balcony. It looks out onto the courtyard behind the manor, which is so green it makes my eyes throb.

"Well... fuck me," I breathe.

I flinch as soon as the words come out of my mouth. This place might be fit for a lady, but apparently my manners don't quite match. I glance guiltily at Edith.

She gives me a shy smile. "It's quite a lovely room, isn't it, Miss Camila?"

I frown. "Cami is fine."

She looks instantly uncomfortable with that. "Well, you have an en-suite bathroom just through there," she tells me, gesturing towards a cream door across the room. "And your wardrobe has a modest selection of clothes for you to wear for the time being. We'll get you fitted for new things as soon as you're ready, but in the meantime, I've taken the liberty of laying out a dress for you for tonight."

I cut off my gawking at once and whirl to face her. "Excuse me: *tonight?*"

She wrings her hands in front of her. “Oh, yes, madam. For dinner.”

“Dinner?” I probably sound like an idiot, but I want to make sure I’m hearing this right. Because she didn’t say “dinner” like it was just the time of day you eat a meal.

She said “dinner” like it was a date.

“You’re having dinner with Master Isaak tonight, of course.”

I’m angry and I don’t bother hiding it.

“I most assuredly am not!” I say with all the adamancy I can muster. “You can go down and tell him that forcing me to marry him doesn’t mean I’m going to play along with this insane charade he’s got going on here. He married a prisoner, not an accomplice.”

I walk over to one of the armchairs and plonk myself down, still in my wedding dress.

“He can go fuck himself,” I add. “And yes, you can relay that part of the message, too.”

Edith stands rigid in place, waiting for the punchline. But it’s not a joke. Or if it is, it’s very, very unfunny.

When I don’t so much as blink, she comes to her senses, backs out of the room, and closes the door with a meek little *click*.

As soon as she’s gone, I kick off those fucking uncomfortable heels and curl my legs up and underneath me.

There’s a small fire crackling in the hearth. Just enough to cast off a glow of warmth against the oncoming London gloom. More clouds are thickening outside my window, and right on cue, just like Bogdan said, rain begins to kiss the glass.

My eyes drift around the room. Now that the big picture shock has worn off, it’s the little details that are amazing me. The chiseled horses cantering up and down the bedposts. The ornate frill of the lampshade. The gleam of the writing desk.

It’s the books that I come back to again and again, though. I can’t help myself. They’re an addiction I cannot quit for the life of me, no matter where I find myself or how or why.

So, despite the million and one other things I should be focusing on, I step up onto the hearth and examine the collection.

*Anna Karenina* is the first title my eyes land on.

Of course—Isaak did tell me that Tolstoy was one of his favorite authors.

I run my finger over the other spines. *Mansfield Park*. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. *The Great Gatsby*. *Women in Love*.

My finger snags on one in particular—or maybe it snagged me, I'm not quite sure. I gasp as I pull it out to reveal a first edition hardcover of *Little Women*.

Giddy, I sink back into the armchair, crack open the book, and fall back into a world that I've fallen into again and again and again throughout my life.

And for a little while, I can forget.

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## CAMI

I'm sniffing hard when the door opens without warning and Isaak sweeps in. He steps in front of me, leaning casually against the mantelpiece, and gives me a smirk that makes my ovaries quiver.

"Sorry to interrupt you two," he drawls.

I slam the book shut and tuck it next to me.

"Edith said you had some choice words in response to my dinner invitation," he adds.

He has this way of watching me. As though he's noting my every movement. Memorizing it. Seeing things in me that no one else has ever or will ever see.

"Was that what you'd call an 'invitation'?" I retort. "Then again, I guess you called that kidnapping earlier a 'wedding,' so maybe you just don't know what words mean."

"Are you unhappy with the dress?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Do I seem like a shallow, empty-headed doll to you?"

"My apologies," he says, even though there's nothing remotely apologetic about his tone. "I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

"Comfortable?" I repeat incredulously. "Do you honestly—"

"This doesn't have to be a battle, Camila."

“You know what? I think it does. I think that’s exactly what it’s going to be.”

He sighs as though *I’m* being the unreasonable one. “I expect you to join me for dinner tonight,” he says at last.

“Then you’re going to be disappointed.”

I decide not to look directly at those forget-me-not blue eyes. They have a way of hypnotizing me even when my guard is raised.

“Just because you bring me to a beautiful house and give me a beautiful room and beautiful clothes doesn’t change the fact that I’m here against my own free will.”

“Sometimes things aren’t as black and white as all that.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I acted in your interests.”

I close my eyes and rub the bridge of my nose. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I don’t kid, *kiska*.”

His unfailing calm is not just unsettling—it also happens to be incredibly frustrating. I’m seconds away from ripping my hair out by the roots.

I jump out of my seat. *Little Women* goes clattering to the floor, but I don’t give a shit.

“You,” I breathe, jabbing a finger at him, “are using me. You are using me just like your cousin used me—allegedly, that is. Which means I was and am only a pawn between two powerful men with egos so large that they think they have a right to destroy lives without a second thought.”

He says nothing. The blue in his eyes swirls like alien oceans.

“Do you know how much I lost?” I ask, feeling emotion clog up the somewhat eloquent speech I’ve been practicing in my head for almost six years. “Do you know how much I had to sacrifice because you decided to interrupt my date that night?”

He blinks. He breathes. He doesn’t answer.



“And even after all that happened, and I had to upend my whole life and start over... even then, you’re still involved. Alex, Maxim, whoever the fuck he is... He decided I was important to you, so he took me. Because of *you*. Six years!” I cry out. My voice rises an octave. “I lost six years of my life because of you.”

Then, finally, he speaks. “I know.”

I frown.

“I know all of that, Camila. Which is why I stopped the wedding. Which is why I’m here. Which is why *you’re* here. I wanted to save you from losing the rest of your life to a man who was just using you.”

“By doing what?” I counter. “Replacing him with yourself and doing the exact same thing?”

“I’m not like Maxim.”

“You are exactly like Maxim,” I snap. “At least he had the decency to ask me to marry him.”

A shadow flits across his face. It’s a ripple of anger, mixed in with something else I can’t quite catch in time.

“I was never much good at pretending,” he says.

“Is that your excuse?”

“I don’t give excuses,” he replies. “Just explanations.”

He pushes off the mantle and takes a step towards me.

My immediate instinct is to move back, but I don’t want to give him the satisfaction.

What is it they say about bullies? They’re weak when confronted with strength. I’m not sure that rule holds here, but I stick to it anyway.

“You want to give me explanations?” I ask. “Then tell me why I’m even here.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Have dinner with me and maybe I’ll tell you.”

I cross my arms across my chest. “Ha! Here’s a word you’re not used to hearing: *no*.”

His eyes go cold so fast that I almost gasp. It’s like jumping into a frozen lake, how the tiniest shift in his expression sucks the air from my lungs.

Then he moves. He’s on me in a heartbeat. Hips flush to mine. His face fills my field of vision. His scent consumes me—the same cool, musky cologne I’ve spent six years trying and failing to forget.

“Don’t mistake this for a partnership, *kiska*,” he snarls in my face. “This is a give-and-take. Meaning that either you give, or I take. Either way, I get what’s mine. That’s the only way you’ll ever earn back your freedom.”

My breath catches. All I want is to shrink back, to run from his face of fury. But I can’t.

Because I know damn well he means every word he says.

“So if I have dinner with you,” I gulp, “you’ll let me go?”

He relents, leaning back and nodding. “Eventually.”

“When?”

“You’ll be here for as long as it takes to remove the threat that Maxim poses.”

“What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t concern you.”

I shake my head. “Typical.”

“What is?”

“You. Men like you,” I snap. “You use and command and drag people around as it suits you. You expect us to be at your beck and call, but me? I’m left out of the decisions, the reasons, the planning.”

“This is the Bratva.”

“Uh-huh, and?”

“And if you want a seat at the table, you have to earn a seat at the table.”

“I don’t want a seat at any table you’re at,” I retort like a brat.

“Then be content to do as you’re told,” he says. “I expect to see you down for dinner at eight. Don’t make me come drag you down myself.”

I’m tempted to tell him to go fuck himself again as he turns to leave, but I suppress the urge. I may talk a big game, but I’m not delusional. I know I have no power here, and no resources. If there’s even a chance that he might let me go, I have to cooperate. But that doesn’t mean I have to lay down flat and thank him for walking all over me.

“Isaak.”

He stops in the threshold and glances back over his shoulder.

My breath catches in my throat again, and for the dozenth time since he turned around in the hall to reveal himself to me, I wish that he wasn’t so sinfully attractive. It would have been so much easier to hate him if he looked like the villain.

“Yes?”

“I can cooperate,” I tell him. “But there’s something I want.”

He waits. Breathes. Leaves me dangling in the silence.

“I want to make a video call every day,” I finish. “And I want privacy when I do.”

He pivots slowly towards me. “And who is it that you’re calling?”

“That’s my business.”

“You’ll find that everything that happens in this house is my business,” he intones.

Taking a deep breath, I let him have this one morsel of truth. Partial truth, at least. “My sister,” I say. “I just want to talk to my sister.”

“The one who convinced you to go on that date with the douchebag?”

My eyebrows lift immediately. “You remember?”

“I remember everything, Camila.”

I shudder. He has a way of saying things that seem to mean so much more than how they affect the here and now. Like there's weight and importance to each and every word. It keeps me on edge at all times.

"Very well," he sighs. "You can have your daily phone call."

"Unsupervised?"

"Until you prove that you don't deserve that privilege. But you should know that if I find out you're trying to get in touch with anyone other than your sister, there will be consequences."

There it is again. Another word that means so much more than it should. *Consequences*. It makes me think of whips and chains.

"I'll see you at eight."

Then he storms out and I'm left all alone in this gorgeous, haunted castle. I won a minor victory in this battle, maybe—but I have no doubt that Isaak Vorobev intends to win the war.

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## ISAAK

“There must be some trace of him.”

Bogdan looks up from the screen. “I’m afraid not. He went under soon after the dust cleared.”

“How many of his men did we get?”

“Fifteen,” Bogdan replies. “The rest fled with him. And with his resources here, he’s going to be tough to find if he doesn’t want to be found.”

“All those resources didn’t protect him from us,” I snort.

“True. We had the element of surprise and Maxim was cocky. But he knows we’re here now.”

I lean back in my armchair and consider the situation. Something about it is fucking irritating me and I can’t quite figure out what. We’ve been planning this mission for years now. I’ve had time to contemplate every angle, every strategy.

And my plan worked perfectly. Or almost perfectly. I got the girl. Decimated Maxim’s personal forces. Sent him running for the goddamn hills.

The only way it could’ve gone better would be if I had his head on a silver platter right now.

But that failure isn’t what bothers me. He’s on the run now. It won’t be long until I dig the rat up from his hiding hole and end his miserable life.

No, the thing I’m angry about is the time it took to get this far. Eighteen months they were engaged. That’s eighteen months

of touching her. Of kissing her. Of taking what was never his to take.

That shit makes me see red.

“You okay, *sobrat?*” Bogdan asks, shutting the screen and pushing the laptop aside.

“I want everyone on high alert,” I say instead of answering his question. “The fucker knows I have her now. He’s going to try and take her back.”

“That would really put a damper on your honeymoon.”

I chuck a pen at his head. He ducks and laughs, knowing he’s the only one who can get away with saying that kind of thing to me.

“She’s very beautiful, you know,” he adds, slumping back in his chair.

“So you’ve said.”

“Do you think Maxim knows?”

“Knows what?”

“That you and Camila only really had that one night together. One conversation, really.”

“I don’t give a fuck what he knows. He miscalculated badly.”

“Oh, I don’t know about all that.”

I narrow my eyes at Bogdan. I love the little whelp, but he can be tiring sometimes. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying, he was right in assuming she meant something to you. Otherwise, why would we go through all this trouble to take her back?”

“I didn’t want him thinking he’d won.”

“And that’s the only reason.”

I glare at him. “Yes.”

“If you say so.”

“Don’t make me send you back to New York.”

“Please,” he scoffs, rolling his eyes. “You’d miss me too much.”

“But at least I’d be able to get some peace and quiet.”

Bogdan chuckles, but his expression irons out as he looks at the mess of paperwork on the desk between us. “You don’t have to go through all this yourself, you know. We have an accountant.”

“I don’t trust anyone with my money but me.”

Bogdan shakes his head. “Papa used to do this, too.”

Our father’s shadow has been hanging over my head since the moment he took his last breath. In life, he made sure to imprint his presence into the very folds of my skin. No matter what I do, I can’t escape his voice in my head. I glance down at the silver scars along my right arm and remember him.

“I should have had the same scars,” Bogdan says suddenly, noticing where my gaze is directed.

“What?”

“You think I don’t know, but I do,” he says. “He never cut me—because *you* stood in front of me. You stopped him from teaching me the lessons he taught you.”

My jaw flexes uncomfortably. “When Uncle Yakov died, I knew I’d be done one day. So it was necessary for me to learn. It wasn’t necessary for you.”

“Sure, I know all that. But I know how much you protected me from him.”

“Are you getting sentimental on me, little brother?”

Bogdan smiles. “Not today.”

I get to my feet and move for the door. I feel restless and impatient sitting here. I need to pace, to move, to feel like I’m doing something.

Bogdan reaches for his laptop to resume the hunt for my traitorous cousin. “Before you go,” he calls after me without looking up from his screen, “you should know that Mother called this morning.”



“Did you tell her we’re in London?”

“I had to.”

I nod. “I’ll call her later.”

“You better, or there will be hell to pay. Even big, powerful dons have to listen to their mothers.”

I grumble and give him the finger.

“Off to dinner with your new bride?” he asks, wagging his eyebrows at me.

I roll my eyes. “I need information from her.”

“If that’s your story,” he smiles. “You need to tell Mother she has a daughter-in-law.”

“She doesn’t.”

“I think you might be confused on the meaning of the word, brother.”

“I’m not confused about anything,” I snarl. “This whole thing is fake. Bullshit. An arrangement, nothing more.”

“Mhmm. Whatever you say, sir.”

“You are insufferable. You know that, right?”

He smiles wide. “Better than anyone.”

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## ISAAK

I pace the grounds for a while and brood despite the rain. Or perhaps because of it. I'll always prefer New York, but there's something about London's dreariness that suits me.

When eight o'clock nears, I step into my private quarters, shower, and change into a white button down shirt and crisp black slacks. I cuff the sleeves to my elbow, then make my way to the dining room.

I'm five minutes early, but she's already there when I arrive. I freeze in the doorway.

"I take it you didn't like the dress?"

Cami's face is free of makeup and her hair is a rat's nest piled on top of her head. She's dressed in tattered jeans, a logo-free white t-shirt, and a pair of fuzzy pink flip-flops that I didn't even realize I paid for.

She turns from where she's standing by the windows. "Under other circumstances, it would've been fine," she says. Her eyes spark with defiance. "But I don't like being forced into things."

My first instinct is to rage. But immediately, I realize that's the wrong move. She probably planned this little rebellion from the moment I left her room. She wants me to get angry, to see how far she can push me.

I'll bite back at the little *kiska*.

But on my own terms. Not hers.

“Shall we sit?” I gesture gracefully to the table.

She plonks herself down unceremoniously on the chair opposite me and tucks her hair back behind her ears.

It’s clear she’s taken pains to look as unappealing as possible, but the effort is laughable.

She’s still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.

“You look lovely.”

She frowns. “You’re overdressed,” she says, eyeing my white button down.

“Wine?”

“No thank you,” she says brusquely.

I pour her a glass anyway. A moment later, the maids roll in the food trolley and start uncovering the silver cloches. One by one, the dishes are revealed and the room fills with savory scents.

“Help yourself,” I tell her. Her face is alight with hunger, although she’s trying not to tip her hand to me.

She shrugs like she doesn’t care about anything one way or the other. Then she takes a piece of grilled barramundi and drenches it in the accompanying sweet-chili sauce. I notice her eyes flicker towards the wine a couple of times, but she manages to resist.

If this is her “cooperating,” we have some work to do.

“We have a library in the manor,” I tell her. “You’re welcome to use it whenever you want.”

She nods.

“And the gardens cover about an acre. So there’s a lot to see there.”

Another nod.

“Is something wrong?”

Her eyes snap to mine. I’m met with green fire. “Oh, you mean apart from the fact that I’m a prisoner in this awful house and this fucked-up marriage?”

“You can leave,” I say. “Just so long as you’re accompanied by me or my men.”

“Jailers.”

“Bodyguards,” I amend.

“You expect me to be grateful that I’m allowed to check out your stupid books and your stupid gardens?” she asks bitingly. “Am I supposed to grovel at your feet and say, ‘Thank you, Master Isaak; you are so benevolent!’? Well, sorry, I’m not impressed.”

“Let me be clear: I don’t give a flying fuck if you’re impressed or not.”

She flinches back at my tone, but she manages to keep the fire blazing. “What did you do with Eric?”

“The Marshal?”

“Yes,” she practically hisses at me. “The Marshal.”

I suppress my smile. “He’s fine. We didn’t hurt him.”

“I’m going to need proof of that.”

“At some point, you’re going to have to trust me.”

“You’re dreaming if you think I’m ever going to trust another man again for as long as I live.”

I cock my head to the side. “You seem to trust Eric.”

“Eric is different.”

“How so?”

“He’s the father I never had,” she blurts out. Immediately after she says it, regret washes over her face, giving her instant color. “Or, I mean—that’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

She looks down at her plate. “I have a father,” she says. “And he was around my whole life. He was just...”

“Not the kind of father you wanted,” I say, helping her out.

That seems to strike the right chord. She looks up at me and nods. “Sure. Yeah.”

“I know a little something about that.”

“Who could’ve guessed that you have daddy issues?” she seethes sarcastically.

I pull up my sleeve and brandish my silver scars in her face. “These were some of his gifts to me.”

At once, the feistiness dissipates. “Oh my God!” she gasps. “He... he did that to you?”

I shrug and lower my arm. “He was teaching me.”

“Teaching you what?” she asks incredulously. “How to be a fucking psychopath?”

“Teaching me how to be the leader I needed to be,” I explain. “And it worked. I learned my lessons. I’ve never forgotten.”

“How could you?” she scoffs. “When they’re ingrained into your literal flesh.”

I smile somberly at her outrage. She seems to sober a little. “He’s dead now. So it doesn’t really matter anymore.” I jut my chin at her full wine glass. “You should drink. It’s a Domaine Leroy Aux Brulees from 1993.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“It means you should drink.”

She crosses her arms and leans back in her seat. “No.”

“Are you always this stubborn?”

“Only when my principles are involved.”

“And you have a lot of those, do you?”

“Every person should.”

“You must be lots of fun at parties.”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “Did you force me to have dinner with you so you could fling insults at me all night?”

“I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing.”

“Please—you always know what you’re doing.”

I have to resist the urge to laugh. She's just as sharp as I remember her. Just as caustic. Just as funny.

There were moments over the last six years when I'd managed to convince myself that I'd idealized our night together. I'd been fascinated with an unknown woman, and before my curiosity had been properly sated, she'd been plucked away.

Of course it makes sense that I'd thought about her since then.

I'd never gotten the chance to get her out of my system.

"Stop looking at me like that."

I raise my eyebrows. "Like what?"

"Like you're imagining what I look like naked."

I smile. I can't fucking help it. She's more entertainment than I've had in a while.

"I don't have to imagine anything," I remind her. "I've *seen* you naked."

The blush is immediate. And it's as fierce as her stare when she decides she has something to be angry about. She kicks at the table to scoot her chair back. The cutlery rattles angrily.

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"Sit down," I tell her calmly.

"Why don't you make me? Since that's what you seem to be into."

I take a sip of my wine and breathe for a long moment. She's testing my patience, my composure. She won't win, of course. But part of me relishes the challenge she presents.

Setting my glass down, I fold my hands on the table and look Cami square in the eye. "Sit down in your fucking seat or I'll have a dozen men in here at the snap of my fingers to put you there for good."

She stiffens and gawks for a moment. Wondering just how serious I am. My threat hangs in the air, exactly as ominous as I intended. She doesn't know that it's actually an empty threat—sort of, at least.

In truth, if push comes to shove, I'll sit her ass down and chain her to that chair with my own two hands. I'd never let my men lay a finger on her.

Cami looks deep into my eyes. And what she sees there confirms it. I'm a man of my word.

And she sits.

*Good little kiska.*

"Was this manor bought from blood money?" she asks quietly.

I resume eating. The lamb is a marvel tonight. "No."

"But you'd probably wouldn't tell me the truth anyway, would you?"

"Probably not."

"That night when we met, you told me you were dangerous. I should have believed you."

I try not to let the regret in her voice get to me. "You did believe me," I tell her. "You just wanted me too much to care."

She opens her mouth as if to argue, but then she turns her attention back to her plate instead.

Her shoulders are forced back, like she's trying her best to keep her composure and her head. A thick lock of her hair has escaped the messy bun to drape down her back. I imagine collecting that wealth of hair between my fingers again. Bunching it together so that I can steer her from behind.

I'd done it before.

But the memory is somewhat faded now.

I wouldn't mind a refresher.

"Promise me that you didn't hurt Eric," she says, bringing the conversation back around to the beginning.

"I didn't hurt Eric," I echo.

"And you're not lying to me."

"No."



She sighs deeply. “For a long time, he was my only friend, you know. And when the agency got wind of that, they replaced him.”

“You didn’t like your new agent?”

“Agent Andrew Wentworth,” she mimes cruelly, her tone filled with disdain. “He’s a dick.”

I snort with laughter. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“I cried for a week when they replaced Eric,” she says softly. I have a feeling she’s going somewhere with this. “I saw him maybe once every couple of months after I was relocated to England, if that. And I used to long for his visits because it meant I could sit down, face to face, with an actual human being and have a real conversation. I could be myself. I could tell the truth. I could vent and rage and cry. And he would sit and listen. He would tell me how unfair it was that my life imploded because I got caught in a war that had nothing to do with me.”

Her voice falters. She tightens her fist around the napkin in her lap.

And for the first time today, I frown.

“I never meant for this to happen, you know.”

“You can plead innocence that night,” she says. “But what about this morning, when you stole the rest of my future by marrying me?”

I’m not about to explain my reasoning. And I’m not about to ask for forgiveness, either.

“Would you have rather I let you marry my cousin?”

“All I have is your word against his,” she says. “And let’s face it: I’m not allowed to have words with him at all, am I?”

“You want to talk to Maxim?”

“I want to talk to *Alex!*” she cries in frustration. “He’s the man I agreed to marry.”

“He’s a fantasy,” I growl. “He doesn’t fucking exist. ‘Alex Royston’ is nothing more than a mirage that was going to

disappear the moment you signed on the dotted line.”

“Again,” she says, raising her voice, “that’s *your* story. All I’m hearing is *your* version of things. I haven’t been given the chance to get anyone else’s opinion.”

“And you won’t, so stop asking. If you think I’m going to let Maxim anywhere near you—”

“That’s not your damn call!” she interrupts furiously.

If she’s scared of me, she does a freaking brilliant job of hiding it. Those green eyes are pure fire.

It’s like she was fucking made for me.

“I have a right to decide who I want to talk to and where I want to go,” she adds. “I have the right to decide who I want to marry.”

I lean in towards her a little. “And you want to marry him, is that it?”

“He promised me security,” she snaps. “And safety. A chance for me to go back home and finally see—”

She breaks off mid-sentence, her cheeks flushing once again.

“Finally see whom?”

“My family,” she says, her voice teetering on the brink of collapse. “My sister, my nephews. I haven’t seen them in years! I haven’t gotten to watch them grow up. I haven’t been there to... to tuck them into bed...”

A sob bursts through her lips, and she turns her wild, tear-stained eyes away from me in shame.

“Camila—”

“Don’t!” she says. “Don’t do that. Don’t say my name as if you know me.”

“I do know you.”

“One conversation doesn’t make us friends, Isaak,” she hisses. “And being married doesn’t make us husband and wife.”

A single tear breaks free and trickles down her cheek. And that tear...

*Fuck.*

Seeing that lonely tear does something to me. Something utterly unexpected.

It makes me fucking furious.

Does she not realize what I've saved her from? Does she not realize that I've just given her back her life?

"You're upset," I say coldly. "Go upstairs and get some rest."

"Stop ordering me around. You've taken enough from me without trying to steal away my free will, too."

"Is that what you think I've done?"

"Isn't it?"

Those green eyes gleam under the light from the chandeliers hanging overhead.

"I'm not free, am I?" she says.

"You want freedom?" I ask. "Fine. I'll give you freedom."

Then I storm out of the dining room, leaving Camila to our half-finished meal.

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## CAMILA

“I don’t understand.”

“You and me both,” I sigh.

Bree stares at me so long that I wonder for a second if the screen froze. “You’re with him. *Him* him?”

“*Him* him.”

“Well, fuck me sideways.”

I have to smile at that. Bree stopped swearing when she had Peter, thirteen years ago. But if there were ever a time to take it up again, it’d be right now.

“So the house you’re in right now is his?”

“Bree, focus.”

“Sorry. I’m just trying to wrap my head around this.”

“You and me both.”

“Stop saying that,” she snaps.

“Sorry.”

“No, no, I’m sorry,” she says quickly. “I’m just... stunned. And worried. Cami, this is kidnapping.”

“Technically, yeah.”

“And legally, morally, spiritually, psychologically... I could keep going.”

“I get it. But Bree, he hasn’t hurt me.”

“Yet!” she screeches. “Yet!”

“That’s the thing,” I say. “I don’t think he’s going to.”

She stops short and gives me an odd look. “Cami...”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m just trying to figure something out.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Cami, you don’t still have feelings for the man, do you?” she blurts.

I end up doing a brilliant impression of a goldfish. Lips flapping uselessly with no words emerging.

“That... that’s a ridiculous question.”

“Is it?” she asks. “Because you just took about ten light years to answer a very simple question with a very obvious answer.”

“He’s responsible for every bad thing that’s happened in my life in the last six years,” I remind her.

“Mhmm,” she agrees. “But he’s also responsible for Jo.”

And bingo, she’s hit the nail on the head. That’s the impossible reality of my life right now. Isaak Vorobev is the reason my world imploded six years ago.

But he also—unbeknownst to him—gave me the biggest joy of my life.

Jo Ferrara.

My daughter.

“Have you told him?” Bree asks quietly.

I lean back in my chair and rub my face. “Of course not. And I don’t plan to, either.”

“Mhmm...”

“You know, I really wish you would stop saying ‘Mhmm.’”

“What’s wrong with ‘Mhmm’?”

“Nothing’s wrong with ‘Mhmm.’ What’s wrong is your tone.”

“There’s no tone.” She brushes a stray lock of hair out of her face innocently.

“I wish you would just come right out and say it.”

“I thought I already had.”

“I don’t have feelings for the man. I never did.”

Bree frowns. “Well, ‘never’ is a strong word...”

“Bree!” I snap. “I had one conversation with him one night.”

“And you also slept with him that same night.”

I close my eyes and cover my face with my hands. “Fuck.”

Bree laughs. “You don’t have to do that, Cami. Not with me. I was glad you finally decided to break your dry spell. I just wish you’d chosen a different man.”

“You and me—”

“Cami!”

I grin. “Sorry.”

“Where are you, exactly?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?” she demands.

“For one, I don’t actually know. For another, I don’t want to piss him off and ruin my chances of getting out of here.”

“You think that’s likely?”

“I think he’ll keep his word,” I admit.

“Okay, well, wow.”

I sigh. “What?”

“You like him,” she breathes. “And if not ‘like,’ you definitely have this kind of... begrudging respect for the man.”

“He hasn’t actually lied to me.”

“He hasn’t had the chance to!” Bree points out. “You’ve known him for what, a couple of hours in total, if you string together all the time you’ve really spent together?”

“I know, I know, you’re right,” I say in defeat. “Of course you’re right. But I’m going with my instincts on this one. Maybe if I cooperate, then I’ll have a better chance of seeing Jo. Maybe I’ll get the chance to be a real mother to her.”

“Hey now, stop that right now. You are her mother.”

I wipe away the tears threatening in the corner of my eye. “In name only. But let’s face it, you’re more of a mother to her than I am. You’re the one who puts her to bed and washes her hair and holds her when she’s sick or sad.”

“Oh, honey...”

But she fades off. She has nothing to say, because she knows it’s true. It’s all true. And Bree is too honest to patronize me by pretending otherwise.

“This is a curveball I didn’t expect,” I tell her. “And I’m trying to figure it out. For me and for Jo. Like you said, he is her father. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to conceal her from him.”

“Are you worried about how he might react?”

“Honestly, I haven’t even thought about how he might react. I’ve got enough to worry about.”

“Like Alex whose name is not actually Alex?”

“Among other things, yeah. Maybe he’s just karma.”

“What makes you say that?” Bree asks.

“I lied to him about my name. Why shouldn’t he have lied to me about his?”

“Oh, come on, Cami, that’s ridiculous and you know it. You lied to protect yourself, your identity, and your daughter. He lied to trick you into falling in love with him. The two things are not comparable.”

When she gets her stern mom voice on, it’s hard to disagree.

“Maybe so,” I whisper. “So why do I feel like I’m in the right company?”

“Because you’ve always been too hard on yourself. Always.”



I take a deep breath. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Does he know you’re talking to me?” Bree asks.

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure he’s not, like, tapping the line or listening in or anything?”

“He told me I’d have total privacy.”

“Ah, I forgot: you trust him.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I amend. “I believed him on this one thing. That doesn’t mean I trust him.”

“Good. So you’re sure you don’t want me to contact anyone? Not even Eric?”

“No. If you tell him, then he’s going to press for more details about where I am. He’ll be obligated to get the department involved, too. I don’t want him getting hurt looking for me. He’s close to retirement, and he deserves a peaceful one.”

“He’s worried about you, Cami. We all are.”

“Let him worry,” I say. “It’s enough to know he’s safe.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yes. For now. Let me just see how this plays out.”

Bree gnaws at her lip. “Okay. If you’re sure.” She hesitates, then adds, “Cam, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Do you think he’ll be involved in Jo’s life one day?”

That’s a loaded question. “At this moment, I honestly don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Along with everything else.”

“And what about Alex?”

“Maxim,” I correct automatically, even though I still think of him as Alex in my head. “I’m not sure I’ll quite believe it until I see him in the flesh, speak to him face to face.”

“You should. You’ll need proof. Not to mention closure.”

I frown. “You don’t think Isaak would lie, do you?”

“About Alex being Maxim?” Bree scoffs. “He is a criminal mastermind. Bratva Don and all. I think he’s capable of anything. It’d be stupid to assume otherwise.”

I suppress the shiver running down my spine for Bree’s sake. “Is Jo back yet?”

“I’m sorry, hon. She’s still at her play date. If I’d known you were gonna call, I would have rescheduled.”

“No, no,” I say quickly. “I don’t want you rearranging her life around me. I want her to have fun. To be a kid. This is exactly why I left her with you.”

“See?” Bree says with a sad smile. “Best mother in the world.”

“Debatable,” I sigh. “Highly debatable. But thanks for saying it anyway. I’ve got to go.”

“Okay, one more question before you do: are you still as attracted to him now as you were back then?”

I gulp involuntarily. Leave it to a big sister to ask the hard-hitting questions.

“And keep in mind, I know when you lie, Camila Marie.”

Uh-oh. Stern mom voice plus my first and middle name. She means business.

“Yes,” I groan, burying my face in my hands. “Maybe more, honestly.”

“Fucking hell.”

“I’m glad my life is turning you into the foul-mouthed sailor you’ve always been deep down inside.”

“Just how attractive is this man?”

Her eyes flit away and I hear the clacking of a keyboard.

“Wait, are you googling him right now?”

“Of course. Hmm... lots of Isaaks, but none of them seem to be the right ones. Unless he’s a forensic accountant in his spare time.”

“Definitely not.” The thought of Isaak Vorobev in a cubicle is laughable, to say the least. “I don’t think he’s looking for notoriety on a public scale.”

“Do you have a picture of him lying around?”

“Why on earth would I have a picture of him lying around?”

Bree blushes. “Sorry, I went fifteen-year-old girl there for a second. I guess it doesn’t matter what he looks like. Just as long as you’re safe.”

“‘Safe’ is a strong word. According to Isaak, I’m safer here with him. I’m sure Eric would disagree, as would Maxim.”

“And according to you?”

I hesitate, then nod reluctantly. “I think here is safe.”

Bree nods. “Okay. You’ll call again?”

“As often as I can,” I tell her. “But don’t worry if you don’t hear from me, okay?”

“Um, not sure I can do that, but I’ll try,” she says, pursing her lips up. “At least you’re suffering in style.”

I glance around at the royal-caliber study I’m sitting in. “No kidding. This place is unreal. Small blessings, I guess.”

“Stay safe, Cami.”

“I will. I love you. Look after my girl.”

Bree gives me a little wink. Then her picture disappears. I leave her information on Skype, so that I can call her again tomorrow. Even if Isaak were to check up on me, all he’ll see is that I’ve called my sister, just like I said I would.

When I walk out of the study, Edith peels herself off the wall of the corridor, hands clasped in front of her. She must’ve been waiting for me.

I jump and nearly scream. “For God’s sake! How long have you been standing there?”

“Fifteen minutes, madam. Master Isaak instructed me that I was told not to disturb you while you were on your call.”

“Right. Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell; you just scared me. Thanks for waiting, but next time, just... knock or something.”

“Yes, madam.”

I take a moment to eye her. She’s a petite little blond thing, with warm gray eyes and an ever-present smile. I don’t know if my mind was poisoned by Lurch in the Addams Family cartoons from when I was a kid or what, but I always figured that household servants would be dour and off-putting. Edith is anything but that. She’s a bright ray of sunshine amidst all the English gloom.

“What were you waiting for me about?” I inquire.

“Well, perhaps we should get you to your room,” she suggests.

I glance down the hall. My room is two doors down. A literal hop, skip, and a jump from where we’re standing right now.

“Might I ask why?”

“You’re to be downstairs in half an hour, madam. You and Master Isaak will be dining out of the manor tonight.”

My blood curdles at once. “Is that so?” I drawl.

Edith hurries to open the door to my bedroom for me. I step inside and kick off my flip-flops, but my eyes go straight to the beautiful jade green evening dress that’s been laid out on my bed.

“Master Isaak picked it out for you himself,” Edith comments before I can even ask.

“Did he now?” I’m entirely unimpressed by his arrogance, if not his taste in clothes. “Well, it’s actually rather pretty. But I won’t be wearing that tonight.”

Edith blinks in confusion. “Ma’am?”

“Don’t worry,” I say dismissively. “I’ll be down at the appointed hour. We wouldn’t want to keep Master Isaak waiting, now would we?”

She flinches at my biting tone and looks nervously at the dress on the bed. I get the feeling she’s not much of one for conflict.

“If you don’t mind, could I ask what else you had in mind?” she says politely.

“First of all, the ‘ma’am’ has gotta go,” I say gently. “Just Camila is plenty. Or Cami. Whichever you prefer. And second of all, I’m perfectly comfortable in what I’ve got on right now.”

Her eyes flit over my jeans and t-shirt combo and she pales. “You... you’re wearing that for dinner tonight?”

“I am.”

“But—”

“Thanks for your help, Edith,” I say firmly. “You’re off the hook for today.” I give her a wink and a pat on the forearm. “Don’t worry. I can handle him.”

She looks pale, shaky, and rather skeptical as she leaves my room. I don’t like putting a sweetheart like her in an awkward position. But I’ll be damned if I let Isaak fucking Vorobev turn me into his little china doll.

This is my first step towards taking control of the situation.

Smiling to myself, I use the bathroom and then plant myself in front of the mirror. I wash my face with cold water and towel it dry.

Then I do absolutely nothing else.

I don’t even bother running a brush through my hair. I just keep it lying loose around my shoulders and head back into the bedroom. The fuzzy flip-flops will do nicely, I decide.

I step out. There’s a huge mirror hanging at the end of the hallway. I stop and peruse my appearance for a second.

Ripped to pieces blue mom jeans? Check.

Pink flip-flops that look like I taxidermized the Energizer Bunny? Check.

Hair like I just did a backflip in a wind tunnel, not a speck of make-up on my face, and a very carefully crafted “Isaac Vorobev, eat your heart out” gleam in my eyes? Check, check, and check.

“Dinner time,” I say to my reflection with a wicked grin.  
“Hope you’re ready for me.”

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## CAMILA

He's waiting for me at the bottom of the staircase.

I have to try very hard to control my expression, because Jesus Christ—he looks like Adonis in a suit. The dark blue suit coat seems to make his broad shoulders even broader. The crisp white shirt he's wearing underneath is open at the collar, with two buttons undone to show a smattering of dark chest hair and the creeping tendril of a tattoo.

“Is that what you're wearing?” Isaak asks. “I believe I chose a dress specifically for the occasion.”

The navy suit gives the intensity of his stare an extra lift. Not that he needed it.

“As a matter of fact, it is,” I say cheerily. “I'm all set for dinner. What's on the menu?”

I'm ready for a fight. A tug-of-war. At the very least, for him to send me back to my room like a scolded child.

In the end, though, I'm disappointed. Isaak just shrugs and holds the door open for me.

“After you.”

Feeling slightly deflated, I walk down to the silver, convertible soft-top coupe parked at the end of the gravel pathway.

He opens the passenger door and usher me in. I climb into the seat without a word. It takes all my willpower not to let out a quiet little sigh when I sink into the buttery soft leather.



Isaak slams my door shut, strides around the front of the car, and climbs into the driver's seat.

“Ready? Good.”

Then he floors it.

We shoot out of the compound like a cannonball. I suppress a scream, although I'm not ashamed to white-knuckle the armrests and pray a little bit to every god I've ever heard of.

We rip through the streets, tires squealing at every turn. When he whips one turn especially hard, I yell over the roar of the engine, “You're gonna get a ticket!”

“I don't get tickets,” he says coolly. Somehow, he manages to speak at a normal volume and still have his voice cut through the cacophony.

“Because you kill the cops who try?”

“Because they can't catch me.”

Then he shifts gears, we merge onto the highway, and I realize with a nauseous jolt that the speed we were traveling at before was him being cautious.

This is him being reckless.

Other cars dive out of the way as we tear down the road. I'm pressed back into my seat with the force of the acceleration and my thighs are tingling from the car's vibrations.

Isaak, on the other hand, looks cool as could be. He steers with one hand, switching gears with the other.

I just close my eyes and wait for the roller coaster to end.

It happens sooner than I expected. One moment, we're screeching through traffic like a bat out of hell. The next, brakes grind and we pull to a sudden stop outside of a restaurant.

My jaw promptly drops.

I recognize the name. Situated right on the banks of the Thames, this restaurant is one of the most exclusive, most expensive, and most beautiful in the entire continent.

The waitlist for reservations is up to ten months long. A woman could make a reservation, get pregnant, and have her baby before she'd get to sit at one of their tables.

I'm still processing the whiplash arrival when I see the valet approaching my door to help me out. I swear I notice a flash of surprise cross his face when he sees my attire through the car window.

Probably because he, the other valets, the hosts, and every other staff member else I can see is dressed in immaculate suits and ties.

Suddenly, my little rebellion loses all its steam.

"Something wrong?" Isaak asks innocently as he looks over at me.

I rearrange my face instantly. "Nothing at all."

Another valet steps to Isaak's door. Isaak rolls the window down, hands over an absurdly thick roll of bills, and says, "I'll park it myself." Then he floors the gas again and we go screeching into an empty spot in a shadowy corner.

Once we're stationary, he turns to me. "Still feeling confident in your choice of outfit?"

I narrow my eyes, feeling adrenaline surge through my body. "You mean they'll refuse to serve white trash like me?"

"Of course they won't," he replies. "You're with me."

"Well, then, do we have a problem?"

"Actually, we do," he says. His tone is calm. Eerily calm. I'm starting to feel a little uneasy. "I sent up a dress for you."

"I wasn't in the mood to wear it," I bite back. "I'm not usually in the mood to be dressed up like a doll. Never, actually."

"I wasn't trying to dress you. I was simply giving you a gift."

I laugh in his face. "You can't buy me with expensive presents and you can't impress me with fancy restaurants. None of that stuff works on me."

"It worked for Maxim."

The comment takes me completely off-guard. That's probably the only reason I don't slap him across the face.

"Fuck you."

Again, same as earlier when I taunted him as I came down the stairs, I'm expecting a reaction. Anger. Outrage.

I get nothing. Just more of this deadly, icy calm.

"This is what I wanted to wear," I add, unable to help myself from filling in the silence. "I knew it would piss you off the most."

"Piss me off?" he asks, raising an eyebrow. "I'm not angry. Maybe I would be if you tried walking into that restaurant dressed as you are now. But that's not going to happen."

"Great. Then take me back home."

"No."

I frown. Where's he going with this? "You can't make me change clothes," I point out.

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I realize their futility. Of course he can make me. He's a man who's built his reputation on making people do things they don't want to do.

I'm just his latest target.

I don't even have time to be frightened of what happens next, because I don't even really see it coming. I glimpse only a gleam of ivory and silver. Then the blade in Isaak's hand is ripping through my t-shirt from the collar all the way down to the hem.

It hangs in tatters. My black lace bra is on full display, though he somehow managed to slice through the front clasp in the same motion, so it's as useless as the shirt.

I stare down so long, a scream still trapped in my throat, that I actually think I've lost my voice. It takes a minute to find it again.

"What. The. Fuck!"

He just glances at me with his sure, confident gaze as he tucks the blade away. Then he pulls out a plastic-wrapped package from underneath his seat and hands it to me.

“You can either walk in there naked,” he says, “or wearing this. Your choice.”

I’m seething. So angry that it feels like I’m short-circuiting. “I can’t—you should’ve—you are fucking insane!” I stutter.

He gives me a dangerous smile, one that’s as much a warning as it is a seduction. “What’s it going to be, *kiska*?”

Keeping my eyes on him the entire time, I rip off what’s left of my t-shirt and bra. He may have won this one, but I don’t have to take it lying down like some beaten puppy. I unbutton my jeans, jerk my hips up, and shove them over my butt and down my legs.

His eyes linger on my black panties. On my bare breasts. I recognize that gleam in his gaze. Six years ago, it sealed my fate.

Things are different now, though. And if he thinks it will ever go back to the way they were, then he’s fucking delusional.

Sitting in his front seat in nothing but my underwear, I rip open the package he’s just handed me. I tear it open, strewing the shreds of crinkly plastic all around his precious convertible.

But when I get to what’s inside, I pause in disbelief.

“Are you serious?” I ask.

He smiles. “I was told it’s couture.”

“‘Invisible’ would be a better word.”

I hold up the garment. It’s a silver scrap of fabric that would be insufficient for a bandana, much less a dress. Cutouts in the side, a deep scooping neckline, and an outrageously short hem mean that the choice between wearing this and going in naked isn’t much of a choice at all.

“We’re five minutes late for our reservation,” Isaak adds, “so you’d better hurry up.”

Gritting my teeth, I try and figure out how to put the damn dress on. There isn't even a backseat available for me to spread out a little.

Suddenly, Isaak lurches towards me. I get a nose full of his scent—which, despite everything he's done to infuriate me in the last few minutes, few days, few years, remains obnoxiously sexy.

“What are you doing?” I demand as he encroaches into my personal space.

He leans in a little further so that his face is practically pushed up against my breasts. Then he grabs a lever next to my seat and pulls.

Immediately, my seat jerks backwards, giving me a little more leg room.

“There,” Isaak says. “That should help.” He leans back in his seat, a smirk playing along his lips.

“I could have done that myself, if you just told me where the lever was.”

“You seemed a little flustered.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” I snap sarcastically.

“You're holding the dress upside down,” he adds.

It takes me two more minutes to figure out how to put the dress on. And this time, he doesn't seem at all interested in helping.

He just watches me struggle. His eyes never leave my body. And despite my anger and resentment, my body grows hot with arousal.

Which tells me one thing: from here on out, when it comes to Isaak Vorobev, I need to be careful.

Really fucking careful.

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## ISAAK

I had purposefully chosen the slinkiest dress I could find. Because, despite what Cami seems to believe, I know her.

She relishes the fight. That's why she brandished that devious little smile when she pranced down the stairs at the manor in street clothes.

And that's why she was so disappointed when I played along. She expected sparks—and even though I knew what was happening next, I still felt that flash of anger at her defiance.

But this trick up my sleeve made it easy to fake my indifference.

Now, I'm reaping the rewards.

A front row view of her tight little body. I'm staring openly because I don't give a fuck if she sees me, if it bothers her. She's too goddamn delicious to look away from.

Those pert little nipples. The tiny patch of blond hair between her thighs. Even the tiny silvered stretch marks at the sides of her hips make my fucking mouth water.

Once she's got the dress on, I get out of the convertible with the second package and walk around to her side. Tugging open her door, I get down on one knee.

She regards me suspiciously. "What are you—" Then I pull out the pair of silver heels that sets a nice contrast to her glittery little slip dress.

“Take those fucking monstrosities off,” I order, jerking my head to the pink slippers she wore out of the house.

Surprisingly, she doesn't argue. She ditches them in the wheel well, then offers me her bare right foot.

I pluck the heel out of the box and slip it on her. My hands linger at her ankles as I set the clasp in place.

There's a moment when I'm certain she trembles at my touch. But when I look at her, she pretends to be preoccupied with a flock of crows overhead.

I take my time with the second one, too. I'm enjoying how hard she's fighting not to tip her hand. Not to show to me what I know is raging inside of her.

When both shoes are secured, I get to my feet. My cock is iron-stiff, but I ignore it for now.

“Here,” I say, offering her my hand.

She turns her nose up at it. “I can get out of a car just fine on my own, thanks. Been doing it for years.”

She clutches the sides of her door to tow herself upright. She's slightly unsteady as she gets used to the heels. I take the opportunity to appreciate the dress on her body.

It suits the little *kiska* perfectly.

The back is completely open, and only two tiny straps hold it up around her delicate shoulders. It's short, too, making her legs look a mile long.

“You look beautiful.”

“Shut up.”

Grinning, I turn and lead her towards the restaurant.

The maître d' welcomes us at the entrance and leads us straight to the special table I'd booked for us. It's a private, open-air patio that sits right on the Thames itself.

Cami is definitely stunned. Not just by the opulence of the restaurant, which is ranked top fifty in the world for good



reason, but in the natural beauty of the river sweeping by at our feet as well.

Of course, she doesn't say a word about either.

She sulks silently opposite me while the maître d' recites the chef's specially-curated menu for the evening.

She sulks silently while the wine is brought, presented, and poured.

She sulks silently when the fresh bread is placed at the center of the table and the waiters retreat.

Only when we're alone again does she finally turn her eyes up to meet mine and scowl. "What are you doing?" she demands.

I take a sip of the wine. Chateau Lafite Rothschild. Fucking perfection in a glass. "What do you mean?"

"I mean all this," she says, gesturing towards the mighty river and the decadent restaurant. "Why all this fuss and bother? I'm just your prisoner."

"I wouldn't say that."

"What would you say then?"

"You're my wife."

Her jaw tightens. "Do you enjoy provoking me?"

"I can't say I dislike it."

She crosses her arms over her chest. It has the not-unwelcome effect of pushing her breasts higher.

"Do you mind?!" she exclaims.

"Mind what?"

"You don't think I can see you staring?"

"Maybe next time you'll just accept my gifts the first time I offer."

"In your fucking dreams," she laughs.

I chuckle. "Suit yourself. The next dress I get you in is going to be even more risqué."

She rolls her eyes. “You can’t go more risqué than this. I’m practically naked.”

I just smile. Her eyeballs take another trip upwards.

Grumbling, she snares a roll of bread from the basket in the middle of the table and tears off a hunk with her teeth like a Viking. Even the way she eats is sexy as sin. She eats like she enjoys eating, like she enjoys food, pleasure, life. It’s far better than seeing a woman nibble at the edges of her plate as though eating is some sort of cardinal sin.

“You had your phone call today,” I say.

She chews another bite of bread open-mouthed, as though she’s absolutely determined to be as unladylike as she can. Problem is, it’s having the opposite effect on me. I’ve been hard since the moment she came down the stairs.

“I did. Did you eavesdrop?”

“I gave you complete privacy.”

“Hm. I told her about you,” she says abruptly.

“Did you?”

“Does that make you nervous?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because shit like this doesn’t scare me. I can deal with it.”

“Pretty cocky.”

“I’m just speaking from experience,” I tell her. “These scars aren’t just for show.”

Her eyes soften instantly. “I still can’t believe he did that to you.”

Fuck. Bringing up my scars was a mistake. I don’t want the conversation to revolve around me. This night is about her.

“Not everyone has happy, normal, functional families like you,” I say, re-routing as gently as I can.

“Please, you think my family is normal?” She amends that in her head and shrugs lightly. “Okay, my family is comparably more normal than yours.”

I dip my head in acknowledgement. “That’s a low bar to clear.”

“But it’s far from being happy or functional.”

“So you called your sister, but not your parents.”

“Have you been keeping track?”

“Always.”

She sighs. “What are you doing, collecting information on me for your next evil scheme?”

“Maybe I’m just interested.”

“In me?” she asks incredulously, as though the very notion is far-fetched. That takes me by surprise—I hadn’t expected her to have any kind of insecurities like that.

“Is that so hard to believe?”

She frowns. “Surely, your life involves more interesting people.”

“You’re selling yourself short.”

She stiffens, blushes, and turns her gaze towards the Thames. The waiters choose that moment to appear with the first course. It’s a seafood bisque with a fat lobster tail taking center stage.

The smell itself is enough to drive a man insane with need. But it does nothing for me right now.

Because my only interest at the moment is her.

“Thank you, darling,” Cami says politely to the waiter. She gives him a smile, which he returns with unnecessary enthusiasm.

My fist tightens under the table. If it weren’t for that fucking smirk of his, I wouldn’t have cared to even notice the little bastard. But as it is, I take note of his light brown hair and his dark brown eyes.

“Leave us,” I snap when he lingers longer than he needs to.  
“Now.”

He nods and scurries off. Cami watches him go. Then her gaze snaps to me immediately. “You don’t have to be so damn rude.”

“Was I being rude?” I ask, feigning innocence. “I didn’t notice.”

“Hmph.” She picks up her spoon without invitation and ladles it into her mouth.

Watching her eat continues to be a strangely sensual experience. The way her mouth moves, the way her tongue washes over her lips just after swallowing...

My cock stiffens more. It’s damn near painful at this point.

“You’re not hungry?” she asks, breaking the little fantasy that’s starting to take shape in my head.

“I could eat,” I reply coolly. But I don’t divulge the details about what exactly I’d like to eat right now.

*Focus, Isaak*, I counsel myself. I have a motive for the evening. I can’t let the little *kiska* tempt me off-track.

“So what did you tell your sister?” I ask.

“That the man who landed me in the Witness Protection Program six years ago was back in my life and determined to ruin the rest of it.”

I laugh. “I bet that was comforting for her to hear.”

“Does nothing faze you?” she demands, abandoning her spoon in her bowl of bisque.

“No,” I answer. “Not anymore.”

“You know,” she remarks, “I actually believe that.” Her voice is soft, mystified. She’s trying to figure me out.

Good fucking luck with that.

“I didn’t tell her that you forced me into getting married,” she adds suddenly.

I raise my eyebrows. “Why not?”

“Honestly? Because I don’t think it’s important enough to mention, considering we’re not going to be married for much longer.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Don’t do that,” she snaps, leaning in. “You promised me.”

I take another sip of wine. “What exactly did I promise?”

“That you would let me have my freedom if I compromised with you,” she says. “I assume that meant you would annul this farce of a marriage and give me my life back.”

“Give you your life back?” I say sharply. “How much of a life could it have been if you thought marrying my fucking cousin was the answer to your problems?”

The words have more of an impact than I anticipated. She recoils as though I’ve pushed her against her chair. Her eyes widen and her body seems to quiver for a moment. It takes her several more seconds to regain mastery of her expression.

“You don’t know anything about my life,” she hisses. “Or about why I agreed to marry Maxim.”

We’re exactly where I want to be. This is the road I wanted to walk down with her.

But now that we’re here, I’m not fucking happy.

“So tell me then,” I challenge. “Why did agree to marry him?”

She stares at me, breathing heavily. Her chest rises and falls heatedly. It’s very fucking distracting. And it makes me speak without thinking.

“Was it just because he asked?”

Her eyes flash with heat, and just like that, we’re transported back six years ago. To another restaurant an ocean away, when I asked her why she let some appalling douchebag take her on a date and she said, *Because he asked.*

I shouldn’t have used that confession against her. She’d shared it with me in good faith.

“You’re an asshole.”

“Camila—”

“Stop saying my name like you know me!”

She turns her face back towards the Thames. I realize she’s trying desperately to maintain her sense of composure, when in reality, she just wants to scream.

When a long beat has passed, I tap her bowl with my spoon. “You should eat. It’s getting cold.”

Her eyes snap back to my face. “Do you never apologize?” she demands.

“Not as a general rule, no.”

“Apologizing doesn’t make you less of a man, you know. I know that was probably one of the ‘lessons’ your father taught you, but it was the wrong one to teach.”

I almost laugh out loud. Her eyes are blazing, her hair is an untamed waterfall cascading over her shoulders, and the snarl on her face is enough to pressure a weaker man into silence.

She’s something else entirely. Something I’ve never quite encountered before.

“Why the hell are you smiling right now?” she presses. “Is something funny?”

“You never answered the question,” I say, diverting the conversation. “Why’d you agree to marry Maxim? He’s not your type.”

“Oh and you know what my type is, do you?”

“I don’t think my answer is going to satisfy you.”

She groans in frustration, and pulls her head back for a moment, exposing her neck to me. Goddammit, what is it with this woman? I’ve never found so many random parts of a woman’s body so damn attractive.

“He was charming, okay?” she huffs eventually. “He was nice, generous, confident and... and...”

“Are you describing a fiancé or your mailman?”

She bristles again. “What do you want me to say?”

“Something that is personal.”

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry my answers aren’t satisfying enough for you, but—”

“Do you love him?” I interrupt bluntly.

She stops short as though I’ve just asked her an incredibly invasive question. I suppose I have.

“That’s none of your fucking business.”

“It’s a yes or no question.”

“It’s extremely personal.”

“And extremely straightforward. Do you love the man you promised to marry, or don’t you?”

“Why do you even care?” she demands. “What’s the point of the Twenty Questions bullshit?”

“I’m just curious, like I said.”

“How I feel about Alex—”

“Maxim.”

“—is not your concern.”

“Did you tell him that you were in the Witness Protection Program?”

“According to you, he already knew.”

“But you didn’t know he knew. Did you trust him with your secret?”

“Yes... eventually.”

I’m disappointed in that, and I don’t fucking know why. “So you did trust him.”

“He deserved to know. At least, I thought he did at the same. So yes, I trusted him with that part of my life.”

“And did he trust you with his life?”

“He was busy a lot. Meetings and business trips... It wasn’t like I sat in on—” She cuts off abruptly, her eyes going wide with realization. “Oh my God.” She slams her hand down on

the table. “Oh my God, that’s what this is about. You want information from me. I am so fucking stupid. You just—”

She’s forced to stop when the waiters return right then with our next course. We stare at each other silently while they clear away our half-eaten bisques and replace them with braised lamb shank atop roast potatoes and caramelized onions.

The moment they back away, she picks up right where she left off.

“I should have known. I should have freaking known! He wanted to marry me to stick it to you. And you married me to stick it to him. Of course this dinner wasn’t a peace offering. It was a fucking manipulation.”

I’m not going to insult her intelligence by pretending it wasn’t. But I can admit to myself at least that that’s not all it was.

Not that she’ll ever believe me—which is why I stay silent.

She’s not done. “First of all, if Alex is really who you say he is, then I never really knew him at all, did I? He was putting on a show. He was playing a character. So even if I am willing to give you information on him, how can you be certain any of it is legitimate?”

“I’m a pretty good judge of character.”

“Right, of course,” she says, throwing her hands up. “I forgot. You’re a god amongst mortals. You have no weaknesses. You’re the man with a plan.”

“It pays to be prepared,” I tell her. “I was caught off guard once six years ago, and I promised myself I’d never be taken unaware again. But,” I add, leaning in close, “I needed Maxim to feel what I felt the night he took you. I wanted him to hurt.”

She shakes her head. “You’re assuming he loves me.”

“You don’t believe he does?”

“How can I anymore?” she counters. “He was just using me. And who’s to say I don’t deserve it?”

I frown. “What is that supposed to mean?”



Her cheeks flush and she shakes her head immediately. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter. Forget I said anything.”

But that’s the thing: I’ve never been able to forget a single thing she’s told me.

Six years later and I still remember every word.

She picks up her fork absentmindedly and starts stabbing her tender lamb shank. It falls apart easily, and she takes a disinterested bite.

“I know the last six years can’t have been easy on you,” I say.

She looks at me from beneath her eyelashes as she chews thoughtfully. I don’t think I’d be able to take my eyes off her breasts if her face wasn’t so fucking beautiful. She’s not wearing a stitch of makeup, and she looks all the more flawless for it.

“No,” she says softly. “They haven’t.”

“I didn’t want that for you. It was never my intention when I approached you that night.”

“What was your intention?” she asks.

“I told you already: I couldn’t walk away.”

She sighs, looking down at her plate to avoid looking at me. “You know, Isaak, I’ve spent so many nights thinking about that dinner. That conversation. Everything that followed...”

I expect her to continue, but she doesn’t.

She snaps her mouth shut. Whatever she was going to say never passes through her lips.

It drives me fucking crazy. But I’m not about to wrestle the thoughts from her head. Not yet, at least. No matter how badly I want to.

“It’s a beautiful view,” she says, looking out over the river with a resigned sigh.

I nod. “It really is.”

But I’m not looking at the river.

I’m looking at her.

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## CAMILA

“Did you enjoy the meal, ma’am?”

The maître d’ stands between us with his hands clasped together, looking downright nervous about my verdict.

“The food was fantastic,” I assure him. “Honestly, one of the best meals I’ve had in my life.”

His answering smile is both relieved and thrilled. “Oh that’s wonderful to hear, ma’am. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

He gives Isaak an awkward little bow and backs off, facing us the whole time. Only when he’s on the thin bridge that leads back to the main restaurant does he turn to walk away.

“Is it always like that for you?” I ask Isaak when he’s gone.

“Like what?”

“People fawning all over you. Or trembling with fear at the thought that you might not have fully enjoyed yourself at their establishment.”

“Yes, pretty much.”

“Does it feel good?”

He raises his eyebrows, as though this is the first time he’s ever been asked to think about it. “It doesn’t feel like anything.”

I frown. “Okay, fine. What does make you feel something?”

He smirks. “Is this an interrogation or a psych evaluation?”

“You’ve asked me a lot of questions you have no right to ask,” I point out. “It’s only fair that I get to ask a few of my own.”

“I don’t usually concern myself with what’s fair.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“You know, I understand why you see me as the villain. But people are so much more than just one thing.”

“How very philosophical of you,” I scoff, not trying very hard to keep the sarcasm to a minimum.

Maybe I ought to try harder, though. If I stand any chance of getting what I want from him—aka, freedom—it’ll only happen if I rein in my resentment. If I charm him. If I get inside his head.

The problem is, I’m certain he’s trying to do the same thing with me.

“You don’t agree?”

I sigh. “Actually, I do agree.”

“You just don’t want to concede that I may be more than the big bad wolf.”

“You’re definitely the big bad wolf,” I correct. “In my story, at least. One of many.”

He regards me with a cool gaze. “And Maxim? How does he factor into your story now?”

“I don’t even know how to begin answering that question.”

“Because you still have feelings for him?”

I tense instantly. I thought I had feelings for Alex. Maybe I even believed I loved him. But now, I wonder if that was just the lie I needed to tell myself in order to justify marrying him.

Jo March would never have compromised her principles like that.

But I did.

I did it shamelessly.

“Camila?”

I look up and realize Isaak is watching me with his sharp blue eyes, trying to decipher every emotion that flits across my face, trying to read the secrets behind my eyes.

And he's getting closer and closer with every minute I spend in his company.

"Alex gave my life a little bit of normalcy," I admit. It answers the question without really answering the question. "I was so lonely. It had been years of isolation. I had a job, but no real friends. The only people I could really speak to were Bree and Eric. And I never got to see them. So when Alex showed up... Let's just say it was easy to pretend like I was just an average girl getting to know an average boy."

Isaak snorts with derision.

I glare at him. "I'm sharing something vulnerable and that's your reaction?"

He holds up his hands. "Pardon me. Just the thought of Maxim masquerading as an 'average' guy."

I almost smile. "Point taken. I guess he wasn't the most average of guys. For one, he was wealthier than any man I'd ever been out on a date with."

"Present company excluded."

I roll my eyes, but I can't exactly argue with him. Isaak's manor alone is absurd.

"It's ridiculous, really. I look back at those early days and I see things in a totally different perspective."

"You mean you see him for the spineless *mudak* he is?"

I ignore that. "I felt like such a fraud. Masquerading under a different name, giving people my fake life story. That's why I never allowed myself to get close to anyone here. It felt disingenuous."

"So you isolated yourself?"

"I had to. The moment I got close to anyone, I felt like the only way the friendship could progress is by telling them the truth. And I couldn't do that. My dating life was the same way.

There were a lot of guys who asked me out, but I turned them all down. Eventually, I just became the loner girl with no one to turn to.”

“So what was different with him?”

“He refused to take no for an answer,” I admit. “He was persistent. Adamant. I thought it was charming then. Now, I know the real reason why.”

“He should never have involved you in this,” Isaak smolders. “I will make sure he pays for it.”

“By doing what?” I ask sharply. “I know enough about your lifestyle to know what you mean by that. But if you’re going to hurt anyone, please don’t use me as the reason.”

“Some people deserve to be punished.”

I sigh and shake my head. “Alex had the same kind of ego,” I say. “He thought he got to mete out right and wrong. I never understood it.”

“The Bratva is a totally different world, Camila. A totally different reality.”

“I get that. I just don’t want any part of it.”

“I think it’s a little late for that.”

Footsteps clomp over the bridge to our secluded patio. “Can I offer either of you a mug of hot chocolate?” asks one of the waiters, brandishing a silver tray.

“None for me,” Isaak scowls. “Bring me a whiskey neat.”

“Too feminine for you?” I jab at him. “I’ll take some, please. Thank you very much.”

The server pours me a mug of steaming chocolatey goodness. I take a deep breath of the fumes. My sweet tooth has always been my downfall, my Achilles heel. And true to form, the first sip leaves me moaning.

“Good?” Isaak asks with a chuckle on the edge of his voice.

“Orgasmic. That’s just liquid chocolate.”

Isaak smiles.

I change my answer—that smile might just be my true Achilles heel. Which is why I look away immediately so that I don't get drawn in.

Sweets are an addiction.

Isaak is an obsession.

“What was the plan?” Isaak asks, picking up the thread of the conversation where we left off. “After you got married.”

I stall for time by taking another sip of my hot chocolate. “The plan was to move back to the United States.”

“Of course he'd have wanted that.”

“It wasn't his suggestion,” I reply. “It was mine. I was determined to go back home.”

“To reunite with your beloved sister and nephews?” he asks.

Goosebumps pepper my skin. Here it is—the moment I was dreading.

I know that to avoid mentioning Jo now would make things obvious later if and when she does come to light. There's no way I trust the man enough to share Jo's existence with him. God only knows what Isaak would do with that information.

But maybe I can protect her by telling him about her now. I can hide her in plain sight.

“And my niece,” I say, feeling like I'm betraying Jo.

“You have a niece, too?”

I nod. “She's a beauty.”

“I'm sure she is.”

“I've missed so much of their lives. I don't want to miss anymore. And Alex—”

“Maxim.”

“Maxim,” I amend. “He swore was powerful enough that he could protect me from the threat of the Bratva. I know—ironic, isn't it?”

“Life usually is.”



“I was on the verge of leaving the program altogether, you know,” I inform Isaak. “The department was going to release me back into the wild, so to speak.”

“I see,” Isaak says slowly. His tone is telling, but I can’t pinpoint why.

“You don’t know my reasons for making certain choices, so don’t bother trying to figure them out,” I snap.

He raises his eyebrows. “I didn’t say a word.”

“But I can see you thinking.”

“You’re going to hold my thoughts against me?”

“If I have to.”

He chuckles. At that sound, I feel excitement snake down my body before concentrating between my legs. The fact that my physical attraction to him is so strong even after all these years is troubling. Not to mention terrifying.

Nothing about the two of us is simple.

We share a daughter and he has no clue about her.

He married me against my will and he’s keeping me hostage.

His cousin is my ex-fiancé and there’s a whole family feud brimming just under the surface.

It’s all so complicated that I get a headache just thinking about it.

And it’s nowhere close to finished.

“Are you going to tell me how this thing started between you and Al... er, Maxim?” I ask.

“It started long before we were born,” Isaak explains. “With our fathers. Exceptions have been made, but generally speaking, the mantle of *Krestnyy Otets* passes down from the oldest son to the oldest son.”

“No wonder you think of yourself as a king.”

He smirks. “My father, Vitaly, was the youngest son and my uncle Yakov was the older one. So Yakov took over when my grandfather died.”

I lean in, immediately intrigued.

“Except that Yakov wasn’t really suited to be don. He wasn’t ambitious, wasn’t motivated. He took the legacy my grandfather built and began mortgaging it for nothing. He started selling to our enemies and dramatically reducing the power of the Vorobev Bratva. He made us vulnerable. Weak. We were more susceptible to attack because our enemies started to see our family as an easy target. The reputation we worked so hard to construct was falling apart.”

“Did something happen?”

“We had many enemies outside of the Bratva. But under Yakov’s leadership, we started to earn enemies within our ranks, too. And then, Yakov started to get sick. His diagnosis was vague. Complex. He died months later, coughing up blood in his own bed.”

“And your father became don,” I surmise.

“Yes. He rebuilt the Vorobev Bratva and restored our reputation.”

“He was a ruthless man, I take it?” I ask, glancing at Isaak’s mutilated arm. I can’t see the scars under his long-sleeved shirt, but I doubt I’ll ever be able to forget them.

“He was what a don needed to be,” Isaak replies. “Like it or not, everyone agreed that it was effective. Everyone but Svetlana.”

“Svetlana?”

“My uncle’s widow. Maxim’s mother.”

“Oh.”

“After Yakov’s death, she took Maxim and they left New York. My father gave them a mansion in Michigan, and he also gave Svetlana a generous monthly stipend. She kept her distance, but she always maintained that it was my father who killed Yakov.”

I raise my eyebrows. “And did he?”

Isaak's eyes go cold for a second, and I know I've asked the wrong question. But I refuse to take it back.

"Of course not. My father was not a perfect man. But loyalty was one thing he did have. He ingrained the importance of loyalty into my brother and me when we were still just boys. He may not have agreed with my uncle, may not even have respected him. But while Yakov was alive, he was my father's don. He would never have moved against him."

I can see the certainty in his eyes, the absolute absence of doubt. And I can't help but believe it, too.

"It is possible that Yakov was poisoned," Isaak admits. "But if so, it wasn't my father who did it. Svetlana didn't believe that, though. And when she took Maxim away, she filled his head with the same lies."

"So he believes that you've taken his birthright?" I say.

"That's exactly what he believes," Isaak says. "And he has his loyalists who support that opinion."

"And you couldn't have just, I dunno... talked things through with him? Explained that your father could never have killed his brother?"

"I did try," Isaak admits. "But Maxim severed all chance of reconciliation in one move."

I tense. "What did he do?"

"He killed my father."

I stare at him in shock. "He killed his own uncle?"

"Not personally, he's too much of a coward for that. He got one of his henchman to do the dirty work."

"And you're sure that Maxim gave the order?" I ask.

"My father died the same way my uncle did," he replies. "I'm sure."

I sit back and take a deep breath. "That's... a lot of information."

He smirks. "Don't say I never shared with you."

After a night of refusing to do it, I finally give up and lose myself in that smile. It's too easy to do. Like falling asleep. One moment, I'm raging against it, swearing that Isaak Vorobev will never get inside my head or my heart. The next, I'm on the verge of smiling back and saying something with that smile that I cannot possibly let myself say.

Luckily, I catch myself at the last second.

"It's late," I say abruptly. "We should go."

He doesn't argue as he gets to his feet. I try and adjust the dress, but the moment I pull down the hem, it reveals too much boob, and the moment I pull at the neckline, it reveals too much leg.

"Damn you for this dress," I tell him as we make our way to the exit.

"That dress was the best decision I've made in a long time."

I keep my head down so Isaak doesn't see the blush in my cheeks as we step into the car, which is idling out front for us.

My head is still spinning with everything he just told me. Murder and poison and legacies—it's all so bizarre, so unreal and so real at the same time. He really means it when he says his world is not like mine.

I sort through the details again and again. I'm so lost in the story that I don't even realize where we are until we come to a stop on open tarmac.

"Where the hell are we?"

"I thought I'd give you a new view of my world," Isaak says, getting out of the convertible. "Come on."

I'm baffled—until I get out of the car and take note of the black helicopter resting in the middle of the circular helipad.

"Oh my God..."

Isaak glances over at me and shoots me a sinful smile. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

"We're getting in that thing?"

“That’s the idea, generally speaking.”

The helicopter’s choppers start whirring around, and the amount of wind it creates is enough to push me back. Right into Isaak’s arms.

“Geez. Sorry...”

He grabs hold of me protectively. “Not a problem.”

I’m forced to pin the hem of my dress down to stop from flashing all of London, so it’s not like I can slap his hands off me.

And it’s not like I’m very motivated to, either.

He guides me towards the helicopter, keeping my head down. The whole time, I can feel his arm wrapped around my waist.

“Get in!” He has to shout to be heard over the choppers.

I get in with his assistance and he jumps in right after me.

There’s only one man sitting in the cockpit. He turns to Isaak as we clamber on and gives him a friendly thumbs up. Isaak nods, a spark of communication passes between them, and a second later, the pilot hops down out of the helicopter.

“Wait, hold on!” I protest. “Where’s he going? What’s happening?”

Isaak chuckles as he takes the pilot’s abandoned position and pats the copilot seat next to him. “Sit down and put your seatbelt on.”

“Isaak, the pilot jumped ship!”

“No, he didn’t,” he replies. “He’s right here.”

I stare at him with my mouth hanging open for a second. “You’re going to fly this thing? Please tell me you’re joking.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, *kiska*? I never joke.”

“So in addition to being a Bratva don, you also have a pilot’s license. Oh God, you do have a pilot’s license, don’t you? You didn’t, like, bribe someone to give you a fake one or—”

“Camila.”

That's all it takes. One word. With his voice, with his eyes, with his smile, my name alone is enough to cut through the thickening haze of panic and bring me back down to earth. Back down to him.

I swallow through a suddenly dry throat. "You better not get us killed," I croak.

"Don't worry, *kiska*," he says as my heart does a little flip-flop just like it does every time he calls me that. "I've got you."

Fucking traitorous body I've got here.

He hands me a pair of sound-canceling headphones and then slips one on himself. It cuts the sound of the roaring rotors in half and lets me hear him through the microphone.

He manipulates the controls with an expert hand, and before I know it, we start levitating drunkenly off the ground.

Nerves bunch in my stomach. "Oh God..."

"I told you not to worry," he says confidently. "I know what I'm doing."

And again, stupid as it may be, I believe him.

"Isaak?" I say as London slowly shrinks beneath us into a breathtaking map of stars.

"Yeah?"

"Why are you doing this?"

He smiles and looks at me. "You said you wanted freedom. So that's what I'm giving you. Freedom."

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## ISAAK

The door bursts open and Bogdan rushes in, wide-eyed.

“Heads-up. She’s here.”

I have just enough time to close the file I have on Maxim’s latest movements and history with Camila before the “she” in question comes storming through my office door.

Dressed in an ivory sweater dress and colorful beaded shawl, my mother looks every bit the commanding presence she used to be when she was an active Bratva wife.

But she gave up that life almost completely six years ago. She’s always claimed that’s what she wanted. Sometimes, though, I’m pretty damn certain she misses it.

“Mama,” I say, rising to my feet.

She glances towards the large bar in the corner of the room. “You haven’t been day-drinking, have you?”

“Not today.”

She gives me her famous glare. “Very funny.”

I smile. “It’s good to see you, too.”

With a little sigh, she comes forward and gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “You look well.”

“Of course he does,” Bogdan jokes pointedly.

I shoot him a warning glance, but of course, our mother’s not the kind of woman who’s likely to miss cues like that.

“Oh?” she says. “What’s going on?”



“Yeah, big brother, what’s going on?”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I ask him.

His annoying grin just gets wider. “And miss our little family reunion? Never.”

“Bogdan,” Mama snaps, “stop goading your brother. And Isaak... I may be old, but I’m not blind, deaf, dumb, or stupid.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What have you heard?”

“That you have a wife,” she says immediately. “A wife that you apparently stole.”

I snort. “I stole nothing. I simply took back what was mine.”

“Does she agree with that assessment?”

Trust my mother to ask the most inconvenient questions. And she knows it, too.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “She’s here to serve a purpose.”

“You mean she’s live bait,” Mama corrects.

I ignore that. “Once I’ve got Maxim out of the way, then Camila will go back to her life.”

“I have one question,” Mama says.

“Just one?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Why did you marry her? Using her to lure Maxim in would have been just as effective without signing on the dotted line.”

“It needed to be believable,” I reply coolly.

“And,” Bogdan adds, “he wanted to piss Maxim off.”

Mama sighs, looking out towards the gardens. She does that a lot. Falls into thought mid-conversation. It’s as if she’s being dragged back into the past. But I know for a fact that she’s escaped most of her demons relatively intact. My father being the meanest of the lot, of course.

“Isaak, is this a wise plan?” Mama asks, turning back to me.

“I thought you only had one question.”

“Don’t be smart. I’m only asking if you’ve thought this through.”

I grimace. Looking at her now, I can still see the woman in those wedding portraits that used to hang in the mansion Bogdan and I grew up in. The wrinkles are deeper. Her hair is grayer. Her eyes are far more tired.

But beneath all that is the same fiery woman, fueled by a determination to prove herself worthy.

My father never saw her as such. So somewhere along the road, she’d given up trying to earn his approval. She’d found comfort in her work. In Bogdan and me.

I thought that had been enough for her.

But when I see her now, I wonder if it I was right about that. I wonder if, in growing up, I’d failed to take into account that my mother was more than just... my mother.

If she was a person in her own right.

“You know,” she says when I don’t answer for a while, “it makes me so happy to see you boys like this. This is what Yakov and Vitaly should have been.”

“They got along fine,” I snap.

She sighs. “You were a child when Yakov died. Too young to remember your uncle and certainly too young to remember what his relationship with your father was like.”

“Then tell us.”

“Your father was the more capable leader—”

“Clearly,” Bogdan scoffs.

Mama continues as though no one has interrupted. “But he was overly ambitious. Overly greedy. Overly cruel.”

“He was the *Krestnyy Otets*,” I say, defending him out of instinct and obligation. “He had to be all those things.”

“You two have only ever known your father as don. But he was not the *Krestnyy Otets* back then. He was supposed to support Yakov, guide him, advise him... but always, always

follow him. That last part, he didn't do so well. He pushed and challenged and fought when it was not his place to do so."

"Because Yakov was breaking the Bratva down for parts!" Bogdan exclaims.

Mama nods. "And that was your uncle's fatal mistake. He saw your father's ambitions as ugly. He wanted a simpler life. And because of that, he gave his enemies the means to attack him. They were both proud, stubborn men. And they both died for it."

"Do you ever miss him?" Bogdan asks into the silence.

The question lingers there for a moment in search of an answer.

"Of course I miss him," Mama replies. "Of course I do."

Bogdan and I exchange a glance. Sometimes, it's hard to know where Mama's thoughts are. It's harder still to pull her out of them.

I thought she'd have freedom once our father was gone. But apparently she's trapped by her own past. Her own regrets.

She shakes her head as if to clear unwelcome thoughts and turns her gaze on me again. "Isaak, do you have feelings for the girl?"

If I lie, she'll know. They both will.

"She... fascinates me," I admit. "I thought that conversation we had six years ago was a fluke. But we've talked since I brought her back here. She still fascinates me."

"I've never heard you say that about any woman before," Mama points out.

"It doesn't mean anything. I'm just curious about her. Especially because of how involved she was with Maxim. She was a part of his life for a year and a half."

"And has she told you anything useful?"

"Nothing yet."

“What makes you think she has anything worthwhile to give you?” Bogdan asks, sitting on my desk and hiking one leg up.

“I guess I’ll find out. One thing I know for sure: Maxim took a lot of trouble to locate Camila. Then he wooed her aggressively. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. Which means he’s not going to just surrender her to me without a fight.”

“You’re anticipating an attack?” Mama asks.

“Most definitely.”

She takes a deep breath. “I haven’t seen Maxim in years. He was a sweet boy, you know.”

“Stop getting sentimental on us now, Mama,” Bogdan groans. “He betrayed us all by killing Papa. He has to pay for that.”

She looks down. I can’t help noticing how small she looks all of a sudden. So fragile.

“I’m going to take a room on the second floor,” she tells both of us.

“You’re staying here?” I ask.

She gives me a knowing smile. “I am welcome, aren’t I, Isaak?”

“Of course,” I say instantly. Even a millisecond of hesitation will earn me endless grief.

She smiles. “Thank you, my boy. Are we having dinner together as a family?”

“Oh no, Mama,” Bogdan interjects evilly. “Isaak only has dinner with his wife now. Followed by helicopter rides around the city.”

*Little shit.*

Mama doesn’t comment at all.

She nods, purses her lips, and then disappears down the hall. As soon as she’s gone, I turn to Bogdan and smash him in the shoulder with a punch.

He stumbles backwards. “Fuck!” he complains. “You didn’t hold back.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Bogdan says, rolling his eyes at me. “It’s just Mama.”

That’s the thing about my little brother: he can’t fathom secrets among the people he trusts most. I know better.

Sometimes, the ones you love are hiding the most important secrets of all of them.

“Bogdan, do you ever get the feeling that she knows more than she lets on?”

He frowns, instantly uncomfortable with the question. “About what?”

“About everything,” I muse. “About Father and Yakov. About Svetlana.”

“Svetlana? What does she have to do with this?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I growl. “You are not that naïve, so stop pretending. She’s the one who spread the rumor that Papa was the one that killed Yakov. And I’m starting to think Svetlana is more of a player than we initially suspected.”

“Why do you say that?” Bogdan asks, perking up a little.

“Camila mentioned that she was questioned by an older woman when she was taken six years ago. Before the cops rescued her from the basement cell of that fucking warehouse.”

“Fuck. You think that was Svetlana?”

“Who else could it be? She’s been the driving force behind Maxim’s motives since he was old enough to hold a gun. It would make sense that she’s involved somehow.”

“So Camila is giving you good information after all, eh?”

“I told you bringing her here had a purpose.”

“Yeah,” Bogdan says, thrusting his hips and lolling his tongue out suggestively. “That’s definitely the purpose you had in mind.”

“You’re lucky we’re blood,” I remind him icily. “Otherwise, you’d have been buried at the bottom of a river a long time ago.”

Bogdan laughs. “What good is a lucky break like that if I don’t use it?”

I roll my eyes and head for the door. “Contact our spies,” I tell him. “Ask if they’ve got any leads on Maxim or any of his men. He’s been quiet so far, but that’s only because he’s planning something.”

“Got it, boss. Say hi to the ol’ ball and chain for me.”

I give him the middle finger and set off towards Camila’s room.



I pause at her door when I hear her speak. She’s talking softly, secretively, so I can’t catch whole sentences. But I can make out bits and pieces. Only then does it strike me that she’s probably having her daily phone call with her sister.

“Okay... Okay... No, he doesn’t know... Listen, I love you... I love you so, so much.”

Her tone is heartfelt. And it sticks in my head like a fucking leech that won’t let go.

Who is she talking to?

Because it sure as hell isn’t her sister.

I try and pick out more of the conversation, but she’s saying goodbye already.

“Fuck,” I growl, stepping back from the door.

Jealousy zips through my body as my mind plays her parting words.

*I love you, so, so much.*

Is it possible that she was just talking to Maxim?

Is it possible that she’s playing me for a fool?

Is it possible that her loyalties remain with him?

She spent more than a year of her life with the man. She'd fucking agreed to marry the man. I'd convinced myself that her decision had been motivated by a desperation to lead a different kind of life.

But now I'm forced to face a different scenario: maybe it was because she fell in love with him.

Before I can get my composure in check, I burst into her room. She springs upright on her bed.

"Jesus, Isaak!" she says. "What the hell are you doing barging into my room?"

I'm in no mood to deal with attitude, particularly not from her. "Actually, this is my fucking house. So that makes it my room."

Her eyes narrow. She swings her legs off the bed and stands to face me. "Who pissed in your cornflakes this morning?"

"I came here to let you know that I've organized a shopping trip for you. Edith will accompany you. You can pick out whatever you like and put it on my card."

She frowns, clearly trying to figure out why I look so pissed right now. "If the thought of buying me clothes is pissing you off so much, I'll pass."

"For once, can you not fucking argue?"

"Are you being serious right now?" she jabs, her eyes flaming. "I'm not the one who stormed in here and started yelling for no reason."

"Believe me, I have my reasons."

"Care to share them with me?" she counters. "So I can at least have the chance to defend myself? Although the very thought is freaking laughable."

"What exactly is laughable about it?"

"Oh, how about the fact that *you've* taken *me* hostage, and I'm still expected to defend myself to you?!"

I don't bother addressing the point directly. Instead, I cut to the chase in an icy drawl: "Have you lied to me, Camila?"

She freezes at once. The anger dissipates, replaced by... something. Fear, maybe. It just adds fuel to the fire of my suspicions.

"If I did," she says quietly, "could you blame me?"

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## CAMILA

My first and only thought is...

*He knows.*

He knows about Jo.

He lied about giving me my privacy and he's been listening in this entire time.

*Oh God.*

*Oh God.*

*Oh God.*

Isaak's eyes blaze with anger. Steel so hot it's blue.

He takes a step towards me, and despite myself, I back into the wall, allowing him to pin me against it.

“Who were you speaking to just now?”

My heart is thundering against my chest. What answer do I give him? Should I lie, knowing that he might already know the truth?

Or should I stick to my story and make him force it out of me?

I choose to do neither.

“Get off me!”

I try to shove him backwards, but his hands slam down against the wall on either side of my head, locking me in.

“Don't fucking play with me, Camila.”

“You think I’m playing with you?” I demand. “I was just caught in the middle, remember? Between you and Alex.”

“Maxim.”

“He’s Alex to me!” I practically yell in his face. “He’s only Maxim to *you*.”

His eyes narrow to slits. “You think I’m lying.”

“It’s not like I’ve seen or spoken to him since you hijacked our wedding day,” I remind him. “It’s your word against his and I haven’t heard a word from him.”

“You sure about that?”

I blink. “What?”

“Are you sure you haven’t heard a word from him?” he enunciates venomously.

“Of course I haven’t. What the hell is that supposed to mean? What are you asking me?”

“I’m asking if that was him on the phone just now, Camila.”

And just like that, the anxiety rushes from my lungs. Joy blossoms in its place.

*He doesn’t know.*

Jo was just showing me her paintings from school at the end of the call. “Look, Mama,” she’d crowed, beaming proudly.

“Oh my darling, that’s beautiful. What is that pink thing on top?”

“That’s our roof, Mama,” Jo had explained. “And you and me. We live in a white house with a pink roof.”

“We do?”

“Yeah, and we have a dog, too.”

“That sounds amazing. Does he have a name?”

“Not yet. I’m waiting ‘til you come and live with us. Then we can name him together.”

I’d been forced to fight back tears. The dream of reuniting with my daughter has all but disappeared now. God only

knows if it'll ever come to pass.

We'd ended the call the way we always do. "I miss you, Mama."

"I love you. I love you so, so much."

Even now, I'm tearing up again. But Isaak's fury burning right in front of my face is hard to ignore. I focus back on him.

"You think I've been contacting Alex?"

"Have you?"

"No."

He doesn't believe me. No—he doesn't trust me. I shouldn't give a flying fuck about that, but against all reason, I do care.

"I was talking to my sister," I tell him. "And her boys and... and her daughter."

He doesn't say anything. It's like he's weighing my words and he finds them wanting.

"I don't know why you're acting like this," I say. "Last night —"

"What about last night?" he snaps.

"We actually *talked* to each other," I say. "I don't understand what's brought this change."

"I won't tolerate being manipulated."

I raise my eyebrows. "Are you fucking serious? You're really going to stand there and claim that *I'm* the one who's manipulating *you*?"

He has the audacity to look me right in the eye, without the slightest bit of guilt or remorse.

"You were the one who orchestrated a ridiculous 'date' to coerce me into giving you intel on your cousin," I point out. "Or was that all in my imagination?"

"Helping me take down Maxim is in your best interests."

"Oh, that's the spin you're going with?" I scoff.

“It’s not spin,” he growls. “It’s the fucking truth. He’s dangerous.”

“And you’re not?” I laugh humorlessly. “Yeah, right, I forgot: you’re a regular knight in shining armor.”

“It’s all about perspective.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“One man’s trash is another man’s treasure. One woman’s villain is another woman’s hero.”

“Are you claiming to be mine?”

“I’m merely pointing out that two things can be true at the same time.”

“Your logic is beyond flawed and beyond sickening.”

“Everything is flawed. Even logic. You know why? Because people interpret everything and the people who do the interpreting are fundamentally flawed.”

“Are we back to discussing philosophy?” I ask. “Because I’m gonna be honest, I don’t think I can hack it today.”

“Shall we pencil it in for later then?” he asks, his voice dripping with condescension.

I want to scream. I don’t understand how he can act as though he’s the one occupying the moral high ground when I’m literally his captive.

“I can’t believe I ever thought you were charming.”

The words slip out of my mouth before I can stop them. His eyes widen instantly, but the fight in his expression doesn’t back down. Not by a long shot.

There’s something he wants from me.

And he hasn’t got it yet.

“You think I’m charming, is that it?”

“*Thought,*” I repeat vehemently. “I used the past tense, meaning I definitely no longer hold that opinion of you. And just FYI, this is what I thought six years ago, before I knew who you were. Who you *really* were.”

“And who is that?” he asks. He hasn’t budged from where he’s standing just inches away from me, hands still planted on either side of my face. He hasn’t stopped smirking that fucking smirk. He hasn’t stopped being totally and completely Isaak Vorobev.

“Honestly,” I say, “you are the cockiest, most arrogant man I’ve ever met in my fucking life.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is.”

“You need to become a better liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

His smirk only gets more pronounced. “Yes, *kiska*, you are.”

“Don’t pretend like you can read my mind.”

“I don’t have to,” he acquiesces. “I can read your face. Your body.”

I tense immediately. “I don’t know what you want from me,” I say quietly. “I don’t know what you hoped to achieve by abducting me and forcing me into this sham of a marriage. But I don’t have the power to help. And even if I did, I wouldn’t waste it on you.”

“Is that loyalty talking?” Isaak hisses. “Or love?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Call it professional curiosity.”

“You need to learn to lie better,” I say, savoring the feeling of throwing his own words back in his face. “You know what you sound like? A jealous boyfriend.”

He snorts. “I’ve never been jealous of Maxim. Not in my whole fucking life. Why do you think he’s trying so hard to take what’s mine?”

“That’s all this is then?” I ask. “A dick measuring competition?”

Isaak shrugs. “Call it whatever you want. The bottom line is I’m going to fucking win.”

“There you go again,” I say. “*Win*. What a joke. This is not a fucking game, Isaak, and I’m not a fucking pawn or a prize. I don’t deserve to be caught up in the middle of it.”

“And yet you are. Denial serves no purpose other than to get you killed sooner.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a warning.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?”

“I told you once before, Camila,” Isaak says, pressing against me. “I’m a dangerous man. There’s no fucking doubt about that. But I’m no danger to you. Not if you do as I say.”

My skin is tingling. Is it fear or excitement that’s causing that, though? When it comes to Isaak, I don’t know. I haven’t known since the beginning.

I shake my head. “Don’t you understand?” I say softly. “You pose the *most* danger to me.”

Confusion ripples across his face, but I don’t bother trying to explain. There’s too much that’s lying unsaid between us. I can already feel the tension of all the conversations we have yet to share.

“How’s that?”

“You’re the one who’s taken away my freedom.”

“Maxim was planning the exact same thing.”

“He asked me, Isaak. You never did.”

“No,” he growls. “I never ask for what I want.”

“Of course not. Because if you ask, then there’s always the possibility of a no.”

“You are not to contact Maxim,” he says instead of arguing further. His voice is low with deadly command. “Ever.”

“I deserve the right to get some closure.”

“I can give you all the closure you need.”

“You think wining and dining me is going to make me forget that I have a fiancé out there? A *real* fiancé?”

His eyes flash dangerously. And at that sight, I feel a flux of power I’ve had felt or had before.

*He is jealous.*

Jealous of what I might feel for his cousin.

Jealous of something that he can’t claim as his by force.

“He’s not your fucking fiancé,” he snarls.

“I’ve heard your version of things. I deserve the right to hear his version.”

His jaw forms a hard, square line. A vein in his forehead twitches erratically.

I’m pulling at a dangerous thread here, but I’m riding the high that is his reaction. I like seeing him lose it. And yes, a small, petty part of me enjoys the fact that he’s unravelling over the thought of me demanding to speak to another man.

“My version is the only one that matters.”

“You’re jealous,” I accuse again. “Just a jealous schoolyard bully.”

I want more of his rage. More of his envy. I can see in his face that he’s about to deliver exactly that—and then he stops.

Instantly, the fury disappears behind his icy blue eyes. His shoulders straighten. His jaw unclenches.

And I regret my decision to push him. Because compared to his rage...

Whatever is coming next will be far, far worse.

“I’ve already told you,” he says calmly. “I’m not jealous of Maxim. I have no reason to be. Do you want to know why?”

I ignore the rhetorical question as he eyes me like a predator stalking his prey.

“Because I can make you forget his name in twenty seconds flat.”



“And how do you propose to do that?” I say. It’s supposed to be a taunt, but my voice cracks at precisely the wrong moment. In that crack, Isaak sees everything he’s looking for.

And he leaps on it like a killing blow.

His lips descend on mine. His chest presses me against the wall and his hands slide around my wrists and pin them to my sides.

My head spins, and I can almost feel my arguments tumbling out of my head one by one, like dominoes.

His lips push mine apart and I feel his hot breath a moment before I catch a hold of his tongue.

My moan feels like it’s trapped between my heart and my throat.

The kiss burns. But it’s the kind of soft, aching burn that you crave after hours spent outside in the frigid cold.

It’s the kind of burn that warms you from the inside and reminds you that hope is like kindling. It only takes a little spark to get to a raging fire.

I’m not prepared for the kiss to end when it does. So when Isaak breaks away, my lips follow him.

His blue eyes are intense, but it’s the smugness in them that warns me that he knows exactly just what kind of a victory that I’ve surrendered to him.

“What’s his name?”

I frown. What is he talking about?

Isaak smiles. It’s the slow, arrogant half-smirk that I still remember from our first meeting. Six years later, the heat it sends flushing between my thighs remains exactly the same.

“Camila,” he repeats firmly. “What’s his name?”

“I don’t... I...”

I try and grapple with the strings of the conversation we’d been having just before he’d planted that wreck of a kiss on

me. But my brain won't cooperate. My lips are fumbling and awkward.

He nods, satisfied. Then he leans forward to brush his lips against my ear and whisper, "I told you I could make you forget it."

He releases me and steps backwards. The cold air rushes back in between us. It seeps beneath my skin. Sinks into my bones. Makes me long for his fire again.

"I told you, Camila: I know you. Never forget."

Then he walks out of the room. I stay there sagging against the wall, limp and breathless.

My lips are raw. My legs are weak. And my head pounds with disappointment.

Because not for the first time, I've let myself down.

And he's the reason why.

That's the fundamental difference between me and all the heroines I read about and admire.

They accept only heroes.

I can't resist the villain.

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## ISAAK

In my office, I riffle through the desk drawer and find her file. I have shit to do. Plans to make.

But not even the promise of revenge is enough to steer my thoughts in a clearer direction.

I flip the folder open and see Camila's face staring out. The photo is blown up and grainy, making it clear it was shot from a considerable distance with a powerful telephoto lens.

Maxim got lazy in the lead-up to his wedding. For nearly six years, he'd done his best to keep our spies at bay as best as he could. Maybe he thought the ring on Cami's finger would keep him safe.

If so, he thought wrong.

I found out eventually. Learned what he was doing and why. And then I waited, and waited, and waited—until it was time to make my move.

While I was waiting, my spies were gathering information. These photos, for instance. I peruse through them. She'd found a job in a library in Chelsea. In this one, she's pushing a trolley cart piled high with books. Her ass looks fucking delectable in that slim black pencil skirt.

In another, she's scanning the shelves in search of something. Her face is turned up, and even though only her profile is visible, it captures a serenity that I haven't seen much since I brought her to the manor.

Her blonde hair is pulled into a messy bun at the back of her head. Loose strands curl on either side of her face. She's wearing a light white sweater, a green knit skirt that falls past her knees, beige ankle boots with a modest heel.

I flip again. The last one is her alone. She's seated at the window seat of a little café about fifteen minutes from the library. One hand clasped around a cup of coffee and the other holds a book.

Something jumps out at me. Something I've never noticed before. I frown, lean in, look closer. And then I see the title of the book she's reading: *War and Peace*.

Tolstoy. A Russian author. One I distinctly remember mentioning the night we met.

It makes me wonder: Have I been in her head the past six years?

If so, her face gives nothing away. She's lost in the book. Lips pursed in subtle concentration, that blond hair falling in waves around her face again. The tiniest hint of cleavage is the icing on the cock. Enough to send all the blood in my body rushing to my cock.

I'm throbbing hard beneath the desk. And I know instantly that it's not the kind of erection that I can just will away.

It demands release.

All it took was one picture of the little *kiska*.

I unzip my pants, free myself, and wrap a hand around my shaft. I can still feel her on my lips. I can taste her on my tongue. Like fucking cinnamon.

I start pumping at my cock, even though it's not even close to how it feels being inside her. Being with her. This is nothing more than a quick fix, like slapping a bandage over a bullet wound.

And yet I'm surprised by how fast the orgasm comes. It's savage, tearing through me like a lightning bolt.

But when it's gone, I'm even hungrier for Cami than I was before.

Frustrated, I grab a couple of tissues and clean myself. I've just zipped myself back up when Bogdan bursts into my office without so much as a knock.

"I didn't say you could come in," I growl.

"I didn't know you were in here in the first place," Bogdan replies unapologetically. "What are you—"

He breaks off when he notices the open file on my desk.

"What's that out for?"

I close it immediately. "Not your problem."

"Did I interrupt something?" Bogdan asks with a knowing smile.

I put the file back in the locked drawer and give him the death stare I'd learned from our father. "Sit the fuck down and tell me what you came in here for."

Still grinning like a loon, Bogdan sits down across from me. "We just had a Maxim sighting."

I lean in immediately. "Who saw him?"

"Daniil. He was seen in West London, visiting his penthouse apartment. Brought a shit ton of security with him. All heavily armed."

"So he's scared."

"Or angry."

"Is he still there?"

"In and out," Bogdan answers. "He was upstairs for an hour at most."

I frown. "Which means he went in there to retrieve something."

"My sources have been watching the apartment for days now. I suspect he was planning on moving Camila into the penthouse after their marriage."

I laugh darkly. "Yeah, well that didn't work out for him, did it?"

“Do you want to leak the information that you married Camila?”

“No,” I reply firmly. “Let’s save that for later.”

Bogdan nods. “Svetlana is in town. Do we want eyes on her, too?”

I consider that a moment. I don’t consider the woman dangerous. But that’s because I can’t quite separate Svetlana Vorobev from the reclusive woman I used to call my aunt.

I suppose she still is my aunt, in name alone if nothing else.

Just like Maxim remains my cousin.

And we all know how much that counts for—not a fucking thing.

“Put Kirill on her.”

“I’ll let him know. Hopefully, we can establish the tail before she goes underground again.”

“So...” Bogdan says, leaning back in the chair and kicking his feet up on my desk. “How’s the wife?”

I narrow my eyes at him.

He smiles and continues, “I assume that’s why you huffed up here, right? To blow off some steam? Can I suggest couples’ counseling?”

“Where’s Mother?” I ask sharply.

“In the gardens or the library, I don’t know. I don’t keep tabs on her.”

“You should.”

“Not my job.”

“It’s precisely your job.”

“Since when?”

“Since I became the one who decides what your job is.”

He grumbles but doesn’t argue. He’s my brother and my closest confidante. But even Bogdan knows how this shit works.

“Besides,” I add, “don’t pretend like looking after her is a burden. The two of you are close.”

Bogdan nods. He hesitates for a moment like he’s not sure if he wants to say the next piece. Then, in a softer voice, he says, “She wants to connect with you, too, you know. If you’d let her.”

I shake my head. “She doesn’t see me.”

“What does that mean?”

“When she looks at me, I know she’s seeing Papa.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

I shoot him a glare. “Their marriage was—”

“Successful.”

“Is that what you’d call it?”

“She was a good Bratva wife. Papa never had any complaints.”

“He may have respected her,” I say, “but he never loved her. He wasn’t capable of loving anything other than the Bratva.”

“Mama knows you’re not like him.”

“I’m exactly like him,” I growl. I wrench up my sleeve and brandish my scarred arm. “He made sure of that.”

“You are what you choose to be, brother,” Bogdan says quietly.

“Well, I choose to be don.”

“It doesn’t make you weak to choose something else, too.”

“I’m pretty sure our father would disagree. *The man with the crown can have no weak points in his armor*—even you remember him repeating that over and over again.”

He sighs like I’m missing his point. “Of course I remember. Don’t think I don’t know that’s why you let Camila disappear into witness protection.”

“Excuse me?”



“You wanted her to be safe. But you also wanted her to disappear from your radar. So that you could go back to having no weaknesses.”

I’m angry but with no outlet for it. So I sit back in my seat and glower at my smirking brother.

“What?” Bogdan asks when I don’t stop looking at him.

I shrug and exhale my unspent anger. “Sometimes, I forget how perceptive you are.”

“Don’t forget handsome.”

I laugh. “Top two of the Vorobev brothers.”

He gives me the finger, but a moment later, that serious gaze is back on his face. “I’m just saying, you can be both, you know?” he says. “You can be a good husband and a good don. One doesn’t have to come at the expense of the other.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No. Of course not.”

I wave a dismissive hand. “It doesn’t matter anyway. The title of husband holds no real weight here. It was a power play, a way to needle Maxim. Another revenge plot. It’s not real. The marriage is not real.”

Bogdan snorts at that one. “Hate to break it to you, *sobrat*, but whatever’s between you and Camila... there’s nothing fake about it.”

I frown. “What do you know about it?”

“As you so aptly pointed out, I am extremely perceptive. There’s a definite connection between you two and it’s not one-sided.”

I consider that for a moment. Given how Camila had reacted to my kiss upstairs, I can’t pretend that I don’t already know that what he’s saying is true.

But just because she may have feelings for me doesn’t mean she doesn’t have feelings for Maxim, too.

Two things can be true at the same time.

“Where’s Vlad?” I ask, changing direction.

“Downstairs, monitoring the tails,” Bogdan replies. “Why?”

“I want him to accompany Camila out of the manor tomorrow,” I tell him. “Edith will be joining her.”

“Where’s she going?”

“Shopping trip,” I say. “All the clothes she has are what I’ve picked out for her. She resents the amount of control I’ve exerted on her life.”

“So you’re trying to make a peace offering.”

I snort. “Trust me—a shopping spree won’t cut it. She’s not the type of woman who’s going to be satisfied with expensive clothes or fancy dinners.”

Bogdan looks at me knowingly. “You know that’s why you’re so attracted to her, right?”

“The attraction will fade. It always does.”

“It only takes one woman to change that.”

“She’s not it,” I say adamantly. “No woman is.”

“You have to get married at some point. You’ll need children.”

“Why?” I demand. “If we’re talking successors, you are mine.”

Bogdan places his hand over his heart. “Big brother, you flatter me.”

“Stop being precious about this.”

Bogdan grins. “I’m not suited for that seat you’re in, Isaak. You know that.”

“I didn’t think I was, either.”

“Bullshit. If any man was born for this life, it’s you.”

“That sounds like a fucking insult.”

Bogdan laughs. “Only partially.”

“If I marry, I’ll marry a woman who can take on the role of being a Bratva wife,” I say firmly. “And Camila is not that.”

“No?” Bogdan asks. “She certainly has the fire for it.”

So he’s noticed. I have, too. Out loud, though, I say, “It’s not the same thing. She’s a normal girl who’s led a normal life—”

“Up until six years ago,” Bogdan interrupts. “Up until she met you.”

“Yeah, and she’s hated every minute of it. She hates me for the sacrifices she was forced to make because I decided I had to talk to her that night.”

“Love and hate aren’t so far apart, you know.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why are you campaigning so hard for this?”

Bogdan shrugs. “You’ve come alive in the last few weeks. It’s no mystery why.”

“It’s because I’m closer than ever to wrangling the motherfucker who killed our father,” I say firmly. “Nothing else.”

Bogdan raises his eyebrows, clearly disbelieving, but he doesn’t argue with me.

Which, as I’m sure he knows, just annoys me all the more.

“Just tell Vlad to accompany her tomorrow,” I say sternly. “And take a full team with him. I don’t want anyone getting to Camila. For all we know, Maxim has eyes on us, too.”

“No one’s getting anywhere near her,” Bogdan assures me. “Just one question, though.”

“What?”

“Why aren’t I accompanying Camila on this shopping trip?”

I get to my feet and head for the door. “Because,” I say, trying to suppress my smirk, “you talk too much.”

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## CAMILA

“What do you think about this one, Miss Camila?”

I sigh and stare at the cashmere dress that Edith is holding up for me. It’s nothing short of stunning, but I have less than zero interest in trying it on or buying it.

“No, thank you.”

The three salespeople that surround me look positively distressed. Apparently, my complete lack of interest is reading like disapproval, and they feel the need to compensate for that.

“Champagne, ma’am?” an impeccably dressed man named Trevor asks, offering me a tray filled with golden flutes.

“No, thank you.”

His face falls immediately. “If you don’t want champagne, I can bring you something else?” he suggests. “Handmade truffles, perhaps?”

“You have handmade truffles in a clothing store?” I ask incredulously.

“Well, no, but there’s an artisanal chocolatier just down the street. I can whip down there and bring you a box.”

I shudder. *Jesus*. “That’s kind of you. But no thanks, I’m fine.”

He steps back and looks at his manager helplessly.

Lachlan steps forward. He’s my own personal jailer, masquerading as a bodyguard. He certainly looks the part. He

cuts an impressive figure in his black suit and wired earpiece. A “don’t fuck with me” type straight out of Central Casting.

The wrap-around sunglasses are maybe an unnecessary addition considering we’re indoors. But I can’t deny that it completes the look.

“Thank you all for your help,” he says in his strong Scottish accent. “I think Miss Camila is just feeling a little overwhelmed. Perhaps you could give her a little time to make some choices.”

“Of course,” the manager says with a low bow. “We’ll give you some space.”

The sales team backs out of the carpeted, circular room we’re sitting in. Edith and Lachlan are the only two that remain. But I know there are two more men standing right outside this room. Not to mention two armored cars parked right outside this building.

The looks I received when we descended on this luxury couture boutique almost made me laugh. They gawked like I was some sort of foreign princess. Curiosity and envy alike.

If only they knew the truth.

“I don’t need space,” I tell the bright-eyed Scot. “I just want to go back home.”

“If you’d rather head back to the manor—”

“The manor is not my home,” I snap immediately.

Lachlan raises his eyebrows. I notice Edith and he exchange a glance.

“Edith,” he says, “maybe you should pick out some more things for Ms. Camila? You know her sizes.”

Edith looks more than happy to scurry out of the room, passing the multiple racks of clothing I’ve already declined.

Lachlan walks over and stands in front of me. I try not to fidget. I don’t want him to see that he makes me nervous.

It helps that he keeps a respectful distance. I assume he’s trying not to be intimidating. It’s not really working, though.

Kinda hard not to be intimidating when you're a literal Scottish giant.

But then he removes his sunglasses. His eyes are a soft, warm brown that matches his hair. Without the shades, he looks almost boyish. Damn near friendly, to be honest.

He gives me an easy smile. "I know you're trying to make a point," he says. "But honestly, you're making their jobs a lot harder than they need to be."

I raise my eyebrows. "Am I really being lectured by my jailer?"

"I'm your bodyguard."

"That is the politically correct term," I retort. "But I don't think it's accurate."

He smiles again, unbothered by my feistiness. "I get it. You don't want to be here."

"I don't."

"But you are here. So why not make the most of it?"

"Out of principle."

He shakes his head and chuckles. "I've never understood principled people," he says. "They're so busy trying to make their points that they forget to enjoy their lives."

"Spoken like a true hedonist. Or someone who works for one, at least."

"He wants you to be safe."

Something about the way Lachlan talks about Isaak suggests that he's not just a random henchman or hired goon. There's warmth to it. Kindness. Like they're personal friends.

"Now you're his spokesperson?"

"We're Bratva," Lachlan says. "We do things differently."

"So I've noticed."

"I'm just saying, Isaak wouldn't have organized this for you if he wasn't trying to make you feel more comfortable in his world."

“So he makes the minimal amount of effort and I’m supposed to be eternally grateful?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

His smile gets wider.

“Am I amusing you?” I demand.

“Sorry,” he says, without offering an explanation for the smug expression he’s currently wearing.

“This is not what I want,” I say, gesturing to the luxurious space. “All this fuss and bother. I don’t need a t-shirt that costs three thousand dollars.”

“You’re not buying it, so why not?”

“This is not how I grew up.”

“Hey, I hear you,” he says, crossing over to the couch I’m sitting on.

He still keeps about three feet between us, but he sits down next to me. And oddly, I feel more comfortable—although the couch groans under his massive bulk like it wishes Lachlan would leave it alone. I feel more like I’m talking to a friend than I am to a taskmaster.

“I didn’t grow up like this, either. I grew up in Scotland, dirt poor. Dad’s a farmer, Mum bounced between temp jobs and staying at home with us. With six kids, she didn’t have much of a life.”

“Six kids?” I say, gawping at him.

He laughs. “It was a packed house at the Murphy residence.”

There’s warmth in the way he says that, too. I can tell he loves his family. His eyes get just a little brighter when he talks about them.

“I’m the youngest,” he adds. “And the smallest.”

I laugh out loud. “I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. Four brothers and a sister, and I’m the runt of the litter.”



“What made you leave Scotland?”

“Isaak,” he answers shortly. “It’s a long story, but suffice it to say that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or the right place at the right time, depending on how you look at it.”

“Sounds shady.”

“Depends on your definition of the term, I suppose. There was a scuffle that involved Isaak and some Bratva business. He was backed into a corner and I got involved and helped him out. The next day, I had a job.”

“And you knew what you were getting involved in?”

“Isaak had a bullet wound lost in his left shoulder when I got him out,” Lachlan says with a smile. “So yeah, I knew what I was getting myself into.”

“And what made a Scottish farm boy decide to accept a job offer from a Russian mob boss?”

“Well for one, he wasn’t a mob boss at the time. We were both in our twenties. We were young and ambitious.”

“And stupid.”

He laughs. “That, too. Isaak offered me a life that I never dreamed was possible.”

“A life of violence and corruption.”

“Aye, there’s some of that,” Lachlan acknowledges. His eyes go slightly misty. “But my family was about to lose the farm. Mum had just been diagnosed with cancer we couldn’t afford to treat. My sister had been accepted into university and even with a partial scholarship, she still couldn’t afford to go. So yes, there’s unseemly things to what I do. But I did it for them.”

I stiffen. I feel guilty for accusing him of being as craven as Isaak. But I’m still suspicious if he’s telling me the whole truth.

“Sounds pretty selfless coming from someone who hurts people for a living.”

Lachlan doesn't hide it. He nods, honest and transparent. "It took a bit, but I realized that I enjoyed the life. It made me feel... important. Still does."

"Still does?" I ask. "You're a glorified babysitter today. Is this what you consider important?"

He smiles. "I've been working for Isaak for over ten years now. He's never given me a job unless it was important. When he asked me to accompany you today, I knew it was because I'm one of the few he trusts with you."

He's breaking through my anger with his patience and honesty. I don't like it.

"Is that why he sent you?" I ask suspiciously. "Or is it because he knew you'd be able to plead his case better than he can?"

Lachlan chuckles. "Isaak's not the kind of man who's going to plead his case. He doesn't care what anyone thinks."

"I've noticed."

"He's not all bad, you know."

I roll my eyes. "I can make up my mind about him myself, thanks," I say rather bitchily. "I think I'd like to get back to the manor now."

"You haven't picked out anything."

"Everything here is beautiful. But I'm not about to blow a bunch of money on clothes I can don't need and don't want. If I'm going to shop, I'm going to buy the clothes that I'm comfortable in."

"Okay," he says, getting back up to his feet.

"Okay?"

"Where would you like to shop?"

"You're giving me the option?"

"Yes."

I consider that for a moment. "Fine. Let's go then."

"How about, before we do, you pick one dress?" he suggests. "To appease the nervous sales team out there. They're about to

piss themselves in fear, and you'd be doing a good deed, you know. They work on commission."

I sigh and shake my head at him. "He knew what he was doing sending you with me today."

"I'm flattered you think so," he says with another bright grin. He juts his chin towards the nearest rack. "That white dress is spectacular. You should try it on."

"Son of a bitch," I half-growl, half-chuckle.

Lachlan just laughs triumphantly.



Three hours later, we're back at the manor. Edith and one of the other men carry all my bags up to my room. Once I'd started shopping on my own terms, it was hard to stop.

"I can't believe I bought so much," I groan, staring at my bags as they're carried up the stairs.

Lachlan laughs. "Please, the bill wasn't even two thousand dollars."

"I think you're forgetting the white dress."

"With that one exception," he concedes. "But it's his money, not yours. And given that he's holding you hostage here, it's the least he can do."

I give Lachlan an amused grin. Somehow, in the last few hours, he's managed to nudge my emotions from dislike and resentment to something that's in the ballpark of affection. He's funny, honest, and surprisingly easy to like—qualities which have been extremely rare during my time with the Vorobev clan.

And I appreciate the fact that he's not pretending I'm here of my own free will. It makes me feel like someone's listening. It doesn't even seem to matter that he's not exactly going out of his way to help me.

“That’s a pretty bold statement to make about your boss,” I say.

He shrugs. “I say it like it is. But as far as prisons go, this is a pretty good one.”

I can’t argue there. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Enjoy the rest of your day, Camila.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

Chuckling, he leaves me and I head up the stairs to my room.

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## CAMILA

I'm walking down a broad corridor when I pass an open door that makes me stop in my tracks.

"Oh my God," I breathe, turning back and rushing to the threshold. I blink twice, but that does nothing to change my view.

All I can see are books.

Books upon books upon books. Piled so high that I have to crane my neck up to see the top.

I walk inside the room, feeling a little bit like I'm re-enacting the scene from *Beauty and the Beast*, when Belle walks into the library for the first time. It strikes me that Belle was being held captive in a beautiful castle.

I snort at my own realization.

Is it possible that I'd wanted an adventure of my own so much I'd manifested one?

"Hello?" comes an unexpected voice.

Gasping, I whirl around and find myself face to face with a stunning older woman with grey streaked hair pulled back into a sleek topknot. She's wearing black pants, a beige sweater and a rust orange scarf belted in place around her torso. I couldn't look that elegant or effortless with a full team of stylists.

"I'm so sorry," I stammer. "I didn't realize there was someone else in here."

She gives me a curious smile and brandishes the hardcover book in her hand. “I was in need of a little poetry.” Her accent is faint but noticeable, adding a veneer of exoticism to her aura.

Not that she needed it. I can’t take my eyes off her as it is.

“Keats,” I observe, reading the spine of the volume in her hand. “Does that mean you’re feeling a little melancholy?”

She arches a perfect eyebrow. “Melancholy,” she repeats. “That’s a good word. I wish people would use it more often.”

“It would be better if they didn’t have to.”

She smiles sadly. “Do you read poetry?”

“I usually reach for novels first,” I admit. “But I do need a fix of poetry every now and again. I tend to favor Maya Angelou, though.”

“Her poetry is a bit more uplifting.”

“Certainly less depressing than Keats.”

She laughs. It sounds like the soft pitter-patter of rain.

“I’m Camila,” I say. I’m feeling slightly self-conscious, even though I have no idea why.

“Nikita,” she replies. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Finally?”

She smiles. It’s a dazzling grin, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes, which remain sad and distant.

“I’m Isaak and Bogdan’s mother,” she explains.

My heart jumps into my throat. *Their mother?* Jesus. I probably should have made the connection immediately. Bogdan looks a lot like her. But on the surface at least, she doesn’t appear to have much in common with Isaak.

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I don’t bite.”

“Even if you do,” I hear myself say, “I can hold my own. I bite back.”

I blush immediately. I have no idea what made me say that. Maybe I have an intrinsic need to let the world know that I am not okay with this situation, no matter how differently it looks from the outside. To tell anyone and everyone who will listen that I'm no damsel in distress.

She stares at me for a long moment. Weighing me. Searching me.

Then she smiles. "I can see why he was so adamant to get you back."

I raise my eyebrows. "How much do you know?"

"Everything," she says calmly. "Probably even more than my sons think I do."

She's certainly not the kind of woman who looks like she's content to sit in the dark. Maybe that's why I can't help feeling a grudging sense of admiration for the proud woman.

Honestly, I want to be her when I grow up.

"I hope you're comfortable here."

"I do hope you're comfortable here. I know it's not easy..."

"And you're okay with all this?" I ask her curiously. "You're okay with your son abducting women and plotting revenge on your nephew?"

Her expression shifts. The effect is infinitesimal, but I catch it.

"I never had any control over my boys, Camila," she says, addressing me like we're old friends. "I never had much say in their upbringing, either. They were always his sons. Not mine."

"Your husband's?"

She nods. "Vitaly was a hard man. He wanted his sons to be able to carry on the legacy he built. He molded them into men who could run a successful Bratva. I got a little extra time with Bogdan. But Isaak... he was his father's heir from day one. He was the successor and that came with sacrifices. Including his childhood. So when you ask me if I knew about his plans, the answer won't change the fact that I have no power or influence



over either one of my boys. They belong to the Bratva from skin to soul. It's a beast that swallows children and turns them into men."

"That sounds... lonely."

Her eyes flicker to me. "It was. It is."

I would never have imagined feeling sorry for this woman. She's so proud, so regal. And yet here I am, feeling pity.

"Not all cages are literal, Camila. Some are entirely of our own making. Some are even deserved."

That sticks with me. Not simply because of the aching expression on her face. But the amount of regret in her tone when she says it.

"I know what you mean," I whisper before I can stop myself.

"Do you?"

I sigh. "I've spent my whole life striving to be a certain type of woman. And I'm terrified that I'm failing."

"What kind of woman is that?"

"The kind who knows her own mind. The kind who can stand on her own two feet. The kind who doesn't need a man to survive."

"And you don't think that's who you are?"

"I don't know. I'm scared that I want a love story too much."

Nikita raises her thin eyebrows. "Two things can be true at the same time. You don't have to sacrifice who you are in order to fall in love."

"Don't you?" I ask.

Silence steals in between us. I know immediately I've said too much.

Nikita Vorobev is not my friend. She's the mother of the man that abducted me. Shopping sprees, helicopter rides and fancy dinners aside, I am his prisoner.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you. I just couldn't walk past this room when I saw what was in it."

“It’s quite a big library,” Nikita replies. “Feel free to explore it.”

With that, the air shifts. She’s the kind of woman who can end a conversation with merely the arch of an eyebrow.

But we both turn when we hear a voice at the door. “Camila?”

It’s ridiculous how fast my heart rate picks up. My only consolation is that no one can hear it pounding in my chest.

“You’re back,” Isaak says coldly.

“I... Yes, I was heading to my room when I...”

“Ran into my mother?”

I glance towards her. She hasn’t moved or said a word.

“Saw the library,” I correct.

Isaak steps into the room, looking cold and impatient. He looks at Nikita. “Mother, tea is being set up for you on the terrace,” he says. “You should head there now.”

It’s more of a command than a suggestion.

Nikita gives me an enigmatic parting smile and whisks out of the library without saying anything. Isaak steps forward. The door swings shut behind him. I take an instinctive step back.

I should be wary of him. I should want to fight back. Yell. Shout. Scream.

I should be thinking of all the ways I can attempt to escape him.

But all I can think is: if the Beast has a library like this, he can’t be all bad.

Can he?

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**ISAAK**

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FIVE MINUTES EARLIER

Lachlan comes to my office as soon as he, Edith, and Cami return from their shopping. I'm already irritated that they'd exceeded the allotted time for the errands.

"Well?" I ask when he knocks and comes in. "How'd it go?"

Lachlan's got a smile on his face that I'm not sure I care for. "I can certainly see why you married her."

Bogdan snorts with laughter until I glare at him. "Go on," I tell Lachlan.

"The first two hours of the trip were... difficult," he says. "She refused to participate. But I loosened her up."

I clench my jaw. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

I know Lachlan. I've known him for over a decade. We know each other's history. We've fought side by side.

And I trust him implicitly.

Which is why I'd asked him to accompany Camila on this shopping trip outside the Manor. But despite all that, his words make me feel intensely territorial.

The smug Scottish bastard is probably doing that on purpose.

Lachlan shrugs. "Just that we talked. I made her see that enjoying herself was more important than making a point."

I sit back in my chair. "And did she enjoy herself?"

"Aye, I think so. She's not thrilled with the general turn her life has taken," he says. "Can't blame her for that though, can

you?”

“Whose fucking side are you on?”

He smiles. “After today? Hers. Definitely hers.”

Bogdan doubles up with laughter again. I roll my eyes at the both of them. “You two *mudaki* can sort out the logistics for the meetings coming up,” I say. “I’m going to go find some intelligent people to talk to.”

“Hey, boss?” Lachlan calls to me over his shoulder as I head out of the office.

I pause. “What?”

“All joking aside, I get it now. She’s your perfect fucking match.”

“How do you figure that?”

His grin has a spark of mischief. “She fights back like you do.”

Growling, I leave the two of them in my office. I have other business to attend to. Meetings I’ve postponed. I need to reschedule and get my empire back on track.

The list of people that rely on me are long.

The list of people that are going to be vulnerable if this fight with Maxim breaks out into the open is longer.

But as I pass by the library, I hear voices. I stop, double back, and step inside.

My mother is standing close to Camila, a book in hand. They’re eyeing each other—not angrily or confrontationally, but almost more like two souls who recognize each other’s suffering.

I don’t fucking like it.

“Mother, tea is being set up for you on the terrace,” I say. “You should head there now.”

That’s a lie and she knows it. But she doesn’t argue. She just takes the dismissal in stride and exits swiftly.

I step aside to let her go, then shut the door behind me.

Camila stands in the center of the library. She's dressed in a high-waisted skirt, a tight black tank top, and a pair of studded flats. Her blonde hair is swept off one shoulder, but falls off the other.

She looks like she belongs here, surrounded by books and sunlight. Before she saw me enter, she'd looked almost... at peace in this space.

Now that I'm here, though, that's changed. The atmosphere is hot and crackling. Our last encounter is ever-present, reminding us both of the connection neither one of us is willing to acknowledge.

"This is some library," she says, breaking the silence.

She's tense. Eyes cautious, spine erect.

"It's one of the few places in the manor that I've left alone," I tell her. "Even the staircases up to the lofted nooks haven't been restored. So tread lightly when you're on them. They creak."

She almost smiles. "These are all your books?"

"Some," I reply. "Some belonged to the people who owned this home before me."

"What were they like?"

"Condescending Brits with a stick up their ass."

"So only the British part has changed, I guess."

I smirk, but don't answer.

"I used to work in a library," she admits softly a moment later.

I could feign ignorance. But what would be the point? Deception was Maxim's forte.

Brutal truth is mine.

"I know."

One of Cami's eyebrows twitches upward in surprise. "You know?"

"I knew you worked in a library," I tell her. "You stopped working there a week before you wedding."

Her jaw tightens into sharp lines. She's pissed, but she's trying to contain her emotions. Letting them free hasn't worked out for her that well thus far.

"You spied on me," she accuses.

"Not me personally."

"Oh, of course not. You have your henchman do your dirty work," she says bitterly. "Was Lachlan the one spying on me on your behalf?"

"No."

"Bogdan?"

"You don't know their names. You never will."

"Them?" she repeats. "So you had the whole damn team on Cami duty?"

"I knew Maxim was up to something," I tell her unabashedly. "I knew he was busy plotting. I've had tails on him for years, but he'd managed to conceal you from me. Then one day, he relaxed a little. Got cocky. One of my men snapped a shot of you leaving his penthouse in London. And the moment I saw your face, I knew what he was planning on doing. I knew I had to get you away from him."

She stares at me with disbelief. "I'm not yours to save, Isaak."

"Or did you not want to be saved at all?" I ask.

Her eyes go wide with anger. "Meaning what?" she demands. "Because I'm not happy being your fucking captive, I must be desperate to go back to Maxim?"

"I didn't say that."

"You implied it," she snaps. "Has it crossed your mind that maybe I don't want to be with any man that lies to me?"

"I haven't lied to you."

"You haven't been honest," she retorts.

"Have you?"

She snaps around, quickly losing her composure. "I don't owe you any honesty," she hisses. "My life is none of your



business.”

“It is now. I’ve made it my business.”

She glares at me as though she’s not sure how to respond to that. Then she tries to storm around me to leave the library. I block her.

“Get out of my way,” she says.

“No.”

She puts her palm on my chest and attempts to push her way past me. But it does absolutely nothing. A moment later, she drops her hand as though it’s been burned.

“I want to go up to my room.”

“You can go when I say you can.”

I know I’m not exactly showing her my best self, right now. But fuck... The woman knows exactly how to enrage me.

“You have no right,” she seethes. “No right at all to keep me here.”

“I am Bratva. It’s not about what we have a right to. It’s about what we take.”

She scurries backwards and looks around frantically, searching for an alternative way out of here. The curling stairs at the eastern edge of the library lead up to the second tier of books. There’s an exit up that way, but she doesn’t know that. She just heads for the stairs in desperation.

I take two huge steps and cut off her path. “You can try to run,” I tell her icily. “You might even get away from me. But I’m not the only one who was looking for you, Camila.”

She freezes in shock. “Who’s looking for me?”

“The cops for one,” I tell her. “And Maxim, for another.”

Her reaction is difficult to read. I can’t tell if she’s relieved or anxious. Her eyes dart from side to side as though she’s trying to figure out her options.

“He’s... he’s searching for me?”

“He doesn’t have to search. He knows you’re with me. What he’s trying to figure out is how to get to you.”

She looks down silently. A lock of blonde hair falls across her face.

“Is that what you want?” I press. “You want him to come here and save you?”

“Fuck you,” she growls.

She brushes past me again and tries to go up the stairs. She manages to get one foot on the first step before I seize her arm in my grasp.

“I’m not fucking done with you.”

“Well, I’m done with you!” she spits in my face.

“Are you?”

“Yes,” she growls from the step, eye level with me. “Yes, I fucking am. And you know what? I *do* want Maxim to come here and save me. Save me from you.”

“Is that right? So you want him?”

“Yes,” she practically spits in my face.

I’ve got one arm locked around her waist. Her hands are at my chest, trying to shove me off her. But it’s no use. I’m not letting go until I’m good and ready.

God only knows when the fuck that will be.

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You are. You’re lying to yourself. You claim to want Maxim, and maybe a part of you does. But you want me more.”

Her eyes go wide. There’s anger aplenty there. Resentment.

But the desire looms at the forefront, betraying her words.

Her pupils are dilated wide, and I’m willing to bet that, underneath that skirt, her panties are soaking wet.

“You egotistical bastard,” she growls. “Let me go.”

“Not until I prove it,” I say. “Not until I make you see what you’re choosing to ignore.”

With a sweep of my heel, I take her legs out from under her. I cushion her fall to the stairs, but it knocks the wind from her lungs nonetheless.

“Stop, Isaak... st-...”

But she’s breathless. Despite her words, her tone conveys longing. Need. Lust.

The lying little *kiska* just needs to be shown the truth.

I knock her legs apart. Her skirt rides up. She tries to push me back by the shoulders, but her shove is weak and my head is already delving between her thighs.

I push my face into her, licking her pussy over her panties.

I was right—she’s soaking fucking wet.

“Isaak,” she moans. “Don’t... don’t...”

But she’s not even trying to push me away anymore. One hand is clutching the banister tight once more, and her second hand is gripping the step she’s on.

I wind one finger into the thin strap of her panties and rip them right off her. She gasps in shock as the material gives way. But before she can recover, my tongue probes her slit and she arches back with a wordless cry.

I tongue her relentlessly until her insults turn to moans and her body goes limp with desire. In less than a minute, she’s on the verge of an orgasm.

That’s when I pull back and lift my head.

All I can see at first is her heaving chest and the beautiful arch of her neck. She looks up with confusion, and I know I’ve interrupted her right on the brink of coming. I lick her juices from the corner of my lips.

“What did I tell you?”

“You fucking bastard,” she pants.

Smiling triumphantly, I bend my head back down and thrust my tongue deep inside her once more. I explore her wet depths and when she's shivering again, I bear down on her clit.

"Fuck," she whimpers. "Fuck..."

Then she succumbs to it. As she explodes, I feel her fingers tugging at my hair. She's still twitching and muttering breathlessly when I lean back, free my cock from my pants, and plunge into her.

It's fast. Savage. Hardly time to breathe between one orgasm and the next.

I make it known with the very first thrust—I make the rules here.

Cami jerks back to life, her eyes going wide with shock.

"You want Maxim now?" I demand as I thrust into her.

Her hands wind around my neck and her thighs tighten around my waist automatically. She can say whatever she wants—her body is betraying her.

"You... asshole..." she growls at me.

I smile down at her and increase the tempo of my thrusts. Our hips meet brutally hard each time.

"This is what you really want, isn't it, little *kiska*?"

The words on her tongue turn to gasps as I slam my hips against hers. "Fuck, Isaak, you're going to tear me in half..."

I squeeze her thighs so tight that I know I'm going to leave imprints. *Good*. Let her look in the mirror tomorrow and remember who she belongs to.

"Good girl," I growl. "That'll remind you who you really want."

"This... fuck, this doesn't change... anything..." she gasps.

But I'm not sure she even knows what she's saying. Her eyes are rolling back in her head. Her hand cups my hip, pulling me into her, begging for more.

“Tell me,” I whisper in Cami’s ear. “Has he made you come like this?”

Instead of answering, she digs her nails into my flesh, drawing blood.

Pain flashes across my chest, but I fucking revel in it. It makes the pleasure of being inside her that much more intense. All I want to do is draw her out of her self-consciousness. Force her to unleash the wildness I know is inside her.

To fuck all the lies out until the only thing left is the fire I can’t stop obsessing over.

I’m fucking into her as hard and fast as I can. Sweat drips, breath mingles, moans mix. “Fuck...” she cries out as I fuck her into her third orgasm.

The moment I feel her spasming on my cock, I let myself go, filling her with me. As soon as I’m done, I step back to admire what I’ve done.

She’s still crumpled on the staircase, laid out like a gift.

Her eyes are blinking back into the present moment. Her chest rises and falls in gulping inhales.

Then I hear a gasp.

Camila bolts upright, practically pushing me off her. “I’m so sorry, sir,” whimpers one of the maids, Imelda. She turns around to give us privacy. “I... I was just... going to clean... I didn’t mean...”

Camila scrambles singled-mindedly to tug her skirt back into place. Her cheeks flame with embarrassment to have been discovered as we were.

“It’s okay, Imelda,” I say quickly as I tuck myself away. “Don’t worry.”

Imelda retreats back into the corridor. Seizing the moment, Camila rushes past me, heading straight for the door. She doesn’t so much as glance at me as she leaves.

But just before she disappears from sight, I see it: five little bruises on her thigh, courtesy of my fingertips.

Marking her as mine.

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## CAMILA

“Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.”

I pace up and down, throwing frustrated punches at the air and trying to figure out how I had allowed my senses to abandon me when I needed them most.

He had cornered me, yes. But I’d gotten off on it. I’m like a junkie who can’t say no.

I should feel violated.

Do I, though?

No. Not at all.

Because he hadn’t done anything to me that I hadn’t accepted, wanted. Hadn’t practically begged for.

I climb onto the sofa in front of the fireplace and pull my legs up. I bury my face in my hands and rock back and forth.

Not only had I completely abandoned my principles, but my shame had been on display for the maid to see. I’m willing to bet that news of our little sexcapade will be all over the house in three minutes flat.

“What’s wrong with me?” I breathe to the empty room.

I grab the round cushion behind my back and fling it across the space. It hits the grill of the fireplace and lands soundlessly on the carpeted floor.

“Pardon me, Miss Camila?”



I whip around to see Edith standing in the doorway of my bedroom. She's looking at me with concern.

"Edith," I say, blushing. "I didn't see you there."

She steps tentatively in the room and pulls the door shut with a soft click. "Are you okay, ma'am?"

I sigh. "Would you please just call me Camila?"

"I can try," she says uncertainly. "But it doesn't feel comfortable."

"Do you treat all your boss's prisoners like they're honored guests in this house?"

I wince as soon as the mean words are out of my mouth. That was unnecessary. Edith hasn't done anything wrong.

But I can't help it. I'm frustrated and alone and feeling entirely too vulnerable. Isaak has exploited my greatest weakness—which, incidentally, turns out to be him.

"Well, you're the first one, Miss Camila," Edith says.

A snort of laughter bursts through my lips. "The first guest or the first prisoner?"

"Both, I suppose," she says after a moment of thought.

I sigh again. "Sit down, please."

She raises her eyebrows. "Madam..."

"Go on," I tell her, gesturing to the empty space beside me on the couch. "Don't make me get stern."

She hesitates slightly, but eventually she sits down, though she stays perched on the edge of the cushion like she might sprint out of the room at any second.

"I've been here more than a week now," I say. "And I barely know anything about you."

She gives me a surprised smile. It's almost as though she's saying, "*I'm the maid; why would you even care?*"

"There's nothing much to know, Miss Cam—" She breaks off under my pointed glare. "Camila," she corrects in a hushed tone. "Just Camila."

“Tell you what: I’m gonna ask you to do me a favor,” I say with a friendly smile. “I don’t expect you to make a habit of it. But just for now, just for this conversation... could you pretend we’re friends?”

I say it like it’s a joke. And it is—partly. Like, maybe two percent kidding. But the other ninety-eight percent is very, very serious.

For the better part of six years, I’ve been a ghost under the protection of the United States government. Few friends, few moments of human connection.

Even now, who do I have? Isaak?

We do a lot more fighting than talking.

And there’s a distinct power dynamic between us. He’s hiding things from me; I’m hiding things from him. As brutally honest as we are sometimes, there’s always something we’re holding back from each other.

Because being vulnerable is the ultimate sign of weakness. In the don’s world, at least.

Which leaves me with Edith. Because I desperately need someone to talk to. And I’m running out of options.

She looks positively dumbfounded by the request. But to her credit, she swallows, straightens up, and beams at me. “I can do that,” she says.

I give her a grateful smile. “Music to my ears. How did you get this job?”

“My brother works for Master Isaak,” she tells me. “In one of the factories. I’d just graduated secondary school and I needed a decent job with some flexibility. I’m putting myself through university.”

“That’s amazing, Edith.”

“I’ve got about a year to go.”

“And then?”

“Then I’ll hand in my notice here and find a job in advertising or sales. Something corporate and exciting. Someplace I can

wear power suits and give a bunch of men orders.”

I laugh. “Not so mild-mannered after all, are you?”

She shrugs but grins bashfully. “We all have our roles to play. I’m not here to make waves. I’m here to keep my head down and get myself through uni. I’m grateful to Master Isaak for giving me this job.”

I lean back. “Is he a good boss?”

“I know this isn’t exactly what you want to hear... but yes, he is.”

“And you like him?”

She tenses immediately, as though I’ve asked her an invasive question. Then again, given that I’m asking her about her boss, and I am technically his wife, I suppose it is an invasive question to ask.

“Sorry. You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to.”

“No, no, it’s quite alright,” she says quickly, as though her window of honesty is closing. “It’s okay. I do like him. He’s definitely scary sometimes—”

I smirk in agreement. “Tell me about it.”

“But for a man that’s as powerful as he is, he can also be rather kind.”

*Kind.* Now that’s a word I never expected to hear in relation to Isaak Vorobev. The fact that it’s coming from a house servant makes it all the more impactful.

“There was this one semester that was really hectic. I was behind on my assignments and working to try and put a dent in my student loans. I was stressed all the time. Not many employers would even notice.” She raises her eyes and looks at me. “But he did. And when I told him, he just listened. He was sympathetic. Then I went back to work and that was that. About a week later, I got a call from the bank about my student loan. He had paid it in full.”

“Wow...”

Edith nods. “He’s not taking it out of my salary, either. It was one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me.”

“That... that is a nice story,” I stammer awkwardly.

She smiles. “It’s not just me. He takes care of all his employees. I think it’s part of the reason why his men are so loyal to him.”

I stare at the fire, absorbing all this information. I’m suddenly regretting having this conversation at all. I don’t need a reason to like Isaak. Quite the opposite, actually. The fact that I’m insanely attracted to him is bad enough. I was looking for things to despise.

“I know how you got here,” Edith says cautiously. “I’m not trying to belittle your experience. Or make light of it. But...”

“You’re on his side?” I ask.

She flushes. “No, of course not. I just... Some things aren’t as black and white as all that. Isaak Vorobev may not be a hero. But I don’t think he’s the villain, either.”

“Maybe he’s not your villain, Edith,” I tell her grimly. “But he is mine.”

She purses up her lips. I know she disagrees with me. She’s just too polite to say so.

We both look into the fireplace for a while. “I... I used to have a massive crush on him when I first started working here,” she admits suddenly.

I raise my eyebrows, amused that she’s even made that admission. She looks slightly shocked at her own bravado.

“I can’t really blame you,” I say, mostly to put her at ease. “He’s very handsome. Annoyingly handsome, in fact.”

She giggles. “Every single maid who’s starting working here has fantasized about him at some point. Trust me; I’ve heard them all.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Must be entertaining.”

“But you know something? He’s never brought a woman to any of his homes before,” Edith tells me. “Not even for a

meal.”

I freeze. “Am I supposed to be flattered?”

“No,” she says quickly. “I just thought you should know.”

Then I can see it in her eyes: the moment of honesty is over.

She stands and retrieves the cushion I’d thrown earlier. “I really should get back to work. I have to tidy up the credenza in the den.”

I nod distractedly. “Thanks Edith. For... talking to me.”

She smiles, the very picture of politeness. “Of course, Miss Camila.”

And just like that, we’re fallen back into our roles.

She’s the maid.

I’m the entrapped wife.

She has a way out of here one day. But as for me? There’s no end in sight.

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## CAMILA

Edith slips out of the room, leaving me behind to ponder my own isolation. I've been lonely so long that I've gotten used to the feeling. But with Isaak... I don't feel quite so hollow inside. And that part of this whole ordeal terrifies me as much as it confuses me.

I get to my feet and start pacing. But this time, I walk slow. I think instead of rage.

Mostly, though, I long for Jo.

I was so close to having a life that involved her. Then again, if Isaak is right about everything Maxim was scheming, maybe that life only ever existed in my head.

The idea that Alex is really Maxim Vorobev... it still doesn't feel real. More like a convenient excuse for Isaak to storm back into my life and seize control of it.

But really, what other reason would he have had, if not for Alex—I mean, Maxim?

We had one night together. How many nights like that has he had with how many different women?

My thoughts are getting more frenzied and less organized. I need to get out of my own head before I go berserk.

I glance at the clock, and decide to call Bree a little early. Plopping onto my bed, I dial in her number. There's no option for video calling in my room, but I'll take what I can get. I'm not ready to leave my room and face anyone at the moment.

*Brr. Brr. Brr—*

The ringing of the line severs like someone sliced the phone cables. “Weird,” I breathe. Frowning, I punch in her number and try again.

*Brr. Brr. Brr—*

The exact same thing repeats itself. And I start to wonder.

“He wouldn’t...”

Then I recall our last fight in this room. Right before he had pinned me to the wall and stolen a savage kiss from me.

He had accused me of contacting Alex.

I know it suddenly and surely without even having to ask. He’s blocking the line. It’s not enough to keep my body prisoner in his house. Now, he’s cutting me off from the rest of the world entirely.

Just when Edith almost had me convinced that there was more to Isaak than the cruel, dominant don...

He gives me another reason to fight him.

I slam the phone down on the nightstand and storm out of my room.

Had I really been feeling guiltily only a moment before? For keeping Jo’s existence from Isaak?

I need to remind myself not to be so fucking precious about these things. He’s been ruthless from the start. So why shouldn’t I be the same?

I have a duty to protect my daughter, after all. From him as much as anyone else. As far as I’m concerned, he’s just the sperm donor. His feelings—if he’s even capable of having them—are irrelevant.

I’m rushing around so fast I nearly collide into one of the maids. Thankfully, it’s not the one who walked in on Isaak and me on the staircase.

“Miss Cam—”

“Where is Isaak?” I demand.



She looks startled. “I, um, think he’s in his office, ma’am.”

I change direction and head downstairs.

“Miss Camila, he’s in a meeting!”

“Don’t care,” I say, waving my hand in the air without bothering to turn around.

I blaze through the house, but I get turned around on the second floor and realize abruptly that I have no idea which way Isaak’s office lies.

Then I catch sight of Bogdan across the way. Going off a hunch, I hang back to make sure he can’t see me before I follow him through the house.

Just as I’d hoped, he leads me right to Isaak’s office. He walks in and I race after him, refusing to wait or knock. I don’t care if it’s an inconvenient time. He can make time for this.

“You bas—”

Before I can get the whole word out, a hand clamps down on my mouth.

Isaak is sitting behind his massive desk. Lachlan is standing on his right side. Another man I don’t recognize slouches against the wall in the corner. He’s dark and broody and looks only mildly surprised by the fact that I’ve crashed their little party.

“Hey now, let’s calm down,” a voice says in my ear. Bogdan, I realize belatedly.

Isaak fixes me with a trademark deadly glare, but he’s so calm that it’s unnerving.

“Give me a second,” he says to his speaker. He’s on a conference call with someone, it seems.

Isaak clicks a button and the green light starts blinking yellow. He lifts his gaze to me and nods. Bogdan releases me cautiously.

“Camila,” Isaak says coolly, “is there something wrong?”

“You cut the phone line in my room. I can’t make my call.”

His eyes narrow. “That’s why you barged in here?”

I can feel all three of Isaak’s men staring at me, but I refuse to let that intimidate me. They may be big, scary motherfuckers. But none of them are mothers.

None of them know what it’s like to be separated from their children.

“Yes,” I snap, “that’s why I barged in here. And if you won’t let me make the call in my room, I’ll use your line here.”

“It’s in use,” he replies acidly.

“I guess I’ll wait until you’re done then.” I notice Isaak exchange a glance with Bogdan.

“Maybe you should be here for this anyway,” Isaak tells me.

I freeze. My heartbeat slows to a crawl. I don’t like his tone or the look in his eye. “Who are you talking to?”

“It’s your knight in shining armor.”

“Alex?”

“Maxim,” he corrects harshly.

Do I even want to be here for this?

It takes me only a second to decide: Yes, yes I do.

I need to hear his voice. I need to hear him acknowledge who he is. I need the truth, from his lips.

“I want to speak to him.”

Isaak’s eyes get even colder. “Oh no, *kiska*, you don’t get to speak to him. You can sit here and be a good little girl, mouth closed. Or I’ll close it for you.”

“Absolutely not,” I seethe.

“I expected no less.” Then he gives another crisp nod.

I hear the screech of duct tape. “No!” I start to cry out.

But it’s too late. The tape is slapped over my mouth. Before I can pull it off, Bogdan wrenches my hands behind my back and holds them there.

Isaak waits until the commotion is over, face as impassive as ever. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Then he presses the same button again. The light turns green.

And the kind voice that promised me the world comes through the speaker.

“Isaak? I didn’t call you to be fucking put on hold.”

I feel my throat constrict. So it’s true. Alex really is Maxim.

Everything I thought I knew was a lie.

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## ISAAK

Her shock is slowly wearing off. Anger seeps in in its place.

She's going to come at me with her claws out and teeth bared when this is over.

I'm looking forward to it.

"Calm the fuck down, Maxi," I say, using the nickname he had when we were kids. "I'm here now."

I can't take my eyes off Camila. Bogdan has her hands restrained behind her back. He's keeping her on the other side of the room, probably to prevent her from doing something stupid and rash.

But I can see the expression on her face—hearing Maxim's voice has done something to her. Hell, she's not even struggling anymore.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. Is she frozen out of anger and resentment? Is she battling betrayal?

Or is there more to it than that?

"My inner circle advised me against this call," Maxim says dryly. "I'm the one who insisted."

"Missed me?"

I can practically see him grinding his teeth. "Fuck you, cousin."

"Likewise."

"How did you find out?" he asks, cutting right to the chase.

“How do you think? I’ve been doing this a long fucking time.”

“So have I.”

“You weren’t trained to lead.”

“I was fucking born to lead.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re a pampered mommy’s boy with a head full of lies,” I say. “You’re no don.”

“You’ve taken too much that belongs to me. There’s no lie in that.”

“I have to believe you’re fucking with me right now,” I scoff. “Camila was never yours. She’s been mine from the start.”

That gets a reaction from her. She flinches violently. But she doesn’t try to run. Nor will she. She wants to hear this conversation. She wants so badly to reconcile the man she thought she knew with the asshole on the phone.

There’s no pretense anymore for him to hide behind. She’s seeing the unfiltered Maxim.

“She never spoke about you, you know?” Maxim hisses, trying desperately to goad me into anger. “A year and a half I was in her life, and she never once fucking mentioned you.”

Somehow, he has managed to raise my hackles. But not the way he intended.

He thinks I care that Camila never once mentioned me? I don’t. Not in the slightest. I know damn well I’ve been burrowed deep into her subconscious from the moment I sat down at her table six years ago.

I do care about the amount of time he got with her, though. The amount of time he stole.

“You think that means something?”

“Of course it does.”

I laugh coldly. “Did it ever cross your mind that she didn’t mention me because she was trying to preserve the memory of the one pure thing in her life?”

Camila makes a strangled sound low in her throat. Her eyes are wide and turbulent. Rage? Fear? A mix of both, perhaps.

“That’s fucking bullshit. You never meant anything to her.”

“But that’s not why you took her, is it?” I remind him. “You took her because you thought she meant something to me.”

“And I was right.”

“No, you are a fucking idiot. The night you saw us together was the first night we ever met.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Why would I lie?”

“Why go through all the trouble to get her back then?” Maxim demands. “If she was nothing more than a random whore?”

“Because I want to make a point, little cousin. Whatever you take from me, I can take back. Whether I give a single fuck about it or not.”

I stare Camila in the eyes when I speak. She stares right back. Trembling, but unwilling to glance away. At the edges of the duct tape, I can see how tight her jaw is clenched.

The little *kiska* is as brave now as she’s ever been. But I can suss out the hurt beneath that façade.

I just didn’t expect for it to make me feel so fucking guilty

I wanted to teach her a lesson as much as Maxim. Two rebellious little birds, one stone. And yet, even as it’s unfolding exactly how I predicted, I feel my chest constrict.

“Where are you keeping her?”

*Focus, Isaak. Fucking focus.* I need to stop looking at her.

“Do you honestly expect me to answer that question?”

“I want to speak to her.”

“I’m sure you do. What makes you think she wants to speak to you?”

Camila’s eyes are wide, but the tape remains steadfast. Does she want to talk to him?

My cock is still coated with the aftereffects of her orgasm. I can still smell her on me. And I'm certain that if I were to close the distance between us, I'd smell myself on her.

I'm tempted to say as much to Maxim. It would be a fucking pleasure to hear his bellow of rage.

But I can't bring myself to betray Camila in that way.

Weakness—that's all that is. More fucking weakness. My father is probably rolling in his grave right now.

"I'm her fucking fiancé," Maxim growls. "She agreed to marry me."

"Because you were her get-out-of-jail-free card," I snap. "Not because she loved you."

"Is that what she told you?"

His voice cracks ever so slightly. That piques my attention. Is it concern he's revealing?

This whole time, I've assumed that Maxim stalked Cami down because he wanted to snatch something precious from me. Did the bastard have the fucking audacity to actually fall for her in the process?

"That's exactly what she told me," I say decisively.

Camila makes another sound with her throat. She wrestles free of Bogdan and lunges forward. But my brother is too fast. He grabs her and tugs her back under his control.

I frown. What is it about what I just said that upset her so fucking much?

I shake my head and snap out of it. I had meant for this conversation to be a mindfuck for Maxim—not for me.

"You're a fucking liar," he snarls.

"Did you think she was the kind of woman who'd be satisfied with expensive clothes and fancy dinners and penthouse apartments?" I growl. "You gave her luxury, but that's not what she wanted."



The anger is building now, so I'm thinking less about what I'm saying. The words are spilling out of me, and I'm not thinking of the consequences of saying them.

"You may have been with her for all those months, but you never bothered to get to know her. You gave her hollow gestures; you tried to buy her love. Is it any wonder it didn't work?"

The room has grown strangely silent. I lift my eyes and instinctively find Cami's.

She doesn't look pissed anymore. She looks... stunned. Apparently, she's underestimated just how much I've been paying attention.

*Fuck.*

"Are you still claiming that you don't have real feelings for her, cousin?" Maxim asks maliciously. "You forget that I've known you my whole life. You've never given a fuck about any woman. I pay attention to my enemies. And to all the things they have their eye on."

"You think you're the only one who watches their enemies closely?"

"Am I your enemy then, cousin?" taunts Maxim.

"The day you decided to place a hit on my father, you became one."

"You talk about my crimes without ever acknowledging what motivated them," he says, his voice thick with anger. "I only righted a wrong that was done years ago."

"My father didn't kill Yakov."

"If you believe that, then you're delusional."

I temper my impatience. "Going in circles with you is getting exhausting, Maxi. I have no interest in digging up ancient family history over the phone."

"Family—interesting choice of words," he says. "Like it or not, that's exactly what we are. And the Vorobev Bratva

doesn't fight from a distance like children. It's time we met face-to-face and talked like men."

And there it is. He has been angling for this the entire conversation. He assumes he's led me to the conclusion subtly, but I know Maxim. I've always been able to predict his next move.

"I can agree to that," I say coolly.

"Just you and me. No weapons. And no men. We come alone."

"Isaak—" Bogdan interrupts, but I hold up my hand. He falls into silence immediately, but I can tell he's not happy about this agreement.

"Done."

"I'll contact you with the details of the meeting shortly."

The line goes dead a second later.

But I'm still tense. Still raging inside. The conversation got away from me for a moment there in a way I did not like. It's my own fucking fault.

"Boss?" Vlad says uncertainly.

"Give me the room. Leave the girl."

Bogdan drops his hands immediately. He's the first one out, followed by Lachlan and Vlad.

I notice that Lachlan gives Camila a small smile as he leaves. But she's too busy staring at me, her eyes burning.

When the door shuts, she gives a startled little jump, as though she's been snapped out of her trance. Then she grabs the corner of the tape and rips it off her mouth. Hissing in pain, she flings the tape to the floor.

I expect her to start raging at me immediately, but she doesn't. She just stares at me, her eyes limpid. Searching.

"What gives you the right to speak for me?" she asks quietly.

"What gives you the fucking right to assume you know my mind?"

"Because I do."

She shakes her head. “You don’t know me.”

I step around the desk and slowly strut towards her. “Wrong, *kiska*. You wish I didn’t, because that would be less threatening to you. You wish I didn’t know every little crevice of your mind. Every word of your thoughts. Every image of your dreams. But I do know you, like it or not. Inside and out. Top to bottom. You’re mine. You know it. And that scares you very, very badly.”

She stands in place in the center of the Turkish carpet, though she’s quivering. “Why should I be scared?”

“Because you’re falling for me,” I rasp. “And you’re trying as hard as you can to resist it.”

Her hands clench into fists. Even now, she thinks she can fight back. Thinks she has a chance at winning.

Why is that so fucking sexy?

“You think you know me?” she says. “Prove it. Tell me something real. Tell me something no one else knows—not even Maxim.”

I arch an eyebrow. It wasn’t quite the move I expected from her. But I’ve never been one to back down from a challenge.

I take another step closer. An arms’ length away from her now, I say, “So many things to choose from. You have a secret you haven’t shared with anyone—including your precious fiancé. You’re disappointed about your choices because you hold yourself up to unrealistic standards. And most of all, you fucking love fighting with me. You can’t get enough of it. It turns you on so much that I’ll bet anything you’re wet right now.”

Her eyes get wider with every revelation I hit her with.

Her fists unclench. Her eyes dilate.

“That’s three, little *kiska*. Should I keep going?”

“You think too much of yourself.”

“I think you should be wary of lying to me,” I remind her. “You know what happened the last time you tried. My seed is

probably dripping down your thigh as we speak.”

She winces and turns from me to hide her embarrassment.

“Why didn’t you let me speak to him?” she deflects.

“Speaking to that *mudak* is a waste of time.”

“You don’t get to decide that for me.”

“I decide everything in this fucking house.”

She squares her jaw and faces me once more. I catch the excitement in her eyes.

I was right: she gets off on this. Every bit as much as I do.

“Is that why my phone line has been blocked?”

It takes me a moment to realize what she’s talking about. Then I remember—it’s the whole reason she stormed in here.

“It’s blocked because I decided I’d given you too much freedom.”

Her eyes blaze. “Are you fucking serious?”

Her arms cross over her chest again. I fucking love when she does that. It just makes me want to unwrap her. To tear her arms apart and fuck her ruthlessly against the nearest surface I can find.

Jesus, I’m hard already.

“I want to talk to my sister. She’ll be expecting my call.”

“Is that right?” I say, disinterested and disbelieving.

“I am not contacting Maxim,” she hisses.

“So you’ve said.”

“I’m not lying. Not about this.”

I nod. “Very well. You want to talk to your sister?”

“I’m glad you were listening.”

“Then you can do it here. While I watch.”

She frowns. “You’re going to listen in?”

“Take it or leave it.”

“You can’t even give me a few moments alone with my sister? You really have to control every fucking aspect of my—”

“If you’d rather avoid the call altogether...”

“No!” she balks immediately. “No. I... I want the call.”

Her immediate submission has me curious now. Is there more to the relationship with her sister than I first deciphered? Does this have something to do with the secret she’s hiding?

Only one way to find out.

“Great,” I say, striding back around to my desk. “Then it’s settled. Give me her number.”

She blinks at me, looking suddenly nervous. No, it’s more than just nerves. There’s fear there, too.

“Something wrong?” I ask innocently.

She shakes her head, but it’s not convincing. “It’s just that my sister might suspect something if you decide to listen in on us.”

“That’s up to you. If you play your part, dear Brianna won’t need to worry about you.”

She grits her teeth. “You’re an asshole.”

I can’t help but smirk. And in my head, I think, *Fuck Lachlan for being right.*

I have met my match.

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## CAMILA

Those eyes. Those fucking forget-me-not blue eyes.

This whole time as Isaak's prisoner, as his pawn, as his—scare quotes extremely necessary here—“*wife*,” his eyes have been my undoing. When he looks at me, I just can't muster up the fight he deserves. They reduce me to nothingness. To impulse. To pure feeling.

And that is very, very dangerous.

Even more dangerous is what his stunning speech to Maxim just revealed. Isaak hasn't just been manipulating me in some brutal, heavy-handed power play

He's been observing. Watching. Listening.

I should be pissed as hell. And in a way, I am. Who wants to feel like a lab rat in a maze?

But I also feel seen. And for someone who's lived a lie in the shadows for six long years, that means something to me.

It means that despite the façade I've put on, there's someone out there who knows the real me. Well, a part of the real me, at least.

Of course, it's never black and white. And I'm stuck in the grey space between both. Because Isaak's right: I *do* get off on clashing with him. I *am* wet right now—and it has everything to do with him.

Not just the way he's been paying attention, but the way he bosses me around like he has the God-given right to. The way

he looks at me like he's ready to bend me over and fuck me to the next incredible orgasm at a moment's notice.

No man should have that power over another person.

But Isaak has it over me.

And he's not afraid to use it.

I watch as he dials Bree's number. My heart is pounding. How am I supposed to speak to Jo within Isaak listening in? What if he suspects something? What if he hears her voice and instinctively knows?

My palms have started to sweat, but I've got to get it together. He's going to sense my nerves and I'll end up giving my secret away.

He knows too much already.

"Hello?"

I'm yanked out of my trance by Bree's voice.

"Brianna!" I say, lurching forward so that she'll be able to hear me.

She'll know something is wrong. I never call her Brianna.

"Camila," she responds in kind.

I can't help smiling. I love my sister. Thousands of days and thousands of miles of separation between us is brutally unfair—but it hasn't stopped her from knowing right away when something is wrong.

"Are you cooking?"

"Just finished," Bree replies.

"Let me guess," I say, proud of how smooth and natural this is coming off. "You cooked goulash again?"

*Goulash.* It's the code word we agreed on six years ago when I'd first entered the program. A way for me to let her know someone was listening in without actually saying the words out loud.

I'd used it a few times after Andrew replaced Eric as my case handler. I just didn't like or trust him—and I definitely didn't



want him knowing about my daughter.

That was a secret I had only entrusted Eric to keep.

“Goulash,” Bree repeats.

Her tone downshifts. I have to try really hard not to wince. I’d hoped she’d react to the red flag a little better, a little more naturally. There’s no way Isaak will have missed that. His face gives nothing away, though.

“Please,” Bree adds, trying to recover. “I wouldn’t make it again this week. The kids will get sick of it.”

“Not to mention your husband.”

“He can’t afford to complain.”

It’s not exactly seamless. But maybe it was enough.

I glance towards him. His eyes are trained on me.

Maybe not.

“Anyway, goulash aside, how are things, sis?” I ask.

“Great,” Bree replies. “How are you? I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately.”

That’s her way of saying she’s worried for me. I need to reassure her before she presses the panic button. Which, in this case, would be Eric.

“You worry too much about me,” I tell her. “I’m fine. More than fine, actually.”

“Sure about that?”

“Very sure. I found a new library.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s amazing, Bree. Like the one from *Beauty and the Beast*. I could hardly believe my eyes.”

“Aw, that reminds me: the kids watched it yesterday. Jo picked it out.”

I inhale and exhale slowly to calm my nerves that prickled up when Bree mentions my daughter’s name. “Did they like it?”

“The boys were definitely interested, but Jo fell in love.”

I smile. “I’ll bet. I love that movie, too.”

“She hated the part where the Beast turned back into a man.”

I burst out laughing. “I don’t blame her.”

“It was a great day,” Bree continues. “We went to the park in the evening. The kids had a ball on the swings.”

Silence edges into the conversation. I wriggle uncomfortably in place, wondering if I’m ruining everything by agreeing to do this in front of Isaak. This has to sound like a normal, boring conversation between two sisters. Does it?

I don’t know. I don’t fucking know.

“How’s the, uh, the hubby?” I stammer.

“Jake’s started playing golf,” Bree tells me. I can hear the annoyance in her voice.

I smirk. “What a cliché.”

“Right? I’d be more annoyed, but I don’t think it’ll last.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t think he’s very good.”

We laugh about that for a little. It eases some of the tension in my chest. Bree starts telling me more about Jake’s misadventures at the driving range when suddenly, I hear the pitter-patter of little girl footsteps on her end of the line.

Jo.

My heart leaps into my throat. She calls me Mommy when we talk. If she gets on the phone, it’ll be over. It’ll all come to light, the one secret I’ve worked so hard to keep hidden.

God only knows what’ll happen after that.

“Bree,” I say hurriedly, “say hi to the kids for me. Tell them I love them.”

But I’m too late. “Aunty Bree, who’s that?”

Jo’s voice, loud and clear.

*Fuck.*

“Watch out for my origami,” Bree warns my daughter, trying to deflect the question. “And no running in the house. Kids, will you go out and play please? I have some vacuuming to do in here.”

“Sounds chaotic in there,” I laugh nervously.

“Like a hurricane and an earthquake hit at the same time,” Bree sighs. “The kids are having their cousins over for a play date.”

I bite back my grin. Quick thinking on her part to explain away the “Aunty Bree” slip-up.

“No worries, I understand. I have to go anyway.”

“Call me again soon, okay? I really want to know how you’re doing.”

“I’m fine. You worry too much.”

“I’m your sister. It’s my job.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Bree hangs up before I do. My heartbeat is still racing. I close my eyes and breathe until it’s receded before glancing at Isaak.

“Happy?” I ask, trying to muster up the right amount of indignation. “Juicy conversation, wasn’t it?”

“You don’t have another sibling, do you?” Isaak asks instead of answering my question.

I have to try super hard not to clam up and panic. “Uh, no. Just Bree.” But since I know where he’s going, I keep talking. “Her husband Jake has an older brother, though. He and his wife have a couple of kids.”

All lies. Jake’s an only child. The smallest amount of digging will reveal that, but I’m hoping Isaak will think this is too unimportant to look into. I can’t imagine him looking into Jake’s background.

At least, I hope that’s true.

“Sam and Mona,” I add. The devil is in the details.

Isaak nods like he’s satisfied. He turns to toy with the letter opener blade on his desk, spinning it slowly in his fingers. Then his eyes flit back up to mine.

“No goulash for dinner, huh?”

Damn. I lost. He noticed. Everything is fucked.

“Apparently not.”

“How long has that been your safe word?”

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

“Ever since you blew up my life six years ago,” I admit sheepishly. My shoulders sag forward in defeat.

Staring at Isaak now, I realize how much she looks like him. The dark brown hair, the strong cheekbones, the stubborn chin.

And her eyes, of course. Bright blue like her father’s.

“If you feel like your sister and her family are in danger,” he says solemnly, not blinking or looking away, “all you need to do is tell me. I’d make sure they were protected.”

“You... you would?”

“Of course. They don’t deserve to be caught up in all of this.”

“Then it’s best that you have no contact with any of them,” I say quickly. “Because apparently, whatever you touch becomes a target.”

I don’t mean that to come off so harsh. But my words slice through the air and turns the room cold.

“I... I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Didn’t you?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

I wring my hands together. “I don’t know,” I say honestly.

Claiming otherwise would feel disingenuous. Maybe I did want it to hurt him. To share a little bit of my pain with the man who’s causing it, if nothing else.

“You’re close to your niece?”

I swallow and force myself to meet his gaze. I can't be sheepish here. I need to be nonchalant. As cool and collected as Isaak is.

"She's the youngest in the family," I say weakly. "And she... she reminds me a lot of myself. I've missed her whole life. It makes me feel guilty."

I'm closing in on dangerous territory, but talking about Jo, even if it has to be in code, feels good. A small acknowledgement of the truth.

The only downside is that I'm getting emotional. I swallow the lump in my throat and try to stop acting like a mother. Is that even possible, though? Once you've had a child, can you be anything else but their mother?

"Guilty?"

I shrug. "It's not rational," I say quickly. "But that's just how I feel. My sister and I have always been incredibly close. I loved all her children before they even got here."

When I look at him, he's giving me a strange, faraway smile.

"What's so funny?"

He shakes his head. "I was just thinking about my own aunt."

"Maxim's mother?"

He nods. "She wasn't exactly the doting kind. But then again, she does believe that my father killed her husband."

I raise my eyebrows. "We grew up in very different worlds."

He smirks. "Very."

"What was your childhood like?" I ask suddenly.

There's a wary little voice in the back of my head warning me against this conversation. The more I learn about him, the more I know him. He'll start transforming from a caricature of a villain into a three-dimensional person.

He'll stop being the beast, and turn into a man.

I fear I'm falling down the rabbit hole as it is.

But the question is out there now, and I can't take it back.

“It was... unique,” he replies.

“Wow,” I drawl sarcastically. “Thanks for the generous detail. Really paints a picture.”

What am I doing? I shouldn’t even want details. His life is none of my business. Just like my life is none of his.

“You wouldn’t be able to relate to my childhood,” he says.

I snort. “You wouldn’t be able to relate to mine, either. Growing up in the Midwest can kind of feel like a test of survival.”

He laughs. “Maybe we can relate to each other more than we think, then.”

We look at each other for a moment, both smiling. And in the space of a single breath, it happens. Like the flicker of an optical illusion, when you see the hidden picture for the first time and you can never go back to the old way again.

In that breath, he doesn’t look like the Beast who ruined my world.

He just looks like Isaak.

I wrench myself out of it with an angry snarl. Here I am, sitting opposite my prison warden, sharing stories about childhood and smiling? Why?

Because he has the most beautifully intense eyes I’ve ever seen?

Because his smile makes my stomach do backflips?

Because the memory of his lips are still hot on my body?

I am freaking pathetic in every sense of the word. Jo March would be ashamed. *I’m* ashamed.

“Where’d you go?” he asks.

I focus on him. “What?”

“You just went someplace dark.”

My eyes narrow into slits. “My head is the only private space I have left. So I’d rather keep my thoughts to myself, if that’s okay with you.”

He looks amused. “Careful. You’re giving me whiplash.”

“You’re one to talk.”

He sighs. “I’ll reconnect your phone line today,” he says. “Will that appease you?”

“Not by a long shot,” I snap. “But it’s a start.”

“That’s all I can give you right now.”

I shake my head and get to my feet. “That’s the frustrating part,” I tell him. “You’re offering me crumbs and I’m still grateful. I have to be, because hearing their voices... it gives me life on my bad days.”

“It won’t be forever,” Isaak says suddenly. “You’ll see them again one day.”

“Is that a promise?”

His face hardens into his normal cold, impassive mask. “Nothing is a promise.”

“You can’t even give me that, can you?”

“I’m a little preoccupied trying to take down a fucking psychopath, Cami.”

“What makes him the psychopath, and not you?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” I say, “seriously. He wants the same thing you do.”

“Except I have a right to it. He doesn’t.”

“Why? Because you say so. I thought the Bratva is all about power, not birthright?”

His eyes flash with anger. I’m genuinely glad the desk is between us. Every time we get into it, I end up at his mercy in ways I crave and hate at the same time. He was right before—I can still feel his mark inside me.

“You’re right,” Isaak says acidly. “It is all about power. The strongest always wins. I guess we’ll see how this plays out.”

His tone is frigid. The easy back-and-forth we’d shared only moments ago has completely dissipated.

It's what I wanted, though, right? I'd picked the fight that had squashed our temporary truce. So I'm not sure why I feel so disappointed. So lonely.

And not lonely in general. Lonely for... *him*.

Fuck.

"You should go," Isaak says.

I bite down on my tongue, refusing to walk back the argument. It's best this way. We have no future. How can we? I'm not his wife; I'm his prisoner.

So I nod. "I was just on my way out."

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## ISAAK

An hour later, Maxim calls again with the proposed details of our face-to-face meet.

I barely hear him. I'm distracted. Still trying to piece together the catalyst that flipped Cami's switch so suddenly and viciously. Maxim's voice is a dull drone in my ear.

"You catch all that, cousin?" he drawls.

I have no objection to any of it, but I change the location anyway. Just to control an element of the arrangement. To throw my weight, establish my power in all this.

Maxim balks, but eventually, he concedes. He knows who's holding the cards.

We hang up. Bogdan, who's been waiting on my couch since a few minutes after Cami stormed out, speaks up immediately.

"You're really not taking anyone with you?" he demands.

"No," I reply firmly. "It's what I agreed to."

"He's not going to keep his word," Vlad says from his position in the doorway.

"Exactly!" Bogdan exclaims, throwing his hands up in the air. "Finally, someone speaking sense around here."

He's always had a flare for the dramatics. He gets that from Mother. That's how she used to be—before Otets slowly drained the enthusiasm from her personality.

"I'm not going to pretend I'm scared of him. I'm not."

“That’s all well and good. But fearlessness isn’t exactly going to protect you from a whole army of backstabbing motherfuckers.”

“He’s not going to come with an army.”

“He doesn’t need to,” Vlad interjects. “All he needs is five good men.”

I sigh, looking at Lachlan for support. He’s usually more even-tempered than Bogdan and more strategic than Vlad.

“I agree it’s risky to go alone,” the Scotsman says. “But it’s been decided already. A don’s only as good as his word.”

“Thank you, Lachlan.”

“But I wouldn’t go in naked, either,” he adds.

I glance over at him. “What are you suggesting?”

“Probably the same thing that Maxim’s advisers have told him: take a small contingent of men. Give us about a mile’s berth. If something goes wrong, we come in fast.”

I glance towards Bogdan and Vlad. “You two happy with that?”

“Define ‘happy,’” Bogdan grumbles.

I smile. “Where’s this protective side coming from?” I ask. “I’m supposed to be the big brother.”

He glares at me. “Maxim killed Otets. What’s to stop him killing you, too?”

“You really think I’d let that *zjelob* kill me?”

“I just think that sometimes you underestimate Maxim. It’s been a long time since we were kids. He’s not the same person.”

“Your brother’s right about that.”

All four of us turn in the direction of the door to see who spoke. My mother stands there with a grim expression on her face.

“Sorry to interrupt the meeting, but I’d like a word with my sons, please.”

Vlad and Lachlan leave immediately. Lachlan closes the door on his way out.

“Was that necessary?” I ask, turning a stern glare on my mother.

She sighs. “Are you really meeting with Maxim?”

I roll my eyes. Fan-fucking-tastic. Another person with input I didn’t ask for.

“The decision has been made, Mama,” I say, trying to be patient. But between this meeting and Camila, I feel fully maxed out on patience.

“But what purpose does it serve?” she insists anyway. “Are you planning on changing your mind and calling a truce?”

“Not likely.”

“Then it stands to reason that he’ll be of the same mind.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“You’re spoiling for a fight?” she asks, sounding vaguely disappointed.

“No, but I am prepared for it.”

Bogdan takes a step forward, putting himself between the two of us. That’s been his default position over the years. “Mama,” he says, “I’m worried about this meeting just like you are. But even I know that putting an end to Maxim is essential to the future of the Bratva.”

“Must everything be about the Bratva?” she says with a sigh.

“We *are* Bratva,” I say firmly. “It’s in our blood. There’s no point in pretending that life encompasses more than that. Nor does it need to. The Bratva is enough. The Bratva is everything.”

She shakes her head. “He’d be proud of you.”

“Somehow, I don’t think you mean that as a compliment.”

A spark of regret flashes across her eyes. She’s always been an expert at hiding her feelings. Or maybe I’m just incapable of studying her objectively. When I look at her, all I see is the

woman who used to sing and press kisses to Bogdan's bruises when he was a clumsy toddler.

If she ever sang to me, I can't remember it. I'm guessing Otets put a stop to that early on.

"He raised you to be a strong don," she clarifies. "And that's what you are."

Something pricks at my attention. A shade in her expression, a slant in her posture. "Mama," I say softly, "what aren't you telling us?"

Bogdan looks at me with a frown. Then he turns the same expression on her. "What do you mean? What does he mean? You're not keeping something from us, are you?"

She's quiet at first. Contemplative. Then she looks up from the ground and meets my eye. "You remember the house you boys grew up in, don't you?" she asks.

"Of course," says Bogdan.

I nod.

"Well, at one point, it wasn't just us there. There was a time when we all lived together. Yakov and Svetlana lived in one wing and Vitaly and I lived in the other. I had you, Isaak," she says, looking at me. "And Maxim was born a few months later. It should have been some of the happiest days of my life."

"But?" I press.

"But the environment in the house was tense. Svetlana never liked me. And after our sons were born, that dislike only became more pronounced."

"Why?" Bogdan asks.

"She felt like she needed to compete with me. She felt like she was always compared to me, but those comparisons were all in her head. She created a rivalry that didn't need to exist, and I'll admit, I played right into her hands. She was also intimidated by Vitaly's ambition. And she resented that, despite the fact that Yakov was the don, your father was the one that had the

men's respect and loyalty. Suffice it to say, the moment Yakov was buried, the rumors started."

"This is ancient history, Mother," I interrupt. "We know it all. We know that Svetlana was the impetus behind those rumors. We know she poisoned Maxim against Otets. Against me. Tell us what we don't know."

She takes a deep breath. Her eyes fall back into the past and for a long time, she stays there.

"I have something I need to tell you both. I've kept it from you for long enough."

Bogdan and I wait. The room is silent, but the air feels like it's crackling with the electricity before a thunderstorm.

"Those rumors weren't just rumors," she says finally. "They were true."

I stare at her. "Which part?"

She looks down. "Your uncle didn't have a congenital heart defect. That's not what killed him. Vitaly did."

I focus on Bogdan's expression. It's like I'm staring at myself. My own reaction. Shock lances across his face, but his eyes convey a stubborn denial that resonates in my core.

"That's a fucking lie," I snap, breaking our loose semi-circle.

"Isaak—"

"Don't fucking speak," I growl, lapsing back into my don's voice. "Not unless you plan on speaking sense."

"Just because you don't want to believe it doesn't mean it's not true." She looks between the both of us helplessly.

"Mama, this... it can't be true," Bogdan sighs.

"Do you think I would have told you both if I didn't know for sure?" she asks. "I've known for years. I heard your father discussing it with Dr. Yevgeni."

Dr. Yevgeni was Papa's personal Bratva doctor for decades. The two of them were thick as thieves. Both men of the old country, stubborn and silent and proud.

She nods. “Your father had been poisoning Yakov for months with Dr. Yevgeni’s guidance. They wanted it to appear as natural as possible so that there would be no question of disloyalty when Vitaly assumed the mantel of don.”

My hands ball into fists. My father had been a ruthless don. He’d been cold, calculated, and entirely without conscience when it came to dealing with his enemies.

But Yakov was no enemy. Yakov Vorobev was his own brother, his don.

He had turned against the one man he was sworn to protect. He had turned against the flesh of his flesh, the blood of his blood.

He’d broken the one rule.

“Loyalty,” I say.

“What?”

I lift my head. “Loyalty. That was one fucking thing he taught us to respect above all else.” My voice is rising, shot through with steel cords of anger.

“Without loyalty, you will have nothing,” Bogdan says, repeating the words Otets had told us time and time again during our training sessions.

I look at my mother. “You’re telling me he was the worst kind of hypocrite. The kind of man who preached about loyalty in the open and then killed his own brother in the shadows. Is that what you’re saying?”

She nods, trembling uncharacteristically. “It was part of his strategy,” she says. “Who would believe that a man as loyal as Vitaly would be capable of murdering his own brother? But it was more than just that. Vitaly’s pride was his biggest downfall. He believed he was above everything—including his own rules.”

I pace over to my desk, trying to fight the urge to punch something. To break something. “You’ve known about this for years,” I accuse. “You found out when Otets was still alive.”

“Yes.”

“So why tell us now?”

Bogdan stiffens and stares at Mother along with me. Her gray hair glows silver in the firelight. She looks older than I ever remember seeing her before.

“Because... I couldn't keep the secret anymore,” she admits. “I have too many.”

“So now it's our burden to bear, eh?” I snap. “Now, it's *my* fucking problem?”

Her eyes turn cold as she looks at me. “You can't image what it's been like for me. Holding your father's secrets close to my heart. Feeling obligated to be loyal to a man that never showed me a moment of love. But what was I to do? He had me in his thrall since the day we married. Even when I rebelled against him, I had to do it in the shadows so that he'd never know.”

“How did you rebel?” I ask.

Her body tightens instantly. “In the small, subtle ways a woman can rebel,” she says vaguely. “And I will hold onto those secrets.”

Grimacing, I turn and sweep all the files off my desk with a roared, “FUCK!” I turn to face her again with my chest heaving. “Do you know what this fucking means, woman?”

“Isaak—”

“Maxim's claim that I stole everything from him is true,” I growl.

“No, it's not,” Mama says, stepping forward. “You are the true don. You have the temperament and the talent for it. Trust me, Isaak.”

“Trust you?” I scoff. “I doubt I'll ever trust you again.”

“Hey, brother...”

“No,” I say, cutting Bogdan off at the pass. “No. I refuse to stand here and listen to this fucking nonsense. Everything he ever taught us was a fucking lie.”

I push past them both and whip out of the office.



I hear them call out to me, but I'm not interested in sticking around to hear what Mama has to say. She's said her piece and now she has to deal with the fucking consequences of keeping her damn secrets.

Does this change anything? It changes my perspective at the very least.

But as for the rest of it? No. I cannot just hand the keys of the Vorobev Bratva back to Maxim. It's no longer his to take. And I will not abandon my men to his control.

This information has come too late. I am the fucking don, and I'm not giving anything up.

But that doesn't change the fact that I feel as though I'm walking on shaky ground. Because the foundation of who I am and where I came from? It's crumbling.

Who am I without it?

*Loyalty.* That was the one absolute, the one constant that guided every moment, every life lesson, every training session with my father. That's what he built me out of.

He built me on a lie.

I have no idea where I'm going exactly. I just needed to get away from here. I need some fresh air, room to breathe. To think.

That's when I spot her.

Camila is walking down the cobbled steps that lead to the garden. Her head is angled downwards, and I know instinctively she's deep in thought.

Without even thinking about it, I follow her. She's standing by the koi pond when I catch up to her. She doesn't hear me approach until I'm standing right next to her.

"Jesus!" she gasps, jumping backwards. "Where'd you teleport from?"

I ignore that. "Something on your mind?"

She frowns. "Always."

We look at each other. The fight feels distant, forgotten. In its place is something else. Something I don't know how to describe just yet.

"Talk to me," I tell her softly. "It might help."

She gnaws at her lip like she's considering it. Then she looks up and meets my gaze. "Will you talk to me?"

"About what?"

"About whatever it is that brought you out here looking like the world has just been put on your shoulders."

"So now you care what's bothering me?" I taunt.

"What if I do?"

I raise my eyebrows. She breaks the eye contact pointedly. "Oh, forget it," she snaps. "You don't have to say a fucking word. Maybe it's better that way."

Cami wraps her arms around her body like she's trying to hold herself together. Her blonde hair flutters over her face, but she makes no attempt to push it back.

So I do.

She jerks away from my touch, but I ignore that and tuck the stray strands of hair back behind her ears. I should pull back immediately, respect her personal space.

But I indulge myself instead. I let my hand linger against her cheek until I'm trailing the soft skin along her jaw. She's tense, but she allows it, staring at my face the entire time.

I admire the soft curves of her lips. They're a work of art all on their own. She's got the kind of face that makes me believe in a higher power.

Because only a deity could be capable of creating something as fucking beautiful as she is.

"I never wanted to hurt you, Camila."

"You're not a danger to me," she whispers.

"What?"

She shakes her head. “That night, the night we met... I asked if you were dangerous. And you said—”

“*Not to you,*” I murmur, repeating my words from six years ago. “You’re the only person in the world that can say that.”

She gives me a soft smile. The kind of smile that can drive a man to do crazy, irrational, stupid fucking things. The kind of smile that can make a man feel centered, strong, powerful.

More like himself.

“You remember,” she says.

“Of course I remember. I remember everything about that night.”

“Careful,” she says. “Or I might accuse you of being sentimental.”

And despite the black void inside me, I laugh. Because somehow, she’s made that void a little smaller. A little less urgent.

And she’s done it all with a smile.

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## CAMILA

“Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I tell Isaak. I’m desperate for his warmth at the same time that I’m terrified I’ve begun relying on him far too much.

“Try me.”

He’s standing close to me. Without even realizing it, we’ve gravitated together so that we’re only inches from one another. I should feel uncomfortable, right? I should want to guard my personal space like I guard my secrets.

But he smells so good. And he looks so solid.

He’s the complete antithesis to how I feel at the moment. Which is weak and vulnerable and entirely unsure how I’ve landed in this position.

“I wanted to be Jo March,” I hear myself say. “And somehow, I ended up as Rebecca.”

He blinks.

“I told you,” I say with a sigh, “you wouldn’t understand.”

“What I don’t understand is why you think you’re even remotely like Rebecca. When you’re Jo March through and through.”

I frown, waiting for the punchline, studying his expression to determine if he’s making fun of me.

It doesn't come. There's nothing but pure sincerity in his eyes. It's baffling, not to mention disarming.

"What do you know about Jo March?" I stammer.

He smirks. "About as much as you, I'd guess, seeing as how I've also read the book."

My mouth pops open. I stare at him in disbelief. "You have not. You didn't mention it back then. I said it was my favorite and you said—."

"Because I hadn't read it then. I read it after."

My jaw is still hanging loose. "You read it for me?"

He shrugs. "I wanted to see what all the fuss was about."

"And?"

"It's a good book," he acquiesces.

"Serious question: when Beth died, did you cry?"

He rolls his eyes. "I've never cried in my life."

"Not even as a baby?"

He throws me an impatient glare. I can't help but laugh. The fact that is, I can't picture Isaak as a baby. I can't even picture him as a little boy. He's the kind of man that feels like he descended from the sky, fully grown and completely in command of himself at all times.

I wonder if there are ever times he feels vulnerable. Lost. Lonely, like I do.

"So that's what brought you out here to pout?" he asks. "You're scared you're not emulating the fictional heroine you look up to?"

I take a deep breath. "I feel like I'm losing myself, Isaak. I don't know who I am anymore."

It's a big admission. I realize I'm putting myself in a vulnerable position by saying it out loud to him. But I need to talk to someone. And there's something about him that makes me feel safe.

It's a ridiculous notion, of course, considering where I am and why I've been brought here in the first place. But I've always known there's nothing rational about catching feelings for someone.

Love comes when you least expect, and never how you thought it would look.

He runs his hand through his hair. It looks soft, the kind that demands to be run through. Have I ever done that? Just stroked my fingers through his hair? Those are gestures of a different kind of intimacy. It's a gesture of affection, an entirely different and dangerous territory to venture into.

I can't risk it.

"We all have moments like that," Isaak says at last.

"Do we?" I ask. "Have you ever felt like that?"

"You'd be surprised."

There's something he's not telling me. Some secret lurking behind his eyes. But what else is new? Instead of feeling resentful of that fact, I feel the need to comfort him.

I don't know why that is. Maybe it's the mother in me that I've been forced to suppress for the last five years. Maybe I just can't bear to see Isaak with that strange, sad look in his eyes.

Or maybe I just want an excuse to touch him.

I move closer. My arm grazes the side of his. "Are you going to tell me what's bothering you now?"

He gives me only a slanted glance. "Nothing's bothering me."

I narrow my eyes. "Right, of course, I forgot. I'm expected to bare my soul to you, but you're the broody mystery man whose armor no one can penetrate."

He smirks. "Sounds about right."

I roll my eyes. "I would tell you to go fuck yourself, but I'm not in the mood for a fight today."

"That's a first."

I send him a glare And he returns a flawless smile. But he's distracted. Usually, when he looks at me, it's like the rest of the world doesn't exist. It's just me and him.

But this time, even though he's right here with me, he's looking past me.

"You're staring."

I blush instantly.

"Trying to figure me out?" he asks.

"You know, admitting that something's bothering you doesn't make you weak, you know."

His smirk falters into something else. Something more inscrutable. "I just... learned something."

"Oh?"

"A bit of family drama," he says, "that my mother decided to dredge up for no apparent reason other than to fuck with my head."

I already know he's not going to tell me what this revelation is. So I don't bother asking. "Maybe she wanted to clear her conscience?" I say instead.

He scoffs angrily. "She kept a secret for years. She willfully hid the truth from me. I call that betrayal."

My heart constricts slightly. This conversation is hitting painfully close to home. Is he really talking about his mother, or is this a trap meant for me?

Has he found out about Jo? Is this a prelude to an accusation?

I have to calm down. If I'm not careful, I'll give away my secret.

Isaak may not be the villain I once thought he was. But does that mean I want him involved in Jo's life? I don't know the answer to that. And until I do, I'm keeping my secret close to heart and far away from the men who're still using me as a prop in their power games.

"Or maybe she was just trying to protect someone?" I suggest.



He doesn't so much as flinch. "I don't give a shit about her reasons. If you care about someone, you're honest with them."

The sentence lands between us like a ticking time bomb waiting to explode. But I meant what I said to him earlier: I don't want a fight today.

"It's a two-way street, you know?"

"Meaning?"

"Have you been as honest with your mother?"

"It's different."

"Why?" I demand. "Because she's a woman and you're a man?"

"Because I am the don. I'm the one who makes the decisions and I'm the one who has to live with them. The secrets I keep are to—"

"Protect the family?" I finish for him. "So then you're just a hypocrite."

His jaw clenches tight. "I'm—"

"That's what it sounds like to me. I mean, you expect total honesty from everyone else, but you don't feel like you owe them the same thing. Why? You just think you're above the rules?"

His eyes fall on me like dark storm clouds just before the thunder breaks. I've struck a nerve.

"I'm not like him..."

"What?" I ask, trying to catch his low words.

He shakes his head like he's snapping out of a fugue state.

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Tell me."

Isaak sighs. He lifts his hand up and pinches the bridge of his nose. It's the first time I've seen him do that and it makes me stop short.

Unfortunately, he notices my reaction. "What's wrong?"

“I... nothing.”

But it’s not nothing. That gesture... it’s the exact same one that Jo does. She started when she was about two years old. And I remember it clearly, because it had seemed such an adult thing to do.

Bree and I had laughed about it, and I’d of course lamented the fact that I hadn’t been there to see it in person. Chalk that up as another moment I’ve only experienced virtually.

It looks so wrong to see in another face, another place. Or maybe it’s not wrong at all? Maybe it’s exactly right.

Jo has a father—and he’s right here in front of me. Except he has no idea he has a five-year-old daughter who looks like him and smiles like him and pinches the bridge of her nose. Just like he does.

“Camila?”

I shake my head, but horrifyingly, I feel tears well up in my eyes. It’s not just about me either. I’m crying for all the years Isaak has lost, too.

“Are you crying?”

I turn away from him forcefully, but he’s not going to let it go. “Ignore me.”

“Not likely.”

“Isaak, please...”

“Camila,” he says right back, matching my firm tone.

He walks around me and plants himself directly in front of me. His shadow blocks out the sun, but I don’t need the heat when he’s near me.

*Jesus.* I’ve got to stop thinking of him like that. Like he’s anything but the man who stole me away and forced me into marrying him.

“Is this about the phone line in your room?” Isaak asks. “Because I meant what I said earlier. I’ll have it restored.”

I look up at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Isaak, you and I both know that we’re not being a hundred percent honest with each other. And I’m okay with that. But... maybe we can try to be honest with each other for just one question?”

I don’t know what possesses me to go there, but I don’t regret it once I’ve spoken.

“I can do that.”

“You go first,” I say, feeling immediately self-conscious.

He doesn’t argue. “Okay. Are you in love with Maxim?”

My eyes dart to his. I’d been expecting some curveball, but definitely not that. Is this the question that’s been keeping him up at night? Or is it a throwaway question, one whose answer he doesn’t really care about?

“I thought I loved him,” I say softly. “But even back when he was Alex, I didn’t love him the way you’re supposed to love the man you’ve agreed to marry.”

“And how are you supposed to love the man you agree to marry?”

“Wholly. Unequivocally. Passionately.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

I snort with laughter, but it helps to put me at ease. It gives me enough confidence to ask him the question that’s been keeping me up at night lately. “My turn.”

“Go ahead,” Isaak says.

“Why did you approach my table that night?” I ask. “Why did you feel the need to interrupt my date?”

He reaches out and strokes my cheek with the back of his hand. It’s so bizarrely tender that I nearly swoon. I mean it—my head gets faint and my knees turn to jelly. I have to tighten my grip on Isaak’s strong forearm to stay upright.”

“Because I couldn’t stand seeing you with another man when it was clear you were meant for me.”

And just like that, I melt. The only way to keep myself from falling apart completely...

Is kissing him.

So I do. I throw my arms around him and press my lips against his. It takes a second before his hands land on my hips, pulling me against his body so that I can feel his erection at my hip.

There's no conscious thought involved, because the next thing I know, I'm clawing at his shirt, ripping until the buttons give way. He returns the favor. In the blink of an eye, we're both naked.

It's broad daylight. And despite the relatively secluded part of the garden we're in, it's still very much a common space. The library incident is still fresh in my mind, but the embarrassment that came with being discovered has almost completely faded.

He wraps an arm around my waist and pushes me against the trunk of one of the broad, leafy trees that stand sentinel around the garden. The bark scrapes at my back, but the discomfort somehow lends itself to the pleasure.

Isaak's hand squeezes my breasts, pulling at the nipples and rolling them between his fingers, drawing sharp gasps from me again and again.

He doesn't need to do anything more for me to be ready for him, but his fingers slip inside my wetness anyway. I cry out, desperate for the high that only he can give me.

He had asked me in the library if Maxim made me come like he did.

And the honest answer is no. Maxim never made me come at all. He was too selfish in bed, too oblivious to my needs. I spent eighteen months pretending it didn't matter.

But now, with Isaak's body pressed against mine, with his hand on my breasts and his fingers inside me, I know how much I would have been sacrificing in marrying Maxim.

How naïve I had been. How foolish.

Isaak fingers me hard, forcing a moan from my lips that would have made me blush on any other day. But I need a release now, and all the comfort that comes with it. So I clench my pussy around his fingers and brace myself for the onslaught.

When I'm quivering all over, he pulls his fingers out of me and licks me off them. It pulls me back to the night we met, when he'd done the same thing in the middle of the restaurant.

I'd been entranced by him then. His charm. His looks. His bulletproof confidence. It was a high knowing that a man like him could ever want a woman so ordinary.

He could have anyone.

And he chose me.

"Isaak," I gasp. "Fuck me... Please God, just fuck me."

His eyes flash, and a second later, I feel his cock graze my lips. He runs the tip up and down, making me tremble with anticipation.

Then he lines himself up and drives his hips forward. I grip his shoulders tight as he rams into me. My back scrapes the bark of the tree with each slap of his hips, but I welcome every glorious sensation. Every tug of pain, every little shiver of pleasure. Every startling ache that's winding its way into my heart.

This might be a mistake, but I'm starting to think Isaak Vorobev is a mistake worth making.

Our eyes lock together. It's not an easy thing to look a man in the eye when you're having sex. To feel so exposed, so vulnerable, so completely at his mercy.

But I couldn't look away from him if I tried.

So I don't. Not even when the orgasm shivers through my body, a slow burn that I'm not expecting.

Not even when he palms my ass, pushing himself deeper inside me before he lets himself go.

Not even when he pulls out of me and I feel him trickle down my thighs.

Then, finally, we separate, sweaty and breathing hard. I still can't look away, though, just as I'm unable to calm the frantic thrumming between my legs.

Because there's one thing I know for certain now. Something I'd only suspected before: when it comes to Isaak Vorobev, I am well and truly fucked.

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## ISAAK

The moment she comes down off the high, her self-consciousness seeps back in. She's avoiding my gaze, but only because she's trying to conceal the blush on her cheeks.

It's enough to make me hard all over again.

"Uh, did you see my um..." She's still breathing so hard that she can barely get the words out. "Underwear."

"Over there."

I could pick them up myself, but I want to see her bend over. She doesn't disappoint. The moment I'm faced with her perfect, pert little ass, my cock starts throbbing.

She's quick about slipping on her panties. Then she fusses with her clothes while I watch. I know I'm not exactly making things easy on her by staring. But that's just part of the fun.

And honestly, I need a fucking moment.

After... everything.

She combs her hair into place with her fingers as she turns to me. I've only bothered to pull on my boxers and pants. My shirt's still bunched up in my hand, slightly wet from the come I'd wiped off her thighs.

Her eyes linger on my abs, and I can see the blatant desire in them.

"You can touch if you want."



The blush she'd managed to cow into submission rages back in full force. "I... I wasn't..."

"Staring?" I ask. "I think you were."

She can't even deny it. She gives me a nervous little drizzle of laughter, but she's still trying to get her bearings. I sit down underneath the tree I'd just fucked her against.

"Aren't you, uh, going inside?" she asks tentatively.

"No."

"Oh." She sounds perplexed. After every sexual encounter we've ever had before, some shit happens. A fight. An explosion.

The relative peace between us now feels... strange. Like she's waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Why don't you sit down?" I suggest. "You seem a little unsteady."

She hesitates for a moment before sitting down next to me. Closer than she'd like, maybe. Or perhaps not close enough.

"You okay?" I ask. "You seem a little jumpy."

"Not jumpy," she says quickly. "I just... I just realized something."

She gives me a shy smile that piques my curiosity. "What?"

"We've never actually had sex in a bed, have we?"

I snort with laughter. "No, I guess not. But the day's still young."

She shakes her head. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Acting like we should be doing this."

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Because... well, I don't know. It's not right."

"Says who?"

"Me," she says defensively. "I mean, I'm your captive."

I roll my eyes. “You can do better than that.”

“As far as excuses go, I’d say it’s a pretty damn good one.”

“It’s temporary,” I tell her. “Just until I can get Maxim under control. This is for your own good, Camila.”

“I hate when people say that. Especially men.”

“It happens to be true in this case. If I let you go, he’s only going to come after you. And then you won’t be getting simpering Alex. You’ll be getting Maxim Vorobev.”

“What makes you think he was simpering?”

“Because I know him. He’s the definition of the fucking word.”

She almost smiles. Almost. “You know, in a lot of ways, the two of you are very similar.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I thought you weren’t in the mood to fight today?”

She smirks. “I’m not trying to insult you—”

“Too fucking late. I’m nothing like that dipshit.”

“He’s your cousin.”

“We can’t choose who we’re related to.”

“No, but you can choose to get along with them.”

“That sounds like a load of pop psychiatry bullshit.”

“Now who’s being insulting?” she quips. “Can you stop being so defensive and listen to me for five seconds?”

“No.”

“Isaak.”

“How often do you talk to your parents?” I ask, turning the tables on her.

She narrows her eyes immediately. “You’re an asshole.”

I laugh. “Add it to the list. Answer the question.”

She grinds her teeth together. “Okay, fine. I’ll admit, I don’t have the closest relationship with my parents. But I don’t have

a bad relationship with them either. We just... don't see eye to eye."

"Sound familiar."

"It's not the same thing."

"I agree, it's not. You realize this isn't about a philosophical difference in opinion? He believes my father killed his. And in retaliation he killed mine."

She bites her lip. "Which is on a whole other level," she admits, looking supremely uncomfortable. "But you have to admit, your reactions were exactly the same. An eye for an eye."

"A father for a father," I repeat morbidly.

I know I'm lying by claiming that Maxim only thinks my father killed his. When in truth, I now know he's right. But admitting it out loud—even to Cami—feels like a betrayal.

And damn him for that. That wily motherfucker made sure to ingrain loyalty into me so deep that I can't stop—even when I know he's not deserving of it.

"What story did he give you?" I ask, mostly to distract myself.

"Maxim, I mean. About himself."

"He told me he was a businessman."

"Technically true, I suppose."

"He told me that he'd inherited a few businesses from his father and he'd expanded them since taking over. He said he had properties all over the world. He played the stock market. He was rich, he was powerful, yada yada yada. I had no reason to believe he wasn't what he said he was. Guess I'm the idiot."

"How could you have known?"

"When I entered the Witness Protection Program, Eric told me to be careful. He said that the Bratva were dangerous and their methods were unconventional. I didn't know what he meant back then."

"So you and Eric got close?"

She nods. “In a way, he was a father figure to me. That first year, I basically just cried on his shoulder nonstop.”

“Why?”

She gives a little start, as though my question has reminded her of something. “Just... the trauma of having to leave behind my life in the States. Leaving my sister and her family. I felt very isolated that first year. I mean, I never stopped feeling isolated. I just got used to it.”

“Guess you were ripe for the plucking when Maxim showed up.”

Her eyes flash to me and back, a little defiance sparking in them. “I’m not a piece of fruit. I wasn’t ripe for anything.”

I have to try very hard to suppress my smile. “If you say so.”

“I just... He was so persistent, and in some ways... he reminded me of you.”

Immediately after the words come out of her mouth, I know she regrets them. Hell, I don’t think she even thought about it before it came out. She looks as shocked as I am.

“You gave him a shot because he reminded you of me?” I press.

She looks completely mortified. “No, no, no, I... that... That’s not what I meant.”

“Freudian slip then?”

She glares at me. “Forget I said that.”

“Not likely.”

She groans and buries her face in her hands. I, on the other hand, am smirking from ear to ear. The little *kiska* has spent every breath since I found her again denying that our night together six years ago meant anything to her.

But it’s so fucking clear now: I’m burned in her memories, in her mind, in her heart. She can’t get rid of me no matter how hard she tries.

“Wipe that smug expression off your face. I just meant that he was confident and persistent, too,” she says. “All that means is that you’re both privileged white men who aren’t used to hearing the word ‘no.’”

“Should I tell him that next time we talk?”

“Isaak...” she warns.

My cock strains against my pants. If only she knew how hard she makes me with just those flashing green eyes. Like a lioness on the prowl.

“Fine,” I chuckle. “We’ll stick to the agenda.”

“So you are going ahead with the meeting?”

“Yes. We’ve already decided on the time and the place.”

“Wait—when is this happening?”

“This evening.”

“This evening? That’s... fast.”

“Neither one of us wants to give the other a chance to plan.”

“And you’re going in alone?”

“So is he.”

She looks out ahead to the koi pond, bordered in lush, sprawling vines of ivy. “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Can I come with you?”

I freeze. “What?”

“I want to come with you when you meet Maxim this evening.”

“Why?”

“I... I need to see him. To talk to him.”

And just like that, I feel the existing peace between us implode. Has she been working up to this request the whole fucking conversation?

I think back, combing over every sentence, every response. It's been an hour-long manipulation. And I fell for it hook, line, and sinker, like a goddamn fool.

“Isaak?”

I explode from my spot and leap to my feet. Cami just blinks up at me, clearly taken back by my reaction. I discard my soiled shirt on the ground and turn to face her.

“Listen,” she says, “I know how you feel about him, but—”

“But what?” I demand. “But what, Cami? You need to talk to him? You need to be with him?”

She recoils. “You realize that, since you told me who he really was, I haven't said a word to him? He hasn't said a word to me?”

“How long have you been planning to ask me this?”

Her eyebrows knit together. “Planning? I haven't—”

“Don't fucking lie to me,” I growl. “You're on thin ice as it is.”

“Don't speak to me like I'm a child.”

“You are a child if you think talking to Maxim is going to solve anything.”

“And you're a jerk if you think that I don't need closure.”

“Closure?” I repeat, dumbfounded. “Is that what you're claiming this is about? For fuck's sake, at least put some effort into your lies.”

I'm pushing her into the argument she's wanted to avoid, but I don't give a shit. We're having this out now. Once and for all.

“I'm claiming it because it's true. Not that I owe you an explanation.”

“Why shouldn't I believe this is just an excuse to reunite with him?”

“What if it is?” she demands. She jumps up to her feet. “What if you're the villain and he's the good guy, huh? What if

you're the one who's full of shit and he's been honest since the beginning?"

"What if, indeed," I mutter dangerously. I narrow my eyes. "Tell me: that whole performance you just gave... was it just a way to manipulate me?"

She frowns in confusion. "What performance?"

"Oh, you know," I drawl. "Rewind to fifteen minutes ago, when you begged me to fuck you until you came on my cock."

Her eyes go wide with shock. But it's quickly replaced with anger. Hot, burning anger so deep that her knuckles go white when she balls her hands into fists.

"You asshole," she spits, her emotion turning the words into a sob. "You fucking asshole."

"Oh, grow the fuck up, Camila," I say, digging the knife in. "It all makes sense now."

Her anger writhes on her face. I'm expecting a slap. I'm ready for it. But what I get instead is...

Tears?

That's not right. Is the little *kiska* this good of an actress? Or have I misjudged things?

"Tell me you're joking. Do you really think that the only reason I slept with you just now is to get you to agree to this?"

I meet the question with silence.

She shakes her head at me, stifling a furious sob. Her green eyes have turned the color of moss. They're masked by a veil of tears that are only now beginning to fall.

She bites down against them, and turns her back on me. Then she starts storming up towards the manor.

And even though I want to go after her... I stay rooted in fucking place.

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## ISAAK

“You okay?”

I send Lachlan a piercing glare. “Is there a reason you’re asking?”

“I’m just concerned, Isaak,” he continues, totally unaffected. “You’re about to walk, unarmed, into a meeting with your vengeful cousin who definitely wants you dead. You just seem a little... distracted, given the circumstances.”

It’s a fair question, but I resent it anyway.

“When I have I ever been distracted from a fucking job?” I snap. “When have I ever botched a mission?”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“Lachlan,” Bogdan says, entering the office dressed in a bulletproof vest. “If he says he’s fine, he’s fine.”

I turn my back on both of them and slip on my own vest. Two guns and a knife rest on the desk, but I ignore all of them.

“You can conceal a knife easily enough,” Bogdan says, gesturing to the desk.

“No. I will not break my word.”

“That’s awfully noble,” Bogdan says with a resigned sigh. “But is it smart?”

I glare at him, knowing that both men are studying my every move carefully. “I know what I’m doing. Can the two of you stop acting as though this is my first day on the job?”

Neither of them answers.

I nod, satisfied. “Good. Now, how big is the contingent?”

“Including the two of us, that’s twelve men in total.”

“Cut five of them. I want no more than seven.”

“But—”

“No fucking buts. That is an order,” I snarl at Lachlan. “Go and kick five men out of the support vehicle. Now. I don’t give a shit who you pick.”

Lachlan gives me a curt nod and heads out the door.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I say to Bogdan when we’re alone in my office.

“*Sobrat*, you need to get her out of your head first.”

I turn away from him and fiddle with the straps on my vest.

“She’s not in my head.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Bogdan asks. “I’m your brother. I know you better than anyone else out there. And I also know that you were just in the garden with her.”

I give him a startled glance.

He grins like a wolf in the hen’s house. “Don’t worry—I went back inside when you started ripping each other’s clothes off.”

“*Blyat*’.”

Bogdan smiles. “Lucky bastard.”

I roll my eyes. “I needed a... distraction.”

“What you needed was a bedroom, brother dearest. But yeah, a distraction makes sense. Seems like she needed the same thing.”

His words remind me about the fight that had driven me up here earlier than expected. It’s still playing over and over again in my head.

“Bogdan, this thing about Otets...”

“Mama wouldn’t lie about something as big as this.”

I grimace. “I believe her. That’s the fucking problem.”

“It sucks, okay?” Bogdan says. “It fucking sucks. He was a damn hypocrite and he lied to us our entire lives. But it doesn’t really change anything.”

“No,” I agree. “It does not.”

“Maxim cannot be the leader of the Vorobev Bratva. You’ve been at the helm since Otets started getting sick. You were the one who took us to new heights. If Maxim gets his hands on the reins, he’ll run this Bratva to the ground just like his father did. And we can’t let that happen.”

We meet each other’s eyes, and I nod in agreement.

“You’ve got more don in you than you realize,” I tell Bogdan.

He snorts. “Keep the title. I’d rather do the fun shit and leave the responsibility to you.”

“Wise choice.”

“Although, if being don means getting a girl like Camila, I wouldn’t mind taking a stab at it.”

I shoot him a bemused glare. “Get out and get ready. I’ll be down in a second.”

Grinning, he leaves me to my empty office. I put my hands on my desk and lean in for a moment to catch my breath. I have no idea how this meeting with Maxim is going to go, but I do know that he has an ulterior motive.

There’s no way the fucker is just looking to have a conversation with me. Not when I have his fiancé.

I need to be ready for anything.

Before I head downstairs, I fit myself with a thin wire and a microphone. The wire’s thin and the microphone is small. Once my shirt is buttoned over the vest, neither are at all visible.

I may not be carrying weapons, but I’m not going in completely naked. Only a fucking idiot walks into the lion’s den without an insurance policy.

Then it's time to move. I'm on my way downstairs when I notice my mother at the threshold of a doorway. She's watching the men get ready through the window with a nervous expression.

"Isaak..."

"I don't have time to talk right now, Mama," I say coldly. "Duty calls."

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

I breathe through my latent anger. "He had a strong hold on you," I concede, giving her a way out. "I can't be surprised that it extended past his death."

She flinches back at the statement, but she doesn't say a word. Her face is as unreadable as ever.

"I'll see you later."

Once I'm outside, the men file into the support vehicle. I'll be driving alone in my black Titan Wrangler.

"Remember," I tell them before we disembark, "I want you to give me a mile's berth. If I need backup, I'll call for it."

"We'll listen for the gunshot," snarks Bogdan.

He's convinced that Maxim's going to sneak in a weapon. It's certainly not out of the question for my snake of a cousin. I'm just hoping he has some sense of honor remaining.

But then again, I don't know how far he's fallen. It doesn't matter either way. I can take Maxim, with or without a weapon of my own. It makes no difference to me.

It's a fifty-minute drive to the empty warehouse where we'd agreed to meet. I pass the support vehicle as they set up camp exactly a mile outside the warehouse, per my orders.

I drive the Wrangler through the open gate of the compound and park just outside the empty. There's another car parked on the opposite side of the lot: a shiny red Ferrari SF90 Spider with all the fixings. Maxim has never been a fan of subtlety.

Rolling my eyes, I climb out and head inside. There doesn't seem to be a soul around.

I climb the darkened stairway to the second floor. Downstairs was dark and dank, but up here, light pours through the square factory windows that line the west-facing walls. The panes have rusted and some of the windows are broken. Nothing seems out of place.

“Isaak,” comes a voice.

At the far end of the wide-open space, Maxim steps out from behind a large pillar.

He’s dressed similarly to me, which means I can’t tell if he’s concealing a weapon underneath his clothes. I take a few steps forward to gauge his reaction.

He tenses and I can’t help but smile. “Don’t tell me you’re scared of me, cousin?”

My voice echoes in the emptied factory. Maxim’s eyes narrow. I notice he’s bulked up considerably since I’ve last seen him. He was always a scrawny kid, so the extra muscles make him look like a blow-up doll that’s been inflated a little too much.

“I’ve never been scared of you,” Maxim hisses.

I laugh. “Really? Last time you tried to start a fight with me, you ended up hiding underneath your bed when I came to settle the score.”

“I was eight.”

“So was I.”

He grinds his teeth together. His eyes flare with resentment. “Those days are over, cousin,” he snarls. “I’m not eight anymore and I’m definitely not scared of you.”

“Does that mean you’ve come without a weapon?” I ask, cornering him.

He controls his body this time, but not his eyes. He gives himself away with a single fucking blink. “Of course.”

I pretend to believe the lie. I know the inevitable conclusion of this meeting, but I don’t want to speed the process up. Not before we’ve had a chance to talk.

“How’s Bogdan?” Maxim asks.

I smile. “We can do away with the pleasantries.”

“Fine,” Maxim snaps.

We circle closer and closer to each other, winding between the row of steel pillars that runs down the dead center of the warehouse floor.

He doesn’t just look bulkier—he looks taller than I remember, too. Then I glance at this designer Armani shoes, only to realize he’s got a half-inch wedge at the heel.

“Nice shoes,” I chuckle. “I bet those are great for reaching the top shelf.” I know I’m goading him, but fuck it—it’s worth it to see the enraged twitch on his face.

“How is she?” he asks, deftly changing the topic.

“Well-looked after.”

Maxim slowly retreats towards the bank of windows. I follow, matching him step for step and maintaining the distance between us. I wonder where he has his backup hiding. Somehow, I’m pretty sure he hasn’t told them to keep a mile’s radius.

“What the hell does that mean?”

I shrug. “Let’s just say that no woman likes being lied to.”

“Then why would she stay with you?”

I laugh. “I never lied to her. Right from the beginning, she knew my real name. And if we’d had more time that night, she would have known what I did, too.”

“That right there is a fucking lie. You were involved with her long before that night. Why claim otherwise?”

“Because it’s the truth. That night was the first time I’d ever laid eyes on her.”

“So you just walked about to a random woman, sight unseen, and decided to protect her with your life? I call bullshit. Why?”

“She was an itch I needed to scratch.”

He shakes his head like I'm pitiful. "Then give her back to me."

I scoff. "Not likely."

"Why?"

"Because you want her back," I say simply. "And I'm not about to give you anything you want. Not after what you did."

"Vitaly killed my father. Did you think I would just let that go? Bow and scrape and give him the respect owed to a don when I knew what he did to become one?"

Guilt—it's a fucking inconvenient feeling. And it makes this meeting more complicated than it needs to be. But as Bogdan said, it changes nothing.

"Very well," I say. "My father killed yours. And you killed mine. That would make us even."

Maxim raises his eyebrows. "Even?" he balks. "How the hell do you figure that?"

"You are still my cousin, Maxim. We are family, if nothing else. I'm prepared to end this feud between us now."

He looks stunned. Understandable, given my reputation. I'm not one for ending feuds with peace. My answer has always been strength and blood. In this instance, though, I'm willing to explore an alternative route.

"You... you'll give me back the Bratva?"

Perhaps not.

I stare at my cousin, wondering how a man as thick as he is could share the same blood as me.

"Give you back the Bratva?" I repeat. "I'm not offering you anything of the sort. The only thing I'm offering you is an end to the war between us. You get to keep your life and your breakaway little empire."

"Convenient," Maxim snarls, his upper lips curling over his teeth. "For you."

“It’s a generous offer. And you’re receiving it only because of your last name.”

“All this talk of receiving, when the only thing you do is take, take, take. You took my father’s—”

“Don’t play the fucking fool,” I hiss.

I don’t raise my voice, but the icy tone is enough to shut him up. I take a threatening step forward. I don’t miss the way his hand twitches towards the right side of his coat.

“Your father nearly burned the Bratva to the ground. He wasn’t interested in leading. He had no fucking ambition. The empire our grandfather built was broken apart and sold off like scrap metal. He would have finished us completely if my father hadn’t stepped in. I’m continuing his work. The Vorobev Bratva is mine. And it always will be. So if you’re looking for me to hand over the keys and walk away, then you’re even more fucked in the head than I initially thought.”

He’s silent, still, impassive. His eyes give nothing away.

“I am offering you a chance to preserve what you have,” I tell him. “I’m offering you the chance to live your own life and build your own world—provided you stay out of mine.”

His expression turns hard. “You’re offering me scraps and telling me to be grateful.”

“That’s just fucking it, isn’t it?” I snarl. “I shouldn’t be offering you anything. We are Bratva, Maxim. We don’t wait to be offered. We don’t wait to be given. We take what we want.”

He nods slowly. “Then I will take it. I will take everything you’ve stolen from me.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You are nothing but a spoiled little brat, whining about all the things you didn’t get. Come at me in any way you choose. But remember, you’re going to lose. And I will make it hurt.”

We’re finished here. I’m about to turn away when he speaks, his tone thick with pent-up bitterness.

“Have you fucked her?”



I turn back around slowly. “Excuse me?”

“I asked if you fucked the whore.”

His hands ball into fists. Mine do the same.

And I hear my father’s voice echoing in my head from the distant past. Instinctively, I glance down at my arm. It’s covered now, but I know the exact placement of the scar I received for failing to learn one of his most important lessons.

*Never show emotion in the presence of an enemy. Never lose control.*

A man who can’t suppress his emotions can be goaded, manipulated, and used.

A man who can’t suppress his emotions can’t read his enemy because he’s too lost in his own head.

It’s not surprising that Maxim and I ended up here today. All we have to do is look at our teachers to understand the legacy that gave us each life.

Maxim had Svetlana.

I had Vitaly Vorobev.

“What’s wrong, Maxim?” I taunt. “Did you fuck it all up? The plan was to make her fall for you. Did you go and make the mistake of falling for her?”

He lifts his eyes to mine. I can see it all there, beneath his black expression. He knows he’s fucked up this meeting. He knows he’s in the weaker position.

“Fall for her?” he sneers. “She was nothing but a mark. A way for me to hurt you.”

“And what purpose did it serve? I have her now. So who’s hurting who?”

“I will get her back,” he vows.

“You just claimed she means nothing to you,” I point out. “Why fight for a woman you don’t give a fuck about?”

“The same reason you stole her from me,” Maxim says vehemently. “She’s a power play. The last move on the board

before checkmate. And I plan to win.”

I laugh. “I’m afraid you’ll have to kill me first. Because as long as I’m alive, Cami is mine.”

“So be it.”

He acts almost immediately. But I’ve been anticipating this move since the moment I arrived. As soon as his hand moves to the right side of his jacket, I send my fist flying towards his face.

I whip around him and tighten my arm around his neck as I get a hold of the gun in his jacket.

“He made the first move,” I growl into my wire—just as the thundering of approaching footsteps echoes through the building.

I don’t think those footsteps work for me, either.

But like I said from the very start—it doesn’t matter to me. Isaak Vorobev always wins in the end.

By the time his men burst into the second story, I’ve already got the gun pointed at Maxim’s head. “Any of you fuckers move and I pull the trigger.”

“You’ll do it anyway,” Maxim spits, grinding his nails into my arm.

“I should. But I won’t. Consider this the repayment of a debt, cousin,” I hiss in his ear. “Tell your men to drop their weapons.”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t fucking test my patience,” I growl, backing towards the staircase behind me.

I don’t need to buy much more time. My reinforcements are already on the way and I’m close enough to the windows to see when they arrive.

I do a quick scan of Maxim’s men and count. “Jesus,” I growl in disgust. “You brought fifteen men. Fucking coward.”

“I knew... urgh... you wouldn’t... wouldn’t keep your word.”

I roll my eyes. “Look around, Maxim. My men were stationed a mile away. And I came in unarmed. Like we agreed on.” I make sure to raise my voice so that his soldiers will hear our conversation. “We may not live by the laws of the land or the rules of society. But we have our own code to follow, Maxim. And you violated it. Twice.” I look towards his men. “Is this the don you follow? Because I find him severely lacking.”

I hear the screech of wheels. In the corner of my eye, I see my men arriving.

I watch as Lachlan jumps out of the jeep before it’s even come to a stop. Bogdan is right behind him. The two of them are the first into the warehouse.

“Remember this moment, cousin,” I tell him. “I could have taken your life. But I chose to spare you. It’s the last mercy you’ll ever get from me.”

The moment Lachlan, Bogdan, and the other Vorobev troops burst into the space, I hurl Maxim onto the floor in front of me. Where he belongs.

Then the first gunshot rings out and the best bit begins...

The fight.

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## CAMILA

I've been sitting on the terrace for hours when I hear a noise. It snaps me out of my thoughtless reverie. When I jump and turn around, though, I force myself to stifle my squeal.

"Hi," I squeak.

Nikita regards me coolly from just inside the French doors. "Hello."

"Sorry," I mumble self-consciously. "I didn't mean to—if this is your spot or something, I wasn't intruding, I just—I can leave. I'll go. Sorry."

She glides over to me and bends over like a ballerina to retrieve the book that fell from my lap. It's still open to the first page. God only knows how many hours of staring at it since I first ran here after what happened in the garden, and I still couldn't tell you how the story begins.

Nikita fixes me with a contained smile. "It's a big terrace," she says. "I'm willing to share."

I still feel antsy and uncomfortable, hands clamped on the armrests of the iron-wrought chair I'm in. "It's really okay, I'll leave you to—"

"Sit," she says. Her tone is regal, confident, but not cruel or demeaning. "I told you already: I don't bite."

She sinks into the other chair. There's a glass table between us, but I still feel like I'm somehow encroaching on her space.

“It’s a beautiful spot, isn’t it?” Nikita observes, looking out at the gardens that lie sprawled out before us.

“Very British.”

She smiles. “I can’t quite figure out if you mean that as a compliment or not.”

I snort with laughter. “Me neither.”

“Sometimes,” she says, “I think I love this place. Other times, I want to leave so bad it makes me scream inside.”

I shiver at her words. She has this cryptic kind of doublespeak to every word she utters. Like she’s having one conversation, but in reality, we’re talking about something completely different altogether.

She still hasn’t handed back the book I dropped. Instead, she closes it gently and examines the front cover. “Gogol?”

“I’ve never really read any of his work,” I admit, trying not to give myself away. “Thought I’d give it a shot.”

“He’s one of Isaak’s favorite authors.”

I don’t know why, but I feign ignorance. “Really?”

Okay, so maybe I do know why I’m feigning ignorance. And it’s more than a little embarrassing, so I figure it’s just easier to pretend. Especially to his mother.

“Oh yes. My son has a deep sense of loyalty to his Russian roots,” she says. “Although he is more American than he cares to admit.”

I smile. “Does he know you think that?”

“I’m no fool. I’m on thin ice with him as it is.”

I look at her with surprise. Her tone is teasing, but her eyes tell a different story. For the first time, I wonder what her life must have been like. Being a wife to a dominant and no doubt hyper-controlling man. Being a mother to boys who would grow up to take over for their father, to rule exactly as he ruled. Maybe that’s what she meant about loving something so much and wanting to scream at the same time.

“Thank you for not asking,” Nikita adds.

“It’s none of my business.”

“Still, another woman would have asked.”

I give her a small smile, still trying to get my bearings. It’s not that she intimidates me. Not quite—or at least, not totally. It’s more that I’m scared to talk too much, reveal too much about myself.

I get the feeling that Nikita is a lot more dangerous than she looks. She’s got secrets behind those clear brown eyes, and she hides them well.

“How do you find the library?” she asks.

“Amazing,” I breathe, deciding that sticking to neutral topics is the way to go. “It’s the most beautiful library I’ve ever been in. And I used to work in one.”

“Really? Which one?”

“Oh, I doubt you’d know it. It was a tiny little vintage place in Chelsea.

“I’m curious as to why you picked that of all places to work in.”

“I liked how small and cozy it felt. I had the entire place memorized in a couple of days. I knew where every title sat. I didn’t even need to check the computer at the end of my first month there. I think I felt a sense of community, I guess you’d call it. And since I couldn’t get that out of life, I figured, Why not?”

“Why couldn’t you get that in your life?”

I gulp. “Well, I’m not sure how much you know about me—”

“I know you were in the Witness Protection Program before my son found you.”

*Well, that answers that question.*

“Right. Uh, yeah. Well, being in the program made me feel like I was a prisoner in my own life,” I admit, falling back into that terrifying, isolating feeling. “I couldn’t tell anyone my

real name. I couldn't tell them the real reason I was in London in the first place. I just felt like all of my social relationships were... hollow. I wasn't myself. I was playing a version of myself. It was all pretend."

She doesn't take her eyes off me once as I babble. "You had a good reason for lying."

I shrug. "That's what I thought at the beginning. But as I got closer to people, I started to feel guilty. And eventually, I distanced myself from everyone. That felt easier."

"And you turned to books instead of people. So you weren't alone."

"I wasn't all alone. Well, physically, I was most of the time. But I had my sister."

She nods. "That must have been a comfort to you."

"It was. It still is."

"I never had a sister," Nikita tells me. "I think I would have liked one. Especially later on in my life, when I found myself surrounded by men."

I snort. "Egotistical men, no doubt."

"Is there any other kind?" she agrees. "That includes my son."

I give her a side glance. "Son as in... singular?"

She gives me a guilty smile. "I did say that, didn't I? To be honest, they're both egotists. It's just that Isaak is don."

"Meaning what? He needs to be?"

"It takes a lot to be the kind of leader than a Bratva needs. You can't show weakness, not ever. You can't make a misstep because that could cost lives... the lives of the men who've sworn their allegiance to you. Sometimes, that robs you of your humanity."

"He seems to love it, though," I point out somewhat hesitantly.

"He does," Nikita concedes. "Sometimes, it's amazing how much he reminds me of Vitaly."

"Isaak's father?"



“Yes. He earned a reputation for being one of the most ruthless and unforgiving dons in the history of New York City. He reveled in that reputation. Wore it like a badge of honor.”

“Isaak told me that he was trained by his father.”

Her façade of composure seems to crumble just a little. She flinches back as though I’ve intruded into her private thoughts. She glances in my direction, but she’s looking right past me. Right through me.

“Vitaly insisted. He was five years old when Vitaly spirited him away one afternoon for training without a word of warning.”

My mouth snaps open. “Five?”

That’s how old Jo is right now. She’s a child. A sweet, innocent little girl who still aches for her mother and gets scared of the dark when it rains.

I can’t image that Isaak would have been all that different at that age.

Nikita nods slowly, falling into her memories. “I tried to stop him. No, that’s not entirely true. I asked him why he needed to start training so young. He slapped me across the face and I shut up. He always knew how to get me to shut up.”

I can’t take my eyes off her. She looks so distant. So unreachable. The way I imagined I looked in the early days of my pregnancy.

I have no idea why she’s opening up to me. But I don’t want her to stop. Maybe understanding her will help me understand Isaak a little better.

“He was abusive?”

Nikita’s eyes snap to mine. “Abusive?” she repeats, as though the word is foreign to her. “He wasn’t abusive. He was Bratva.”

I sit up and angle my body towards her. What kind of Kool Aid has she been drinking? “Nikita, abuse is abuse. It doesn’t matter who or what the man is.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t understand. The Bratva is a different way of life. There’s a different set of rules.”

“No, there isn’t,” I say firmly. “Those rules are just an excuse to keep the women in their lives in check. They get off on control. Even Isaak—”

I break off the moment I say his name. Nikita isn’t a girlfriend who needs my help. She’s the mother of the man who has me captive in this manor.

I can’t believe I’ve allowed myself to forget that already.

“Go on.”

“I... I wasn’t thinking when I spoke,” I say quickly, keeping my eyes on my hands clasped in my lap.

“I understand why you feel that way,” Nikita says, even though I never finished my thought. “He plucked you out of your life and planted you here. Against your will.”

I suppress a sigh. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re about to defend him?”

“No, I’m not,” she says, surprising me. “He can defend himself if he feels the need. He certainly doesn’t need his mother to fight his battles for him.”

I risk a glance up at her. “How could you have let him do this?” I ask in a soft rasp. “How could a mother let her son...” My voice cracks and I trail off.

She raises her eyebrows, but as usual, she’s calm and unmoved. “I haven’t been able to make him do anything. Not since he was five years old and he was ripped from my arms. When he came back, he was beyond my reach.” She reaches out to touch the back of my hand. “He was raised to be a don, Camila. He wasn’t raised to listen or follow. He was always meant to lead.”

“A good leader listens to advice from the people closest to him,” I point out.

She nods and relinquishes her grasp on me to sink back into her seat. “Unfortunately, I haven’t been close to him for many decades now. Vitaly saw to that.”

I frown. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“It wasn’t. But I found ways to endure. I found ways to survive.”

“How?”

She smiles and her features turn soft. “I had the love of a good man,” she replies. “And I loved him in return.”

There it is again—that cryptic doublespeak. That say-one-thing-but-mean-another. No wonder she’s lasted so long in this world of harsh men and violent rules: she knows how to play their game.

But from everything she’s told me, I’m having a hard time believing that Vitaly was the “good man” in question. Goodness knows I wouldn’t call what they had “love.”

Am I misunderstanding her? Or is there more to the story than I’ve heard just yet?

I’m drowning in questions when Nikita speaks again. “... Which is how I know how you are in love with my son.”

I snap out of my thinking to look up at her. “Excuse me?” I’m suddenly filled with anger I can’t express, can’t explain.

“Camila, it’s okay, dear. I won’t out you if you haven’t already told him.” She tries to touch the back of my hand again, but I wrench it away from her.

“There’s nothing to tell, because I don’t love him.”

“Oh, dear. I see the way you look at him.”

No. She’s wrong. She’s a broken woman who’s spent too long in a nasty world of shadows. She wouldn’t know love if it smacked her in the face. And she doesn’t know me. She doesn’t know the first damn thing about me.

Clenching my jaw, I say, “I look at him like he’s the man who abducted me and trapped me here. It’s a beautiful prison, but it is still a prison.”

“There’s no need to get defensive.”

I leap to my feet. The iron chair goes clattering backwards behind me. “There’s every need! You can’t go around making accusations like that. You have no idea how I feel, about him or anyone else.”

“So is it Maxim you love then?”

She asks the question so mildly that it doesn’t immediately hit me how insulting it is. A slow burn of anger. It starts in my gut and creeps out to my extremities until I’m humming with it.

“What is this?” I snap. “An interrogation? Did Isaak put you up to this?”

“Of course not.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you,” I seethe. I turn to whirl away and retreat to my room, but before I can go, Nikita reaches out and snares my wrist in her hand.

“I’m sorry if I offended you, Camila,” she says softly.

“And I’ll admit, when I made the statement I wasn’t completely sure how you felt about Isaak,” she says, forcing me to a standstill. “But now I do.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know that you wouldn’t have gotten so defensive if it wasn’t true.”

I try to brush off the words, but they hit hard. And no matter what I do, I can’t unhear them.

Before I can work up enough courage to tell her to leave me alone, I hear the sound of voices raised in alarm.

Nikita hears it, too. And it occurs to both of us at once what it must be: Isaak is returning home.

We both whisk down the stairs, around the house, and out onto the front drive. Nikita stays hot on my heels the whole time.

Half a dozen vehicles are parked haphazardly around the fountain. Men are scrambling in every direction.

“What’s happened?” I ask to no one in particular. My heart is pounding so fast it hurts.

“Clear a path!” someone booms. “Get him inside fast. Where’s the goddamn doctor? He’s lost a fuck ton of blood.”

My heart staggers. Isaak’s been hurt. It can only be him.

“Bogdan!” Nikita calls from next to me. “Where is he? Where’s Isaak?”

Bogdan looks over at this mother. His eyes are dark and hopeless.

*No.*

*It can’t be.*

*Not Isaak.*

The man is invincible. He has the kind of presence that makes you believe he’ll live forever. He has the audacity to make me believe that, and then die on me?

Then Bogdan steps aside and I see the gurney being pulled from the back of the truck.

The man lying on it is big and bloodied. Big enough that the frame groans underneath his weight, and injured badly enough that I can’t make out his face from here. I’m about to go running to it, but Nikita grabs my arm and pulls me back.

More Bratva men pop down the wheels of the gurney and start wheeling it towards the entrance of the house.

It’s coming closer. A crazy thought occurs to me: what if I could just pause the moment here? Torn between the desire to look away, to be ignorant, and the desire to know if it’s Isaak who’s dying on that gurney. I’d never have to know. I’d never have to feel. I’d never have to learn what I would suffer if I’m here to watch the final beat of his heart.

But then the gurney passes right in front of where we’re standing.

I catch a flash of fair hair. Pale coloring. Huge hands.

“Oh God,” I breathe. “Lachlan.”

I feel sorrow, but it only comes after. After the instant pang of relief that gets buried under a shit-ton of guilt.

“Hurry,” someone snarls.

My eyes snap up. I know that voice.

When I catch sight of Isaak, I feel a pull that terrifies me to my core. I have to fight the urge to go to him. Because really, at the end of the day, I have no right to.

He’s not mine.

Bogdan, who’d been amongst the men wheeling the gurney up to the mansion, sighs and stops. Everything and everyone grinds to a halt.

“I’m sorry, Isaak,” Bogdan sighs. “He... he’s already gone.”

Isaak’s expression turns from dark to black. A man like him can’t process grief in the same way a normal person would. I would turn to grief and wallow in the pain.

But all I see on his face is the promise of death.

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## CAMILA

It's been twenty-four hours and I haven't even caught a glimpse of him.

I know he's here, though. I can sense him. Twice yesterday, I could have sworn he was close by, watching me. But the moment I turned around, there was nothing there but a line of portraits staring unseeingly back at me.

I've walked around the garden a hundred times now. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that the motive is to run into Isaak. It might be foolish, but I feel like I can sense him out here. That he's somewhere—

“What are you doing here?”

I whirl around as my heartrate ratchets up instantly. “Isaak.”

“What are you doing here?” he asks again.

I gulp, uncertain as to why I'm so nervous right now. “I... I just needed a walk.”

“Bullshit,” he growls, walking around the water fountain towards me.

His sky blue eyes are roiling and dark. A barely-contained storm unravelling slowly. I should want to get out of the way, but fool that I am, I stand my ground.

“You were looking for me.”

Denial is the easiest route, but I decide not to go there. Not today.



“Fine. I was looking for you.”

His jaw hardens. I’m starting to wonder if his black mood has more to do with me than it does with Lachlan’s death. He’s certainly looking at me as though that’s the case.

“Why?” The lone word snaps like a whip.

“I... I just wanted to say how sorry I am,” I say shakily.

“About what?”

I frown. “About Lachlan, of course. I didn’t really know him all that well. But he seemed like a nice guy.”

Isaak snorts. “A nice guy... yeah.”

“Why is that funny?”

“You didn’t know him at all.”

“I just said that,” I remind him. “But the few interactions we did have, he was nice to me.”

“I wouldn’t flatter yourself about that.”

*Jesus.* Whatever I was expecting, it certainly wasn’t this. Isaak’s always been aggressive, abrasive, argumentative. But this? This is different. It’s bitter in a way that makes my chest ache.

I ought to leave. He’s looking for a reason to lash out. And I’m giving him exactly that. If I stay here, it will worsen. Escalate.

But I stand my ground.

Maybe because I’m stubborn. Maybe because I’m stupid. Or maybe because I recognize that underneath all that dark anger is a man who’s grieving his best friend.

“I’m not flattering myself about anything,” I tell him calmly.

“All I’m saying is that when I was at a low point, Lachlan stepped in and reminded me that I deserved to enjoy myself. In whatever way I could.”

“Is that right?” Isaak asks mockingly, as though he has zero interest in the conversation we shared. “That must have made you feel so very special.”

“Not special. Just... seen. And given that I’ve felt like a fish out of water my entire life, it was nice to speak to someone who understood.”

“Aren’t you lucky?” he seethes. “To have so many men be so willing to listen. To want to understand you. Truly spoiled for choice.”

I take a deep breath. I’m not sure how long I can resist my own anger, but for the moment I dig down deep to access the last reserves of my patience.

He wants a fight. I’m sure as hell going to try not to give him one.

“Have you informed his family?” I ask.

“Of course I have. Do you think I’d have kept them in the dark about his death?”

“I was just asking, Isaak—”

“Ask better questions.”

“You know what? You clearly need to be alone right now. I’m going to go inside.”

I’ve already turned away when he speaks up again.

“It was your fucking fiancé that killed him,” he spits. “Maxim’s the one that pulled the trigger. He was gunning for me. But the fucker’s aim has never been very good.”

I pivot slowly. “He’s not my fiancé anymore.”

“No?” Isaak asks. “Because you still seem to have some sort of sick preoccupation with him.”

“Seriously? We’re back to this, after everything that’s happened?”

He shrugs, but his muscles remain tense. “He seems to believe that you’re still loyal to him. That you still love him.”

“What do you care, Isaak?” I demand. “You obviously don’t give a shit about me.” I’m only riling up the beast, but at this point, I don’t have any more fucks left to give.

His eyes flash again. “You don’t know—”

“You and Maxim are exactly the same.”

Yeah. Definitely the wrong thing to say.

He grabs me instantly, yanking me against his body. The collision knocks the breath out of my lungs, but I don't have time to regain my bearings before I'm staring right into his fierce blue eyes. It feels similar to staring down the barrel of a gun.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?”

“Get your hands off me right now,” I say, as calmly as I can manage.

His grip on me tightens. “I could have killed him, you know,” he snarls at me. “I could have slaughtered him like a fucking pig. But I didn't.”

“Then maybe Lachlan's death has more to do with you than me.”

His eyes go wide. His grip on my arm slackens for just a moment. I don't feel guilty for saying what I said. If he's going to around casting blame, then he better be willing to take it, too.

He drops my hand and takes a step back. He opens his mouth to speak. I'm ready for anything. For fury. For venom. For unbridled rage.

Well, I thought I was ready for anything, at least. But I was wrong.

“Maybe you're right.”

I feel as though I'm standing on quicksand. I try to grab onto something to hold me steady, but the only thing within reach is him.

I still don't understand why I feel such a strong pull towards Isaak. Every time he pushes me away, every time he gives me another reason to hate him, I just find an excuse to stay.

Maybe it has something to do with the way his face falls when I lay Lachlan's murder at his feet. Like I just sliced off a little part of his soul.

“I... Isaak... I didn't mean that...”

“Didn't you?”

His tone is still biting. He's not asking for pity or sympathy, though. He's not even asking for understanding. He's just trying to wade through a loss he never saw coming.

“What even happened?” I say, desperate to keep him from retreating back behind that icy wall of aloofness he wears so well. “I thought this meeting was meant to be peaceful. Unarmed.”

“Maxim didn't keep to his side of the bargain.” His voice is a hollow croak. It makes my heart ache. Like I'm forcing him to relive the moment—but this time, I feel every ounce of his pain along with him.

“I expected it,” he continues. “I was ready. And then the fight broke out. We were outnumbered almost two to one, but we won anyway. They were fucking retreating. It was almost over. But of course, Maxim being the coward he is, decided to take one last shot at me. And like I said... his aim was always shit.”

I want to reach out, touch him. And only because I have no idea how that gesture will be taken, I resist the urge. So instead, I stand a few feet away, wishing there wasn't this uncrossable chasm between us.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper.

He's staring into the middle distance. “I should have killed him when I had the chance. I had him right underneath my fingers. One move. I could have snapped his neck and ended all of this for good.”

I flinch at the brutal fantasy. Isaak doesn't miss it.

“Something wrong? Was that visual too much for you?”

“You're talking about snapping someone's neck, Isaak,” I whisper. “That's not a visual I'm comfortable with.”

The thunder creeps back into his expression. The walls go up. The temperature drops.

And just like that, the moment of fleeting connection—the single instant of Isaak Vorobev acting like a fucking human being with feelings, as opposed to an emotionless beast—is gone. Severed like it never existed.

“I’ve forgotten who I’m talking to,” he sneers. “Maxim’s loyal little lapdog.”

In my head, I know what’s happening. It’s textbook. He’s trying to hurt me to mask his own sense of loss.

But there’s only so much a person can take. And I’ve reached my limit.

“Fuck you,” I snap.

I turn to leave before I can say anything else I might regret. I’m not expecting him to stop me. So when his hand clamps down on my arm and he swings me back around to face him, I feel a sharp sense of whiplash.

“You can leave when I fucking dismiss you,” he growls, his face only inches from mine.

“I’m not anyone’s lapdog. Especially not yours.”

He pushes me against one of the moss walls surrounding the smaller alcoves of the garden. “No, but you are my wife. And if you don’t start listening, then I’m going to have to break you in.”

“I get it,” I snarl at him. “We all fucking get it: you’re the big, strong don who never loses. But if you expect me to be your obedient little wife, then you picked the wrong girl. And if you think you can ever tame me, then you’ve got another thing coming.”

“What do you think you can do to me, little *kiska*?” he taunts cruelly. “What power do you think you have?”

It takes only a split second before it occurs to me exactly what tools are at my disposal. The same thing that started all of this, six long years ago.

I jam my hand into the space between our hips and grab his cock hard through his pants.

“I’m more than a match for you, Isaak Vorobev,” I say. “You may be the don here, but you don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

I undo his zipper and free his length into my grasp. He’s throbbing hard and hot. His eyes roll momentarily before snapping back into place.

“You may be able to control the world, Isaak,” I whisper to him. “But I won’t let you control me.”

I start stroking. A low, guttural groan sounds from deep in Isaak’s chest. His eyes flutter closed as he plants both palms on the wall behind me and lets his head hang low.

Then he raises his gaze to meet mine.

And I realize that I haven’t won quite yet.

“You’re right. I can see that now,” he says. “You’re much too good at manipulating the men around you.”

My hand freezes on his cock. His cold blue eyes stare back at me unapologetically.

It was all a mirage, my so-called upper hand. There is no winning with Isaak Vorobev. He’s played every game out there, broken every rule, and he always comes out ahead.

He knows my weaknesses and he’s just proved that he’s not above using them to put me back in my place. I have to bite down on my tongue to stop the tears.

I thought I could make him see me as his equal. But I was a fool to think that I could make him see me as anything other than a pawn on his board.

He’s not a man who wants anyone standing next to him.

He’s built to survive alone.

I shove him off me with an angry cry. He steps away easily, tucking himself back in his pants.

“Your father trained you well,” I tell him. Then I’m running up to the manor before my tears can betray me.

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## ISAAK

“Is there anything I can do for you, Mrs. Murphy?” I say into the phone.

“No, nothing. Just... just bring my son back where he belongs, Isaak.”

Her voice comes through faintly, but that’s because it’s weighed down with grief.

I’d met the woman a few times early on in my newfound friendship with Lachlan. His mother was everything my mother wasn’t: warm. Friendly. Outward with her love, with hugs, with kisses on the cheek and warm mugs of tea.

Not that I’d know what to do with a mother like that. I wasn’t really the hugging kind of son. It was something that Mrs. Murphy had clocked early on during my first visit to their quaint farmhouse in rural Scotland.

“Hugging helps you live longer,” she had told me.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I’d drawled.

Of course, I’d forgotten about that moment until right now. Hearing her voice jogs my memory, pulls out little scraps that I’d pushed back into the recesses of my mind.

“I will,” I tell her. “I’ll bring him back myself.”

“Thank you,” she says faintly.

I hang up a second after Bogdan walks in. He’s been quiet since the fight, but I know he’s been dissecting every single



thing that occurred from the moment we set a collision course with Maxim.

Bogdan processes things through analytical thought. The objectivity helps distract him, orient him. It forces him to look at things clinically so that he doesn't have to face the emotions head-on.

He did the same thing when Otets died. Although I'm willing to bet there had been considerably less affection where our father was concerned.

"How are you doing?" Bogdan asks.

"Fine," I say curtly. "Just got off the phone with Mrs. Murphy."

"Fuck. How's she doing?"

"How do you think?"

"Pretty fucking broken up, I'd imagine. Lachlan was her youngest."

"Does it matter?" I ask. "Youngest or oldest, a child is still a child."

"I don't know," Bogdan says with a shrug. "I doubt Papa would have cried over either one of us."

I snort. "You're right about that."

"Actually, he might have cried over you."

"Not because I was his son. Only because he would have lost his successor."

"Which makes me what—the insurance policy?"

I snort with laughter, and Bogdan joins in. But it doesn't last long. The silence claws its way back to the forefront.

"He wanted to go back to Scotland this year," I muse quietly. "He hadn't been in a few years. Felt guilty about it."

Bogdan sighs and sinks into an armchair. "Don't go there, Isaak. Don't put that shit in your head."

"He didn't go because of all this shit with Maxim," I remind him. "He said things were too volatile."

“He made the decision, not you.”

“I didn’t exactly insist on his behalf.”

“Why would you? He’s a grown man who made a decision.”

“A decision based on loyalty.”

Bogdan sighs again. “There’s no denying that. Lachlan was loyal. The man never faltered.”

*Loyalty*. Still one of the highest compliments a man of the Vorobev Bratva can lay at someone’s feet. Ironic, really, that the man who carved those words into our skin was guilty of betrayal on all the most fundamental levels.

“You’re going, aren’t you?” Bogdan says after a pause. He’s eyeing me warily.

“I have to,” I say. “I’m not going to let anyone else hand Lachlan’s body over to his family. I’ll set them up with an account. Lachlan’s salary will be transferred directly to them in perpetuity.”

“That’s generous.”

“I wouldn’t do it for anyone else.”

“Not even me?”

“Especially not you.”

Again, we both chuckle, but it too dies quickly.

I look up at my brother and for the first time I can remember, I feel like the desk is a huge separator between us. A gulf that needs crossing. The office has been set up like that since Otets first took power. No doubt it’s intentional, to remind visitors of who wears the crown.

But today, I don’t like it. I decide to break tradition.

I walk around my desk and take the seat next to him.

He doesn’t comment, but I know he understands the gesture. Maybe that’s what encourages him to brood the topic in the first place.

He turns to me and says, “*Sobrat*... why didn’t you kill Maxim when you had the chance? You had the fucker.”

I know he's not blaming me. He's genuinely trying to understand the frame of mind I was in. The wire I'd been wearing didn't just transmit directly to my team; it also recorded the whole conversation I'd had with Maxim that day. I'm sure he's listened to it again and again, just like I have.

And wondered what the fuck happened, just like I have.

"Our father killed his, Bogdan," I explain. "I was trying to even out the scales. Now, I can take him on without feeling any sense of guilt."

"You were willing to broker a peace deal with him," Bogdan points out.

"I was giving him scraps and he knew it. A smarter man would have taken that offer, though. I've never made one like it before. I don't intend to do it again."

"Then why do it once?"

"Because, at the end of the day, we're family. And that loyalty to our shared blood is something I can't ignore, even if I wish I could. But I said my peace and made my offer. He rejected it all. So be it. Going forward, my conscience is clear."

"So it's war then?"

"It's war," I agree.

He nods grimly. "Good."

I glance at him with a curious smile. "I've never seen you so ready for a fight before."

"I was born fucking ready," he snaps. Then he exhales and relaxes. "But this is a unique circumstance, of course. Maxim is a threat to the Vorobev Bratva. More importantly, he's a threat to you and Camila."

Something occurs to him. His eyes find mine. "Are you taking her to Scotland with you?"

I don't like the tiny edge of smugness in his tone. "I'm not going to give Maxim the chance to get to her. I need to keep her close."

“Right,” he laughs. “That’s definitely the primary reason you’re taking her.”

I shoot him a glare. “Are you really going to be a little shit today of all days?”

“Are you going to keep denying that your feelings for her are real?”

“Bogdan.”

“Listen to me: I heard the entirety of your conversation with Maxim. It was good; you were in control the entire time—or at least, that’s what anyone who doesn’t know you would think. But I’m your brother. I do know you. And that’s how I clocked it.”

“Clocked what, exactly?”

“The subtext. You care about Camila. Hell, maybe you’re even in love with her—if a cold-hearted son of a bitch like you is capable of something like that.”

I play off my sudden stiffening. “She’s a tool, Bogdan. She’s the trump card I’m keeping up my sleeve until the right time to deploy. Nothing more.”

He rolls his eyes. “That’s not the reason you approached her that night in the restaurant.”

I grit my teeth. “I’ll admit there was something about her. I couldn’t walk away. But now, I wish I had.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do,” I say firmly. “Camila’s not suited for this life. Can you imagine her as a Bratva wife? She’d be miserable.”

Bogdan just smiles secretively.

“What?” I demand.

“I don’t know where you get off thinking she wouldn’t cut it in this life. She gives as good as she gets. Even Lachlan thought so.”

“So he said.”

“She’s more than a match for you.”

My body tenses instantly as I remember the fight we'd had only hours ago. I'm still fighting an erection because of the fucking memory. She'd been so damn confident, so... in command of herself.

Even when she'd been pressed up against that wall, completely at my mercy, she had fought back. She'd held her own. And it was enough to nearly make me explode in her hand right then and there.

Except that I refused to concede any kind of defeat. Give her the upper hand? Let her think she could manipulate me in any way?

No. That, I cannot do.

So I'd said the words I suspected would hit close to home: *You're much too good at manipulating the men around you.*

And it worked. Never mind that I'd felt like a fucking monstrous asshole afterwards.

"Stop," I tell Bogdan. "This is business. Having Camila around is necessary with Maxim out there. When that changes, she can go."

"Bullshit. You're just going to let her walk away once Maxim is dealt with?"

"I'll give her the choice."

Bogdan narrows his eyes at me. "How noble. That's a rigged game, brother. You know she won't leave you."

"Must be nice to have the world at your feet."

"Comes with the territory. I have a lot, and as much to lose."

"You won't lose it."

"No," I agree. "I won't. Prepare everything for the trip. We leave tonight."

Bogdan sighs and gives me a mocking salute. "Got it, boss. What do I tell Mama?"

"That I'm going to Scotland," I say dismissively. "The fuck do I care?"

“I think she’d like to talk to you, Isaak.”

“Well, that’s fucking tough. I have shit to do and a trip to get ready for. I’ll need you to take charge while I’m away.”

“How long will that be for?”

“For as long as I want,” I reply. “Haven’t decided yet.”

He doesn’t press me for more details. Just gives me a nod and gets to his feet. I do the same and we leave my office together and part ways on the steps.

Bogdan heads downstairs to send instructions for the jet to be readied. I walk upstairs to Camila’s room.

I know I’m not allowing for much time for things to simmer before speaking to her, but if I want to leave tonight, there’s no postponing this.

And there’s no way I’m leaving her behind. I know she’ll most likely be safe here, but the possessive part of me can’t let go. It makes me question that confident claim I’d made to Bogdan only moments ago.

If she asked to be let go, would I be able to say yes?

I walk into her room without knocking. She jumps off the armchair by the window. Her eyes are red and her face looks puffy. It’s as though she’s been crying into a pillow for the last half an hour. But I can tell from her tired eyes that she’s all cried out now. There’s nothing left.

“I want to be alone,” she says coldly.

It’s a defense mechanism. She doesn’t want me to see how distraught she is right now. Too fucking late for that. How can I leave now? How can I pretend?

“We’re going to Scotland tonight,” I tell her, unable to make my tone any less commanding than it always is. “Pack a bag.”

She shakes her head fiercely. “No.”

“It wasn’t a question, Camila.”

“Don’t act like I’m the one being difficult. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Why? Because I hurt your feelings?”

She cringes back, frowning at my words. She’s not the type of woman who wants pity. I respect that more than she could ever know.

“No, because you’re a controlling monster and I’d rather not be around you right now.”

I stalk one step closer to her, taking in her sweet, floral scent. It’s like a drug to me.

“You’re my wife,” I tell her. “And you will go where I want, and do as I say.”

“Is that really the kind of relationship you want?” she asks quietly. “I’m not one of your little lackeys, you know.”

“You’re not really my wife either, though, are you?”

She turns her face before the second wave of hurt gives her away. But her body does that well enough on its own. She slumps forward, as though she’s caving in on herself.

“You know, I’ve been an asshole quite a lot in my life,” I tell her.

She glances towards me. “I can sure as hell believe that.”

I smirk. “You’re the first person that’s ever made me feel bad about it.”

She’s definitely not expecting that, because she smiles instantly, unable to hold it in. “Is that right?”

“It is.”

“Well, hooray for small victories, I guess.”

She moves back to the armchair and sits down. She pulls her legs up and wraps her arms around them. She looks so fucking fragile that all I want to do is go to her and hold her.

So that she’s not forced to do it herself.

“When are we leaving?” she asks suddenly.

*We.* It irks me to admit how much I like the sound of that phrasing. A little too much.

“Tonight. In a couple of hours.”

“I’m guessing this is to go and see Lachlan’s family?” she asks.

“I have to return his body to them,” I confirm. “He’s always wanted to be buried on Scottish soil.”

“I suppose in your world, planning for an early death is... pretty standard?”

“We have to be prepared for everything. Including death.”

“I really am sorry, you know. I liked Lachlan.”

I walk over and take the seat opposite her. The sunlight streaming through the tall windows illuminates half of Camila’s face and shrouds the other half in shadow. Her green eyes are thrown into high relief. She looks like a fucking daydream.

“He used to tell me that he was going to retire from the Bratva at fifty,” I tell her. “He was going to go back to Scotland and run his parents’ farm.”

She smiles. “Was he serious?”

“Nah. He just liked to believe he was. After living this life, you can’t go back.”

She nods. Her expression mellows. “I... I should start packing.”

When she shifts in the light, I see the shimmering tracks left behind by her tears. Two meandering streams on her cheeks.

I reach out instinctively and cup the side of her face in my palm. She doesn’t move. Hell, she doesn’t even look surprised.

“You’re fucking beautiful,” I tell her.

She accepts the compliment without a word. It’s a fragile truce, and no doubt it will be easily broken. But I savor the quiet moment with her.

Because for as long as it lasts, I can let myself believe that at the end of this, we might have a future together.



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## CAMILA

The moment the flight attendant's back is turned, I eye her suspiciously.

She's blonde like me, though her hair is whiter, almost platinum. It's ironed straight and flows down her back like some silver waterfall out of a fantasy film.

Her body looks like it's straight out of a fantasy film, too. And not the PG kind. The skintight top and pencil skirt uniform she's wearing feels incredibly inappropriate at first glance.

But when I look at her objectively, I'm forced to admit that there's nothing wrong with it. She's just got a rocking body and amazing boobs. Boobs that are on full display thanks to the fact that she's left her top three buttons undone. Her white shirt hugs her chest tightly, highlighting her impressive cleavage.

"If you want a moment alone with her, I can leave."

I turn to Isaak with a start and realize that he's caught me staring.

Great. Just fucking great.

"I asked her for water ages ago and she still hasn't brought it over," I explain, feeling like a complete bitch for lying to cover up my own insecurities.

Isaak looks up. "Marissa," he says, "bring us some waters."

"Of course, sir," Marissa says at once with a flirtatious bat of her eyelashes.

Fake eyelashes, no doubt, to match the fake tits and the fake ass and the fake girlish pitch in her voice.

Even the way she says the word “sir” sounds full of innuendo. It makes me want to roll my eyes every time she leans in a little too deep and says it to Isaak.

She struts down the broad aisle of the luxurious private jet we’re currently on. Her hips sway with every step, and I can’t help think she picked her clothes this morning for this purpose exactly.

“Something wrong?” Isaak asks, giving me an amused smile.

I settle for rolling my eyes at him. “No. Nothing.” My voice is salty and bitter. I know. I’m in complete and total bitch mode right now, but I can’t seem to turn it off.

“You want me to speak to her?”

“No. Just leave it.”

“As you wish.”

Marissa heads back down the aisle towards us. She’s got a bottle of Avion water on a silver tray and two tall crystal glasses.

“Here you go, sir,” she says, her eyes glossing over me before they settle on Isaak. “Would you like anything else?”

“It’s a little cold in here,” I interrupt. “Can I get a blanket, please?”

I don’t really need one. I just want to force her eyes off Isaak.

“Of course,” she says, her tone falling considerably in the enthusiasm department when she addresses me.

She heads off to fulfil my request. I stare pointedly out of the windows. There’s nothing but a sea of cotton candy clouds right outside. Makes you want to jump right in.

When I turn away from the window, Isaak is still observing me with a half-smile on his face.

“What?” I demand defensively.

He chuckles. “Nothing.”

I want to smack him, but only because I know exactly what he's laughing about. And I know how smug it's making him. Damn my telltale face.

Fortunately, the flight doesn't last much longer. I breathe a sigh of relief as I exit the jet and leave beautiful Marissa behind. Isaak follows me down the steps and leads me to a jaw-dropping restored car that looks like it's been around since the roaring twenties. I'm not a car girl in the slightest, and I still can't help ogling over the beautiful cherry-red curves.

"Looks ancient," he tells me when he sees me gawking. "But she's all new on the inside." He pops open the passenger door and ushers me in, then walks around to take the driver's seat.

The engine purrs to life. Isaak handles it confidently, expertly—not that I would've expected anything else. Something about the careless way he controls the steering wheel captivates my attention. It's so... masculine, I guess. I didn't know that would do it for me, but it definitely, definitely does.

I make myself look at the window so he doesn't catch me going gaga over his hands. Scotland is beautiful. Gorgeous in fact. There's so much raw, natural beauty that it takes my breath away. Honestly, it looks like I've stepped into a photoshopped postcard.

Isaak was right about the car, too. It drives smoothly and even though we're on the road for a long time, I enjoy myself for longer than I'd have anticipated. An hour in, I start to get impatient, though.

"Where exactly are you taking us?"

"My place," Isaak replies simply.

"What exactly am I expected to do while you're... doing your thing?"

"There's a pretty big library here, too," he says. "And the grounds are quite large. You can explore them if you want."

"Do I get to explore the city?"

"Not without a chaperone."

"Jesus," I say, rolling my eyes. "Typical."

“I’m not risking your safety just because we happen to be in Scotland. Maxim could have eyes on us right now.”

“Look around, Isaak. There’s nothing but hills, road, and sky.”

“Never underestimate a desperate man.”

I shift in my seat to glance at him. “What makes you think he’s desperate?”

“He knows he’s up against me.”

I shake my head. “Sometimes, I wonder if that ego is your superpower or your Achilles’ heel.”

He gives me a side smirk, and even that makes my body hot with unnatural desire. Honestly, I need to get a hold of myself, or I’m going to start to lose the plot entirely.

“Ego is part of the job description.”

“Yeah, so I’ve been told.”

“By whom?”

“Your mother,” I say, deciding that there’s no point lying about it.

“My mother,” he repeats. “When?”

I shrug. “We talk.”

“How often?”

I raise my eyebrows. “What’s the matter, Isaak? Nervous?”

“Not nervous. Just... uneasy.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s my mother.”

“You’re worried she’ll tell me all your dark, dirty secrets?”

He scoffs. “If you think I’ve trusted my mother with my secrets, then you clearly have a lot to learn about me.”

“She’s your mother,” I point out.

“And your point is... ?”

“Why wouldn’t you trust her with your secrets?”

“Because she has her own, and she’s definitely not sharing. So why should I?”

“That’s the most childish thing I’ve ever heard. Tit for tat with your own mom?”

His smirk gets wider. “It’s complicated.”

“Aren’t all families?”

“Some more than others.”

I can’t help admiring the harsh, perfect lines of his profile. In another life, he could easily have been a model or an actor. He has the looks, he has the presence, and he definitely has that mysterious, broody quality that women find hard to resist. In my case, impossible to resist—no matter what else he does.

“You shouldn’t be so hard on her, you know. She has your back.”

He frowns. “And you know that how?”

“Because she spent the better part of our conversation defending you. Or rather, justifying your behavior.”

He sighs with frustration. “My mother has a beautiful country house about twenty miles south from the manor. I don’t know why I spent so much on it if she’s not going to stay there when she’s in London.”

“God forbid she wants to be close to her sons.”

He doesn’t answer to that. He just stares off into the winding road ahead, looking stoic and aloof.

“Is it that hard for you to get close to her?” I ask when it becomes clear he’s trying to end the conversation. “Or is that just a general rule of yours?”

I notice that his eyes twitch to his arm. The one with the line of scars running from elbow to wrist.

“Oh, I see. It was another lesson your father taught you. Don’t trust anyone? Don’t trust women?”

The hand resting on top of the steering wheel that was so at ease just moments ago is now death-gripping it. His knuckles

show white through his skin.

“You don’t like that I can read you, do you?” I ask.

“What you know about me is what I chose to share with you,” he growls. “If it weren’t for that, you wouldn’t know a goddamn thing.”

I roll my eyes. “Right, sorry. I keep forgetting that you’re a robot who doesn’t need anyone or anything. Least of all to have a conversation.”

I’ve got my hands crossed over my chest, and for some reason that seems to amuse him.

“But,” I continue, “I’d just like to point out that *you* were the one that approached me that night. *You* were the one who couldn’t walk away.”

“That is true,” he says softly.

“Don’t worry—I don’t flatter myself that you wanted anything more than a quick fuck.”

“Who said anything about quick?”

I glare at him. “Why don’t we just enjoy the countryside and not talk?”

He laughs under his breath. I can only tighten my arms against my chest and wait for this drive to end. I want to ask how much longer it’s going to take to get to his place, but that would break the “no talking” rule I’ve just put in place.

Thankfully, I don’t have to ask, because a few minutes later, the road we’re on rounds a hill and peters out into gravel. At the same time, I catch sight of a turreted structure in the distance.

“Oh my God!” I gasp, sitting up. “Did I fall asleep and wake up in Narnia?”

“Welcome to Macleod Castle,” is all Isaak says.

“Castle. You just said ‘castle.’”

He smiles. “It’s only a little one.”

“Right,” I say. “A little castle. This is insane.”

And it really is. Isaak's London manor was large and luxurious. But a Scottish castle is something else entirely.

This one sits on the top of the tallest hill in the area, surrounded by lush greenery and dense pockets of forest. The turrets seem to scrape the cerulean sky. Moss and vines race to the top of the towers and ravens flock along the rim of the walls.

The gates throw themselves open as we approach with some kind of hidden mechanism. Isaak drives us through. From there, it takes us a full four minutes to reach the grand entrance of the castle. It takes me almost exactly that long to find my voice again.

"Eighteenth century?" I ask as we park.

"Seventeenth actually," Isaak says. "But there were a couple of restorations in the eighteenth century, which is why it has certain nods to the era."

"This is amazing. I bet the library is brilliant."

My door swings open. I step out enthusiastically. I'm so busy staring up at the castle's impressive façade that I don't even remember to acknowledge the man who's just opened my door.

"Camila," Isaak prompts, "this is Alastair Fraser. He's been tending to this property for the last twenty-seven years."

I turn to the older man, whose luxurious white mustache is so big that it covers the entirety of his top lip. He's also dressed in traditional Scottish garb, kilt and all.

"Alastair," I say, offering him my hand. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little distracted."

He gives me an easy smile. "She's a beauty, isn't she?" His tone is warm and filled with affection. But it has nothing to do with me. It's clear that the man is in love with the property itself.

"Gorgeous," I say fervently. "I'd love a tour."

"Alastair can give you one shortly," Isaak cuts in, ushering me into the castle.



His hand lingers on the small of my back. I can't deny that I don't hate it there.

"I'm Camila, by the way," I tell Alastair as he follows behind us with our bags in hand.

"Of course, I know who you are, ma'am. We have all been excited to welcome home the mistress of Macleod Castle."

My mouth pops open wordlessly and I dig my heels in.

Isaak chuckles. "Excuse her, Alastair. She's not used to titles. Where have the refreshments been set up?"

"In the formal sitting room, sir. I thought the young madam would enjoy seeing the French tapestries we have on display there."

"The 'young madam' would rather be in the library surrounded by books instead of people. But we'll start in the living room for now."

My head is thoroughly spinning now. I'm in awe of the entire place. I know I'm coming off like the country mouse who's making his first visit into town, but I can't help it.

Stepping into the formal sitting room doesn't help matters. To start with, the place is massive and it feels a little bit like a perfectly preserved, highly sophisticated museum. There's a display of Brown Bess muskets on one wall, next to a Lochaber axe and Scottish broadswords from different centuries.

Then my eyes land on the French tapestries that Alastair mentioned and I actually catch my breath. They're so beautiful and so intricate that I have to move closer to examine them.

I'm vaguely aware of Isaak talking to Alastair behind me, but I'm not paying any attention to either one of them.

A few minutes later, I feel Isaak at my shoulder.

"This is incredible," I whisper.

"I didn't think you'd be so easily impressed."

"I mean the whole thing, not just the tapestries. I can't believe you own a castle."

“It was my father’s first big purchase after he restored the Bratva’s reputation. He wanted a symbol of his power.”

“So he just bought a whole freaking castle?” I ask in awe.

Isaak shrugs. “He wanted a good investment.”

“Wow,” I breathe. “I’m literally speechless.”

He chuckles in amusement. “You should eat.”

With his hand on the small of my back again, he steers me towards the ornate table waiting by the windows. It’s laden with an assortment of different goodies, each of which looks and smells better than the last.

We sit down together and I take a tiny little Scotch pie that fits perfectly in my palm.

“What’s in it?” I ask. “Actually, never mind. I don’t care.” I take a big bite and sigh with satisfaction. “Damn that’s good.”

Isaak just sits back and smiles.

“You’re not going to eat anything?” I ask, with my mouth full.

“Not hungry.”

“It’s rude to watch another person eating.”

He shrugs. “I don’t mind being rude.”

I roll my eyes. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

Still chewing, I turn to admire the view from the huge, arching windows. The castle overlooks a little brook trickling between the green hills. The trees out here look ancient and gnarled, older than time itself. It’s easy to get lost in gazing at this otherworldly vista.

But when I turn back for more food, Isaak is staring at me.

“Now what?” I ask.

“It’s nice to see you enjoy yourself a little bit.”

I shake my head. How can I explain to him that enjoying captivity feels like something only a fundamentally broken individual would relish? That in some ways—in many ways—I hate myself for it?

But he is right about one thing: I am enjoying myself, and clearly doing a bad job of hiding it.

“Alastair will take care of you while I’m gone.”

“You’re leaving now?” I ask, trying not to sound too disappointed.

“I promised I’d meet Lachlan’s family the moment I arrived. I just wanted to get you settled first.”

It’s a nice gesture. Sweet, in fact, but again, I’m scared to read too much into it. There’s probably an ulterior motive buried deep down somewhere. With Isaak, there always is.

And I’ll see it only when I’ve convinced myself that there’s something more between us than just a plan for revenge.

“I’ll be fine. You go and see to Lachlan’s family.”

Isaak gives me a nod. His expression is hard to read, but I’d guess it’s somewhere between acceptance and mild relief. I’m not sure which of that applies to me, and which applies to Lachlan.

“I’ll be back in the night.”

“Okay.”

“You’ll have the castle at your beck and call until then.”

I frown. “That reminds me: why did Alastair refer to me as the mistress of this castle? Apart from sounding completely archaic, it’s not actually true.”

“I didn’t see the need to fill them on all the grisly details of our situation,” Isaak explains. “So as far as they know, you’re my wife. Mrs. Isaak Vorobev.”

My stomach does a little backflip when he says my name that way. Damn him. Damn him and his insanely beautiful blue eyes. Damn him and everything he does to me without ever needing to try.

“Is there a landline here I can use?” I ask, to gloss over the slightly pregnant moment. “Or an internet connection?”

“There’s both,” Isaak replies. “And you have one call.”

“I remember the rules, your highness.”

Isaak gets to his feet, and my eyes automatically dance over his tall frame, his broad shoulders, his perfectly muscled arms.

By the time my eyes reach his, he’s already looking at me, smiling that knowing smile that makes me feel like he can see into my head and read all my thoughts.

“Stop looking like you know what I’m thinking,” I snap.

He laughs. “But I do, little *kiska*.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I know you’re hoping that I’ll be back soon.”

I should control my expression, but he doesn’t miss the flicker of irritation that, once again, he’s right.

“Don’t worry,” he adds before I can say anything. “I don’t flatter myself that you care about me. But if it’s not my personality, it’s definitely my body you’re after.”

Is he... teasing me? That sinfully dangerous smile seems to say so.

“Don’t you have someplace to be?” I say grouchily.

Still smirking, he walks out and leaves me in his majestic castle. It’s ironic, really. If I ignore just a few inconvenient details, it almost feels like I’m living in a fairy tale.

But I’m no princess.

Isaak Vorobev is no prince.

And there sure as hell isn’t a happily-ever-after waiting for us at the end of the rainbow.

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**ISAAK**

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A FEW HOURS LATER

She opens the door almost immediately. Like she's been waiting for me.

"Isaak."

I give her a tight, tired nod. It's the best I can manage after my depressing evening with the Murphy clan. Cami is wearing a gauzy white dress with cutaway sleeves and a deep V neckline. I have to take care not to stare.

"You look nice."

She looks down at her dress and then back at me. "Thanks. You bought it for me."

"My taste is as good as ever, it seems."

On another day, this same conversation would have resulted in a fight. Cami would have accused me of trying to control her by paying for everything she owns.

And I would have bitten back with some low blow that would have had her slamming the door on my face.

Which, of course, would require me to push my way in through said door and remind her who is boss.

The sudden little fantasy has my cock stiff as an iron rod in two seconds flat. That, and the way she's looking at me now with those fierce green eyes.

"Come on," I say gruffly. "We're going out."

"Now?" she asks. "It's almost ten o'clock."

“Do you have other plans?”

She purses up her lips in irritation, but follows me out of her room. We head outside quietly, where my midnight blue Ferrari is parked and waiting for us.

I open the door for her and I notice how her eyes brighten just a little. As though the simple gesture is something she'd been waiting for all her life.

I get into the car and we start the drive. Camila keeps shooting me little glances every few seconds, and from the way she's wringing her hands together, it's obvious she's nervous about something.

“What?” I ask finally.

“I just... I don't know if I should ask or not,” she admits.

I sigh. “It was predictably horrible.”

She winces. “I'm sorry.”

“It's the nature of this life. Death isn't just inevitable; it also comes sooner than you'd think.”

“I could have come with you,” she says. “For support.”

I glance at her and she blushes immediately, turning her face to her window so that I can only catch a glimpse of her profile.

“But I'm sure you had support,” she adds quickly. She clears her throat. “So where exactly are we going?”

“The Scottish Rose Garden.”

That gets her looking at me again. “Sounds fancy.”

I smile. “It's just a big public park,” I explain. “And on occasion, there are events hosted there. Tonight, there's going to be a *ceilidh*.”

“A *ceilidh*?” she repeats in awe. “Get outta here. No way.”

It strikes me that I would have had to explain what that is to another woman. But with Cami, there's no need. Her eyes go wide with recognition and she looks instantly excited. No doubt she's read about the traditional Scottish gatherings in some obscure history book that no one's ever heard about.



The only question that remains is, why does that make my heart feel like it's going to lurch out of my chest?

"I've always wanted to go to one," she says. "Folk stories are my absolute favorite."

"Some women might be more interested in the music and dancing."

"Not me," she says, coloring immediately. "I... I'm not the best dancer."

"Uh-oh. Have I stumbled across your one weakness?"

She smiles. "Trust me, I have a few. Dancing is certainly high on the list."

"Consider me intrigued."

She snorts. "Prepare to be sorely disappointed."

I park the Ferrari on the outskirts of the garden's boundaries, close enough that we can still see the party taking place in the middle of the grass.

Two separate fires crackle on either side of the lawn, which is strewn with benches and tables in a loose circle.

Inside the circle, dozens of men in kilts and women in traditional highland dresses are whirling around in intricate Scottish dances.

"Oh God," Camila breathes as we walk towards the ring. "We're not dressed right. We'll stand out."

"Look around, Cami. There are people here dressed just like us. And anyway, you were always going to stand out."

It takes her a moment to process the compliment. When she does, she gives me a sideways glance as if to make sure I meant it the way it sounded.

The party isn't limited to the makeshift dancefloor. Smaller groups that have broken off to play games and listen to an old woman tell stories.

Cami clutches my arm excitedly. "Let's go over there."

She drags me toward the storyteller. We find a place on the edge of the group and sit down on the grass.

The woman telling the story is in her seventies at least. She's got long, flowing white hair that reaches down to her hips.

"Isn't she glorious?" Camila whispers to me, leaning in a little.

I laugh, and that earns a few glances from the people sitting adjacent to us, most of whom are couples. To their eyes, we probably look like one too.

As we listen, Cami's arm brushes up against mine. I'm acutely aware of every touch. Every sensation.

The silver-haired woman finishes her tale of Fingal's Cave before launching right into another story, The Nine Maidens of Dundee.

Camila is transfixed through the entire tale. But I barely hear three words. I'm too fixed on her. Watching her expressions ebb and flow is the most entertainment I've had in a long time.

It's exactly what I needed after the day I've had.

Once the silver-haired woman is done with her second story, she announces a small break before the next storyteller. The crowd doesn't disperse. Instead, a friendly babble rises up over us. The atmosphere of the *ceilidh* is infectious, and I find myself smiling easily.

"Can we go talk to her?" Cami asks me.

"The old woman? Sure. Lead the way."

I help her to her feet and she immediately dashes over to snare the storyteller before she can get away.

"Hi," Cami says eagerly, as though she's approaching a celebrity. "Your story was beautiful."

"Oh, it's not my story, lass. These are the stories of Scotland."

"Of course. You just told it so well."

"I'm glad you thought so. Is this your first time at this event?"

I stand back a little, content to observe Camila. But I notice a few other women passing by who throw me curious glances.

Some come cluster up behind the old women to not-so-subtly eavesdrop.

“Oh, yes. My, uh... Isaak brought me.”

“Isaak?” the woman asks, looking right at me. “He’s the fine *coinneach* at your side there, is he?”

Camila glances back over her shoulder. “Um, yes.”

“Good evening, ladies,” I say, moving forward.

I’m met with appreciative glances, though they cool when I wrap my arm over Camila’s shoulder. “I thought my wife would enjoy the Scottish experience.” She tenses instantly, but I maintain my grip on her shoulder.

“What a lucky girl you are.”

“Indeed,” chimes in another of the old women. “If we were thirty years younger, you’d have lots of competition on your hands, little lass.”

Camila lets out a burst of nervous laughter. I decide to be gracious and save her.

“If you’ll excuse us, ladies. We’re going to explore.”

They wave us off. I steer Camila away from the crowds and towards the large tuft of trees in the distance. She looks back over her shoulder only once, but she doesn’t protest as we leave the *ceilidh* behind.

We meander through a dense thicket of trees and end up in a little clearing that provides us with a brilliant view of the sky. Far from the lights of the fire, the stars shine more fiercely.

We can still hear the music, still see glimpses of the dancing fires, but it’s far enough away that it doesn’t intrude on the peace of the little clearing.

“Wow,” Camila says, her face turned up to the starlight. “This is amazing.”

She pirouettes slowly on the spot, her arms raised slightly to either side. I stand back and watch her, admiring the way her blonde hair turns dark and her green eyes catch the reflection of the stars.

She brings her face back down, and her eyes land on me.

“Isaak.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you... for bringing me here.”

I smile. “I thought you’d appreciate it.”

She nods. “It’s exactly the kind of thing I appreciate. What made you think of it?”

“Actually, Lachlan brought me here years ago. We brought beer and sat around listening to the stories. It was a strange night, but I remember it as a good one.”

Her eyes grow soft, and she moves towards me. “It must be hard being here without him.”

“It was easier than I imagined it would be,” I admit.

She reaches out and takes my hand. I’m not expecting the gesture. She’s always protective about her space around me. But there’s a hunger in her eyes tonight, probably ignited by some old highland magic.

“You introduced me as your wife a few minutes ago,” she says. But she doesn’t look angry about it.

I shrug. “It’s an easier story to tell.”

“Is that why you do it?” she asks. If I’m not mistaken, there’s a sneaky tease in her tone.

“Why else would I do it?”

“Because you like the sound of it. You like the possessiveness of the word. You like thinking you own me.”

My cock jumps to full attention immediately. Then again, it only had a little ways to go. I give her a smile. “That could be it.”

She rolls her eyes, but it’s playful. “I’m not yours, you know,” she reminds me. “Only I have the power to give myself away like that.”

She’s edging closer to me. I stay where I am and let her come. When there’s an inch of space between us, my hand finds her

hip.

“I know. But I’ll take what I want in the meantime.”

I pull her hips against mine, and her eyes spark with desire at once. Her dress is soft and ethereal and it feels like it’ll melt in my hands if I hold on too long.

I wait, because I know she’s going to kiss me. I can see the promise in her eyes and I want to give her the freedom to do it in her own time.

The anticipation builds, but it’s worth the wait when her soft lips press against mine. It’s feather-light but fervent. Her hands wrap around my neck, and I pull her into my embrace.

My erection prods her in the thigh, but she seems to welcome it. Her hand slips down between us and she starts to massage my cock as we kiss.

I pull at the buttons of her dress, and she starts undoing the buckle of my pants. The soft touches turn more impatient, more aggressive. At least, until our clothes have been discarded. Then I wrap my arms around her and push her back against the soft, mossy grass.

I see a flash of determination in her eyes, and suddenly, she puts her hands on my chest and pushes me off of her. I’m surprised by the sudden burst of aggression and wondering what she wants—until she rolls right on top of me.

When she mounts me, her breasts pressed squarely against my chest, I realize what she wants.

She hasn’t changed her mind.

She’s just claiming her power.

She kisses me as I squeeze her perfect ass. Then, all too soon, she breaks away and starts moving down my body. Her tongue flicks over my cock hungrily, and my entire body stiffens from the rush of sensations.

I’ve had plenty of blowjobs in my life.

But this... this is fucking different. And I don’t know why.

Either Camila's tongue is magic, or else she herself is. All I know is that two minutes in and I'm trying very hard not to come.

She rolls her tongue over the head of my cock, taking her time, until there's saliva sliding down my shaft. She's teasing, delicate, barely going more than an inch or two down my length.

And then suddenly, she changes gears. She slides my cock down her throat, taking all of me inside her sweet, wet mouth.

"Fuck," I groan to the stars. "*Kiska...*"

She wraps her hand around the base of my shaft and keeps going. Sucking me deep and diligently, until my eyes roll back in my head.

After a few more long sucks, she releases my cock with a little pop. It's completely drenched with her saliva, but that's exactly what she was going for as she slides up my body, giving me a full view of her breasts in the starlight.

She straddles me, lifting her hips so that she can position herself against the tip of my cock. She teases me, stroking me against her wetness with a feathery touch.

"Cami, you'd better..."

Then she sits down on me and I sink into her.

"Fuck," she moans, her eyes fluttering tremulously as I fill her.

I reach out and grabs her tits, twisting and pulling them gently as she rides me slowly, getting the feel of my cock from this angle.

I expect this to be a slow burn too, like her blowjob had been. But only a couple of minutes in, she starts riding me harder, bucking her hips against me with force.

Her eyes roll back and her hands grip my chest hard as she starts grinding her hips furiously. I watch her tits bounce, mesmerized by how different she looks right now.

So fucking wild and free.

Completely uninhibited.

It's a cool night, but I still notice little drops of perspiration form over her breasts and collar bones. I sit up to meet her with an open-mouthed kiss and palm two handfuls of her ass to urge her faster, harder, more intense. She wraps her arms around my shoulders and bucks against my cock.

"Fuck, Isaak..." she breathes, her eyes flickering open and closed as though she can't quite handle her own body at this point.

"Come on, little *kiska*," I growl into her ear. "Show me what you've got."

I slap her ass, and she gives a little scream that turns into a moan.

She can say she hates my orders all she wants—but her body gives her away. Because when I command her to fuck me as hard as she can and spank her into doing so, she obeys like she was born to do it.

She picks up the pace, jerking her body against mine so violently that I almost collapse back into the grass again. She's quickly losing it. I can see the orgasm heat throughout her body as she tries desperately to stay in control of it.

I lean in and suck one of her nipples into my mouth. She gasps once, and then again when I swipe a thumb across her clit.

That does it. She cries out as she comes, her entire body rocking with the bloom of the orgasm. It's savage and fast, and when it's over, she falls limp against me.

I put a palm into her chest and press her onto her back. Hoisting one leg over my shoulder, I find a new angle and thrust hard into her.

Her eyes go wide, and her mouth forms a perfect O as I fuck her aggressively, without allowing her a moment of rest. She's so spent from the first orgasm that the second one takes her silently.

I watch as her eyes roll back in her head. Goosebumps erupt all over her body.

Then I come with a roar, spilling everything inside her.

After I float back down to earth, I fall off of her. My chest is heaving with the exertion.

I look over at Camila. There's an expression of disbelief in her eyes. Of soft realization. Realization of what, I'm not sure—but something. Something significant.

She doesn't give it away, though. She just pushes herself up and places a soft kiss on my cheek.

I wonder if she knows how much of herself she gives to me with that kiss.

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## CAMILA

Even before I open my eyes, I can feel his weight around me. His body is tucked against mine.

I blink my eyes open, and the first thing I see is my white dress thrown over the deep blue armchair across the room. Green grass stains mar the fabric.

I even notice a small rip down the hemline. I definitely hadn't noticed it last night. But then again, I wasn't capable of noticing much last night.

There's a comforting ache running up and down my body. I feel the need to move around a little, but Isaak's arm is lying on my hip and I don't want to move it.

Instead, I stare at his hand. It's so big and masculine. So powerful. My pussy throbs erratically and I almost laugh at my own body.

After last night, I'd assumed my desires would be sated. But apparently, all I needed was a good night of sleep and we're right back where we started in that department. Isaak stirs beside me, and his hand moves up my hip. The throbbing between my thighs just gets worse.

Feeling unmoored from reality, I wiggle away as quietly as I can and sit up a little. The windows are shut tight, but one side of the curtain has been pulled back to reveal a pool of sunlight on the carpeted floor.

Walking into this castle yesterday felt like something out of a dream. But now, I can't help thinking that it's skewed with my

brain a little. Sent me tumbling down a rabbit hole I can't climb out of.

I have to remind myself of the truth: I'm not a princess living out a fantasy with a handsome prince. That's not real.

My reality is that I'm a mother. I have a little girl out there who's being raised by my sister because I made an impossible call to keep her safe rather than with me.

But what is my excuse now?

And what is my excuse for not telling Isaak about Jo?

We've slept together multiple times since I've been in his home. And last night, I initiated the whole thing. I was the one who leaned in. I was the one who kissed him. I was the one who rode him until I came.

I'd made all the decisions, and every single time, I'd chosen him. Last night, under the stars, our problems had felt small. Miniscule, in fact.

I was just a girl.

And he was just a boy.

No. Not a boy. That word doesn't suit Isaak at all. There's nothing remotely boyish about him. He's a man in every sense of the word.

And last night, he had been mine.

But that was all just a beautiful illusion. How can two people belong to one another when there are so many secrets between them?

How can I belong to Isaak when the only reason I'm in his bed at all is because he wants to stick it to his cousin?

My head feels heavy with all the reasons why this can never work between us. And at the end of it all, the only feelings that stick out clearly are the ones I have for my daughter.

She comes first. Period. Always.

"Morning."

I give a start of surprise as I turn to Isaak. "You're awake."

“I’ve been awake,” he corrects. “Watching you.”

“Oh.”

The blush hits my face instantly. He doesn’t bother pretending he doesn’t see it. He caresses my cheek. God, I wish that didn’t feel so good.

“Come here,” he says, his tone rasping into a growl.

His arms encircle me from behind and he pulls me into his body. Immediately, I feel the length of his cock between my butt cheeks.

He feels me up from behind, letting his hands roam my breasts, my curves, the heat of my center. All the while, he buries his cock between my ass and plants little kisses on my shoulder and down my arm.

There’s something different about morning sex. The way your skin feels like it’s come alive after a night of rest. The way it feels extra sensitive to every grazing touch.

I moan, and he’s not even inside me yet. The worries of a moment ago still exist. But they seem less urgent now that he’s touching me. I allow myself this one moment of reprieve. I let myself enjoy—because I know it can’t last.

The castle will dissolve into yesterday’s memory and it’ll take this tentative truce with it. We’re too different, Isaak and I. We belong to different worlds.

And maybe that’s the reason I’ve put off telling him about Jo. Because I know that if I do, it will be because I’m sure I want his world to be mine. And right now, I’m not sure. Not even close.

He teases me with his cock, rubbing his tip against my opening, pushing in just a little before pulling back out again. At one point, I back my ass into him, hoping he’ll slip inside.

But as usual, I can’t do anything unless he lets me.

As always, he’s the one in charge.

He winds me down to a quivering mess of hormones and only then does he push inside me. Slowly, with such excessive care

that I feel him wholly as he sinks deep inside me.

He puts an arm under my head so that I'm resting on his curved elbow, and he fucks me slow, priming my body for the orgasm that he's taking the time to build.

Just when my toes start to curl and my moans come faster and more desperate, he pulls out of me and turns me onto my chest.

With my head pressed to the side of my pillow, he enters me again from behind. This time, he doesn't go gentle. He knows I'm close.

So he pounds into me, squeezing my ass as his breathing gets more and more labored. We're almost in sync now, but he can control himself a lot better than I can. I've always been helpful when he owns me like this.

He waits until I come, and the moment I explode on his cock, he pulls out and flips me back over so that I'm looking up at him.

He straightens up and balances on his knees above me, his hand wrapping around his massive shaft. He pumps back and forth, while staring down at my face.

I know instinctively what he wants, and I'm surprised to realize that I want it, too. So I pull myself up and balance on my elbows, as he brings his cock to my mouth.

I suck him off a little, licking his balls and running my tongue up and down his shaft, before his body starts to convulse. I notice the tiny dot of pre-cum on his tip and I open my mouth wide and take him in just as he erupts.

I feel him slide down my throat and coat my tongue.

And when I pull back again, his cock is completely spent. I collapse back into my pillow as Isaak rolls off and sinks into the mattress beside me.

We lie there in silence, each basking in the afterglow of our own orgasms. No man has ever made me come endlessly like he has. Not that I'm about to confess that to him, ever.

He already has way more power over me than I'd like to admit.

The problem is that I suspect he already knows it. And if that's true, then I really am screwed.

"What were you thinking about?"

I turn my head to the side and meet his blue eyes. I love how they change hues depending on the time of day, on his mood. Right now, they're a soft, calm blue. Like the sky right after a storm.

"Just now?"

"No, before."

"Oh. Nothing."

"Camila."

I shiver. When Isaak says my name that way, it gives me a little thrill I can't explain.

"Tell me," he presses. "I'm listening."

I gnaw at my lower lip. "I was just... missing my sister."

That tiny nagging voice in the back of my head is trying to convince me that telling Isaak is the right thing to do. Jo has a father. Regardless of his reputation, do I have the right to keep him from her?

"And her kids," I add.

I cringe a little on the inside when I say the words that omit Jo from the equation entirely. I'm just so scared. I've kept her a secret for so long that it feels wrong to talk about her now.

"Did you get to see them much in the last six years?"

"A few times," I admit. "But that was only because Eric arranged it."

"The agent?"

"Former agent," I correct. "The agency replaced him."

"Right."

“Andrew was assigned to my case about a year and a half ago, and... he wasn't so interested in going that extra mile for me.”

“So you haven't seen your sister and her family in a year and a half?”

“Yeah. It's been torture.”

Maybe I give too much away in how I say it, but Isaak stares at me with an expression that borders on suspicious. I'm not sure how to walk this conversation back without looking like I'm trying to hide something.

“We've always been very close,” I explain hastily. “Sometimes, she's felt more like my mother than my sister.”

“I suppose I can relate. Sometimes, Bogdan can feel like my kid.”

He's joking, and I'm thankful for the tension breaker. But the distraction I need comes when he pulls the covers off his body. He gets off the bed and grabs a glass of water from his bedside table. While he drinks, I take a moment to admire him.

He looks like he's been carved from stone. His angles are fierce and strong, his torso ripples with abs, and even his arms look like they're flexed even when they're not.

And of course, there's his cock.

His massive, beautiful, capable cock that's made me come more times than I can count now. He just fucked me to within an inch of my life and somehow, he still manages to look hard.

I mean, that's got to be a talent, right? Sometimes, it's true what they say: God really does give with both hands.

“Like what you see?”

I flush with color as he calls me out for staring. “Sorry,” I mumble, turning my face into my pillow.

He chuckles under his breath. I hear him walk around the bed to my side. I very pointedly bury my head further underneath the pillow, hoping he'll just leave me to my embarrassment.

No such luck.

He snatches the pillow off my head, and I'm forced to turn up and look at him. The fact that he's still naked is incredibly distracting, but I manage to keep my eyes above his neck.

He bends and grips the side of the bed with both hands. "You can use this line," he tells me, gesturing to the phone on the bedside table next to me. "It's secure."

I sit up, not even caring that the sheets fall off my body like water.

His eyes land squarely on my breasts, and unlike me, he doesn't seem in the least bit embarrassed to be caught staring. In fact, he looks as though it's his God-given right to stare.

I'd call him out on it, but I'm too excited by the opportunity he's offering me.

"I can call my sister?"

"For as long as you want," he says. "I won't even eavesdrop."

"Where are you going?" I ask, my hand already inching towards the phone.

"To shower," he tells me. "I'll probably be in there for a while."

Before I can say another word, he leans in and catches my lips with his. It's a deeply possessive kiss, one that he finishes by biting down on my bottom lip.

It's not so hard as to draw blood, but enough to sting a little.

Though the absence that follows when he pulls away stings more.

I watch him walk into the bathroom on the other side of his gigantic room. He shuts the door with a soft bang and a few seconds later, I hear the shower turn on.

Confident that he won't be able to hear me, I call Brianna. It takes a few rings, but Brianna picks up at last. Her voice sounds blurry and muffled though.

"Hello?"

"Bree, it's me."



“Cami?” she croaks.

And that’s when I remember the time difference. I feel like a total putz, but I’m selfish enough to not want to hang up.

“Bree, I’m so sorry. You’re sleeping, aren’t you?”

“Well, I was,” she says, whispering a little. I hear movement on the other end and then the click of a door. “Okay. I’m in the living room now.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost five in the a.m.”

“Fuck, I’m an idiot.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve been waiting to hear from you. You’re okay, right?”

“I am,” I tell her hurriedly. “Everything’s fine. I just... I got excited about calling you and I forgot that Scotland is four hours ahead.”

“Um, Scotland?”

“Yeah, I’m in Scotland at the moment.”

“With... Isaak Vorobev?”

She says his name like he’s a stranger. But then, that’s exactly what he is to her. Which makes me realize that he’s no longer a stranger to me.

And that realization feels... transformative somehow, in a way I can’t quite explain.

“Yes, with Isaak.”

There’s a long pause on the other line. I want to break the silence, but my heart is pounding really hard and I don’t even know why.

“Cami... what’s going on?” she asks, and I know exactly what she means.

“I slept with him last night, Bree,” I admit, lowering my voice just to be doubly safe. “And this morning. And... neither one of those times was the first.”

“Well...” she says, leaving the word hanging on its own for an eternity. “Fuck!”

A burst of almost hysterical laughter bursts from my lips. The absurdity of my life. I can't quite get over it. I can barely begin to wrap my head around it.

“Cami, are you falling for him?”

“That... would be insane, wouldn't it?”

“Whether it is or it isn't is immaterial,” she says. “Are you falling for him?”

“I... oh Bree, I don't know.”

“You slept with him. More than once.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to sleep with him again?”

God help me.

“I do.”

“Fuck.”

“Stop saying that.”

“I don't know how else to express myself.”

Panic bubbles up in my chest, and I don't know how to tell Bree that I need her now more than ever. But I force down that need. What I actually need is to stop relying so much on her. She's already raising my daughter for me. I've asked too much of her already.

“Does he treat you well?” she says suddenly.

“What?”

“Focus, love,” Bree says, using her *mother's-in-charge* voice. “Does he treat you well? Is he kind to you? Does he make you feel all warm and gooey inside?”

I'm silent so long that Bree actually checks to make sure she hasn't lost me.

“Cami... you there?”

“I’m here.”

“Are you going to answer the question?”

“Bree, I can’t... I can’t say it out loud.”

“Well... fuuu... fudge.”

I almost laugh. “Nice save.”

“Cami, honey?”

“Yes.”

“If you mean what you’re saying... then you need to tell him about Jo.”

And there it is. The thing I need to hear, but don’t want to face. The big secret sitting between Isaak and me. The truth that I want to protect at all costs.

I don’t need Bree to say it to know what I have to do. But it helps all the same.

“You need to tell him about Jo, Cami,” Bree repeats when she gets no response from me.

I take a deep breath. “I know.”

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## ISAAK

“Bogdan.”

The line crackles for a second before it clears out. Sometimes, the connection gets a little gravelly in certain rooms in the castle.

“How’d it go?” he asks.

“It went... better than I thought.” Although I’m talking more about everything that followed Lachlan’s funeral than the funeral itself.

“You told his parents that they’d still receive his salary?”

“They refused it at first,” I tell him. “But they’re good people. Once Mr. Murphy realized I wasn’t going to budge, he accepted. They need the money.”

“I’m glad they’ll be provided for.”

“I’m starting to get the feeling that you’re gearing up to tell me something I’m not going to like,” I say.

There’s a second of silence that confirms my suspicion.

“We’ll get to that in a second,” Bogdan says. “How’s the honeymoon going?”

I frown. “It’s not a honeymoon.”

“Where’s the new bride?”

I roll my eyes. “In the library. She’s been there all morning.”

“Hm.”

“What?”

“I mean, she’s choosing to spend all her time with a bunch of stodgy books rather than you. I think you need to up your game.”

“Bogdan, stop deflecting.”

He sighs. “Why can’t we just ever have a conversation? You know, brother to brother.”

“We can do that after we talk business.”

Even as I say it, I remind myself of Father. He was never interested in any conversation that didn’t have to do with the Vorobev Bratva.

The Bratva was his life. He made sure I felt the same.

I never had another choice. My path was decided for me from the minute I left the nursery and entering the training room that Otets built especially for me.

It’s strange to feel two opposing emotions at the same time. I resent my father, but I still respect the don he was. I despise his hypocrisy, but I still hold to the values of loyalty he instilled in me.

I hate the man who made me.

And yet I love him for it.

“Fine,” Bogdan says. “We may have a tiny issue.”

“Go on.”

“I don’t think this is going to be a huge problem or anything, but... you should know that the cops are searching for Camila. There’s a search in place.”

It’s not as bad as I’m imagining, but it’s not exactly welcome news, either. Now, not only do I have Maxim to look out for; I have to worry about the cops, too.

“Interpol has been informed,” he adds with a wince.

“Interpol?” I repeat. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“The man pushing for the search is Eric Keller. I think he’s Camila’s agent.”

“Former agent,” I tell him, echoing her words.

“Hm. So why’s he pushing so hard?”

I pace down a cavernous hallway. “Because the two of them are close. He had her back through the first couple of years in the Witness Protection Program.”

“He might be more trouble than we need.”

I know what he’s implying. I also know that Camila will never forgive me if anything were to happen to Eric. “Leave him be for now. This might just blow over.”

“I doubt it, *sobrat*. The British cops have been informed as well. They’re keeping the search on the down low for the moment. But there’s talk they might take it public if they don’t get any new leads in the next few weeks.”

“They won’t take it public,” I say confidently. “It’ll become a circus. Not to mention that it’ll be like a beacon to anyone with designs on Camila.”

“We have an informant on the inside,” Bogdan points out.

“I’m starting to wonder if Maxim does, too.”

Bogdan is quiet for a moment. “You think that’s possible?”

“I’ve been thinking about the timing of certain things. Not to mention how Maxim found Camila in the first place. It stands to reason that he might have had someone on the inside too. Someone close to her.”

“Wait, is there someone you have in mind?”

I nod grimly. “Eric.”

“Fuuuck,” Bogdan breathes. “Goddammit. You might be right. That’s too convenient.”

“Their relationship is unconventional,” I say with a shrug. “But I have no proof. Nothing more than a hunch.”

“If he’s one of Maxim’s, we’ll have no choice but to take him out.”

“I know,” I reply. “But for now, Eric Keller is not going to be touched. I’ll deal with him when I have to.”

I'm about to ask Bogdan for any new intel on Maxim and his movements, when I hear a noise at my back. I turn around and see Camila standing at the threshold of my bedroom.

She's got three books in her arms, but her eyes are wide and suddenly panicked.

Fuck.

She overheard something. The question is... how much?

"Bogdan," I say, without taking my eyes off Camila. "I have to go."

"Gotcha. I'll call with another report in the night."

I hang up and turn to Camila, who seems rooted to the spot. She can only stare at me, her eyes sparking erratically, as though she's not sure whether to be disappointed or angry.

"What was that call about?" she asks. The fear's obvious on the edge of her tone.

"Just business."

"Business that involves me apparently," she accuses. "And Eric."

God. Fucking. Dammit.

"There was more to the conversation than what you just heard," I say, taking a step towards her.

She flinches out of her frozen state and drops her books down on the closest surface she can find. When I move closer to her, she springs away.

"Really? Because it sounded like you were ready to call a hit on Eric," she says.

I curse my own carelessness. I should have had this conversation with Bogdan in one of the private studies with the door locked. "That wasn't it."

"Why is Eric such a threat to you?" she asks.

Her eyebrows knot together just a little as she puts the pieces together. It only takes her a couple of seconds. She's too smart for her own good. "He's searching for me, isn't he?"



I close my eyes in a grimace and nod. “Yes.”

“Is he going to find me?”

“He’s certainly got a lot of people involved.”

“What do you mean?”

“Interpol and the British police.”

Her eyes go wide. “They’re all looking for me?”

“It would appear so.”

“And you think killing Eric would remove the threat of anyone finding me?” she asks incredulously.

“No, of course not. Bogdan and I were discussing another possibility entirely.”

“Which is?”

I want to tell her my suspicions. But she’d told me only yesterday how much comfort her relationship with Eric gave her during her years of exile. Am I really going to blow up her trust in the man because of an unfounded suspicion that’s yet to be proved?

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You suspect Eric is going to make things difficult for you, and your plan is to... kill him off?”

She sounds completely disgusted, but most of it is to cover up the devastation.

“Camila—”

“Is that how things work in the Bratva? You kill off people at will simply because they’re inconvenient to have around?”

“It’s a complicated world, Camila.”

“And you’re full of bullshit. What gives you the right to play God?”

“No one gave me a goddamn thing,” I snap. “I’ve taken the right.”

Her eyes turn cold. I feel the truce that we’ve spent days building come crumbling down around us. Of course, this was

inevitable. We never had a solid foundation.

All we have are secrets upon secrets.

Camila shakes her head. Her hands are trembling. The little daydream we've been living in is fading away and in its place is cold, hard reality.

"Maxim is probably looking for me, too, isn't he?"

My hands clench into fists. "Yes."

"It must be awfully hard for you to keep me hidden away, out of everyone's reach."

I narrow my eyes. "Camila..."

"What's your plan exactly?" she asks, her tone challenging.

She's asking for a fight now, and given the current frame of mind I'm in, I'm ready to give her one. I move forward, but this time, she holds her ground.

"Why would I tell you about my plan?"

"Because I'm at the center of it," she says. "You abducted me because you wanted information on Maxim. But he gave me none. I have nothing of significance to tell you. So why are you keeping me around?"

"To make sure he can't get to you."

"What does it matter if he does?" she insists. "Why do you care?"

I don't know what she expects me to say here. Make some bold declaration of love for her? Tell her how important she is to me? Tell her that I can't live without her?

I'm not that man.

And even if I could make myself form those words, they wouldn't be true.

I *can* live without her. I was born out of my father's ambition and his ruthless cruelty. I was born to lead the Bratva, and that is what I'll do—whether Camila is by my side or not.

But I'm also starting to realize that letting her go is going to be far, far harder than it should be.

“Isaak!” she says, her voice rising fast. “Answer the fucking question. Why are you keeping me here? What are your plans for me?”

“My plans are my business.”

She steps in front of me as though she’s worried I’m going to leave the room. “Is all this worth it?” she asks, her expression turning from bitter to imploring. “What purpose does it all serve?”

“Purpose?” I repeat bitingly. “This is my life.”

“So change it,” she says, as though it’s the simplest choice in the world. “You can walk away from it all. You don’t have to be the Bratva don. You don’t have to live your life based on revenge.”

I shake my head. “You don’t know what you’re asking. You think I should just leave Maxim to his own devices? Call off the manhunt and let him do whatever the fuck he wants without consequence?”

“Yes,” she says fervently. “Yes, that’s exactly what I think you should do.”

She reaches out and takes my hand in both of hers. Her eyes are bright and desperate.

“You don’t have to be like your father, Isaak. I know being the ruthless, unforgiving don is what you were trained to be. But... you’re your own man now. You can choose to be different.”

She’s asking me to be someone else. Someone different. She wants me to transform into one of the heroes in the books she’s always reading.

And what do I expect? She’s not from my world. She doesn’t understand what it means to be Bratva. How can she? What we want is lightyears apart.

She wants peace and quiet. She wants the predictability of the mundane. She wants boring and stable. She wants to read books and hold down a good job and reunite with her sister.

Me? I want the blood of my enemies. Nothing less will suffice.

“And what if I’m not different?” I ask impassively.

“You’re not your father.”

“That’s just it,” I growl. “I am my father. He wasn’t loving or kind or understanding. He wasn’t compassionate or patient. But he taught me to be strong. To be in control.”

“You know the thing about control?” Camila says, her tone hardening. “You never know if the people in your life are there because they want to be, or because they’re forced to be.”

“This is not a fairytale, little girl,” I snarl. “It’s not a fucking book. Real life is an entirely different beast. And I don’t give a fuck about what other people want. Their desires, their opinions, their thoughts mean shit to me.”

“Including mine?”

“Including yours,” I snap immediately, without leaving even a second of silence between the question and the answer.

She rears back as though I’ve struck her. Her eyes pool with hurt as she tries to grapple with who I am. With what she means to me. Or, more precisely, what she doesn’t mean.

“You’re never going to let me go, are you?”

“So you can go back to him?” I scoff. “No, I’m not.”

Her eyes cloud over. “You really think that’s what I’m going to do if I get my freedom back? You think I’m going to scamper straight back to Maxim?”

“Well, you were just advocating for me to abandon my plans where’s concerned,” I point out. “It’s a loyal gesture. I might even go so far as to say it’s a loving gesture.”

Anger and hurt burn in her eyes and for the first time, I see a spark of hate ignite her features. She looks like some lost and broken siren who’s been pushed to the brink.

“You bastard,” she seethes. I’m impressed that her voice doesn’t shake. Not even a little bit. “After everything... after everything... you still think I’m manipulating you into letting me run back to Maxim?”

“Everything?” I laugh cruelly, exclusively to twist the knife a little harder. “It was just a few meaningless fucks, Camila.”

Her jaw drops, her cheeks flush, her bottom lip trembles. The gesture is so innocent, so honest, that it takes me off guard.

“To you, maybe,” she says finally, without offering anything more.

She turns and walks towards the antique table where she set her books down. She picks them up, one by one, with slow, jerky movements.

I want to stop her. Call out to her. Tell her that I’m not used to backing down or giving in. I’m used to the fight. It’s the whole reason I can’t stop my pursuit of Maxim. It’s the reason I can’t rest until I know that my cousin is no longer a threat.

I am more my father’s son than I ever cared to admit before.

But now, I’m faced with the glaring truth. I’ve become the man I despised, because that’s what it takes to run a successful Bratva.

It’s the reason my uncle failed. He was a kinder man, possibly even the better man. But he was weak, and weakness cannot be allowed to exist in this life. It has to be extinguished early on, just like Yakov Vorobev was.

Once she’s got all her books gathered in her arms, she turns to glance at me over her shoulder. She’s about to say something, but she changes her mind at the last second.

Her green eyes are flushed with disappointment. Hopelessness has replaced the excitement that had flourished in the days past.

It’s all gone.

Maybe that’s for the best.

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## CAMILA

The flight back to London is nothing like the one we took getting to Scotland.

For one, Isaak and I are not speaking. He sits on the right side of the private jet, nursing a glass of whiskey and a broody expression, while I opt for as far away from him as I can get.

The atmosphere is tense, prickly with the heat of a fight that never really reached its full potential. Every few seconds, I think of another comeback I could have thrown at him, and curse my own inability to land a punch when the opportunity is right in front of me.

The only thing that hasn't changed about the flight is the stewardess, the leggy blonde with eyes for Isaak. She orbits his space as though she can't keep away.

And this time, she doesn't have to pretend to be interested in me at all, because it's clear that Isaak's not going to call her out on it.

I grit my teeth as Marissa walks towards me. I'm parched. I need a glass of water and a blanket, but she's not overly concerned with my comfort.

Instead, she veers predictably towards Isaak's seat and leans in unnecessarily. Her outfit hasn't changed, but there is an extra button she's neglected to fasten.

I can't help but notice that she's taken a little more care with her appearance this time around, too. Her hair seems more voluminous, and there's definitely more makeup on her face.

I'm annoyed that she's gone the extra mile, but I'm even more annoyed that she's pulled it off. The makeup is subtle, her body is droolworthy, and I feel like a troll in comparison.

"Can I get you anything at all, sir?" she asks Isaak.

"Another glass of whiskey," he says without looking at her. I'm satisfied for the span of a breath that he isn't giving her the time of day.

Then that changes.

He looks over and suddenly, the brood vanishes. "Have you done something different with your hair?" he asks.

I roll my eyes. I don't even care if he notices. There's no way that Isaak gives a shit about her hair.

"Oh, ya know, just ran a comb through it," she says in a giggly voice that makes me want to mimic her mockingly.

*"Ran a comb through it,"* my ass. She probably woke up extra early to put curlers in. No doubt there's a bunch of hairspray in there as well.

"This is more or less how I wake up," she adds.

That one nearly makes me gag. Which is probably why I can't stop myself.

"Did you wake up with makeup on your face, too?" I inquire sweetly.

Marissa looks at me with wide, shocked eyes. Her mouth hangs open for a second. I feel a tiny little kernel of guilt for putting her on the spot.

He shoots me a glare, but I pretend not to notice. I'm not sure what's wrong with me. I don't tear down other women. That's not who I am.

But it's what Isaak is turning me into.

"I'll... I'll go get you that whiskey, sir," she stammers. She whisks into the stewardess's area and shuts the door behind her.



“Is there a reason you’re being a bitch to the stewardess?”  
Isaak asks calmly, glancing at me from across the aisle. “Or is all that hostility meant to be directed at me?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“You’re doing it for me.”

I hate that he has this power. He always makes me feel like I’m close to hysteria, about to fly off the handle at any moment.

I know why he does it. It puts him in a position of control, whereas I’m left scrambling after my feelings, which almost always get away from me.

Who am I kidding? They *always* get away from me. For six years, Isaak Vorobev has had his hands on the reins of my heart.

“All that fawning doesn’t bother you?” I snap. “She’s practically tripping over herself to serve your every passing need.”

“No,” he answers coolly. “Does it bother you?”

“Not in the slightest,” I say, trying and failing to mimic his uncaring tone. “She can fawn all she likes and you can enjoy it all you want. It makes no difference to me. I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s clearly just angling to fuck the handsome billionaire. I didn’t think you cared for being manipulated or used.”

He snorts. “No, but I do believe in charity.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I know what I do to people. To women, specifically. I don’t give a flying fuck about anything in this world but my Bratva. But fifteen minutes of my attention can change a woman’s life. You should know that better than anybody.”

I don't know why I bother. There's no winning with him. Because he knows exactly how to cut me. His words slice through me like the edge of a knife and my fingers start trembling.

"You're right about one thing," I say softly. "I should have known better."

I bite down on my tongue and my entire body tenses. When that fails to keep the tears at bay, I twist my body to the side so that my back is to him and I close my eyes. He doesn't say a word, but I can feel him staring at me. I pretend to sleep, but we both know I'm not.

"Pardon me, ma'am?"

I wipe away my tears quickly and turn to find Marissa standing over me with a silver tray bearing two bottles of water. I'm not sure if she's overcompensating or if she's just trying to needle me.

Either way, it does nothing to lessen my dark mood.

"You can just set it down wherever," I grumble. Then I add a begrudging, "thanks."

"Of course," she answers with excessive politeness.

She's definitely playing this smart, I'll give her that. She's amping up the manners so that she comes off as the gracious, put-upon server and I come across as the demanding, rude bitch.

Which at this moment, I suppose I am.

Disappointment floods through me. This is not me. None of it is. But despite the abundance of self-awareness that I've always been so high and mighty about, I still can't seem to shake myself out of it long enough to stop the nasty words from escaping my lips.

Because every time I resolve to do just that, I glance to the side and catch sight of Isaak. And all I want to do is scream.

"Can I get you anything else?" Marissa asks, lingering.

"No, I'm fine."

“A book, perhaps?”

I frown, wondering if that’s a crack I’m not getting. “Are there books on board?” I ask.

“A few in the back,” she says, with a nod. “I’d be happy to show you our selection.”

“No, I’m fine.”

She nods and heads towards the cockpit.

“You never turn the opportunity to rifle through books,” Isaak points out when she’s gone.

“Not interested in reading right now.”

“Right, you’re just interested in giving the poor stewardess a hard time.”

That dries up my tears pretty fast. My eyes snap to his angrily. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was upsetting you by treating your precious Marissa badly.”

He smiles so calmly that I want to fling my water in his face. “Not upset,” he clarifies. “Just... amused.”

I flip him the bird, but he just laughs. There’s a tiny dab of anger weighing his laugh down, but I can tell he’s actually getting some sort of perverse amusement out of my misery.

“I just happen to think she’s incompetent,” I say, doubling down.

“I wouldn’t have employed her if that were true.”

I roll my eyes. “Please.”

“What?”

“Just saying, it’s pretty convenient that the one ‘competent’ stewardess you ended up hiring also happens to be a knockout.”

“Is she?”

“Don’t patronize me.”

He chuckles. “She was competent, experienced, and attractive,” he acknowledges. “It was a no-brainer.”

“She’s a no-brainer.”

“She’s got a degree from Brown. Similar to yours, actually. Classics.”

My fingers have started shaking again. And this time, it has nothing to do with Isaak. It’s got nothing to do with Marissa, either, who’s obviously beautiful and brainy and doesn’t deserve to be treated the way I’ve treated her for the past hour.

I’m mad at myself. Furious, in fact. Because I’ve fallen for the wrong man. I’ve always prided myself on being a smart girl, and I’ve gone and done the stupidest thing. Stupider even than sleeping with a stranger in the bathroom of a fancy restaurant. All my stupid mistakes seem to revolve around Isaak.

I can’t blame him for that. It’s on me.

“Excuse me,” I say, choking on the words as I get up.

I can feel him watching me, but I keep walking to the back of the plane where there’s a private nook set up.

All I need right now is to be alone.

I pull the screen door shut behind and try to breathe through the panic that’s taking over. I have to think of Jo. That calms me.

I’m just starting to regain control of my heart and breath when, without warning, the screen door opens and Isaak steps inside. I wheel on him furiously, wiping away the tears even though I know he’s already seen them.

“I want to be alone,” I insist.

“You’re upset.”

“Please,” I whisper, begging for probably the first time since I’ve known him. “Please... just give me some space.”

“You don’t need space.”

“And you know what I need, do you?” I demand.

“I do,” he replies confidently. “You need to say whatever it is you’re not saying to me.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Don’t play me for a fool, *kiska*. I know you—”

“Don’t! Stop saying that. You don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me.”

“Why are you so mad about Marissa?”

He’s got me trapped, both literally and metaphorically, and it’s making me even madder. I try to shove him back out of my space, but of course that only gives him permission to grab a hold of me.

His hands are powerful when they clamp down around my wrists. Before I can resist, I find him pushing me down onto the ledge. I’m at eye level with his crotch, so I can see the outline of his erection just underneath.

“Come on, Camila,” Isaak urges. “Tell me everything.”

I put my hands on his hips, intending to push him away. But something happens the moment I touch him: I don’t want to let go.

My eyes move from his eyes to his crotch and then back again. My heart is pounding, my pussy throbs, and my nipples are as hard as I know his cock is right now.

“You’re jealous, right?” he muses. “You can’t stand the thought that I might have fucked her in the past. Or worse, that I might fuck her in the future.”

“You’re free to fuck whoever it is you want,” I snap at him, even though that’s the farthest thing from the truth and the fading fury in my voice proves it.

Isaak shakes his head. “Oh, I don’t think so. I know what you want, Camila. It’s in your eyes. You’re outed now, so you might as well take what you want.”

I *should* want to prove him wrong. I *should* fight to prove him wrong.

But somehow, I do the exact opposite.

I give in. To him and to my baser desires. I let my attraction take the front seat and before I know it, I’m ripping his belt open and off. The moment I can, I unzip and pull his pants

down. His cock jumps free and I don't allow a moment to pass before I part my lips and take him in my mouth.

Isaak grips the top railing of the plane. He gives me control for only a minute. Maybe even two. Then his instincts kick in and he grabs the reins. He takes control of my head and pins me in place as he starts fucking my mouth.

The heat of his cock sliding in and out of my throat makes me so wet that I reach down between my legs and start to finger myself.

He gives a low groan as he watches me, his eyes boring into my face, taking in every little jerk and gesture. He's straining against the urge to come.

But I want him to. I desperately want to taste him.

"See, Cami?" he says to me. "This is what you really want. You want me. You're just too fucking proud to admit that."

I find it strange that he would say that to me at this moment of all moments, when his cock is buried at the back of my throat. Isn't it obvious that I'm not too proud for anything?

I have managed to give away everything I thought made me who I am. I have sacrificed it all—and for what? A cruel son of a bitch who might just be using me as a tool in his revenge plot.

He pulls out suddenly and yanks me back up to my feet. He grips my ass tight and hoists me up, forcing my legs around his waist.

I gasp as he shoves my panties aside, pushes his cock inside me, and fucks me. I try to cling on to something solid, but the only remotely solid thing in the vicinity is him.

I come so fast and without a moment of warning. And as I do, I feel like my body is giving up on me a little bit at a time. I shiver and tremble and writhe, but he doesn't stop fucking me until he's erupted, too.

When he's spent himself inside me, he sets me down unceremoniously on the window seat and zips himself up again.

It's over as soon as it started, and clearly, he's not looking to stick around.

Fine with me.

Whatever we have, it's pretty clear that it's turning toxic. I'm not sure if all the secrets between us are poisoning the well or if it was poisoned from the very beginning.

All I know is that I can't afford to sulk around his house, waiting for him to make a decision about my life. I need to find a way out of here—before I do any more damage to my heart.

It takes Isaak only a few seconds to get himself in order again. When he leaves the alcove, he doesn't so much as glance at me. I know it's a deliberate choice. He's sending a message: *I'm dispensable*. Just another fuck.

I'm not sure what I look like right now, and I'm not sure I want to find out. My clothes are disheveled, my skin feels dry and sallow, and my hair hangs in knotted tufts around my face.

It's going to take me ages to look human again. Which I feel is appropriate.

I've been hurt. I've been broken. And I shouldn't be able to walk away from that so easily. I'm going to wear these scars like a badge of honor.

Because it's proof that I made mistakes.

But I survived. I endured. Now, I'm determined to live to tell the tale.

Isaak Vorobev will not get the best of me.

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## ISAAK

“How many times?”

“Nine,” Bogdan replies.

“Nine?” I repeat. “Nine fucking times?”

Bogdan and Vlad exchange a glance. Neither one of them were sure how I'd react. But they didn't expect anger. That's clear enough from their faces.

“Isn't this a good thing?” Bogdan ventures. “I mean, Maxim trying to get in contact means that he's backed into a corner.”

“Or he has a plan,” I retort. “The motherfucker's up to something. I know it.”

“We're not going to find out unless we accept one of his calls,” Vlad points out.

“I have nothing to say to him,” I growl. “He destroyed any hope of a peaceful resolution when he attacked me at what was supposed to be a gentlemen's meeting.”

“I get that,” Bogdan replies. “But shouldn't we know why he's trying to get in contact.”

“There is one more thing,” Vlad adds, pulling out a crisp white envelope.

“What's this?”

“A letter, addressed to you,” Vlad explains, handing it to me. “Bogdan recognized the handwriting as Maxim's.”

I stare at the letter. My name is printed on the surface in Maxim's blunt script. It's still sealed.

I rip it open and pull out the letter sitting inside.

*Cousin,*

*We've had our differences, you and I. I've done a lot of thinking since we last saw each other. And I've decided that the Bratva, this feud, even revenge—it all means less to me than Camila does.*

*I want her back. I love her. And whether or not you believe that is immaterial to me. I hope she will believe it. Because we have history together. We built a life together. We were planning on building a future together. Yes, when it started, it was all about you. But the more I got to know Camila, I realized that she was worth more to me than my need for revenge.*

*I am willing to step back, give up my claim to the Vorobev Bratva, and disappear altogether. You can have the Bratva; you can have the power you want. I just want her.*

*I know you, cousin. You're a proud man. And you've never forced a woman into anything against her will. I don't believe you would force Camila to stay with you if I was the one she really wanted.*

*So do this: ask her. Give her the choice and allow her to make the decision on her own. She's just a device to you, but to me, she is my future. Give her back to me, cousin, and you'll never have to see my face ever again. You can keep the keys to the kingdom. I will be content with her.*

*Maxim*

It's hard to get a read on emotion off a letter. There's something sterile about it. You can hide behind written words because it doesn't allow the reader access to your expressions, your mannerisms, the little telltale gestures that reveal sincerity or deceptions.

Unfortunately for him, I don't give a fuck.

My mind is made up where Maxim is concerned. If he thinks this is a genuine attempt at parlaying my sympathies into sparing his life, he's wrong. And if he thinks this shameless manipulation will convince me to let Camila go, he's extremely fucking wrong.

She's mine.

"Well?" Bogdan asks, eyeing the letter curiously. "What does he say?"

"He wants Camila back."

"We already knew that," Vlad grumbles.

I shake my head. "This is different. He's claiming he'll give up his claim to the Bratva and disappear if I just give Camila back to him."

Both Vlad and Bogdan look dumbfounded by that. "Seriously?" Bogdan blurts.

I glare at my younger brother. "That depends. Do you think this is a serious letter?" I ask rhetorically, waving it in his face. "This is a plot in the making. He's trying to orchestrate a meeting so that he can ambush us."

"After what happened last time, he's going to know we'll show up in full force," Bogdan points out.

"That's just it. He will, too."

"Why would he want to come at you this way?" Bogdan asks. "He's obviously at a disadvantage. We have the stronger numbers and the stronger fighters."

"I agree," Vlad says with a nod. "It doesn't feel like a fully formed plan. It doesn't sound like a smart one, either."

"Maybe it has nothing to do with a fight," I say, glancing down at the letter.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe this is a test. Maybe he's expecting me to refuse. If I refuse to give him Camila even after dangling this carrot in front of me, that will only confirm that..."

I break off, unable to say the words. But I don't have to, because Bogdan says it for me.

"It'll confirm that your feelings for Camila are sincere, too. That she means more to you than you want him to believe."

I raise my eyes to my brother's. "He's going to know that the best way to get to me is to get to her."

The three of us stand around in a loose semi-circle. I've never felt Lachlan's absence more than I do right now. He always stood to my left. Bogdan flanked my right and Vlad stood opposite me. We'd never consciously agreed to that placement. It just happened naturally. And now, without the Scotsman here, things feel jagged and incomplete.

"What are you going to do?" Bogdan asks. "We can't let his attempts at contact go unanswered."

"Last I checked, I'm the don. I can do whatever the fuck I want."

Bogdan nods deferentially. "You're right, *sobrat*."

I turn to leave. I need some time to think. Maxim's letter is still clutched in my hand. I'm planning on reading it a couple more times. Maybe I can read the hidden message between the lines. Suss out something else about what that snake might be thinking.

But the moment I open the door, Camila is there.

She's pale-faced and her eyes are wide with shock. She looks up at me but makes no apology for sulking outside my door. It's clear that she's been standing here for a while.

It's also clear that she's heard a good portion of our conversation. Which means she knows that Maxim is looking for her. She probably even knows that he wants her back.

"Were you going to tell me?" she asks, confirming it.

I don't hesitate or shy from the truth. "No."

She flinches. "What exactly did he say?"

Instead of bothering with an answer, I push past her roughly and head towards the stairs.

She twists around and follows me. “Isaak, you can’t just walk away from this. It directly involves me. I deserve to know.”

We’re on the staircase when I turn abruptly on my heel, forcing her to standstill. She’s two steps higher than me, which puts us at eye level with one another. I put my arms out across the banister so that she won’t be able to get past me even if she tries.

“You deserve only what I say you deserve,” I growl. “And I say you’re not going anywhere.”

“Isaak,” she says, her eyes bright with emotion. “Please... you can’t do this.”

“It’s already done.”

I turn away and continue descending the stairs. She follows me right through the house and out into the garden.

“Go back inside, Camila.”

“No,” she says stubbornly. “Not until you tell me what Maxim said, what he wants... I want to know.”

“Why?”

Her eyes chip like ice. “Because I deserve the choice.”

“You are my wife,” I remind her.

“You always say that word like it’s a weapon,” she chokes out. “You act like marriage is a pair of handcuffs that you’ve latched on me. I told you once before: no one can take me. I don’t belong to any man.”

“Do you think—”

“I’m not done,” she cuts in, eyes blazing. “Yes, we’ve slept together. And yes, I’ve even enjoyed it. But that doesn’t mean you own me. And it won’t until I decide I’m giving myself to you. Wholly and completely.”

“Haven’t you already?” I toss uncaringly at her.

She should be used to my aggressive jabs by now, but she flinches back, her expression caving in on itself for a moment.

“You keep forgetting something, *kiska*: I know you. Better than fucking Maxim does.”

She opens her mouth to say something else, but then her eyes flit over my shoulder. I glance around and realize that my mother is standing right there.

Watching the heated exchange.

How fucking wonderful.

“Go back to your room, Mama,” I tell her harshly.

“Stop it!” Camila yells before Mama can say a word. “Stop ordering her around like she’s your employee! Stop controlling me as though I’m your property! What gives you the right to decide what’s best for everyone?”

“I am the fucking don,” I growl, my voice rising for the first time.

She takes a step forward. “You’re not my don.”

“Wanna bet?” I ask cruelly.

Then I hoist her over my shoulder like a ragdoll.

I hear her panicked gasp before she catches her breath. “No! Isaak. Isaak! Put me the hell down! No.”

“I am sick of being questioned. I’ve put up with it long enough. You are in my house and you will do as I say.”

She starts beating her hands against my back, but I ignore it. She starts kicking her legs around wildly, but my grip on her is strong. She isn’t going anywhere until I decide to put her down.

“Son...”

I glance towards my mother, but my expression is a warning. She shuts her mouth immediately.

I stride back into the house and up to Camila’s room. Edith is in there cleaning when I walk in. Camila is still struggling hard, but her words have long since stopped making sense.

Edith looks positively terrified to see us both there in this state. She straightens up like a meerkat and looks at me with

wide, shocked eyes.

“Leave us,” I tell her firmly.

That’s all the encouragement she needs. She snaps the door closed behind her and I move into the adjoining bathroom.

It’s clear that Edith has just finished cleaning in here because everything gleams. I dump Camila in her spotless white marble tub and turn on the water.

I make sure that it’s ice cold as it splashes down on her.

“Isaak!” she shrieks. “You bastard!”

She struggles to get out of the tub, but I press one palm into her hip so she has no choice but to thrash around in the cold water. After a minute, she realizes that fighting only makes things worse.

So she stops. Her legs and arms go limp and she stares at me with her big green eyes.

The moment she stops fighting, I turn the knob. Hot water replaces the cold. She shudders as the water washes over her, and I can see the relief on her face.

I straighten up slowly, and look down at her. She holds her position in the tub, watching me warily.

I haven’t completely quelled the dissent in her eyes. It’s still there, beneath the quiet. And that deserves respect. She’s not the type of woman who can be broken in. To be honest, I’m not sure I’d respect her if she were.

Still, some things need to be said.

“You are not Bratva,” I intone. “You don’t understand our ways.”

Her jaw clenches, but I don’t know if it’s anger I’m seeing, or realization. Then the expression in her eyes seem to slip further away, and for a moment, I know my words have pushed her to thoughts of something else.

Or *someone* else.

“I will not be disobeyed. I call the shots here. That’s how it’s always been and that’s how it’ll always be. When I decide you should know things, I’ll tell you. When I decide you can do things, I’ll let you do them. Until then, stay in your room and stay out of my way.”

I’m almost out the door when she stops me with a soft question. “Is that what you expect from your wife?”

I pause without turning around. “As you keep reminding me, you’re not really my wife.”

“Then what am I?” she asks. “Am I your prisoner? Your plaything? Your fuck toy?”

“You can take your pick.”

She winces but doesn’t shy away from the conversation. “I know you want me to believe that,” she whispers. “I know you say deliberately hurtful things to push me away, and I think I’m starting to understand why.”

“Enlighten me,” I drawl.

“You care about me. More than you’re willing to admit. And somehow, you think that that makes you weak. That it makes you vulnerable. So you overcompensate by turning into a scary monster. Well, you know what, Isaak? You *are* a monster. But I’m not scared of you. So you can threaten me and humiliate me. You can throw me over your shoulder again and punish me in front of your entire household. But I’ll never stop questioning you. I’ll never stop fighting you. And I’ll never stop calling you out when I think you’re wrong. You married me. That was your mistake.”

It’s a fucking impressive speech, and it has me reeling for a second. Not that I let any of it show. Because I inherited my poker face from my father and he broke me down until I built myself up in his image.

I pivot slowly in place to face her. My face is impassive. She chews at her bottom lip.

“I don’t make mistakes, Camila,” I tell her.



She sits a little straighter in the tub, pulls her legs up, and wraps her arms around them. Her hair and clothes are completely drenched and translucent.

She still manages to look like a fucking mermaid. Her green eyes bore into mine without blinking or backing down.

And I have to wonder: where has all this confidence come from?

I've seen glimmers of it before. When we've fought. When we've fucked. But nothing as bold and as unabashed as this.

"There's a first time for everything," she tells me.

And almost impossibly, I find myself hoping that I've made the right mistake.

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## CAMILA

I stay in the tub.

Partly because the hot water feels so luxuriously comforting after that ice cold punishment Isaak had unleashed on me. And partly because I can't bring myself to move.

So I stay here. Caught in between two forces I can't explain, can't resist, can't decide between.

I'm still wearing my clothes. The fabric clings to my body in some places and floats around freely in others. I watch the patterns they make and try not to think.

I look up only when I hear a knock on the door. It's definitely not Isaak. He's not capable of knocking before he enters a room. It's not Edith, either. The knock was too self-assured, too confident to belong to her.

"Can I come in?"

*Bogdan?*

I frown, but I'm incapable of feeling self-conscious right now. Then again, I'm incapable of feeling much of anything.

"You can come in," I say, hating how small my voice sounds.

He steps into my bathroom and eyes me with a sympathetic expression. "Ah."

"What are you doing here?"

"My mother told me what happened in the garden," he says. "She wanted me to come up here and break up the fight."

“Would you have done?” I ask curiously. “If Isaak had still been in here raging at me?”

“Depends,” he answers vaguely.

I roll my eyes. “Sorry I asked.”

Bogdan sighs and grabs the ornate chair that rests on the side of the bathroom. It’s meant to be purely decorative, but he ignores that, dumps off the carefully rolled towels that were resting on it, and sits down.

“I know he must seem pretty harsh sometimes.”

“Harsh?” I repeat incredulously. “He’s borderline psychopathic.”

“Trust me—with the father we had, it’s a wonder he’s not full-on mental. He considers himself a lot like our dad, and in some ways, he is. But his true nature is very different.”

“Sounds like some cop-out excuse. But fine, I’ll bite: what’s his true nature?”

“He’s fiercely protective,” Bogdan says simply.

“I think you mean ‘insanely controlling.’”

Bogdan laughs. “Of course he’s controlling. He’s a don, and he has been for years now. Even before he had the title, he had the responsibility.”

“He’s the same with you, isn’t he?”

“He’s the same with everyone. He fights only because he’s trying to do what’s best for the Bratva.”

I sigh and splash my hand down in the lukewarm water. “He doesn’t always know better.”

“That’s what I used to think, too,” Bogdan says with a commiserating nod. “See, of all the people here, I’m probably the one who can relate to you the most.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because I’m his brother. And I was naïve enough to think that our relationship as brothers would trump everything else.”

But then he became don, and I realized that when it came to certain decisions, he was my don first, my brother second.”

I sigh with frustration. “Okay, fine. But he’s not my don, Bogdan.”

“Even worse—he’s your husband.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Legally, maybe,” I concede. “But in my eyes, that wasn’t a real marriage.”

“Doesn’t make it any less binding.”

“What’s your point?” I ask with irritation. “Just accept that my life is tied to his and bow down to him? Obey him like the rest of you do?”

“Fuck no. That’s what you got from what I was saying?”

I do a double-take. “Um...”

He grins mischievously. “Camila, you’re the only one in his entire life who’s ever fought back. He’s not used to it. And until he gets used to it, you two will clash. Personally, I think it’s good for him.” He pauses to think and then adds, “But just to be clear, if you ever tell him I said so, I’m going to deny it. Confidently and vehemently and completely shamelessly.”

I crack a smile. The numbness that had engulfed me only a few minutes ago seems to fade slowly. I’m very aware that I’m still sitting fully clothed in a bathtub full of water like a lunatic. But I don’t care anymore.

“Was it really so bad with your father?” I ask.

I know it was. But I’m just being nosy, angling for information that I’m not sure Isaak will ever give me. There are no stakes with Bogdan, though, so naturally, he’s easier to talk to.

“I had an easy time of it,” Bogdan explains. “But only because Isaak stood in front of me like a human shield most of the time. When I say ‘human shield,’ I’m not exaggerating by the way. I mean he was literally a human shield.”

I frown. “Do I want to know this story?”

“There are many. But I’ll tell you one. I can’t remember what I was meant to be learning. But I do remember that I failed.

Over and over again. Papa's go-to means of punishment was to leave a cut on the skin. Deep enough that it would leave a scar, but not so deep that you'd need stitches or anything like that."

I wince at the casual way Bogdan conveys this story. Almost like he's speaking of an everyday family moment instead of disgusting, abusive behavior.

"I knew I was going to get punished and I was scared. But I'd watched Isaak go through this enough times. I wanted to take my punishment as bravely as he did. So I stood there, bottom lip trembling, waiting for my cut. Papa drew his knife and came towards me. But just before he cut me, Isaak interrupted. He pushed Papa away, hard. I just stood there in shock and stared."

Bogdan's eyes are hazy as he remembers.

"No one ever touched Papa. Especially not the way Isaak had. Aggressively, angrily. I think Papa was equally shocked. Isaak got right in front of me and told Papa that he wasn't going to let him touch me. I was sure that Isaak would get his ass whipped because of that. But instead, Papa gave him a choice. Either he stepped aside and let me take my punishment. Or Isaak would take it for me."

My eyes go wide. I know immediately what Isaak chose.

"He took it."

Bogdan nods. "He did... and all the ones that followed. Half those scars on his arm belong to me."

"Oh God..."

Bogdan gives me a shrug. "I know that story sounds horrific to you."

"Only because it is."

He smiles. "Did I mention that I was six at the time? Isaak was ten."

"Your father sounds like the devil incarnate. Why did he even have children?"

“He got married because he needed a wife to give him children. And he needed children to carry on his legacy. I don’t think he ever looked at Isaak and me and saw ‘sons.’ He saw us as vehicles to drive forward his name.”

“And doesn’t that hurt you?”

“I can only speak for myself,” Bogdan says. “And yeah, it hurt when I was younger. Before I understood this life. Before I accepted it. But in the end, I didn’t miss out on much. Sure, Papa wasn’t much of a father. But Isaak more than made up for it.”

I shiver a little despite the fact that the water is still warm. The relationship Bogdan is describing reminds me so much of Bree and me.

I’d clung to her the same way that Bogdan had clung to Isaak. I have no doubt that Bree would do anything for me, and I believe the same of Isaak and Bogdan.

It’s the one thing I can fully and completely relate to.

“You have every right to be pissed, Camila,” Bogdan says. “But you’re seeing him wrong. You think he’s controlling because he gets off on the power trip. He’s controlling because he’s trying to protect the people closest to him.”

“And you’re implying that I’m one of those people?”

“He’s never been so singularly interested in keeping one woman around for this length of time,” Bogdan tells me. “Honestly, he’s purposefully shied away from anything meaningful with a woman since he was twelve.”

“Twelve?”

“That’s when he, uh... became sexually active.”

I shudder. “Jesus.”

Bogdan laughs at my reaction. “It’s the Bratva. You mature fast.”

I lean back against the tub, realizing that Isaak has probably with a legion of women. I don’t know how I feel about being on his list.

But I am surprised to realize that I don't regret it.

We sit in silence for a while. Bogdan doesn't excuse himself, and I find that I actually enjoy his company. It's nice to have a conversation that's not solely combative.

"Can I ask you a question?" I ask after soaking in my thoughts for a few minutes.

"Of course."

"Why are you even bothering with this?"

"With what?"

"Sitting here and talking to me," I explain. "Checking up on me. Giving a shit."

He smiles. "Because my brother won't do it, even if he wants to."

I frown, unsure how to process that. So I decide to put it aside for later. After this ordeal is over—if it ever ends, that is—I'm going to need a shit load of therapy.

"I heard part of your conversation earlier," I tell him. "I heard that Maxim's been trying to contact Isaak."

"Yeah. I figured."

He looks calm, completely unrattled, but I sense something change. He doesn't stiffen or anything, but somehow I know he's not going to bend on this topic.

That doesn't stop me from trying, though.

"What did he say?"

He shakes his head and gives me a knowing smile. "Oh no. I'm not saying a word."

"Because of Isaak?"

"Because of *me*," he corrects. "I like you, Camila. But I'm loyal to my brother."

"If you hadn't told me that awful story, I'd have judged you for that," I admit to him.

He laughs. "Fair enough."



“As it stands though, I get it. He deserves your loyalty.”

Bogdan gets to his feet and heads towards the door. Just before he leaves, he pauses at the threshold. “You can hate me for saying this but... he deserves yours, too.”

“That’s a two-way street.”

“Hey, no arguments here.”

I take a deep breath, knowing that there’s no point explaining my perspective or my circumstances to Bogdan. As he’s stated already, he’s always going to be on Team Isaak.

And I can’t blame him.

But despite how compelling Bogdan’s argument is, I can’t get caught up in it. Because I have my own interests to protect. I have a daughter I need to think of.

“Thanks for the talk, Bogdan.”

He gives me a smile that looks eerily similar to Isaak’s. “Back atcha, sis.”

My own grin twists into a frown. “Don’t call me that.”

With a laugh, he leaves the bathroom and clicks the door closed behind him. Letting out a sigh of frustration, I finally force myself out of the bathtub and start to peel my clothes off.

I’m in no mood for anything other than bed, so the moment I’m toweled off, I change into sweats and a clean t-shirt and pad into the bedroom.

I head to the armchair by the window and settle down in it. There’s a whole pile of books on the center table, but I ignore them all. For the first time in my life, I don’t feel like reading. Maybe because my life has somehow turned into a horror movie.

Instead, I sit in the armchair, staring out the window as I think of my daughter. I’ve spent next to no time with her in the five years since she was born.

And yet, I have never felt like anything other than her mother. Because only maternal love could have sustained me through this time in the desert. Only maternal love could have led me

to make the decision to keep her away from the madness of my life.

If I'd kept her with me, she would have been as much a pawn as I am now.

I'm starting to realize that despite my aspirations, I'm not Jo March after all. I never was. But maybe she can be—because of what I've sacrificed to give her.

A life of freedom, unbound by the hold of men who would use her to gain the upper hand.

I'm deep in the memory of the day she was born when the door opens and Isaak walks in. When I look at him, I see her beautiful eyes. It strikes me like a spear through the heart.

He closes the door and walks over to the window. Then he takes the empty armchair opposite me. He looks calmer now, but no less determined. No less in control.

Was he ever really that ten-year-old boy who stepped in front of Bogdan against his bully of a father? All I can see now is a man. But then again, his actions then were the actions of a man.

"Here," Isaak says, handing me a piece of paper.

I frown. "What is this?"

"You wanted to know what Maxim said," Isaak tells me. "There it is. In his own hand."

I take the letter and open it up. There's a blocky paragraph in the very center of the page. The writing is familiar, but I don't feel any kind of emotion when I look at Maxim's handwriting.

I read the letter once.

Then I read it again.

On the third read, I realize my hands are trembling. I fold it up and hand it back to Isaak. He's been watching me carefully this whole time, reading every twitch on my face and making his assumptions.

"Are you going to convince me that everything he said in that letter is a lie?" I ask.

“What I think is immaterial,” Isaak says with a nonchalant shrug. “What do *you* think?”

*What do I think?* It’s a damn good question. If anyone out there knows the answer, I’m all ears. Because right now, I’m so lost in the never-ending deception and lies that I can’t figure out what’s real and what’s not.

The letter was certainly compelling. It sounded sincere. But of course, he would know how to play me. He had time to practice.

“Why did you let me read it?” I ask.

“Because you wanted to know what he said.”

I take a deep breath and try to come to terms with what I’m feeling. What am I feeling right now? It’s heavy and uncomfortable and it nags and scratches and claws at my mind like a parasite that won’t subside.

And then it hits me.

*Guilt.*

That’s what I’m feeling.

Because if what Maxim wrote in that letter is true, then our relationship was legitimate to him. Maybe it didn’t start out that way, but that’s certainly where it ended.

And I’ve been sleeping with Isaak this whole time. While he’s trying to find ways to get me back, I’ve been fucking his cousin.

Maxim has betrayed me, too. But the fact is, that I betrayed him first.

Every time I fantasized about Isaak while he was making love to me.

Every time he did or said something sweet, and I wished that it was Isaak saying and doing those things for me.

Every time I looked at him and imagined a different man in his place.

Those were all betrayals. Maybe they were justified now. But I didn't know the truth then, and I did it anyway.

“Camila.”

I jerk up and meet his eyes. The very same eyes that convinced me that cheating on my fiancé was justified because he didn't deserve my loyalty.

“You made me believe he didn't care for me.”

Isaak's expression is flawlessly impassive. “Is that what you believe?”

“You told me he was using me.”

“And he was.”

“But... it is possible that he fell for me,” I say, glancing at the letter I'd handed back to him. “He was honest in that letter. He admitted that he sought me out for all the wrong reasons, but...”

“He fell in love with you?” Isaak scoffs. His tone carries a biting sting that I cringe away from instinctively. “His love for you outweighs his ambition?”

“Is it so hard to believe that he's capable of love?” I ask softly.

I hold my breath as I wait for his answer. Because if it's so out of the realm of possibility that Maxim could have fallen for me... then does the same hold true for Isaak?

He looks me in the eye. “I know the man.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he's not capable of love.”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Are you capable of love, Isaak?”

His eyes flash violently. For a moment, the air in the room seems to evaporate.

Then, in a low growl, he says, “You have no idea what I'm capable of.”

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## ISAAK

Cami's question burns in my head. *Are you capable of love?*

What a fucking question. Am I? She wants to believe. And she hates herself for wanting that.

That conflict in her is obvious. It ignites in her eyes like bonfires.

Not just one conflict, either. There's two. Because a part of her also wants to believe that Maxim is sincere. Another part of her wants to hate him. She's trying to reconcile her feelings for him with her feelings for me.

My cousin and I are at war on multiple battlefields.

"I haven't changed my mind," she insists. "I still want to speak to him."

"That's not going to happen."

She stiffens, but it's clear she's expected the answer. She turns her face to the window and as she does, I catch her profile. Her nose is small and delicate, her lips are full and pouty, but her eyes are heart-wrenchingly sad.

She looks lost. Confused. Close to being broken.

"He's not worth it, Camila," I tell her.

Her green eyes snap to me. "Of course you would say that. He's your enemy, the man who killed your father. You need me to believe that. You've manipulated me into believing it. Or tried to, at least. Just like you've manipulated everything else."

“I haven’t manipulated everything.”

“Haven’t you?” she asks. “I walked into the hall that day ready to marry Alex. And instead, I was forced to marry you. Since that day, I’ve never seen or spoken to Alex.”

“Alex is a fucking fiction,” I snarl. “He doesn’t exist.”

“Don’t you understand?” she whispers. “He does to me.”

The weight of those words falls between us. I’ve underestimated so much, and I’m not used to feeling like I’ve fallen short in some way.

The worry is only fleeting. I’m not about to waste time stewing. Taking control means pushing back the regret of past mistakes and focusing on fixing them when you can. Cowards dwell on the past. Dons burn it to ashes.

“I spent a year and a half of my life with him, Isaak. I let him into my world. I chose him.”

I lean in a little. “You chose a lie. You may as well have picked a character from one of your books.”

She shakes her head in defiance. “I’m not naïve enough not to believe that. I know he lied to me. I know he manipulated me. I know he used me. But... it’s possible that somewhere in the middle of all that, he fell for me, too.”

It sounds like she’s waiting for me to agree with her.

She’d better be prepared to wait for a fucking century, in that case.

“You read the letter,” I say suddenly. “It’s only fair you hear the rest of it, too.”

Her brows furrow together. “The rest of it?”

“Remember the meeting Maxim and I had? The supposedly peaceful conversation we were meant to share?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I taped it.”

Her eyes go wide. “You taped the whole conversation?”



“Yes,” I reply with a nod. “And I think it’s time you hear what he said.”

She sits there frozen in place when I pull out the tiny recording device that’s been sitting in my pocket this whole time. She eyes it suspiciously.

I fire up the machine and fast forward to about midway through our conversation. It lands right where I want it to.

Camila’s eyes tense when she recognizes Maxim’s voice. “You’re offering me scraps and asking me to be grateful.”

My voice slices in. “That’s just fucking it, isn’t it? I shouldn’t be offering you anything. We are Bratva, Maxim. We don’t wait to be offered. We don’t wait to be given. We take what we want.”

“Then I will take it. I will take everything you’ve stolen from me.”

“For fuck’s sake, you are nothing but a spoiled little brat, whining about all the things you didn’t get. Come at me in any way you choose. But remember, you’re going to lose. And I will make it hurt.”

A pause. The audio feed crackles. Then:

“Have you fucked her?”

Cami doesn’t make a sound, but her eyes dart up to my face. Her spine is ramrod straight now and her fingers shiver.

I know her well enough now to read her like a book. She wants to hear all of it. But she’s terrified of what she’ll find out.

And once she learns... there is no going back.

The recording continues.

“Excuse me?”

“I asked if you fucked the whore.”

“What’s wrong, Maxim?” I taunt. “Did you fuck it all up? The plan was to make her fall for you. Did you go and make the

mistake of falling for her?”

I know what’s coming next. I feel the slightest tug of uncertainty. Not because she doesn’t deserve to hear this—but because I don’t want her to be hurt any more than she needs to be.

I glance at her. Is this enough? But her eyes are steeled still.

Which means she’s left me with no choice.

“Fall for her?” Maxim sneers. “She was nothing but a mark. A way for me to hurt you.”

“And what purpose did it serve?” comes my voice from the audio device. “I have her now. So who’s hurting who?”

“I will get her back.”

“You just claimed she means nothing to you. Why fight for a woman you don’t give a fuck about?”

Maxim again: “The same reason you stole her from me: she’s a power play. The last move on the board before checkmate. And I plan to win.”

I stop the recording.

Camila just stares at the recording device as though it’s still playing. She doesn’t move for a full minute.

Finally, she takes a deep breath. Her eyes are dense with tears, but I know damn well she’ll die before she lets them fall in front of me.

“Did you enjoy that?” she asks, turning her gaze on me.

“No.”

She smiles, and there’s not an ounce of love in it. There’s anger and derisiveness and hatred. But no love. None. “Please,” she scoffs, “you kept that recording for a reason. You were waiting to throw it in my face at exactly the right moment.”

“I needed evidence.”

“Evidence of what?”

“His intentions.”

“How do you know for sure those are his intentions?” she asks. “You’re his enemy. You think he’s going to be honest with you about everything? You think he’s not exactly as full of shit as you are?”

“Are you really going to bat for him right now?”

“Rewind the tape.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You want to hear it again?”

“No, I mean rewind it back to the beginning. I want to hear the whole conversation.”

“Camila—”

“You took the time to record everything. I should hear everything.”

She’s determined. I can’t help but be impressed by that brilliantly controlled expression on her face. A part of me likes to think that I’ve had something to do with the slow burning confidence that’s slowly taking over her.

I rewind the tape back to the beginning. And of course, we stumble across the portion of the conversation I had hoped to avoid having her hear.

“How is she?” Maxim’s voice asks from the machine.

“Well-looked after.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Let’s just say that no woman likes being lied to.”

“Then why would she stay with you?”

“I never lied to her. Right from the beginning, she knew my real name. And if we’d had more time that night, she would have known what I did, too.”

“That right there is a fucking lie. You were involved with her long before that night. Why claim otherwise?”

“So you just walked about to a random woman, sight unseen, and decided to protect her with your life? I call bullshit. Why?”

“She was an itch I needed to scratch.”

This time, Camila is the one that leans forward and stops the recording. She falls back into her armchair like she’s been slapped.

“Who should I believe, Isaak?” she asks softly. “Both of you, or neither? Those are the only options, as far as I can see.”

“Camila—”

“Did you, by the way?” she interrupts. “Scratch your itch?”

It’s not in my nature to offer her an apology. All I can give her is an explanation. “I thought at the time that’s what you were.”

“So you fucked me in the bathroom of a restaurant to satisfy the ‘itch,’” she says. “You would have kicked me to the curb right afterward. Except that Maxim saw us together, misread the situation, and assumed I was important to you. And that’s the entire reason he tracked me down in the first place. From the very beginning, I’ve always been in the middle of the two of you. Before I even knew it.”

“I meant what I said on that tape,” I tell her. “I never lied to you.”

“But how the hell would I even know that?” she counters. “I am your prisoner, not your wife. You’ve taken everything from me, and still, you expect me to be grateful for it.”

Cami stops and waits for me to answer.

I say nothing. She wants things I can’t give her right now.

“You’re using me the same way that Maxim is, Isaak,” she continues. “You’re using me.”

“We do what we have to in order to protect what matters.”

“And for you, that’s the Bratva?”

“For me, that’s the Bratva,” I tell her, without bothering to deny it.

“For me, it’s my family,” she says, and suddenly, I can hear all the emotion she’s kept from her tone during this conversation, heavy and troubling. “And I choose them. I want to go back home. I don’t want to be a part of this anymore.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that now.”

She bursts to her feet and starts pacing around the room. Her green eyes spark with anger, but from her controlled breathing, I can see she’s trying hard to maintain a level of calm.

“I will never stop fighting you,” she says, turning on me.

I get to my feet and approach her slowly. “I know,” I say. “But it’s not because I married you against your will. It’s not even because I’m keeping you in my home.”

She raises her eyebrows in sarcastic disbelief. “It’s not?” she asks incredulously. “Well then, Doctor Vorobev, tell me your diagnosis.”

“It’s because you hate that you have feelings for me. And since you can’t control that, you fight and rage and yell and throw insults. Because that’s the only way you can think of to feed your conscience. To keep pretending that you are who you think you are.”

“I don’t have feelings for you.”

“I didn’t force you to fuck me, Camila,” I throw at her. “You did that all by yourself.”

She reels back and turns away so that I can’t see her face. “You took advantage,” she says. “I was vulnerable—”

“So vulnerable that you slept with me while you believed yourself to be engaged to another man?”

I know I’m being harsh. Maybe even unfair. But I can’t help it.

She asked for this.

She wanted the truth, and that’s exactly what I’m giving her.

“I... I shouldn’t have,” she says, her tone faltering slightly. “I should never have... have let you...”

“Let me what?” I demand. “Manipulate you? I did nothing of the sort. You’ve always been attracted to me, Camila. From the first moment you laid eyes on me.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I saw it in your eyes that night when you looked at me. It’s the reason I approached you—because you looked like you were trapped.”

“I may have been trapped, but I didn’t need you to save me.”

“Maybe not, but I made the decision to. And you didn’t exactly push me away.”

“Would you have listened if I had?” she counters. “You take what you want—isn’t that right, Isaak? You take what you want and you don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks or wants or loves. You just take, and take, and take.”

“You’re many things, Camila. But a coward is not one of them. So stop acting like one.”

She lunges forward and shoves me in my chest. It doesn’t do a thing.

“You think I’m the type of man who’ll force himself on a woman?” I continue. “Look at me now and tell me you honestly believe that.”

She doesn’t say a word.

“I approached you because I knew you wanted me to. I fucked you because I knew you wanted me to. And every other time we fucked, it was because your pussy was soaking wet for me.”

She cringes back, but she can’t deny any of it. I take a step forward. I expect her to retreat, but she’s rooted to the spot, scouring over my words as though she’s still trying to make sense of them.

“You say I’m a monster. If that’s what you believe, Camila, if that’s really what you think, then I’ll make you a promise right now.” I take another step forward until we’re practically nose to nose. “I will never have sex with you again. I will never kiss you, touch you, make you come screaming my name. I will

never even look at you... if you can look me in the eyes and tell me that's what you want."

Something flashes across Cami's face. She doesn't believe me. It probably has something to do with my proximity. This is the peak of the fight, and that has always been the part right before I grab her, kiss her, make her mine.

There's excitement trembling just beneath the disbelief. She's expecting us to take the same route we always do.

But she's underestimating my sense of control.

I can resist anything when I have to.

Including her.

"I'll leave you now," I say, turning away.

"You—" She breaks off almost immediately.

I turn to her with raised eyebrows. "Yes?"

"You're leaving?"

I have to resist the urge to sneer viciously. "I'm leaving," I confirm. "I meant what I said, Camila. You think I'm manipulating your vulnerability by exploiting your attraction to me? Then I'll stop."

She twitches suddenly. A spasm like words are trying to force their way out of her and she won't let them free.

"That is what you want... isn't it?"

Her eyes go wide, and then the anger's back. Quick as a flash. "You want me to prove you right, don't you?" she hisses. "You want me to beg you to stay? Beg you to fuck me?"

"No one ever said anything about begging."

"Attraction is not love."

"I never said it was."

"Then why do you and everyone else keep implying that I—" She cuts herself off.

"Implying what?"

"Nothing."

“You think everyone else is trying to manipulate you, too?” I ask, leaning into her anger. “You think this is all some complex conspiracy to make you want to stay with me?”

She shakes her head. “Stop... stop talking. You’re confusing me.”

“Don’t blame me for that,” I snap. “You’re confused. Leave me out of it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re fighting some sort of internal battle about who you are and what you want. A part of you wants me, but you’re just too scared to admit it.”

“And you?”

“And me what?”

“What do you want?”

I stiffen, trying to sift through the implications of that question. “We’ve been over this before, little *kiska*. I have what I want because I take it.”

“Like you took me.”

I laugh cruelly. “I didn’t take you anywhere, Camila. You came with me.”



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## CAMILA

I'm a mess. A total freaking mess.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Bree asks the moment she hears my voice on the phone. "What happened?"

"It's Isaak."

"Did he hurt you?" she demands immediately, her tone turning hard as flint.

"Not... I... No," I whimper. "Not like that."

"Jesus, Cami."

"What?"

"That wasn't convincing at all."

I take a deep breath, but before I can get my thoughts together, I burst out crying. I can't remember the last time I cried like this. Big, blubbery tears that make me feel like I'm seven years old again.

I hear Bree sigh and plop down onto their squeaky couch. "Cami, honey, I can make a call to Eric. I can tell him where you are. It'll take him some time to get to you, but—"

"No, no," I say quickly. "I'm sorry, that was... I feel like an idiot."

"You wanna start the call over?"

I give a watery smile and nod.

"Are you nodding, Cami? Because you know I can't see you, right?"

I laugh, choking on it for a moment before I finally manage to compose myself. “Sorry. Yeah, I was nodding.”

“Thought so.”

“How do you know me so well?”

“I practically raised you, remember?”

Just like that, the tears resurface again. “I know you did. And now you’re raising my child.”

“Hey now, you know I love that kid like she’s my own.”

“Of course you do. You have a remarkable capacity for love. It’s one of your superpowers.”

“Darling, you’re starting to worry me.”

“Because I’m singing your praises?”

“Because you’re acting like you called to say goodbye.”

That takes me aback for a moment, and I realize that for as much as I’m going through, Bree’s going through just as much in her own way—lingering on the outskirts, worrying about me every step of the way without being able to do anything to help.

“Oh God, no. No, of course not, Bree.”

She exhales. “Well, thank fuck for that.”

“You’ve really got a sailor’s mouth on you lately,” I observe.

“I think this current time in our lives calls for it.”

“Tell me about it.”

There’s a short pause. “You wanna tell me what’s going on?” Bree asks. “Does this have to do with you telling Isaak the truth?”

“No,” I say. “I haven’t told him about Jo. And I’ve decided not to.”

“Really?” Bree asks. I don’t miss the note of disappointment in her voice.

“Do you think I made a mistake?”

“How can I, when I don’t know the whole situation?” she muses. “I’m assuming you have a good reason or two.

“Yes. At least, I think so.”

“You wanna tell me what it was?”

“I can’t trust him,” I tell Bree. “And I don’t trust his world, either. He’s a Bratva don, Bree. Crazy as that is to say, the stakes are high. I don’t want Jo getting mixed up in that world.”

“She’s already mixed up in it, Cami. The moment Isaak finds out, everything will change.”

“He won’t find out.”

Bree is silent for a long time. Too long.

“What?” I ask.

“I just think that’s a little unrealistic. He has resources, Cami. And the moment he looks a little closer, he’s going to figure it out. It’s only a matter of time.”

I suppress a shiver. *Only a matter of time.* Those are haunting words.

“I’ve been used as a pawn in two men’s games for years now,” I say. “I don’t want Jo to be used in the same way.”

“Jo is Isaak’s daughter, Cami. If she has to be mixed up in that world, at least she’ll have protection.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Just instinct, I guess. Everything you’ve told me about Isaak makes me believe he’s the type of man that protects his own. And Jo is definitely top on that list.”

Suddenly, I’m running through every conversation I’ve had with Bree, trying to figure out what I said about Isaak. My heart is thundering in my chest.

“Bree?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you... do you think I have feelings for Isaak?”

There's a long pause at the end of the line. "I mean, don't you?"

"Bree."

"Honey, of course I think you have feelings for him. It's kind of, I dunno... obvious."

I sigh bitterly. "Fuck me."

"I know this whole thing is a little unconventional..."

I snort at that. "Understatement of the fucking millennium."

"Okay, it's all batshit crazy," Bree corrects. "But that doesn't mean it can't work."

"It can't," I say immediately, refusing to allow even the seed of hope to grow inside me. "It absolutely cannot."

"Why?"

"If I stay with Isaak, I'll lose myself, Bree."

"How do you figure that?"

"He's... larger than life. He's powerful and strong and confident. He's been in control his entire life. And that's not going to change with me. So it doesn't matter what I feel or don't feel for Isaak. He's taken away my choices. I can't stay with a man like that."

"So if he lets you go...?"

"I'll go," I say. "I'll come back home and be the mother that Jo deserves."

"And when he finds out about her?"

"I'll worry about that when I have to."

I know there are risks to what I'm saying, what I'm proposing. But it's my life. It's my daughter. It's my decision.

Not Bree's or Isaak's or anyone else's. Just me.

So if my sister disagrees, she's going to give me the space to either prove her wrong or to learn from my mistakes. It's what you do when you love someone.

It's not enough that I'm falling for Isaak. I also want him to fall for me in the same way. But I'm just not sure he's capable of that kind of emotion. He said as much himself.

"Thanks for talking to me," I say quietly.

"Anytime."

"Is Jo around?"

"Hold on."

I hear Bree move her mouth away from the receiver and then she calls for Jo. A minute later, I hear the pitter-patter of my daughter's feet. They get heavier every year and I'm left scrambling for all that lost time.

"Mommy?"

"Baby," I coo. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"I'm good," she replies. "Uncle Jake is going to build a treehouse and we're all helping."

"Wow, lucky you."

"Yeah."

"How's school going?"

"It's fun."

"Read any new books lately?"

"Aunt Bree read me *The Elves and the Shoemaker* yesterday."

"Did you like it?"

"Mhmm. I like the part when the elves see all their presents."

"That was always my favorite bit of the story, too."

We keep talking, but I can tell a few minutes in that Jo's already starting to get distracted. That's the thing about trying to bond with kids long distance—it just doesn't work.

They need physical proximity. They need hugs and kisses and quality time. None of which I can give her.

"I bet your uncle and cousins need your help with the treehouse," I say, letting her off the hook.

“Yeah, I think so.”

That’s my girl. Unfailingly polite. I’d like to take the credit for it, but I know I can’t. All of that goes to my sister.

“Go on, my beautiful girl. Go have fun. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Mommy.”

About two years ago, she stopped asking me when I was coming to see her. Now she just talks to me, says goodbye, and goes back to her life.

Even heartbreak becomes routine if you repeat it enough.

I fight back tears as Jo passes the phone back to Bree and heads off into the backyard to be with her cousins.

“She sounds happy,” I tell Bree, unable to hide the wobble in my voice.

“She’s a happy kid, Cami. And that’s because you made the decision to give her a normal, stable childhood.”

“You don’t have to lie to make me feel better about being a shitty mother.”

“Stop that right now,” Bree snaps in her Mama Bear voice. “What you did was brave, Cami. It was brave and it was selfless and I could only hope I would have made the same choice in your position.”

The tears run down my cheeks as I listen to the ferocity in Bree’s voice. It’s impossible to deny. I wonder if she knows how much I need that reassurance right now. “Thank you.”

“I’m not saying any of this to make you feel better. I’m saying it because it’s true.”

“I love you, sis.”

Her tone softens immediately. “I love you, too, kid.”

*Kid.* She hasn’t called me that since we were teenagers. I like the way the familiar word hits my ears. It makes me feel young again. It makes me feel like my future is ahead of me.

“I know you’re going through a five-alarm internal crisis at the moment, but that was bound to happen with Jo’s father in the

picture. All I can say to you is, you're strong enough to get through it."

"You're sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life. You're made of steel, Cami. You just forget sometimes."

The moment I hang up, that sweeping feeling of isolation starts weeding its way back into my consciousness. In the end, it drives me right out of my room.

I head downstairs to the library, searching for the comfort I so desperately need. I'm staring at the shelves when Nikita walks into the room.

As usual, she's dressed impeccably in black cashmere pants and a matching sweater in a neutral skin tone. There are moments when I look at her and see Isaak in her place.

But not right now. Right now, her features are too calm, her eyes too peaceful.

"Camila," she says. "Are you okay?"

It's not like a Vorobev to talk about emotions, so I'm taken off-guard by the question. Maybe that's why I answer honestly. "Not really."

"Is it anything I can help with?"

I have to remember that the last time we talked, she had accused me of being in love with her son. The fact that she may be right about it seems inconsequential at this moment.

"No. Nothing."

She purses her lips and nods like she knows I'm full of shit. Her eyes shift upward to a portrait of the Vorobevs hanging over the fireplace. Vitaly, Nikita, Isaak, Bogdan. They all have the same hard glint to their eyes, the same cruel angle in their jaws.

"He was never an easy man to be around," she says unexpectedly. "I understand that better than anyone."

"He's your son. It's different."



“I wasn’t talking about Isaak,” Nikita clarifies. “I was talking about my husband.”

“You mean the abusive monster you were married to.”

She arches one eyebrow. It’s one part laughter, one part surprise. Instantly, I blush. “Sorry,” I mumble. “That was over the line.”

She smiles. “Why are you apologizing?”

“For being... rude, I guess you’d call it.”

“Censoring the truth is uglier than proclaiming a lie, Camila.”

“Censoring the truth—is that what you did?”

I know I’m being a bitch. But I feel trapped. I told Bree that I’d made the decision not to tell Isaak about Jo. But the truth is, I’m still wrestling with it.

Do I really have a right to keep Jo away from her father? Do I really have the right to deny Isaak of getting to know his daughter?

And if Bree is right and it’s only a matter of time before Jo is found out, isn’t it best the truth comes from me first?

“Yes, I did,” Nikita answers after a while. “I hid things from my husband. I lied when I needed to. I deceived for sport and I held onto my secrets for as long as I could. But in this house, in this world, you must protect what is yours and take what you want. There is no other way to survive.”

“Then it’s not a place I want to live,” I whisper fiercely.

She nods like she understands every single subtlety of the emotions ravaging my heart right now. “I’ve been in this world for a long time. The men in it see women as merely playthings and objects. Wives may have respect and power, but they rarely ever have full ownership of their men’s hearts.”

“Are you telling me what to expect?” I ask. “Because I don’t plan on being a part of this world for very much longer.”

She gives me a sad smile. “I’m telling what to look forward to,” she says. “If you change your mind.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that what I had is not what you have. Isaak is as cold, cruel, and ruthless as they come when it concerns ruling this Bratva and protecting his men and his family. But he will not be the kind of Bratva husband I had. He is not his father.”

I scoff. “From everything I’ve heard, the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.”

“You don’t know how wrong you are, Camila. Can I tell you something?”

I shrug. “Sure.”

“Vitaly used to bring women home. I wanted so badly to hate them. Not just because they were younger or more beautiful than me, but because they were extensions of him. He paraded these women through my own home, my own bedroom, as a way to punish and control me. Everyone knew; the maids, the staff, all Vitaly’s men. The boys knew, too, though they pretended they didn’t for my sake. But I will never forget how it felt to watch those women leave after hearing their moans for hours on end.”

I feel nauseous. “That’s horrible. But I don’t see what it has to do anything. It just proves my point, really.”

She waves a finger. “Precisely the opposite. Tell me: have you ever seen Isaak lay a finger on another woman?”

My body goes ramrod straight. I think about Marissa. I see her beautiful face and her flirty eyes and I picture Isaak’s body stretched out on top of hers.

And the image makes my stomach turn. The bile rises to my throat and no matter what I do, I can’t get rid of the image now that it’s managed to worm its way into my head.

“If you’re trying to tell me that Isaak has real feelings for me just because he’s courteous enough to fool around behind my back or keep it in his pants for a little while, then I’m afraid you’re wrong. He’s using me, just like Maxim used me. Isaak has no reason to be faithful to me. We’re not really married.”

“Why don’t you ask him then?” Nikita suggests. “Ask him what he feels when another woman looks at him the way they all look at him.”

My stomach twists again, because now I want to know. It never struck me that there might be other women in his life, fleeting one-hour encounters that satiate his lust and give him no grief or vitriol.

But now? Now, the thought’s in my head and I hate how sick it’s making me.

“No,” I say stubbornly. “I don’t need to ask him because I don’t care.”

It’s such a bald-faced lie that I’m scared she’s going to call me out on it. But she doesn’t. She just stands there calmly, reading me in the same way that Isaak does.

“He can fuck anyone he likes,” I continue. “I’ve got a life to get back to. I’ve got a—”

I’m so worked up that I only barely stop myself just short of saying the word “daughter.” I wonder if she noticed.

“I’ve got a family to get back to. I want to see my nephews grow up.”

Nikita nods slowly. “If that’s what you want, Isaak will not stop you leaving the moment you’re safe.”

*Safe.* The word makes me want to laugh. And Isaak Vorobev isn’t the antidote for that.

He’s the poison itself.

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## ISAAK

“Well?”

Bogdan shakes his head. “Another letter.”

“What does this one say?”

“It’s short. More of the same thing, really. He wants her back, and he repeats his offer.”

“To walk away from his so-called claim,” I snort.

“What if he’s serious?” Bogdan asks.

“Don’t be fucking naïve,” I snap. “That bastard is trying to lure me into a trap that gives him the upper hand. You may not remember playing with Maxim when we were boys, but I do.”

“What do you mean?”

“He hated to lose. He used to throw loud fucking temper tantrums. He only stopped because Yakov walked in one day and hit him over the back of the head. Told him to take defeat like a man.”

Bogdan grows thoughtful as I recount the story. “He was a good man, wasn’t he?” he asks. “I don’t remember much of him, but I always remember he was kind to me.”

Of course Bogdan would remember that. Kindness was in short supply in our home growing up. When you experience it, however little, it sticks out.

“He was kind. But weak.”

“He was the worse don,” Bogdan agrees. “But the older I get, the more I wonder if he was the better man.”

I know what it means for Bogdan to admit that out loud. He’s always been fiercely loyal to our father. Only the revelation of his betrayal could have loosened Bogdan’s tongue.

I lean back in my seat and stare at the open map sitting on my desk. Circles and pins surround five different locations around the city.

“We’re going to need all our men for an attack on this scale,” Bogdan points out.

I nod grimly. “Bring them all in. I’m not trying to make a statement this time. I’m ending this fucking war. I’ve given Maxim passes before because of his last name. But that time has passed.”

“I’ll get everything organized.”

There’s a soft knock on the door. I know it’s Mama even before she walks in, looking troubled and detached at the same time.

“We’re busy,” I say brusquely.

I’m sure I’ve been a disappointment to her as a son. I was never one to run to her when I was scared or grab her hand when I stumbled. She wanted to be a mother, but I didn’t need one. Perhaps that’s why she’d clung to Bogdan when he was born.

But in due time, he’d been taken from her as well.

The Bratva is a greedy beast. It’s not kind to those who don’t understand its ways. Mama was the perfect Bratva wife. But only because she was forced to be. It was the only way for her to survive.

“This is important, Isaak,” she says, closing the door behind her.

“I don’t have time.”

“Do you have time for Camila?” she asks. “Because that’s what this is about.”

I pointedly avoid Bogdan's eyes as I glare at my mother. I still haven't forgiven her for keeping the secret of my father's crime for so long.

"What is it?" I growl.

Bogdan vacates his seat for Mama to sit down heavily.

"Camila... she's torn," she starts. "It's clear she has feelings for you, but there's something muddying the waters. Something that's pulling her elsewhere."

"Mama, I'm going to say this again: I don't have the fucking time for this."

It's not strictly true; I just don't want to give her any more fuel. When this is over and Maxim is gone, I don't plan on holding Camila here against her will.

I could. Easily. Shamelessly.

But I won't.

"I had Gavin Hardwick look into her," Mama says.

I frown. "The private detective that Otets used to use for outside jobs?"

She nods. "I've kept in touch with him over the years. He did this as a favor to me."

"Because he's always wanted to fuck you."

"Isaak!"

She looks shocked, and honestly, so does Bogdan. I don't give a shit, though. She should know better than to push the topic when I've made it clear I'm not interested in what she has to say.

"He's a decent man, contrary to what you seem to believe, and he has never had designs on me."

She speaks like she's from another century. It makes me snort with laughter. Her eyes crinkle with hurt, but I don't apologize. The impulse was drummed out of me when I was thirteen years old.

"What did your old beau have to say about Camila?" I ask.

“She has a sister in New York City. Her sister married quite young and had two sons.”

She stops there and looks at me pointedly. I wait for her to continue, but she doesn't. Bogdan looks between us as though he's scared someone's going to pull a knife.

“And a daughter,” I add without thinking.

Mama shakes her head. “No. Her sister gave birth to two boys. She doesn't have a daughter.”

I narrow my eyes. Camila had mentioned a girl on numerous occasions. Why would she lie about a nonexistent niece?

Then it hits me.

And when it does, I feel like I've been railroaded by a fucking train going at two hundred miles per hour.

Mama sees the realization on my face. “You must be patient with her,” she says quickly. “Allow her to tell you the truth on her own. She needs—”

“She hasn't told me shit all this time. What would change her mind now?”

“You. You are the only one who can make her change her mind,” Mama insists. “I know you're angry with me, Isaak. I understand why. But I am still your mother and you have to trust that sometimes, my advice might make a difference in your life. I only have your best interests at heart.”

I get to my feet. Bogdan does the same.

“Isaak?”

“Go find her sister. I want an exact address.”

“Er, right. I'm on it,” Bogdan says, looking nervous. He's at the door when he turns around and looks back at me. “We don't know that the girl is her daughter.”

My hands clench into fists. I remember something suddenly: the night outside the restaurant on the Thames, when she stripped in the car, I saw something on her. Tiny silver stretch marks notched at her hips and around her waist.



And I remember something else very, very clearly: the first time we fucked, those marks weren't there.

My anger curdles in my chest. I eye Bogdan. "Don't we?"

He swallows. "I'll let you know what I find." Then he's gone.

When we're alone, Mama slowly gets to her feet and walks over to me. "There's no point being angry about this, *moy dorogoy*," she says, using a nickname for me she hasn't used since I was in diapers.

My eyes flash to hers. "Don't tell me how to react. And don't ever fucking call me that."

Then I brush past her and head straight to Camila's bedroom.

I've stayed clear of it for days now, giving her the space that I promised. It was a self-serving promise. One I only made because I knew she would come to me eventually.

But this new information has thrown a spanner in the works.

And I'm done being lied to.

Just before I slam through her door, I hesitate. I breathe through my anger, my jealousy. I pace back and forth remembering my father's training.

*A man who can't suppress his emotions can be goaded, manipulated, and used.*

*A man who can't suppress his emotions can't read his enemy because he's too lost in his own head.*

I will not be that man.

Once I've regained full control over myself, I walk into her room calmly. She's lying on the bed on her belly, surrounded by books. Her bare feet are in the air and I can't help but admire the curve of her perfect ass. When she hears me enter, she rolls over and sits up, eyes wide.

"Camila."

She tenses the moment I say her name. Maybe she doesn't know it yet, but she can feel it coming—my anger brimming on the horizon like a hurricane. "What?"

“Come. Sit with me.”

I walk over to the windows where the giant armchairs are set up and sit down in one of them. She pads over a moment later and takes the vacant seat opposite me.

She fidgets and blinks rapidly, watching my every move.

“I’m going to let you go.”

Her eyes go wide. “You... you’re going to let me go?” she repeats with disbelief.

“That’s what I said.”

“What about Maxim?”

“He hasn’t been neutralized yet.”

She frowns. “Is that code for murdered?”

“It’s not a murder when the death is justified.”

“Sounds like a justification to me.”

My muscles flex. Sometimes, I forget how good she is at this. At holding her own, at fighting back. At giving me a fucking challenge.

“Anyway, you haven’t answered my question: why are you letting me go if Maxim is still a threat?” she asks.

“Because I don’t need you to get rid of him,” I say. She cringes back at the hardness in my tone. “You will be exposed the moment I release you. But clearly, that’s what you want.”

A flicker runs over her face. “I... I just want to go... home.”

“And you’ll be able to,” I tell her. “But keep in mind: if you do plan on going home, you’re exposing your family to Maxim’s forces.”

“And yours, too?”

“I promised you once that you have no cause to fear me. I meant it.”

She nods slowly like she’s struggling to take it all in. I’m keeping my own face a cold mask of indifference, but inside, my chest is on fire.

*You must be patient with her, Mama said. Allow her to tell you the truth on her own.*

Fuck, that is difficult. The woman gets under my skin like no other. I'm nearing a boiling point as it is.

'I... I have to go back home, Isaak,' says Cami. 'Even if it's just for a little while.'

'For your sister and your nephews?' I ask.

'Yes.'

'And of course the niece you're so fond of.'

Her knuckles go white as she grinds them together. 'Yes, my niece, too.'

I have to struggle to keep my mask in place.

'When can I leave?' she asks in a small voice. The green in her seems to fade and blot like paint on canvas.

'Now if you want,' I tell her with a nonchalant shrug. 'You can pack as many bags as you need.'

I rise to my feet. She stares at me, still trying to process this change of heart.

'Isaak...'

If it's going to happen, it has to be now. If there's any hope of salvaging whatever the fuck exists or once existed between her and I.

So I wait. I breathe and I wait for her to tell me the truth.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she stands and meets my gaze. I don't miss the diamond tears clustered in the corners of her eyes.

'I'll start packing now,' she says quietly.

I stand there, unmoving and simmering with well-concealed anger.

The moment she has her freedom back, will she run straight to Maxim?

Will they go and collect their little fucking love child and attack me in full force?

If they do, she will have to watch the fucker die. I'm okay with that.

"You do that."

Cami is about to turn away when her body changes course and veers towards me instead. She moves closer and her eyes rise from my chest to my face.

She opens her mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. She shakes her head and a tear falls down her cheek. She seems shocked by the treachery as she wipes it away self-consciously.

"Tears?" I ask.

"Tears," she repeats.

"Why?"

"Because..." Her voice shakes. "Because I can't believe you're letting me go."

Her hands have started trembling.

"Thank you, Isaak."

I give her a curt nod. Just when I think she's about to turn away, she takes a step closer and pushes herself up on her tiptoes. Her lips fall over mine and I taste her.

She kisses me with a fervor that I'm not expecting.

I'm the one who breaks the kiss.

"What are you doing?" I rasp.

"Saying goodbye," she says.

Nothing fucking surprises me.

Nothing.

And yet, what's the point of keeping up the manipulation if she's got what she wants now?

Her freedom has been handed to her on a platter. She has no reason to pretend. To continue the charade.

But she insists. Her hand cups my face, forcing me to look at her. She's trying to find some emotion in my eyes. I've been trained too well for that, though. She'll find only what my father taught me to reveal: absolutely fucking nothing.

"Can't you forget your training for one minute?" she whispers. "I'm trying to tell you something important."

I tense. Is this it? Is this the moment she comes clean?

I arch an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"That I'll miss you."

The words feel like a caress and a stab all at the same time. She must notice me flinch, because she says, "Is that so hard to believe?"

I don't say a word. Her expression twists and I see the disappointment etched on her face. She's struggling to keep her emotions in check. We both know damn well it's a battle she's going to lose.

"Isaak, look at me."

"I am looking at you."

"No, I mean really *look* at me."

Grimacing, I meet her eyes. "Is this what you want, Camila?"

She shakes her head. "Do I really mean so little to you?"

Her lips entangle with mine again. I want so fucking badly to give into the temptation. To reciprocate, to do what I've always done when she looks at me like this: ravage her until the heat of our passion consumes us both.

But I resist. With all of me.

Well, almost all of me. But when Cami's hip grazes against my hard cock, she notices.

"See?" she says, her hand brushing against the bulge in my pants. "Your body gives you away."

"Your body gave you away, too," I snarl. "I was just too blind to see it."

She frowns. “What do you mean?” She releases me and steps back as the air fills with tension, the heat of the secret between us.

We’ve arrived at it—the final moment.

The one where everything that’s been irretrievably broken finally shatters to pieces.

“Is there anything you need to tell me?” I ask menacingly. “Anything important you’ve forgotten to mention?”

She frowns. “N... no. What else would I need to tell you?”

The desire on her face is quickly being replaced by fear. Her body tenses and her eyes dart around the room, as though she’s trying to pull her secrets closer into her.

She’s starting to suspect that this change of heart is going to come at a price.

She’s very fucking right about that.

“The night I took you to dinner on the Thames,” I muse. “I still remember watching you dress. The way you shimmied out of your clothes... the way your skin seemed to glow...”

She looks like she’s barely breathing. “Isaak...?”

“I admired your body. It was beautiful. Every little piece of it. Even the little marks that women hate so much, it all suited you. Even those little stretch marks were beautiful to me.”

She tries to hide her panic, but it’s there, sprawled across her face. She didn’t have my kind of training in concealing what she feels.

“I didn’t think about it then. But it was right in front of me. Your body gave you away, Camila.”

She shakes her head. “No. No. No.”

I pace closer to her. “Now, little *kiska*... Tell me about your daughter.”

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## CAMILA

*Inevitable.*

That was the word that Bree used. Back then, it felt overblown. Now, it feels like foreshadowing. Or maybe self-fulfilling prophecy.

Either way, he knows.

He *knows*.

Isaak's eyes are dark and stormy. He is terrifying as he is beautiful.

Once the shock wears off, though, I'm aware of the disappointment settling in. Because deep down, I had wished for more than anger. It's naïve and stupid, but I had wished for... what? Happiness? Excitement?

I should've known that a man like Isaak Vorobev isn't capable of such things.

"How did you find out?" I whisper.

I'm too tired to bother denying it. Too exhausted, from my skin to my soul, to go through that whole song and dance.

"Does it matter?"

"No," I say with a sigh. "I suppose it doesn't."

"What's her name?"

His tone is hard as ice, and it makes me wonder what about this revelation has actually pissed him off. Because somehow, I'm not sure his main source of anger is about the fact that I



kept Jo's existence from him. That's part of it, certainly. But I feel like I'm missing some aspect of it.

"Jo."

To my surprise, he nods in recognition instantly. An ironic smile on his lips. "After Josephine March, I suppose."

I almost smile back. No one in my entire life has ever guessed that. It figures that Isaak would be the first. "Exactly."

"Does she live up to her namesake?"

"She'll forge her own path," I say. "That's all I want for her."

Her smirks, but his eyes remain cold. "What you want for her is immaterial."

I stiffen. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"She's Bratva, isn't she?" Isaak says. "There is only one path forward for children of the Bratva."

"She's nothing other than my daughter. She's not going to be used as a prop or a pawn in the games of the Bratva."

"You're not going to have a say in that."

"You have no right—"

"Maxim does, though," he interrupts.

I stop short. "I... Excuse me?"

"Maxim does have a right."

*Why the fuck would... ?*

And then it hits me. Everything kind of lines up beautifully and I can see exactly what brought Isaak up here in a cold rage.

There's no joy, no excitement...

Because he doesn't believe that Jo is his.

"Maxim," I say softly.

"I'm surprised he didn't lord that one over me," Isaak continues without noticing the change in my expression. "He fucked a baby into you. It's the ultimate upper hand."

I wince against his harsh words. Not just because he reduces my pregnancy down to a power play, but because the revelation seems to have sucked the humanity out of him completely.

All thought of correcting his false assumption disappears completely.

He doesn't deserve that salvation.

So instead, I stand there, trying to think up ways of hurting him like he's hurt me.

"Maybe he wanted to keep his child out of it," I say. "Maybe he didn't want her to be a power play at all. Maybe he actually has a fucking soul."

Isaak snorts. "You really are delusional when it comes to the man, aren't you? How did you even manage to convince him to keep the child with your sister?"

I shrug. "What's it to you?"

"I'm curious about the plan."

"Would you believe me if I said there was no plan?" I ask. "No, of course not. Because you see only what you want to see. You believe only what you want to believe."

"I am impressed, though," he says, regarding me with appraising eyes. "You managed to conceal it from me for months."

"My daughter means the world to me," I say resolutely. Nothing about that statement is a lie. "She's my whole world. Anything I can do to protect her, I will."

His eyes spark. More anger, of course, but there's also a begrudging respect there.

"No wonder Maxim wants you back so badly."

I shake my head with disgust. "Right. You don't believe a man might want me because, oh I don't know, he genuinely cares for me."

He expression doesn't change.

“Not every man is as cold and unfeeling as you are, Isaak.”

Not even a flinch.

And that flips a switch. I don't want to hold back anymore. I don't want to try and match his controlled state of calm. I'm upset and pissed and sad and emotional.

And there's no shame in that. At least I can own my emotions. At least I can confront my demons head on. At least I'm not a broken shell of a human being.

“You know the irony of this stupid fucking tragedy?” I snap. “I actually did have feelings for you. I did actually care for you. But it's more obvious now than ever that you don't care about me. You never did, you never will, you never can. Maxim may have been using me at first, but at least he found room in his world for love in the end. But you? To you, I'm nothing but a tool to be used and discarded. I was a fool to think that we had a connection at all.”

He doesn't bother disputing any of it.

And that hurts most of all.

It's agony to see the blank, disinterested look in his eyes.

“You were never planning on letting me go, were you?” I ask, the sob catching in my throat. “You were just trying to catch me out.”

Isaak nods slowly. “You're much too valuable to give up now.”

Again, he knows that's going to hurt me. So he flings the words at me like unsheathing a cruelly sharp blade. I hate him in that moment. I hate his cruelty and his uncompromising nature.

Most of all, I hate the man who robbed him of his childhood and the ability to love openly and unreservedly.

“You think you've won, Isaak. But all you have is power. It's nothing compared to the love of a partner, the love of a child. You have none of those things.”

“Nor do I want them,” he scoffs. “They’re only liabilities that raise the stakes.”

“You don’t want a family?” I ask tremulously.

“I have a family. The Bratva is my family.”

“The Bratva isn’t going to warm your bed at night.”

“My victories do,” he snaps. “And in the event I want more, I’ll pick a woman and she’ll fall into my bed without a second thought. Just like you did.”

The venom in his voice is meant to wound. But even though I cringe, I recognize what he’s trying to do. And I realize he wouldn’t be trying to do it unless he cared.

Just a little bit.

I move forward, buoyed by this new conviction. “I know I’ve fought you on that in the past, pretended as though you manipulated me into your bed. But I’m not going to do that now. You didn’t force me. I gave myself to you willingly. You were right before, Isaak: I wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I’d never met a man like you before. You were strong and powerful and so confident. I never thought you’d look my way. But you did and it changed my world. Literally.”

I take a deep, shuddering breath and power on.

“So yes, I *did* want you. But I was a fool to lose myself to the fantasy of you. Because underneath all that beauty and bravado, you’re just a megalomaniac without a conscience. Or at least, that’s what you’re trying to be.”

My words are coming faster and faster. Now that I’ve gotten going, it’s hard to stop. The fact that he’s just standing there, staring at me, makes it easier for me to keep spilling all the things I’ve spent months trying to illuminate.

“Because some part of you feels like you have something to prove to your father. You’d rather be a robot and a monster than admit that you’re a man with real feelings.”

His mouth splits into a slow, menacing grin. “You think you’ve got me all figured out, do you?”

I shrug, refusing to be intimidated. “Maybe I do.”

“I’ve never let anyone in. You’re no different.”

“I think that’s just what you want me to believe.”

He laughs heartlessly. “You’re flattering yourself here.”

“Then answer me this,” I challenge. “Why does the fact that I have a baby with Maxim make you so damn angry?”

His eyes flash with warning, but I’m not about to back down now. I press my chest into his. I have to crane my neck back to look up at him, but I don’t so much as blink when I meet his gaze.

“You’ve been trying to give the illusion that I’m the one with all the feelings and you’re the one pulling the strings. But you’ve been inside me, Isaak. I’ve seen the look in your eyes when you come. I know you feel more than you want me to believe.”

I raise my hand, ready to graze my hand across his cheek—when he grabs my wrist and twists it back.

“You’re hurting me,” I say calmly.

“That’s what happens when you play a dangerous game, *kiska*.”

“I thought you liked games,” I retort. “Especially the dangerous ones.”

“You’re an amateur, Camila.”

“I’m also a fast learner.”

“Not fast enough.”

I narrow my eyes, aware that his erection is stabbing me in the thigh. “Tell me something, Isaak: have you slept with anyone else since I became your wife?”

His eyes tense. For the first time since he came down here, he falters.

And for the first time since we met, I’m sure.

“You’ve haven’t, have you? You’ve been faithful to me.”

I laugh in amazement. I feel so alive and all-powerful, like everything is crystal clear and all the truths are in my hands and all I have to do is look around to see the complete and total picture of everything that Isaak has spent months and years trying to hide and disguise.

“Faithful to your fake wife, the one you forced into marriage to get back at your cousin. I think you’ve forgotten something: *you* married *me*, Isaak. You gave yourself away in that one move. The man who doesn’t want a wife or a family. You wanted me though, didn’t you? You wanted me worse than you’ve ever wanted anything in your entire miserable life.”

He grabs me suddenly and swings me around, then slams me against the wall so hard that the breath leaves my body in a flowing burst.

“Yes, *kiska*, I wanted you,” he growls, his lips trailing along my arched neck. “I fucking wanted your body. I wanted the sweet delights of your pussy. And I got it.”

I meet his eyes. We’re half an inch apart. I can practically count the eyelashes fanning his stare. “Great. You’ve had me. So if you really don’t give a shit about anything, why isn’t that enough for you?”

I can feel the heat of his lips. I know what’s about to happen. So does he. My pussy is throbbing in anticipation of the inevitable.

And just when we’re about to come together in the storm we’ve created, the door flies open.

“Isaak!”

Isaak turns around, although half his body still stays pressed against mine.

“What the fuck is it?” he growls at Bogdan in the doorway.

“The fucking cops are at our gates.”

“The cops?”

Bogdan nods. “Eric Keller is at the helm. Someone tipped them off about Camila’s whereabouts.”

“Fuck,” Isaak snarls. He grabs me by the wrist and tows me out of the room.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere we can finish this.” He’s forcing me through the house so fast that I trip again and again, but he doesn’t let me fall, nor does he slow down. “Bogdan, hold them off for as long as you can.”

“They have a warrant, Isaak.”

“Stall them!” he barks. We stumble down a flight of stairs into a darkened space I didn’t know existed?”

“Where are you taking me?” I demand as we reach the bottom.

In answer, he flips the light switch. We’re standing in what looks like a basement. It’s by no means horror-worthy, but the line of cells in the corner certainly doesn’t inspire much faith.

“I’m not going in there,” I tell him, struggling to get free of his grip. “You’ll have to fucking kill me instead.”

He releases my arm in disgust. “Don’t be so goddamn dramatic. You’re not going in the cell.”

“I’m not? Then why...?”

“This is the most secure place in the manor. It’ll be a while before they get here.”

“Oh.”

I look around at the small, dark cells. The concrete cinderblocks are scrubbed clean, but I can’t shake the eerie sense that they’ve been witness to terrible things.

“Do you really keep people in here?” I ask.

“When I have to.”

“And you’re going to keep me here?”

“If you make me.”

I stare at him, trying to see the man I thought I knew beyond the mask of control. It’s getting harder and harder.

And that makes me mad.

It makes me so fucking mad that he touts himself as this big, badass Bratva don. But at the end of the day, he's still the scared little boy that suffered under his father's cruelty. He thinks it shaped him.

He's wrong.

It broke him.

"Fuck you!" I shout suddenly. "Fuck you for thinking that the only reason I spread my legs for you was to manipulate you. Fuck you for thinking I'm the same as you. I'm not, Isaak. I'm not anything like you. I'm a person with a soul, with feelings, who loves and is loved, and I'm not afraid of that. It doesn't scare me to say I cared for you."

I move forward and slam my palms into his chest. I might as well have railed against a steel wall for all the good it does me. Still, it feels good to get physical. It feels good to use my hands.

Most of my rage is lost in a sob. "You're so damn smart," I say. "You're so damn in control. You have all the answers all the time. But still, despite all that, you don't see, do you? You don't see the thing that matters most."

His mask of impassiveness drops just a little. His brows come together before smoothing out again.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I walk right up to him until the tips of my toes match up to the tips of his. "Jo," I say. "My daughter."

"What about her?"

"She's not Maxim's. He doesn't even know I have a child."

He frowns.

"You want my secret, Isaak? Here it is: my daughter was born eight months after I entered the Witness Protection Program. She's five and a half years old."

And just for dramatic effect, I add the unnecessary clincher.

"She's a Vorobev, yes. But she was never Maxim's. She's yours."



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## ISAAK

Can everything change in a matter of seconds?

The proof is right in front of me, staring me in the face, challenging me to challenge her right back. Because what she's told me feels impossible.

But even as the words settle, I know they're true.

"She was never Maxim's. She's yours."

I have a child.

A daughter.

She's been walking this earth for five and a half fucking years and I had no idea. I don't even know what she looks like, what she acts like, what she loves or hates or fears and wants. What color are her eyes?

Camila breaks away from me and paces across the shadowed space. She puts about four feet of distance between us before turning back to me.

"There it is," she says. "My last secret."

I can't do anything but stare at her. It makes sense now. So much sense, in fact, that I curse myself for not seeing it sooner.

That's why she'd been so insistent on maintaining contact with her sister. That's why she got so emotional just bringing up her family.

That's why she was determined to leave. To be free.

For her little girl.

For *our* little girl.

“How long has she been with your sister?” I ask.

“She was seven months old when I left her there,” Camila tells me. “Eric organized a trip back to the States, and I stayed with Bree for three weeks. When I left, I came back to England alone. Jo’s been with Bree ever since.”

“Why?” I don’t have to elaborate. She knows damn well what I’m asking.

Another flash of anger and impatience flits across her face. “From the moment I knew there was going to be a child, I thought about what I would do. I asked to leave the program, but Eric told me it wasn’t safe to do so yet. Apparently, the people who had taken me the first time were still looking for me.”

“Maxim.”

“Yes, Maxim,” she says. “But I didn’t know that at the time. It was a choice between keeping Jo with me and risking her safety. Or leaving her with Bree and allowing her to have some semblance of normalcy.”

She gnaws at her lower lip and her eyes go hazy like she’s reliving the experience here in this dank basement.

“I veered between the two choices for months. It wasn’t even a question at first—Jo was always going to stay with me. Then, when I was six months pregnant, Eric arrived at my apartment and told me that they had news that Bratva men were in the city. He wasn’t sure if their movements had to do with me, but I was forced to leave my apartment that same night. The next two months, I moved from one safehouse to the next. I was exhausted and terrified by the end of it. Honestly, I thought I might lose the baby.”

She sighs and winces. The pain is as real to her now as it was then.

“But what scared me worse was the realization that, in a few short months, I would have a living, breathing child that would be subjected to the same uncertainty, the same instability and terror. I didn’t make the decision right away. I gave birth to Jo,

and for the first month of her life, things were peaceful. Then Eric showed up—again—and told me they were moving me. Again.”

It makes me angry to hear all this. I could have prevented it. I could have saved her from those lonely, angry nights.

And she’s not done.

“I think that was the point at which I realized I couldn’t do that to Jo. She deserved the right to a safe and stable home. She deserved to have birthday parties and playdates. She deserved to go to sleep at night and know without a doubt that she could wake up in the same bed the next morning. That was what I gave her when I chose to leave her with my sister.”

Her cheeks are flushed by the time she finishes. Her chest rises and falls. Her green eyes have the appearance of being faded with unshed tears.

“It was the hardest decision I’ve ever made in my life. And some days, I’m still not sure if it was the right one for me. But I’m confident in the fact that it was the right decision for her.”

I step towards Cami. She tenses immediately, coiled up like a snake. So I freeze, caught between somewhere and nowhere, one hand reaching for her like it can wipe away all those fears.

When I finally find my voice, it comes out in a hollow croak. But it’s not what I thought I was going to say.

“What’s she like?”

Camila does a double take. But the second she starts talking, her entire face relaxes. Her eyes soften.

“She’s... amazing,” Camila starts, a tender smile playing across her face. “She’s smart and thoughtful and curious about everything. She’s obsessed with puzzles right now. That’s the only thing she asks for on her birthday, on Christmas. She loves the challenge of solving something. Taking a bunch of broken pieces and putting them together. And books, too, of course. She’s reading now, a little. I send her books whenever I get the chance.”

“What does she look like?” I ask quietly.

“She... she looks a little like you,” Camila says softly. “She was born with blonde hair, but it gets darker every year. She has blue eyes. Not quite like yours. A little lighter. A little gentler. Her nose is mine, though. And she’s got a birthmark on her arm in the exact same location as I do.”

I nod, drinking in the little details and committing each one to memory. I feel like I’ve been parched and marooned on a desert island my entire life, and each tiny thing Cami tells me is another sip of water.

Jo still doesn’t feel real. She still doesn’t feel like mine.

But it’s coming. I can feel it.

“And Maxim doesn’t know?”

“No,” Camila says with a deep sigh. “I was going to tell him about her after the wedding, but now I’m glad that didn’t happen.”

“Who would you have told him was the father?”

“Some random guy, a one-night-stand,” she says. “But... he would have seen through that. And he would have used it against me. And against you.”

She turns her gaze away from me, as though the reminder is too much for her.

“Why didn’t you tell him before?” I ask curiously.

She shakes her head as if she herself doesn’t quite know. “I... I was scared to. I’d kept her a secret for so long that it felt wrong to tell anyone about her until I had some sort of surety that I could trust the person I was telling. I thought marriage would be surety enough. Guess not.”

“No. It would not have been enough.”

I take another step forward, but my body is stiff and unyielding. Like it too needs time to process all these harsh and sudden changes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She meets my eyes for a second before she looks away again. Her shoulders are arched back, but the confidence in her

posture seems to crack just a little. She draws in a deep, shuddering breath, and I wonder for a moment if she's going to cry or break down.

But when she raises her eyes again, she looks as fiery as ever.

"You showed up, after six years, on what was supposed to be my wedding day to another man. You married me against my will and kept me in your home despite my protests. Which part of all that was supposed to make me trust you?"

"I'll buy that that was your reasoning in the beginning," I say. "But what about later? When you shared my bed and opened up to me about your life. You failed to mention the most important part of your life."

Her eyes flash. "I had to protect my daughter."

"From her own father?"

She moves away from me, forcing more distance between us. "You aren't her father, Isaak. You're the sperm donor. Nothing more."

I snare her arm and pull her towards me. "You should have fucking told me."

She wrenches out of my grasp. "You didn't earn the right to that secret."

"I can protect her!" I roar. My voice echoes in the cramped room.

Cami is all venom. "I don't want you anywhere near her," she yells right back. "Not if I can help it."

"You don't have the right to make that call anymore."

Her eyes narrow. "What do you mean?"

"I'm her father, Camila. You can't keep me from her."

"No," she says firmly. "Absolutely fucking not. I will not allow you to involve my child in this world. I don't want the Bratva for her. She deserves more. She deserves better."

"What don't you understand? It's not a choice, Camila. The moment she was born, she was Bratva. She deserves my

protection. She deserves all the rights that come with being my daughter.”

“Stop!” she cries. Her voice is reaching panic levels now. “Stop. You are not her father. Until five minutes ago, you didn’t even know she existed.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“I did what I did to protect her.”

“From me?”

“YES! Yes, from you! Because you don’t care about her. The only thing you care about is the goddamned Bratva. Jo deserves more than a father who’ll use her as a power play to get the upper hand in a family squabble.”

I shake my head in dismay. She doesn’t get it. After all this fucking time, she doesn’t know a single fucking thing about me.

“You really believe I would do that?”

“You did it with me.”

I stare at her coldly, anger superseding every other emotion I’m feeling. “You are not Bratva,” I tell her. “You are not family.”

She veers back as the hurt washes over her features. She looks away to cover her expression, to hide it from me so she doesn’t see how deep I’ve cut her.

But it’s too late.

I’ve seen it all.

And I know what I have to do next.

“Isaak!”

Bogdan’s footsteps rush down the stairs in the wake of his voice. He steps onto the cement floor, completely ignoring the tense atmosphere sizzling between Camila and me.

“I’ve held them off as long as I could, Isaak,” Bogdan tells me. “They have a warrant. We have five minutes tops before they get here. We need to get Camila out of sight.”



“No,” I say firmly. “That won’t be necessary.”

“What?” Bogdan asks, clearly confused.

I turn my gaze on her. “Camila, you’re free to go.”

She stares at me in disbelief. “Wha...?”

“You’re no longer my captive.”

Her face runs through a cacophony of emotions. Confusion, fear, anger, understanding, acceptance. Then it hardens into something I recognize: cold-blooded certainty.

“Isaak,” Bogdan says, moving closer to me. “You’re letting her leave?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Take her up to them.”

Bogdan hesitates, studying my face for clues as to what’s changed so drastically in the last hour.

“Now,” I growl.

Bogdan gestures for Camila to follow him. She doesn’t move for a moment. Her eyes rake over my face but I refuse to look at her.

Then, admitting defeat, she follows Bogdan up the staircase and disappears onto the top floor. I stand there in the basement cells for a long time. Long enough for Bogdan to come back down to find me.

“Well?” I ask.

He plops to a seat on the bottom step and rubs the heels of his hands in his tired eyes. “She told them that she was here of her own accord, so there won’t be charges pressed against us.” They’re gone now.”

I nod. “Good.”

“Brother...”

“I need you to do something for me,” I interrupt.

He sighs. “Anything.”

“You found the address I told you to search for?”

He hesitates. “Yes...”

“Good. Get on a plane tonight,” I order. “You’re going to go to that address and get something. Something that belongs to me.”

Bogdan’s eyebrows hit the roof as he struggles to figure out what that something is.

“What kind of something?”

“My daughter.”



### **TO BE CONTINUED**

*Isaak and Cami’s story will conclude in Book 2 of the Vorobev  
Bratva duet, VELVET ANGEL—coming soon!*

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