

A black and white photograph of a man's head and shoulder. He has dark hair and a beard, looking down and to the right. A large, intricate tattoo is visible on his right shoulder. The background is dark.

NICOLAEVICH
BRATVA
BROTHERS

Brother's
BEST FRIEND

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K. C. CROWNE

BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND

A BRATVA ROMANCE




K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION

My brother's best friend is an underground Bratva fighter...

And I'm his new understudy.

In the dark world of underground fights,

Women like me are rare victorious warriors.

Samuil Nicolaevich haunted my fantasies as a teen.

And based on the way his gaze lingers on my lush curves..

He clearly appreciates how much I've blossomed.

Yet when he steps in as my coach...

My focus begins to blur and I find myself wanting more than just victory.

The intensity of our sessions stirs up suppressed desire.

His every command, every gruff word, drives me mad.

The unspoken tension that simmers between us has me yearning for more than just victory.

But in a world where every move can be life or death...

My greatest battle is surrendering to the passion that threatens to overpower us both.

This is Samuil Nicolaevich's story and a fully standalone romance. Enter the gripping realm of the Nicolaevich Bratva Brothers, where power and passion rule. In this Amazon Top 100 dark romance suspense series, four billionaire brothers dominate both their empire and the hearts of their women. The Nicolaevich and Antonov brothers share the same world.

CHAPTER 1

ANASTASIA

“Where the hell is he?”

Rain pelts the tin roof of the decrepit warehouse like a barrage of bullets. Each drop sounds like an accusation, a reminder of the path we’re forced to walk. I hate the rain. In this world of underground fighting, the noise it brings is just another layer of distraction on top of an already tense situation.

As I pace the dimly lit room, shadows cast by the flickering lights overhead play across the walls. Every now and then, a roar erupts from the crowd, punctuating the atmosphere with its raw energy. Somewhere close by, bones crunch and flesh impacts flesh, the symphony of a fight reaching its climax. The room is heavy with the scent of sweat, blood, and anticipation.

Beside me, Samuil Nicolaevich’s massive frame looms like an anchor in a tempest. The tattoos covering his arms tell stories of battles fought, allegiances made, and pain endured. Every now and then, he shoots me a glance, his green eyes searching mine for answers. I avoid his gaze, knowing he’s equally worried about my brother’s absence.

“Where the hell is he?” I mutter once again, more to myself than to Samuil. Viktor should’ve been here by now. Every minute he’s late is a minute closer to forfeiting our chance at the Death Match.

Samuil’s voice is a gravelly rumble. “He knows the stakes, Anastasia. Viktor wouldn’t let us down.”

I clench my fists, trying to swallow down the rising panic. “We need that money, Samuil. We can’t afford to lose this chance.”

He shoots me another one of his searching looks. “There’s more riding on this than just the million-dollar prize, isn’t there?”

My eyes dart away, unwilling to divulge my deepest concerns. There are things even Samuil, as close as he is to our family, doesn’t need to know. “It’s just... Viktor has been acting strange lately. Ever since the rumors about the Death Match started circulating, he’s been distant.”

“I’ve noticed,” Samuil admits. He runs a tattooed hand through his beard. “But I’ve also noticed he’s been training harder than ever.”

I nod, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves. “He mentioned something about this being our ticket out, our way to finally break free from all of this,” I gesture vaguely around us, to the grimy walls and the raucous crowd beyond.

The weight of responsibility presses down on me. As much as I want to break away from the dark clutches of the underground world, there’s something keeping me here. The thrill of the fight, the rush of adrenaline, the lure of the prize money—it’s all a heady cocktail that’s hard to resist.

Samuil moves closer, his voice softening. “Look, whatever’s going on with Viktor, whatever reasons you two have for needing the money, I’m with you. We’ll find a way.”

Before I can respond, the announcer’s voice booms through the hall, echoing over the relentless assault of the rain. “Next up, the qualifier for the Death Match! Viktor Zaitsev, please make your way to the ring!”

My heart leaps into my throat. Every second feels like an eternity. He has to show up. He just has to. The crowd’s restlessness is intense, their hunger for violence growing with every passing moment.

I grab Samuil’s arm, my nails digging into his skin. “What if he doesn’t show? What if something’s happened to him?”

I'm not the panicking sort, never have been. However, when it comes to my brother, things are different.

"We'll figure it out," he promises, his voice thick with determination. But as he speaks, I can see the worry etching deeper lines into his already rugged face.

I shake my head, fighting back tears of frustration and fear. "If we don't compete, if we don't win... I don't know what we'll do."

The rhythmic pounding of the rain grows fiercer, mirroring the tumultuous whirlwind of emotions inside me. The cold seeps into my bones, and I find myself shivering despite the warmth of the crowded room. As the minutes tick by with no sign of Viktor, a sense of dread tightens its grip around my heart.

Samuil leans in, concern evident in his deep green eyes. "Ana," he begins, using the affectionate nickname he's called me since we were kids, "if it's about the money—"

I immediately cut him off, already knowing where he is headed. "Samuil, don't."

He holds up his hand, signaling me to let him finish. "I can help. I can give you and Viktor the money. You know I can."

I look up at him, searching his face. I see genuine concern, the warmth of someone who has always been there, watching over me, even when I pretend not to notice. "I can't accept that," I whisper.

He moves closer, his voice soft and urgent. "Why not? If it helps you and Viktor start anew, then—"

"It's not about the money," I reply, feeling the weight of my pride pushing down on me. "I won't take handouts. Not from you, not from anyone."

Samuil sighs, raking his fingers through his hair, frustration evident in his movements. "It's not a handout, Ana. It's me trying to help. You're like family."

I blink back tears, feeling a surge of warmth at his words. But that warmth is also tainted with a pang of guilt. "I know

you mean well, but I can't. It's not the way I was raised. Zaitsev's earn our keep, no matter how hard the path."

The atmosphere between us grows thick, both of us lost in our own thoughts, the silence only broken by the storm's fury outside which seems to mirror the chaos inside me. Thunder growls in the distance, punctuating the heaviness in the air.

Samuil steps closer, his proximity comforting. "Look, all I want is for you to be safe, to be happy. If there's anything I can do—"

I raise a hand, stopping him. "You're already doing it. Just being here, offering to help... it means everything."

We stand there, lost in the moment, the connection between us evident. Samuil has always been my rock, even when I'm too stubborn to admit it. I feel an overwhelming urge to lean into his embrace, to let him shield me from the world outside.

Instead, I force a smile, trying to lighten the mood. "I'm so worried about Viktor. I can't shake the feeling that something's wrong."

Samuil's gaze hardens, determination replacing concern. "We'll find him. I promise."

Despite my worry, a smile tugs at my lips. "You always know just what to say, don't you?"

He shrugs, a smirk playing on his mouth. "What can I say? I've had years of practice dealing with a stubborn Zaitsev."

I laugh, the sound breaking the tension. It feels good, a brief moment of levity in an otherwise dark night. But as the rain continues to pour and the minutes tick by, the reality of our situation settles back in.

The muffled sounds of shouting and pandemonium reaches our ears, drawing attention away from our conversation. I exchange a worried look with Samuil, and together we rush toward the noise. My heart races, each step filled with a sense of impending dread.

Turning a corner, a sickening sight meets our eyes: my brother, crumpled in a heap, his face a swollen mess of blood and bruises. His clothes are torn, his breathing ragged. Blood pools around him, glistening eerily in the dim light of the corridor.

“Viktor!” I scream, dropping to my knees beside him. I feel for a pulse, relief washing over me as I sense the steady beat beneath my fingers. He’s in bad shape, but he’s still alive.

Samuil swears under his breath as he pulls out his phone. “I’m calling for help.”

But as he speaks, an announcement booms over the loudspeakers, echoing through the hall. “Next up, Viktor Zaitsev!”

Panic seizes me. We need the money from this fight, now more than ever. The thought of backing out is inconceivable. I make a snap decision.

“I’ll fight in his place,” I declare, rising to my feet.

Samuil’s eyes widen in disbelief. “Ana, no! It’s too dangerous.”

I meet his gaze, determination steeling my resolve. “I’ve trained for this as much as he has. I can do it.”

Samuil shakes his head, his voice filled with desperation. “You don’t understand, it’s not just about rules. The fighters here are brutal, unyielding. They won’t care that you’re a woman.”

But I’m already walking away, stripping off my outer layers revealing the athletic wear beneath. I can hear Samuil shouting after me, but his words are a distant blur. My focus is on the ring, on the fight ahead.

I hear Viktor’s voice, weak but urgent. “Samuil...”

I turn to see him, his eyes fluttering open, struggling to focus on his friend. Samuil rushes to his side, crouching down beside him. I hesitate, torn between my brother and the fight ahead.

“Get me a cab,” Viktor rasps, his voice filled with pain. “I need to get to the hospital. But you... you have to watch over Ana.”

Samuil’s eyes meet mine, filled with conflict. “Viktor, I can’t let her do this.”

I watch as Viktor’s grip on Samuil’s arm tightens, the urgency clear in his gaze. “She’s going to get herself killed, Samuil. You have to be there for her. Promise me.”

Samuil nods, his voice choked with emotion. “I promise.”

Viktor gives a weak smile, then slumps back, unconscious once more. I take a deep breath, pushing away the fear that threatens to overwhelm me. I can do this. I have to.

With one final, steeling breath, I step through the arena doors.

The atmosphere is electric, a pulsating energy I can feel in my bones as I stride through the crowd, their jeers and whistles creating a cacophony of disbelief and mockery. The very walls of the warehouse vibrate with the roar of the eager audience, a mix of contempt and excitement flashing in their eyes.

Everywhere I look, faces contort in surprise and disbelief that a woman would dare step into the ring. The scent of sweat, stale beer, and blood fill the air. But no matter the taunts and jeers thrown my way, my eyes stay fixed on the platform ahead, my heart racing with determination. They have no idea what they’re about to witness.

I step into the ring, hearing the gasps of the crowd as they realize I’m taking Viktor’s place. Some look skeptical, others amused, but I pay them no mind. My focus is on the opponent before me, a towering brute of a man who sneers down at me with undisguised contempt.

As the bell rings, signaling the start of the match, I steel myself for the fight of my life. Samuil’s worried face is the last thing I see before the world narrows down to the man before me, and the battle that lay ahead.

CHAPTER 2

SAMUIL

“Move!” I bark, elbowing past a couple of men laughing about the upcoming “slaughter.”

The roar of the crowd is deafening, a mixture of bloodlust and anticipation. My heart pounds violently against my ribs, each beat matching my desperate steps as I force my way to the front of the crowd. My eyes never leave the ring, fixated on Anastasia, standing so small yet so defiant against her monstrous opponent.

The juxtaposition of her petite form against the hulking menace she’s about to fight is jarring. He’s a behemoth; muscles rippling under his tatted skin. Even from a distance, I can make out the snarl of a wolf inked across his chest, its eyes glinting malevolently, mirroring the man’s own gaze.

Ana, what are you doing? The silent scream echoes in my mind.

It’s not her bravery I question; it’s the sheer brutality of what’s about to happen. The underground fighting pits are no place for honor. They’re all about survival, and with the way that man is sizing her up, I fear she won’t last ten seconds against him.

“Stop the fight!” My voice is raw, desperately ripping from my throat as I near the edge of the ring. But it’s swallowed by the ravenous cheers of the onlookers, thirsty for a brutal exhibition.

You’re almost there, I tell myself. Just a few more steps and I can pull her out, consequences be damned.

But as fate would have it, the universe had other plans. The harsh ring of the bell slices through the air, its shrill sound signifying the beginning of the end.

Everything seemed to slow down, the world morphing into a perverse dance. I watch in a mix of awe and horror as Anastasia assumes her stance, every muscle in her body coiled, ready to spring. The giant before her grins a sadistic smile, revealing a row of stained teeth. He believes the fight will be easy, that she's just another lamb for the slaughter.

But as their dance begins, I'm quickly reminded of why I've always been drawn to her. It's not just her beauty or her fiery spirit—it's the raw, untamed power she possesses, a force to be reckoned with.

She moves with expert skill, darting in and out of his reach, using her smaller stature to her advantage. Every time he lunges, she's already two steps ahead, dodging and weaving like a shadow. The crowd's jeers turn to gasps of astonishment.

I know she can't keep this up forever. He's just biding his time, waiting for that one slip, that one fatal mistake.

I grip the edge of the ring, knuckles white, praying to any god listening that she finds a way out of this alive. Because the alternative is too painful to even consider.

The seconds feel like hours, each moment a tightly coiled spring of tension. Anastasia's technique contrasts sharply with the substantial force of her opponent. While he's all about power and intimidation, she's precision and strategy. I find myself barely breathing, hanging on to each feint, each calculated move she makes.

She dodges a blow that would have surely cracked a rib, swiftly pivoting on her heel and delivering a low kick that buckles his knee. The crowd erupts, their loyalty shifting as they recognize the raw talent on display. The boos directed at her earlier begin to transform into cheers of admiration.

The giant snarls in frustration, his eyes burning with a blend of rage and surprise. He's not used to this. Most of his

fights end in mere moments, but Ana is giving him a run for his money.

Every time he tries to corner her, she slips away, frustrating him further. She's using his own aggression and size against him, tiring him out, making him waste his energy on wild swings that connect with nothing but air. It's a classic tactic, one I've used countless times, but watching her execute it with such finesse is truly breathtaking.

The next few minutes are a blur of movement. The intensity ratchets up as the tide of the fight starts to turn. A swift jab here, a sharp kick there, Anastasia's strikes start to find their mark more frequently. Every blow she lands sends a shockwave of excitement through the crowd.

In a brilliant move, she sidesteps a lunge, grabbing the back of his head and pulling him down into her rising knee. The impact reverberates through the warehouse, and for a split second, everything falls silent.

He staggers back, dazed, blood trickling from his nose. Anastasia, sensing her moment, doesn't relent. She leaps into the air, delivering a spinning kick that connects squarely with his jaw. He crashes to the ground, unconscious.

For a heartbeat, the entire crowd collectively holds its breath before exploding in a chorus of cheers and shouts. Against all odds, Anastasia Zaitsev has not only survived but triumphed.

Her chest heaves as she stands tall, absorbing the adulation. Even with the bruises forming on her face and arms, there's an undeniable glow of victory about her. I feel a surge of pride, coupled with a heady rush of relief.

Without wasting another moment, I push my way into the ring, wrapping her in a protective embrace.

"You're insane," I mutter against her hair, trying to convey a hundred emotions in those two words.

She pulls back, a smirk playing on her lips. "But I won, didn't I?"

I take one more look at her, barely able to wrap my head around what I've just witnessed.

“Come on, let's get out of here.”

With that, I usher her away from the ring and through the crowd, which is not an easy feat. Everyone there wants to know who this woman is, the fighter who deftly took down a man three times her size. We make our way through the corridors and to the office I'd been using.

In the dimly lit space, the low hum of the crowd outside filters in through the thick walls. Ana lies stretched out on my office couch, still buzzing from the adrenaline, her sleek form still gleaming with the sweat of the fight. Every breath she takes causes the curves of her muscles to flex subtly, a tantalizing display of strength and resilience.

She undoes her hair tie, her long, black hair spilling around her like a dark halo, contrasting starkly with the paleness of the couch. Those lush lips, slightly parted, hint at exhaustion but also an underlying fierceness that draws me in.

Her toned arms, legs, every inch of her, screams power yet remains undeniably feminine. I find myself struggling to tear my eyes away, each second increasing the risk of her catching me in this indiscreet moment of admiration.

I force myself to look elsewhere, every ounce of my self-control tested.

“Why the hell are you doing this?” I ask, my voice hushed, attempting to keep the mix of anger and concern from overwhelming me.

She shrugs, wincing slightly as I start wrapping a bandage around her ankle. “Viktor can't. Someone has to.”

“Not like this, Ana. Not this.”

Her green eyes meet mine, defiant but also searching for something. I can't help but get lost in them every time our gazes lock. It's a secret I've harbored for too long, always carefully tucked away behind a mask of casual camaraderie.

“I have to prove a point, Samuil. Prove it to everyone and maybe to myself as well.”

I sigh. “You’re reckless.”

She chuckles softly. “Says the man who has been in more fights than he can count.”

“That’s different.”

“Why? Because I’m a woman?”

I shake my head. “No. Because you’re you. And you mean a lot to... people.”

Her eyes glitter with amusement and something deeper, something I can’t quite place. “Just ‘people’?”

Swallowing hard, I nod. “Yeah. Just people.”

There’s an intimacy in the silence that ensues. The smallness of the room, combined with the intensity of the moment, suddenly feels suffocating. For years, I’ve kept my distance, honoring the unwritten code that she’s off-limits. But now, with her in such close proximity, with her life potentially on the line, those barriers seem inconsequential.

Finishing with the bandage, I sit back, and take a deep breath. “You can’t go through with the Death Match.”

She frowns, drawing her knees to her chest. “I can and I will.”

“You could die, Ana.”

Her gaze softens. “So could you. Any time you step into that ring or go on one of your missions for the Bratva.”

“It’s not the same.”

She tilts her head, her long black hair cascading down one shoulder. “Isn’t it? We’re both fighters, Samuil. This is who we are.”

I look away, my thoughts chaotic, the feelings I’ve kept buried for so long threatening to spill out. “I just, I can’t lose you. Not like this.”

Her fingers brush against my chin, gently turning my face to meet her eyes. “You won’t. I promise.”

Despite her assurances, fear gnaws at me. “I’ve seen what happens in those matches, Ana. It’s brutal.”

She pulls her ankle closer, testing its flexibility. “I’ve trained for this. I can handle it.”

“I don’t doubt your skill. But one misstep, one moment of hesitation...”

The intensity in her eyes is unwavering. “I know the risks. And I’m willing to take them.”

It’s maddening. I want to shake some sense into her and hold her close all at once. But I can’t do either. Not without revealing just how deeply I feel for her. The weight of my emotions, the responsibility to Viktor, and the looming danger of the Death Match settle heavily on me.

The stark overhead light casts uneven shadows on the room’s grimy walls, and the faint smell of sweat and blood lingers in the air. I shift uneasily, feeling the weight of the unspoken words between Anastasia and me.

“Why are you being so damn protective, Samuil?” Her voice breaks the silence, a note of exasperation laced with genuine curiosity.

It’s a simple question, one that shouldn’t be so hard to answer. And yet, with the emotions swirling inside me, putting it into words feels like navigating a minefield.

“Look, Ana,” I begin, choosing my words carefully, “I’ve seen too many good fighters get hurt—or worse—in these underground matches. I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She narrows her eyes, her sharp intellect always quick to read between the lines. “Is that the only reason?”

I clear my throat, the weight of our past and my long-suppressed feelings pressing down on me. “It’s... complicated.”

Her gaze softens. “Then make it simple for me.”

Drawing a deep breath, I decide to take a safer path. “You’re Viktor’s sister, and he’s my best friend. I’ve always looked out for both of you. It’s just what I do.”

She studies me for a moment, seemingly considering my words. Then, with a determined glint in her eyes, she says, “If you’re so worried about me, then coach me. Train me for the Death Match.”

My brows knit in surprise. “You want me to coach you?”

She nods firmly. “If you’re there with me, guiding me, maybe you won’t worry so much. Besides,” she adds with a smirk, “think of the winnings we could split.”

The thought of it is tempting. To be there every step of the way, ensuring she’s prepared and protected. And yet, the risk... “I don’t need the money,” I counter.

Anastasia rolls her eyes. “It’s not about the money, Samuil. It’s about keeping me safe, right? Besides, with your expertise and my skill, we’d be unstoppable.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her confidence, even as my concerns linger. “You really think I can help you?”

She gives me a knowing smile. “I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

A heavy silence falls between us, but it’s not uncomfortable. It’s filled with unspoken understanding, a silent agreement that we’re in this together, for better or worse. Finally, with a resigned sigh, I extend my hand. “Alright, deal. But remember, if things get too dangerous, I’m pulling the plug. Agreed?”

She grasps my hand firmly, sealing our pact. “Agreed.”

As we shake on it, the weight on my shoulders feels a little lighter, though the road ahead remains uncertain. With our arrangement settled, urgency returns to Anastasia’s expression. “We should get to the hospital. Check on Viktor.”

I nod, remembering the state her brother was in. “Yes, we should.”

We leave the grimy room and make our way to my car. The rain has subsided, leaving behind a cool, crisp night. As the engine of my G-Wagon roars to life, I can't help but think that despite the challenges that lie ahead, with Anastasia by my side, we'll conquer each and every one of them.

CHAPTER 3

ANASTASIA

“Are you insane? You let my sister sign up for the Death Match? I’m going to shove my foot up your ass when I get out of here.”

Viktor’s eyes blaze with contained infernos, sparking a contrast against the pallid hospital walls. My hands, steady until now, tremble slightly at the intensity in his gaze.

His words, though weakly spoken, slash through the sterile air of the hospital room, landing heavily between Samuil and me.

Samuil, unwavering beside me, responds with a calmness that only slightly appeases the anger in Viktor’s eyes. “What’s done is done. Her name is already on the board, and she fought... well, she fought like a demon.”

My brother’s stare turns toward me, a mixture of frustration and reluctant admiration swirling within. “Stasya, you could be killed.”

Viktor, always a pillar of strength and unyielding determination, lays before me, a stark contrast to the fighter I’ve always known. His face is puffy, both eyes blackened, one still swollen shut. His nose is broken and there is a gash across his forehead. Any visible skin is marred by sickly hues of purple and yellow, evidence of the brutality he endured. A few of his ribs are broken and his hands are bruised and torn, telltale signs of defensive wounds from trying to fight back.

His broad shoulders, often held high with the confident poise of a seasoned warrior, now seem to sag into the sterile

white sheets, burdened by a helplessness I've never seen in him before.

It's not easy to see him like this. And, knowing my brother, this level of vulnerability isn't easy for him, either.

I meet his concern with a tight-lipped nod, offering an unspoken acknowledgment of the danger I'm stepping into. "I know, Vitya. But we need this. *I* need this."

"Dammit, Anastasia..." he mutters, his voice trailing into a resigned sigh. A hand lifts weakly to rub at his temple, skin pallid and eyes marked with lingering pain. "You've always been headstrong. Too damn much for your own good."

I close the distance between us, my hand reaching out to encase his, a silent vow wrapped within my fingers. "We're all we've got, Viktor. And I can't—I won't—stand by while you fight our battles alone."

His hand twitches in mine, a subtle, vulnerable concession that speaks louder than words. "Who did this to you?" I ask, my voice unwavering, eyes scanning his battered form.

Viktor's eyes cloud with frustration. "Don't know. Six of them, at least. Hit me from behind like the damn cowards they are."

"Cowards," I echo, feeling a simmering anger bubbling within, threatening to spill over.

Samuil, his broad form leaning against the hospital wall, rumbles in agreement. "We handle this ourselves. No police."

I nod, my resolve hardening. We are Bratva—law and retribution are ours to mete out, a brutal justice carved from necessity and survival.

My brother, even in his battered state, recognizes the vengeance in my gaze. "Stasya, promise me you'll be careful. These bastards play dirty."

"Like Samuil said, what's done is done," I reply, parroting the stoic reassurance offered to us moments ago.

A heavy silence settles over the room, each of us bound by unspoken understanding and unvoiced fears. Viktor says

something unintelligible as his eyes drift shut, a soft, weary surrender to the painkillers coursing through his veins.

I watch him, every breath a silent prayer, each exhale an unvoiced plea for strength and retribution.

“We find them,” Samuil speaks, his voice a gravelly promise in the quiet of the room. “We find them, and we make them pay.”

I nod, tearing my gaze from Viktor to meet Samuil’s eyes, finding within them a mirrored ferocity, a shared understanding of the revenge we now seek.

“They won’t see us coming,” I whisper, my voice a shadowy vow that slips through the room, entwining with the beeping of machines and the distant din of the hospital beyond.

My fingers gently encase Viktor’s, the slow and rhythmic beep of the heart monitor weaving a melancholy melody through the sterile air. Shadows, long and forlorn, stretch across the pale walls, wrapping us in a muted cocoon away from the bustling world beyond the door.

Viktor’s eyes flicker, the orbs of hazel dancing with reflections from the fluorescent lights above. He swallows, the action pulling a wince through his rugged features. “They were probably gamblers, big bettors...” His voice is a raspy whisper, the words tumbling through cracked lips.

Samuil’s solid and imposing frame moves closer, his eyes narrowing attentively on my brother’s face. “Explain.”

Viktor’s gaze darts between us, a flash of the old fighter’s spirit sparking in the depths. “Or fighters themselves.” A cough rattles through him, but he persists. “They know what I’m capable of in the ring. I’m a threat to their bets, to their chances. It’s all a filthy game to them.”

My grip on his hand tightens, a silent pledge threading through my veins as my eyes linger on the violet and crimson blossoming across his skin. “We’ll find them, Viktor,” I promise, my voice steady despite the tempest within. “We’ll find them and make them answer for this.”

His gaze latches onto mine, a flicker of relief, perhaps, or trust, ghosting through his expression. “You need to be careful, Stasya. They play dirty, and they won’t hesitate to come after you, too.”

Samuil steps forward, a quiet strength emanating from his every pore. “She won’t be alone in this, Viktor. I swear it.”

Viktor’s eyes, clouded with pain and fatigue, flicker toward Samuil. The two of them, bound by years of camaraderie and battles waged both within and beyond the ring, communicate in silent understanding and unspoken allegiance. “Look after her, Samuil. Keep her safe.”

The declaration falls from Samuil’s lips with an unshakable resolve. “With my life.”

In the dim light of the room, with the echoes of anguish and impending retribution winding around us, the pact is forged. Unseen, it binds us with chords of loyalty, resilience, and a shared, unyielding determination.

Samuil’s gaze meets mine, and for a moment, vulnerability flickers through the stoic mask. “Meet me at dawn,” he says, “We start training first thing.”

I nod, ready for the work ahead.

Samuil turns toward the door, his frame silhouetted against the muted lights of the corridor beyond. Before he steps into the shadows, he pauses, looking back at us over his shoulder. “I’ll contact my brothers. This affront won’t go unanswered. An attack against family, against our own, is an attack against the Bratva itself. They will regret ever crossing us.”

And with that, he slips away.

Viktor speaks, his energy visibly waning. “You should lean on him more, you know. He’s always had your back.”

I shoot him a quick, questioning glance. “Viktor, what are you muttering about?”

He offers a weak smirk. “Just saying, Stasya. Life’s short, and you’ve got strong allies. I know it’s your way to think you

can take on the world all by yourself. It's an admirable quality, even if it gets you into trouble half the time."

"But—"

"But you don't need to bear the weight of the world on your shoulders. Samuil is there for you, for us. And shoulders like his are made for bearing weight. Work with him, be allies. Please."

I bite back a reply, the heaviness of the situation pressing in on me.

"Fine. I'll... *try* not to be so headstrong and stubborn this time."

"Good. All I wanted to hear." He opens his mouth to say something else, but winces in pain instead. After a few moments of composing himself, he tries again. "God, this is irritating."

"Rest. I'll be close at hand, Vitya."

"You always are."

Exiting the room into the stark hallway, my mind races, thinking about what's next. Samuil is soon beside me, moving with that usual focused intent, every step calculated and sure.

The hospital's maze-like corridors seem endless. Outside threats and challenges await, casting shadows on our path. But one thing remains clear—our collective purpose. There's a solid foundation of trust between us built from years of navigating this life together and facing off against common enemies.

Sturdy and strong, it will carry us into battle.

CHAPTER 4

SAMUIL

Pungent, earthy aromas of borscht mingle with the savory scent of pirozhki, filling the expansive dining room with the warmth only a well-cooked Russian meal can bring. The rich, crimson soup, laden with beets and tender chunks of beef, steams in ornate porcelain bowls set before each of us.

Beside the borscht, pirozhki with varied fillings—cabbage, minced meat, and apples—lay on the finest China, their flaky crusts perfectly golden. Despite the inviting spread, a tension blankets the room.

My brothers, Andrei, Leo, and Roman, settle into their respective seats, while their wives, Sandra, Nikita, and Valentina, gracefully join, exchanging tight-lipped smiles that fail to hide underlying concerns. Damien, always the observer, lingers at the periphery, his keen eyes absorbing more than he lets on, waiting for the opportune moment to insert himself.

Sandra and Andrei's young twins chatter in hushed whispers at the far end, momentarily oblivious to the strain enveloping the adults, their youthful innocence a stark contrast to our grim demeanor.

My gaze intermittently moves between the meal and the people around the table. My family, bound by blood, loyalty, and dark secrets that have seeped into our very being, intertwining our fates inextricably. I restrain a sigh, leaning back in my sturdy oak chair, fingers gently drumming against the cool, polished wood of the table.

“No shop talk,” Andrei—the Boss—reminds sternly, his intense gaze sweeping across us, his usual firmness wilting under the weight of his worry.

A fragile silence follows until Nikita, the gentle ballerina with eyes reflecting years of discipline and soft strength, quietly asserts, “Some matters cannot wait, Andrei.”

My chest tightens as I break my silence. No time like the present to bring it up.

“Viktor Zaitsev was attacked.”

The name falls like a stone into a still pond, ripples of concern emanating throughout the room. Leo, also known as “One-Eye”, levels a sharp glance at me, while Roman’s steady gaze betrays a flicker of alarm.

Valentina, once known as “The Ghost,” exudes an eerie calm, her eyes flashing with a glint of dormant danger while Sandra’s spine stiffens noticeably. Her alliance with our family is more than marital, it’s a strategic union of powerful bloodlines. Any threat to our stability is an insult to her legacy.

“They intended to eliminate him from the Death Match,” I continue, voicing the ugly truth. “At least, that’s my theory.”

“And Anastasia?” Roman probes, his measured tone threading a thin line between concern and strategy.

My jaw clenches at the mention of her name, emotions surging like a storm beneath my composed exterior. “She’s entered in his stead.”

A chorus of exasperated sighs and groans intertwine, while Sandra’s eyes, fierce and maternal, lock onto mine. “This is not her fight, Samuil. She doesn’t belong in that underworld.”

“She believes it’s the only way to get the prize money they need,” I confess, every word heavy with a mix of admiration and trepidation for Anastasia’s audacious move.

My eyes linger on Damien, his observant silence finally breaking. “The attackers, they weren’t professionals, or Viktor would not be breathing.”

My nod concedes to Damien's bitter truth. His presence, though stemming from a painful betrayal in our family, often brings valuable insights. Perhaps that's why—despite the underlying animosity—his place at our table remains unchallenged.

I slowly stand, the chair scraping softly against the floor. "I'll coach her, keep her as safe as possible," I vow, more to myself than to those around me. "And concurrently, we find and deal with those who dared lay hands on our friend."

Silent nods of approval encircle the table, the unspoken pact lingering, embedding itself into the very bindings of our familial ties of retaliation and protection. While the world outside remains blissfully ignorant, we continue on with our dinner.

My mind, however, remains partially elsewhere, tethered to a brave woman with determination in her eyes and a fighter's spirit, about to immerse herself into a world where even the fiercest warriors fear to tread.

We eat, but it's only a matter of time before the topic is broached once more.

Andrei, his eyes dark wells reflecting the burdens he shoulders, initiates our forbidden dialogue, his voice a quiet rumble. "Samuil, what happened to Viktor is not isolated, I can feel it."

I nod, a union of agreement coming from every soul in the room. "It's Van."

Andrei's eyebrow raises. "Van?"

"Van Babanin. A local bookie whose got his greedy fingers in every damn pie."

Sandra leans forward, her intellect and shrewdness ever sharp despite the softness in her eyes. "I've heard of him. Parasitic scum, the type of man who will do anything for a ruble. But this is a direct assault on our family."

Leo interjects thoughtfully, his eyes flickering with an astute calculative glint. "It's more than that. It's a statement, a

display designed to rattle our composure and undermine our standing.”

Every word hangs in the air.

“Here is my theory. Van wants to manipulate the odds, increase the bets, and in doing so, increasing his cut,” I add.

With her usual calm, Nikita takes Leo’s hand. “We’ve seen worse. We stand firm.”

Her grounded voice brings a collective nod of agreement.

Roman, always the strategist, brings up a point. “He’s no rookie, and he’s got backup. Whatever move we make needs to be sharp.”

My thoughts snap to Anastasia, headstrong and diving into unknown danger.

I catch Valentina’s sharp eyes on me. Her history as The Ghost silently warns of the dangers in our surreptitious world.

“Anastasia,” I say, the worry clear in my voice, “She’s right in the middle of this mess now.”

My raw concern is met with agreement, not pity.

Damien, always trying to prove his place in the family, speaks up. “So we prep her. Give her everything we’ve got.”

His straightforward words underline what we’re all thinking. Blood ties or not, we’ve got each other’s backs.

Andrei scans us all before declaring, “We face this Van issue together, make sure he doesn’t cause more damage.”



The smell of sweat and the unmistakable metallic hint of the gym’s equipment fill the air as I push open the door. Morning light sneaks in through the cracks in the blinds, partially illuminating the dark room. Anastasia’s already there, muscles glistening with sweat, hair pulled back in a fighter’s ponytail. She’s a vision—a deadly one. It’s too damn early to be this on edge.

She doesn't flinch, continuing her high kicks, each snap of her leg sharp and deliberate. Her focus is laser-tight, but it doesn't stop her from speaking without looking in my direction.

“Took you long enough.”

Grit and determination line her voice, and despite the casual jest, I can sense the warrior beneath, preparing for the battle ahead.

I grunt a noncommittal reply, sauntering over to where she's methodically working through her routine. The air is charged, and it's got nothing to do with the impending training session.

My hands, experienced in the art of both violence and restraint, twitch at my sides as she bends forward, wordlessly asking for assistance with her stretches. There's no mistaking the intention in her eyes—bold, unshielded. She's always been unafraid, almost to a fault.

“Help me stretch?” she finally speaks, eyes not leaving mine.

It's a simple ask. Innocent even, if it were anyone but her. My nod is curt, betraying none of the turmoil raging beneath my stern exterior.

I approach, hands steadying her, guiding her into the stretch. Every point of contact is fire and ice, an exhilarating and terrifying blend of emotions that I've forcibly buried for far too long.

Her muscles tense and release under my palms, each exhale she takes singeing my nerves. This isn't just training or stretching. It's an unspoken communication, a dance of concealed desires and forbidden lines in tentative motion. Her body is lean, toned, and powerful. All the same, it's impossible to not notice her curves, her shape.

Anastasia leans into the stretch, a slight grimace on her face. “Samuil,” she grunts, “this hurts more than I expected.”

“Then you haven't been stretching properly,” I say, gently pushing her further into the stretch. “Flexibility is key. You

can't expect to dodge or land a hit if you're too stiff."

She exhales slowly, eyes locking onto mine. "So what's the game plan?"

"First, your agility. We'll focus on drills to boost your reaction time." I adjust her position, and she winces but nods for me to continue. "Second, your endurance. I've seen how you fight. You've got speed and skill, but you need to last longer in the ring."

She smirks, that cocky grin I've grown so fond of. "You think I can't handle an extensive fight?"

I raise an eyebrow, one corner of my mouth tugging upward. "Prove me wrong."

She chuckles. "Alright, coach. What's next?"

"Strength training, but not just lifting weights. Functional strength. We'll integrate movements that mirror the dynamics of an actual fight."

She nods, eyes serious and determined. "Okay. Anything else?"

"We work on your strategy," I say, my hands guiding her into the next stretch. "Knowing when to strike, when to pull back. It's not just about landing a punch but landing it at the right moment."

She takes a deep breath, absorbing everything I've said. "Got it. Let's do this."

With that, she leans into my touch, an act of trust and subtle invitation, and it's almost too much.

"This isn't a game, Anastasia," I find myself growling, my voice low and edged with a warning.

Dark eyes filled with unspoken secrets, meet mine, "Who said I'm playing?"

The close proximity between us is suffocating. Every flex, every curve of her body under my hands has my mind racing. There's a familiarity in touching her, and yet today, everything feels amplified. Every time she groans—a soft, unintentionally

seductive sound—heat surges through me. It’s a sound I’ve never heard from her before, and it undoes me in ways I can’t articulate.

I try to focus on the stretch, on the intent behind the training session, but it’s becoming increasingly difficult. Her scent, a mix of sweat and something unique to Anastasia, wraps around me. My fingers brush the warm skin of her thighs as I adjust her position, and the taut muscles beneath her athletic wear betray just how fit and ready she is. The sight of her, glistening with sweat, her chest heaving as she breathes, the contours of her body emphasized by her fitted outfit, makes my throat dry.

“Samuil?” she asks, noticing my hesitation, her gaze questioning, piercing.

Dammit this is all sorts of wrong. My hand lingers on her back, inadvertently tracing the line of her spine, a boundary unmistakably crossed.

I pull away abruptly, my own limits clashing violently with the yearning pulsating through every fiber of my being.

“I need to grab some water before we begin,” I mutter, retreating hastily before things go a step too far.

As I head toward the door, I can feel her eyes boring into me, a mix of frustration and lingering desire likely mirroring my own. My skin is ablaze, hands trembling slightly as I fumble with the door handle.

The hallway beyond is cool, a stark contrast to the heated intensity of the room I just vacated. I lean against the wall, struggling to regain control over the chaos erupting within me. But my mind is awash with images of her—strong, resilient, tempting.

Shoving away from the wall, I stride toward the small kitchenette, the cold water doing little to quench the fire that Anastasia’s ignited.

My reflection in the small mirror above the sink reveals the visible battle being waged internally — dark eyes filled with discord; jaw tightly clenched. I’m the enforcer, the tough

wall that stands unyielding against chaos, but with her, it's different. It's always been different.

Gulping down another mouthful of water, I drag a hand down my face, steeling myself for what I must do. Protect her, train her, and keep my damn hands—and heart—off her.

When I reenter the training room, she's back to her routine, a mask of concentration adorning her features, but there's a fragility there that wasn't visible before. Our eyes lock, the moment stretches, and unspoken words hang heavy between us.

She's too damn smart to not have clocked my reaction. Her eyes, probing, maddening, hint at a understanding that I'm neither ready to face nor capable of acknowledging.

“Let's get to work,” I bark, more harshly than intended. Boundaries need to be reestablished if we're going to get through this unscathed.

But as we fall into a rhythm, her body moving fluidly through each strike and block, I can't shake the haunting thought that we're already far beyond any safe line, and retreating is no longer an option.

CHAPTER 5

SAMUIL

The noise of the underground is a symphony of chaos and anticipation, sounds bounding off the damp, mold-stained walls of an abandoned warehouse. An atmosphere of anarchy prevails as money changes hands, and bets are placed in hurried whispers.

The ring—more a makeshift space demarcated with battered ropes—is set aglow by the harsh light from rigged-up bulbs, creating an island of focus amid the commotion of the crowd. Shadows dance on the worn, blood-stained wooden planks, telling tales of previous violence.

My breath is a steady stream of controlled inhales and exhales, yet beneath my stern exterior, a storm rages, torn between duty and fear. Anastasia, hands wrapped, and eyes ablaze with excitement, turns toward me, her lips parting to speak.

“I can handle this, Samuil.”

My jaw clenches, eyes scanning over the beast of a man she’s about to face. He’s a mountain—muscles bloated with the aid of steroids, tattoos snaking over his limbs, each one likely marking victories of carnage. He grins, a grotesque display of overconfidence and disregard for the woman before him. A revulsion simmers within me, yet Ana, ever the warrior, doesn’t waver.

I lean closer, voice low and rough. “Ana, let me take the first round, test his weaknesses. You don’t need to prove anything here.”

Her gaze is unyielding. “But I do, Samuil. To myself, if no one else.”

With a huff, I fall back, eyes scanning the chaos around us. The air is thick with the scent of sweat, blood, and desperation, the latter most tangible in the hungry eyes of the audience, awaiting vicious brutality as entertainment.

Anastasia’s hand lands on my arm, a quiet reassurance, yet beneath her calm demeanor, I see a flicker of apprehension. She’s brave, not fearless, and the distinction becomes clear.

We walk toward the ring together, an unspoken pact tethering us amidst the bedlam. The crowd, a mass of impatience and exhilaration, calls out for violence, their cheers wild as the fighters are announced.

“Samuil,” she speaks, barely audible over the din.

I look down, met with eyes to a soul that has seen too much yet remains unbroken. “Stay safe,” my words are terse, emotion restrained, but she understands, nodding once before stepping into the ring.

As the lights dim, the announcer’s voice booms through the echoing space. “Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready for the main event of the evening?” The crowd roars in approval, the sound deafening. “In this corner, weighing in at two hundred and seventy-five pounds, undefeated in the last ten fights, is... Breaker!”

The crowd erupts again.

The announcer continues, his voice charged with excitement, “Facing him, the mysterious contender... Tsarina!”

I can’t help but smile at that. *Tsarina*, a name befitting the confident woman I’ve always known Anastasia to be. I’m not sure who gave her the nickname, but it’s perfect. Regal, powerful, yet unmistakably feminine. It’s a title she’s damn well earned.

As her opponent leers, a malicious intent gleaming in his eyes, Anastasia holds her ground, defiance etching every line of her frame.

The bell sounds, a dull clang signaling the commencement of brutality.

My hands curl into fists as he lunges, a snarl erupting from his twisted expression. Ana quickly sidesteps, but he's a torrent of raw, drug-fueled power and lands a grazing blow to her side. The crowd roars, a sound of fervor and collective bloodlust.

She regains her footing, darting in with a swift jab, then out again before he can counter. This dance of violence continues, and with every evaded strike, every counter she lands, the knot in my chest tightens.

It's not enough to avoid his blows—she has to dominate, to subdue and outwit the behemoth before her. She's capable and skilled, but he's a wall of unfeeling muscle, and every hit she takes is a searing pain in my own gut.

The round progresses, a blur of movement and aggression, each fighter landing blows, the outcome teetering on a razor's edge. Ana's footwork is precise, her strikes, deliberate. She moves with a grace born of strict discipline, and it's working. He's slowing, but he's not defeated.

The bell tolls again, signaling a pause, and as she retreats to the corner where I stand, our eyes lock, an exchange of unspoken words. I pass her a bottle of water, muscles coiled, ready to leap into the fray if need be.

She wipes blood from her lip, a scarlet streak against her pale skin, and says, "I've got him."

I can see the blaze of determination in her eyes, the unrelenting fire that is Anastasia. She has him, yes, but at what cost?

"Keep moving, Ana!" my rough voice echoes in the dingy, harshly lit underground space as the round resumes. Breaker growls, lunging toward her with a barbaric snarl.

"Get 'er, Breaker!" Shouts ricochet off the walls, blending with the thudding of flesh against flesh. Bettors jeer, sipping on cheap vodka and placing their money with cocky smirks.

Anastasia—lithe and hardened steel beneath softness—dodges each blow Breaker attempts, her every move a dance of survival and defiance. My insides coil with each near miss, every huff of her breath echoing in the chamber of my skull.

“Right hook coming!” My warning slices through the shouting of the blood-hungry crowd. Her body sways gracefully under the mammoth fist of the thug aptly named Breaker. Her counterattack—a swift, punishing jab to his kidneys—draws a satisfying groan from his brawny frame.

The crowd is roaring, their lust for violence heavy in the air. “Kill her, end it!” Someone shouts in vehement eagerness. The rest of the horde feeds off this, frenzied, though a few sporadic voices cut in, surprisingly on her side. “Give ‘im hell, girl!”

He’s winded, the colossal fighter. Ana’s resilience and unexpected prowess are like fine cracks spreading through his resolve. He’s off-kilter, staggering ever so slightly, and the tiniest of smirks plays across her lips.

My heart’s a damn drum, each thud in my chest syncing with her calculated strikes.

“Use his weight, Ana!” I holler the strategy to her. She hears me, her body swaying, reacting, the underdog in a dance with death.

The critical blow comes unexpectedly, a swift uppercut that connects with a vicious crunch, Breaker’s bulk crumbling to the filthy floor, a defeated goliath at the mercy of a ferocious, unyielding squall.

A blanketing, oppressive silence descends upon the room. Then, from somewhere amidst the shock-stiffened bodies, a slow clap starts, followed by another, then another, until the room reverberates with reluctant admiration and disbelief.

“The winner—Tsarina!” The announcer, a slimy-looking man, conceals his astonishment poorly, his voice quivering over the loudspeaker.

Whispers weave through the space.

“The hell just happened?”

“That girl took down Breaker?”

She stands tall, breaths coming in harsh pants, gaze meeting mine from across the ring. A nod, imperceptible to most, passes between us. Pride, stark and unyielding, alights in her eyes, and a formidable decision roots itself into the very core of my being.

A solitary moment freezes in time as Ana’s gaze becomes fixated on mine, her lips curling into a triumphant, yet tender, smile. Victory and an undercurrent of affection flickers in her eyes, a subtle shimmer just beneath the surface. She takes a step, then another, toward me.

In the abyss of that nearing embrace, the world shifts off-kilter, the shimmer of triumph shattered by a visceral roar that tears through the space between us. Breaker, monstrous and enraged, heaves himself from the canvas, muscles rippling with unbridled fury.

“Cheater!” His voice is a roar, mangled between pain and unyielding rage as he surges forward, a mass of vengeful brutality.

Ana’s lithe frame doesn’t stand a chance against the tidal wave of his anger. His punch connects, and the sight of her crumpling to the ground detonates something primal, something raw and unbridled within me.

No thought. Just reaction.

I lunge into the ring, muscles coiling and releasing with a single-minded purpose. A deep-seated, roaring rage lacerates through every fiber of my being as I slam into him, a cannon of unrestrained fury.

“You piece of shit!”

My punch connects with his jaw, bone meeting knuckle in a jarring, satisfying crunch. He stumbles, his massive frame unsteady, but my onslaught is relentless, every hit an outpour of pent-up anger, a tangible, physical manifestation of every suppressed emotion that’s been festering within me.

My voice, scraped raw, tears through my throat, “Touch her again, and I’ll end you.”

Every blow is a punctuated promise, an oath inked in pain and passionate anger. His retaliations are clumsy, weakened by the battering from Ana and my own unbridled assault.

Breaker collapses, the grimy canvas welcoming his bulky form once more, but there's no satisfaction, no triumph in the hollowness of my victory. My gaze snaps back to Ana, a motionless heap on the opposite side of the ring.

My limbs move on instinct, gathering her into my arms with a stark gentleness against the brutality that's just unfolded. Her breaths are shallow, her frame unsettlingly limp against my own, and something constricts, binds, and suffocates within the cavity of my chest.

She's out cold, eyelashes a delicate fan against her bruised cheek. The sight causes a silent, torturous scream inside me that echoes endlessly.

The world outside the ring is a blur, sounds and sights blending into an indistinct smudge. The only reality, the only thing anchoring me is the unconscious woman in my arms, and a smoldering vow that simmers in every hollow and alcove of my existence.

Her name, a soft, ragged whisper, teeters on the edge of my lips, my voice hoarse. "Ana..."

I carry her through the dim tunnels, away from the violence and vengeance, my heart swathed in rage and unspoken anguish. Her safety and recovery is the only thing that matters amidst the sweeping gale of emotions that threaten to dismantle me.

CHAPTER 6

ANASTASIA

“What the hell happened?” My throat feels like it’s made of sandpaper.

Consciousness grates against my eyelids, rough and disorienting. As I struggle to wake up, it feels like I’m clawing my way out from under a pile of rubble. A distant ache pulses through my skull, my brain insistent that I remember the cause of it.

I peel my eyes open, the world swaying slightly in an uneasy dance. This isn’t my bed, these aren’t my sheets, and the scent is all wrong, or rather, all too familiar. Cedar and something distinctly... Samuil. It fills my senses, comforting and disconcerting all at once.

I lie there for a moment, soaking in the quiet calm before my memory, fractured and jagged, begins to reassemble itself. The ring. The fight. The surging crowd. The anger etched in every hard line of Samuil’s face as he dove headfirst into violence for me.

My heart lurches in my chest, wild and erratic, as my feet touch the cold floor, a startling confirmation that I’m alive, that I survived.

My ankle protests, but it’s not the unbearable scream of something broken. More the dull, insistent throbbing of a sprain. Ignoring it, I edge myself upright, my hand instinctively sliding to my tender jaw. There’s no mirror, but I can imagine the mosaic of bruises painting my skin.

The distant murmur of a TV, dialogue low and indistinct, sparks my attention, and I hobble toward it, the scent of Samuil growing stronger with each step.

The sight that greets me in the faint glow of the living space sends a shiver—unexpected and complex—through me.

Samuil is sprawled on the couch, unconscious in a way that only total exhaustion allows, the steady rise and fall of his chest the only indication of life. He's half-naked, sweatpants slung low on his hips, every hard, muscular line of him on display. And there, amidst the raw, unguarded vulnerability of his rest, I see the aftermath of battle—his knuckles, a brutal display of purples and reds, and the darkening bruise that swells near his eye.

He's beautiful and dangerous, a lethal combination that I've always been drawn to, even as I recognize the danger it presents.

My breath catches, lodged somewhere between relief and an emotion too terrifying to name. He's okay. No, not okay, far from it, but alive. We're both alive, and that fact looms large, filling every corner of the room.

My limbs pull me forward, a gravitation that's more emotional than physical, until I'm hovering over him, my fingers twitching with the urge to soothe, to caress, to confirm the reality of his presence.

My heart's a traitor, rebelling with a flutter that feels entirely out of place. There's a tornado of butterflies, churning, wild and untamed, in my stomach as my eyes trace the contours of Samuil's peaceful face.

I've known this man for what feels like a lifetime, his presence a constant, unyielding fixture in a world that has always seemed to be swaying on the edge of chaos. I feel something shift as I gaze down upon him, something undefinable yet impossibly profound.

Surveying his sleeping form, I note the scars littering his skin. Each one speaks of a fight, a story of survival. Tattoos

cover some, making a statement of their own. I feel the need to touch them, to understand what's behind each mark.

His face, usually so hard and stoic, appears younger as he sleeps. Those lips, often set in a grim line, seem softer now, inviting. Why am I seeing him so differently? He's always been my protector, my guardian, in this dangerous world we live in. But the fierce way he defended me against Breaker has thrown me off, changed something in the way I see him.

I find myself sitting next to him, battling with these new emotions. My hand moves on its own, getting closer to his face, wanting to touch, to feel. His steady breathing is the only sound in the room, and I feel drawn to him, wanting more. I'm close enough to feel the warmth from his skin, my heart racing as I fight the urge to lean in.

His eyes slowly open, revealing that familiar intense gaze of his. My heart is practically jumping out of my chest, and the room suddenly feels small.

"Ana," he says, a hint of roughness to his voice that makes me shiver. It's just my name, but coming from his lips, it feels different, intimate. "What are you doing?"

I struggle to find the right words, his penetrating stare pinning me in place.

I manage a quiet, "I don't know, Samuil."

His hand moves, brushing my forehead with a gentleness I'm not used to seeing from him.

"You feel warm. Everything okay?"

His concern is evident, and I'm overwhelmed by the affection, the mix of his scent and the undeniable pull between us. Every part of me is acutely aware of him and the carnal energy that surrounds us.

"No... I mean, yeah," I stumble over my words, my breathing uneven. "I'm fine."

What I'm feeling isn't sickness. The weight of what's hanging between us is heavy, and it's threatening to suffocate

me. He searches my face, looking for something, and I feel exposed under his scrutiny.

“You’re not fine,” he says, his gaze hopping from bruise to bruise. “In fact, you look like shit.”

That gets a smile out of me. I laugh. “Such a gentleman.”

The corner of his lip curls. “There’s a time for gentleness, and a time for truth.”

His hand pauses near my cheek, a silent question. I see something in him, a softness I’ve never noticed before, hidden beneath layers of strength and resilience. It’s like catching a glimpse of something forbidden, and it emboldens me.

My fingers move, almost on their own, brushing against his. The spark of our touch sends a jolt through me. Words are on the tip of my tongue, but fear and uncertainty silences them. He inhales deeply, a hint of vulnerability before he draws back.

“You should get some rest, Ana.” His retreat feels like a cold slap, and my heart races, anxiety and desire a twisted knot inside me.

My fingers grasp at his, holding on desperately.

His eyes, intense and unreadable, fixate on mine. “I want to say thank you,” I can barely get the words out. “For everything. For being there.”

He doesn’t reply, but he doesn’t pull away, either. I lean in, brushing a soft kiss on his cheek.

We share a heavy, loaded silence before I release his hand and stand up. I head back to the bedroom, feeling him in every step, in every breath, the taste of what could be and the danger of wanting it, consuming me.

As I lay down, surrounded by traces of him, a mix of comfort and confusion envelopes me. The echo of our almost moment haunts my thoughts, igniting a fire I don’t know how to control.

CHAPTER 7

SAMUIL

The gym door groans open, revealing Anastasia in mid-workout. She's a force, power and grace combined. Sweat glistens on her toned arms, her tank top clinging to her like a second skin, revealing the curves of muscle beneath. Her hair is pulled back, strands sticking to her neck, as she delivers punch after punch to the bag.

It's a beautiful sight, and damn, I wish I could ignore it.

I swallow hard and try to shove down the tightening in my chest. I can't afford to get distracted. Especially not by her. There's an itch in the back of my mind, one that's got nothing to do with the way Ana's shorts hug her thighs or the rhythmic movement of her body.

The lead on Viktor's attack has been gnawing at me. That slippery bastard, Van, was seen yapping with Viktor just before everything went south. It could be nothing. Or it could be the breakthrough we need. Either way, I need to pin it down, find out what the hell is going on.

But right now, Ana commands the room even if she doesn't realize it. Every punch she throws, every move she makes, resonates with a kind of raw energy. It's a pull I'm fighting to resist.

The rhythmic thudding of Ana's fists against the punching bag fills my ears. My mind, however, refuses to settle on the present moment. It keeps trailing back to Van and the little tidbit I picked up. Why the hell hadn't Viktor mentioned anything about meeting with that weasel?

The head trauma could be messing with his memory. It's a reasonable assumption. I need to drop by the hospital later and press him for more details. He's got to remember something about the meeting with Van.

Finding Van has become a challenge on its own. The man's evasive, slipping in and out of shadows, showing his face only when he wants to. No known address, no pattern to his movements. It's infuriating. Not being able to find someone when I need them is a problem.

I've been trying to pin down a meet with him since the lead came up, but he's proving difficult. I have my ways, of course, but Van's been in this game a long time. He knows the ins and outs.

My fingers clench instinctively. He might be a ghost, but every ghost has its haunts. I'll find him. The thought firms my resolve. Right now, though, Ana's training demands attention.

She whistles, sharp and sudden, breaking my reverie. It's one of those playful, attention-grabbing wolf whistles, and I find my gaze snapping to hers almost instantly. Ana's grinning, her cheeks flushed from her workout, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

"What's frying your brain? I can practically smell you thinking," she teases, the corners of her lips turned up in amusement.

Her eyes, sharp and fierce, meet mine, and for a split second, the world narrows to just the two of us. I rip my gaze away, trying to focus on the racks of weights and equipment.

I grumble, irritated at having been so lost in thought that I hadn't noticed her attempt to catch my attention earlier. "Just Bratva business. Nothing you need to worry about."

She rolls her eyes at my evasiveness, her playful mood undeterred. Bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet, she tilts her head, indicating the open space of the gym's center. "You up for a spar? My next opponent is built like you. Think you can give me a taste of what to expect?"

I study her for a moment, taking in the challenge of her stance. Even though my mind's occupied with the Van situation, a good spar might help clear my head, center me.

“Alright,” I relent, cracking my knuckles. “But don't expect me to go easy on you.”

Ana smirks, a spark of anticipation lighting her eyes. “Wouldn't dream of it.”

Facing off against her in the middle of the gym, I can't help but notice the contrast of our forms—her relatively slight build versus my bulkier, muscled physique. But I've seen the damage she can do. It's astonishing, the amount of power that small frame of hers can generate. It'd be a mistake to let appearances lull me into complacency.

Without a word, I peel off my shirt, the fabric clinging to the sweat already forming on my skin from our initial warmup. It lands in a heap beside the mat. I catch the quick flicker of Anastasia's eyes as they run down the expanse of my chest and abs. The slight pause in her breathing, the tiny hitch in her throat, doesn't escape me. It amuses me more than it should. Not wanting to directly address the moment, I simply arch an eyebrow and smirk.

“You ready, *Tsarina*?” I ask, using her new fighter nickname, a tone of mock formality in my voice.

She nods, determination flashing in her eyes. “Let's do this.”

Our dance starts slowly, each of us gauging the other's movements, a test of reflexes and intentions. Every step I take, every swerve, is calculated. I dodge her initial flurries with an agility that might seem out of place for a man of my build. But I've been in enough fights, enough life-or-death situations, to know that speed is just as valuable as brute strength.

Ana's focus is intense, her punches sharp and fast. I can see her trying to figure out how best to use my size against me. But she's still full of surprises. She feints left, and I fall for it, allowing her to land a punch square in my gut.

The force behind it catches me off guard. Damn, that stings more than I thought it would. My respect for her only deepens. If this is her now, at the beginning of her training, she's going to be an absolute terror in the ring soon enough.

"Nice shot," I grumble, trying not to show how much it actually hurt.

She grins, the fire of the fight alive in her eyes. "Just returning the favor."

"I see this is a real fight," I remark, a hint of dry amusement evident in my voice.

Ana's grin widens, her teeth flashing in a predatory smile, her energy contagious. "You'll know by the bruises just how real it was," she shoots back.

With a nod, I set myself, feet shifting on the mat as we size each other up again. She's quick, her movements agile and precise, every punch and kick backed by fierce determination. I manage to deflect most of her blows, countering where I can, but always maintaining a modicum of restraint.

As the minutes wear on, the air thick with our shared exertion, I sense her frustration mounting. Ana's nothing if not observant, and she's clearly caught on to the fact that I'm not giving it my all.

"You holding back on me?" she accuses, panting slightly as she deflects a half-hearted jab.

"What makes you say that?" I retort, feigning innocence.

She dodges another of my punches, her eyes blazing with fiery challenge. "I know you, Samuil. How am I supposed to learn if you're not treating this as a real fight?"

I resist the urge to smirk, knowing it'll only fuel her irritation. "Didn't want to hurt the Tsarina," I tease lightly, but there's a layer of sincerity beneath the banter. I've seen her fight, but the protective instinct in me doesn't want to see her hurt, not by anyone, and especially not by me.

She snorts, rolling her eyes. "Your concern is touching, but if I wanted to dance, I would've gone to a ballroom."

There's a gleam in her eyes, a clear challenge. Alright then. She asked for it. I lash out with a swift, controlled punch, aiming for her midsection. She dodges just in time, her grin widening.

"That's more like it," she says, her tone gleeful.

The intensity ratchets up, our punches and kicks becoming more forceful, more earnest. We weave and dodge, our movements a seamless tango of aggression and defense. Each time one of us lands a hit, it's met with a nod of acknowledgment, an unspoken agreement that this is what we both need—a real challenge.

Finally, leveraging my size and strength, I manage to get the upper hand. Pinning one of her arms behind her back, I twist and use my body weight to bring us both to the ground. Her back hits the mat, but she fights on, her legs instinctively wrapping around my waist, trying to force me off with sheer leg strength.

But I have her, and I use the advantage of my size and strength. I pin her other arm above her head, rendering her immobile beneath me. The air between us is thick, charged with the residual adrenaline of the fight.

We're both panting, the sound of our breaths mingling in the charged atmosphere. Our faces are mere inches apart, our eyes locked in a heated stare. The fierce defiance in her gaze softens to something else, something I recognize because I can feel its twin burning within me.

The closeness is intoxicating. Every inhale brings with it a combination of sweat and Anastasia's unique scent. I can feel the heat of her body, her heartbeat racing against my chest, her soft breaths tickling my face. The space narrows down to nothing else but this moment, this room, this woman beneath me.

The decision, it seems, is made for us. Drawn together as if by some invisible force, our lips meet. The kiss is soft at first, a mere brushing of lips, but it quickly deepens, becoming more urgent, more passionate. The world around us fades

away, as we become lost in the whirlwind of emotions that have been unleashed.

The feeling of our bodies pressed against each other amplifies the urgency of the kiss. The heat, the friction, it's maddening. I can feel every curve of her beneath me, every rapid breath she takes. When my hardness brushes against her womanhood, the world tilts on its axis. She gasps, her body arching into mine, seeking more contact, more of that electric sensation. Her moan, throaty and filled with want, goes straight to my groin.

Goddamn it.

That sound, coupled with the unmistakable feeling of her wet heat against me, has my control teetering on the edge. The raw need, the want, is overpowering, and for a brief moment, all I want to do is sink into her, and allow the passion to consume us both.

But as if I were splashed with cold water, the weight of reality crashes down on me. This isn't right. It's a dangerous path we're on, filled with complications and repercussions we can't come back from. My grip on her wrists tightens momentarily before I force myself to let go and push myself off her.

She looks dazed, her chest heaving, lips swollen from our kiss. Her eyes, previously darkened with lust, now hold a hint of confusion, maybe even a touch of hurt.

"We can't," I growl, my voice rougher than I intend. "We can't allow this to happen."

She's speechless, still processing, still coming down off the high of our intense connection. The air in the room is thick.

With one last lingering look, I turn on my heel and stride out of the gym, trying to put as much distance as possible between me and the tempest of emotions Anastasia has awakened in me. Every step away is a fight against the primal urge to go back, to claim, to consume.

As I make my exit, I can feel her eyes on my retreating form, can practically feel the mix of desire, confusion, and frustration emanating from her. This wasn't part of the plan, and now I'm left grappling with the fallout of a moment that threatens to change everything.

CHAPTER 8

ANASTASIA

My heart pounds like a war drum, echoes from the kiss replaying over and over in my mind. One moment we were grappling, wrapped up in the fight, and the next, we were tangled up in a passionate ballet of lips and tongues, desire and longing. The sensation of his hardness against me, that undeniable evidence of his want... it was intoxicating.

I try to throw myself into another round of shadow boxing, hoping to cool down and erase the memory of what just happened. Each jab, each kick, I picture landing on a phantom Samuil, but it's impossible to shake away the thoughts of how his lips felt on mine or the weight of him pressed against me. The heat of the moment, the intensity of our connection, is the only thing on my mind.

Screw it.

I drop my gloves, making a beeline for the exit. I can't—won't—leave things as they are. I have to confront him.

Minutes later, I'm outside Samuil's apartment. My knuckles slam against the wooden door with a force that speaks of my frustration and need for clarity. "Open up, Samuil!" I demand, my voice echoing down the hallway.

No answer.

Damn him.

"Come on, you coward!" I shout, the sting of his abrupt departure evident in my tone.

That seems to do it. I hear the distinct sound of a lock turning, and suddenly the door flies open, Samuil standing there, his eyes dark and stormy, jaw set in a hard line. The bare skin of his chest heaves with every breath, making it hard to keep my gaze fixed on his eyes.

“I’m no coward,” he growls, his voice low and threatening. I can sense I’ve struck a nerve, took a swing at his ego, and said words that, if uttered by anyone else, would’ve been answered with fists.

My chin lifts defiantly. “Then why did you run?”

For a split second, our eyes lock, a myriad of emotions swirling between us — anger, confusion, desire. We’re teetering on the edge of an unwanted confrontation, and one push might send us over the brink. But I’m ready for it, no matter where it leads.

Samuil’s posture stiffens, his eyes flitting away momentarily as he searches for the right words. I recognize the familiar look of frustration, of struggling to articulate feelings, creeping into his features. I’ve seen it countless times before when he’s tried to communicate in situations that don’t involve brute force.

“You know it’s not that simple, Ana,” he mutters, his gaze fixed firmly on a point just over my shoulder.

I step closer, shortening the distance between us, hoping he’ll make eye contact. “Then make it simple. Talk to me.”

But he’s already shaking his head, a weary resignation in his eyes. “You know me. I’ve never been good at expressing myself with words.”

A sigh escapes my lips, my impatience mounting. “I know, but...” I pause, biting my lower lip as an idea forms. I take another step, forcing him to look at me. “If you can’t tell me how you feel, then show me.”

His eyebrows knit together, a confused expression shadowing his face for a second. But as the implication of my words sinks in, his dark eyes burn with intensity, raking over

my form. I feel the weight of his gaze and the sexual tension hanging thick between us, threatening to ignite at any moment.

We stand motionless and silent for a heartbeat, suspended in the intensity of our connection. I wait for him to act, to take the next step, to bridge the gap between words unspoken and feelings unexpressed. The ball is in his court now.

The air between us vibrates with an almost electric charge, a crackling tension we've both been denying for far too long. Then, like magnets, we are pulled together, our lips colliding with a fervor born of suppressed desires. His mouth is demanding, his kiss stealing every ounce of rational thought from my brain. The sheer passion behind the kiss and the intensity of the moment causes my knees to wobble.

He pulls back momentarily, eyes hooded, voice laced with a mix of lust and conflict. "Ana, this is... God, this is such a bad idea."

The audacity of his statement, the contrast of his words versus his actions, causes a chuckle to escape—a soft, breathy sound against his lips. "Is it now?" I challenge, a smirk forming as I slide a hand up his chest, feeling the hard plane of his muscles.

He groans, a low, throaty sound, and the next second we're lost to the passion again. Hands roam, touching, exploring, claiming. Every layer of clothing we shed only serves to intensify the need, the hunger between us.

His form is a marvel to behold—broad shoulders, powerful arms inked with tattoos, each one telling a silent story of the life he's led, the challenges he's faced. His chest is a vast expanse of chiseled muscle, leading to a core that's just as hard and defined. How had I missed this? I had overlooked the raw, undeniable appeal of this man, hidden beneath the facade of the protective brother figure.

His hands are equally assertive, pulling me close, leaving no space between us. Every inch of him is solid, demanding, insistent. As we continue our heated path to the bedroom, I find myself eager, almost desperate, to discover every hidden

facet of this man who has suddenly turned my world upside down.

By the time we hit the edge of the bed, it's clear neither of us is in control anymore. We're both at the mercy of this tidal wave of passion, willing to be swept away wherever it may lead. All reservations, all inhibitions, have evaporated, replaced by a primal need to be close, to explore, to claim and be claimed.

The smoldering look in his eyes intensifies. "Ana," he rasps, voice roughened by arousal, "there's something specific I like in the bedroom." He pauses, as if gauging my reaction. "Only if you're up for it, of course."

Curiosity flares within me, blending with the smoldering arousal. I'm intrigued by this sudden revelation, eager to delve deeper into this uncharted territory of desire. "Tell me," I whisper, eyes locked onto his, challenging, urging him on.

He reaches down to a discreet black box tucked beneath his bed. As he carefully opens it, I realize the sight before me is unexpected—yet thrilling. Bondage gear containing soft ropes, a blindfold, and a few other things I don't quite recognize.

Samuil is trying to gauge my reaction. "Nothing too wild," he says. Just enough to heighten the senses. It's all about trust."

My eyes remain fixed on the items, the gleaming silver and contrasting black materials. I've never tried anything like this before, and yet the very sight of these toys ignites something within me, a fire of curiosity and desire. I'm aware of a throbbing heat, a pulsing anticipation that makes me feel more alive than ever.

"I'd like to tie you up," he continues, voice gravelly, dripping with intent. "Let you experience the pleasure of completely giving in, letting go." His gaze probes mine, dark and intense. "Only if you want to, of course."

Every nerve in my body screams yes. The thought of being at his mercy, of surrendering control to this man who's proven

himself over and over again, is overwhelming. I bite my lip, a thrill of excitement zinging through me, before nodding. “Yes. I want it.”

Samuil’s smile is reassuring and seductive. He moves deliberately, selecting a soft rope. His fingers graze my skin, causing shivers as he binds my wrists, securing them to the bedposts with meticulous knots. The act is slow, intimate. With every loop and pull, I feel more exposed, more vulnerable, the sensation intensified by the knowledge of the power he holds.

By the time he finishes, the combination of excitement, anticipation, and vulnerability has my body humming, yearning for whatever comes next. The slight pull of the restraints, the limited movement, only serves to enhance the feeling, drawing me deeper into the experience. The mere act of being tied up has me restless, ready and eager for the dance of dominance and submission we’re about to embark on.

The room is alive with the electric hum of desire, a raw energy thrumming between us. After ensuring protection, he shifts, aligning himself with me. The moment he enters me, it’s as if every inch of him seems tailor-made to fit me, a perfect puzzle piece, a synergy that leaves my head spinning.

The sensation of the ropes around my wrists adds a layer of complexity, a blend of restraint and freedom. Initially, the bondage feels foreign, an uncharted territory. But with each of his powerful thrusts, the light pull against my wrists becomes a tantalizing anchor, grounding me in the experience. It transforms what could’ve been merely physical into something intensely emotional, an exercise in trust.

“Come for me, Ana. Now,” he growls, voice deep, drenched in authority. The command in his tone is unmistakable. It’s as if his words have unlocked something within me. With a loud cry, I shatter, pleasure consuming every inch of me.

His own climax follows, his body tensing as waves of pleasure overtake him. There’s a stillness, a quiet intensity as we both come down, trying to regain our bearings. The

sensation of him still inside me, and the ropes binding me, add a layer of intimacy to the moment.

Post-climax clarity descends on me, the world coming back into sharp focus. He gently unfastens the knots, releasing my wrists. The sensation of freedom, tinged with the lingering phantom feeling of the restraints, is oddly exhilarating. My body feels like it's been on a roller coaster ride, full of thrilling peaks and nerve-racking drops.

Instinctively, I gravitate toward him, like a moth to a flame. All I desire in this moment is to feel his solid frame against me. His arm, muscular and reassuring, curls around me, pulling me into the warm cocoon of his body. His heartbeat is a steady rhythm against my ear, lulling me into a sense of tranquility.

Every brush of his fingers, every gentle press of his lips against my temple, is a balm to my slightly raw nerves. The comparison between the Samuil in bed—commanding, demanding—and the tender, protective figure holding me now, is striking. He seems to understand, without words, the exact manner of comfort I need after venturing into the unfamiliar terrains of our desires.

His voice, a soothing baritone, rumbles in my ear, “You okay?”

I nod, snuggling closer. “More than okay. Just processing.”

His chuckle vibrates through me. “Take all the time you need. I'm here.”

My mind whirls, replaying every touch, every sensation, and the unbridled passion. It's both overwhelming and exhilarating. A small laugh bubbles up from my chest. “What the hell did we just do, Samuil?”

He chuckles, his breath warm against my hair. “Started something unexpected, yet not unwelcome.”

That sentiment perfectly captures the storm of emotions brewing within me. This is surprising, and the path forward is uncertain. Yet, there's a thrill in the unpredictability.

In the warmth of his embrace, surrounded by the comfort of his presence, sleep edges in, slowly drawing me into its grasp. The last thing I register, as my eyelids grow heavy, is his lips pressing a soft kiss to my forehead.

CHAPTER 9

SAMUIL

The dim light filtering in from the outside catches her form, drawing me from the depths of sleep. It's a jarring realization to wake up with Anastasia nestled beside me. A tumultuous mix of regret and satisfaction roils within. We've shattered a boundary, danced over a line neither of us had probably ever envisioned crossing.

She looks different in sleep, softer. Those fierce eyes that can pin a man in his place with just a glance are now hidden behind closed lids. Her full lips are slightly parted, her breathing deep and rhythmic. For all the fire and fierceness I know she carries, when she sleeps, she appears almost delicate, fragile.

As I watch her, she stirs, those keen eyes of hers cracking open and locking onto mine. That familiar spark, always lurking just beneath the surface, is there, but it's accompanied by a hint of mischief.

"Enjoying the view?" she teases, her voice raspy from sleep, but the playful undertone is evident.

It's a moment of lightness, of shared banter that helps break the tension of the moments-after. It's not lost on either of us that the dynamic has shifted, that there's an underlying current now that neither of us had truly been prepared for.

The room has that post-coital calmness to it, our breaths syncing in the quiet. Ana's fingers trace absent patterns on my chest. I feel her sigh more than I hear it. "Viktor..." she begins, hesitating, weighing what she wants to say next.

I tighten my grip around her slightly, feeling that familiar spike of worry. “You think we should tell him?” It isn’t a question I want to ask, but it’s one that needs to be raised.

She frowns slightly, her gaze distant, “I mean, he’s my brother. But then, we’re both grown-ups, Samuil. We shouldn’t need his approval for... this,” she says, motioning vaguely between us.

“I respect him,” I reply, my voice low and contemplative. “If we’re going to be, you know, something, then he should be aware.”

“But what if this was just a momentary lapse in judgment?” she counters, a playful glint in her eyes, though I can tell she’s half-joking.

I chuckle, but it’s short-lived. “Then why add drama to it? Let it be our little secret.”

She raises an eyebrow, her lips tugging into a sly grin. “So then, what are we, Samuil?”

I meet her gaze squarely, feeling that familiar weight in the pit of my stomach. “I don’t know, Ana. This is new. Do we need to label it? Complicate things?”

She shrugs, her fingers stilling on my skin. “Not everything needs a label.”

My mind races. It’s a conversation I hadn’t been prepared for, but I should’ve seen coming. “Let’s not add pressure. Let’s see where this goes. Have some fun,” I suggest, trying to keep the atmosphere light, though the importance of the conversation isn’t lost on either of us.

She grins, her mood visibly lifted. “I like the sound of that.”

Our agreement hangs in the air between us, a pact of sorts. Only time will tell where this leads, but for now, we’re content to let the future remain unwritten.

My phone vibrates aggressively on the nightstand, the illumination from its screen an unwelcome interruption in the dimly lit room. I reach for it, already knowing that late night

texts are rarely good news. The message is simple but telling, *Van's been spotted at the Black Diamond. Poker game.*

I mutter a curse. The Black Diamond, one of our Bratva's less conspicuous, illegal underground dens. High stakes, higher egos. Perfect place for a snake like Van.

"I gotta go," I say, moving to get dressed, the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders.

"You going without me?" Ana's voice cuts through the silence. I glance back to see her sitting upright, sheets pooling at her waist, the fierce glint in her eyes speaking volumes.

I sigh. "You should stay here. It could get dangerous." But as the words leave my lips, I realize how empty they sound. This is Anastasia, fear isn't in her vocabulary.

She hops out of bed, swiftly collecting her clothing. "You think I'm just gonna lie here while you chase down my brother's would-be killer? Think again, big guy."

I can't resist pulling her close, my hands on her waist. "Just promise me you'll stay close to me. No rogue-hero moments, okay?"

She tilts her head, lips brushing mine. "Promise if you do."

We head out into the night, the promise of danger in the air. I'm not sure how much I like the idea of Anastasia walking into said danger, but I feel ready for whatever the underworld has to throw our way.

CHAPTER 10

ANASTASIA

Who the hell is this man I'm with?

As we near the entrance of the club, I find myself genuinely puzzled. The Black Diamond—notoriously known for its backroom deals and illicit activities—looms ahead. The building itself is an enigmatic structure; tall, dark, and seemingly void of any life, save for the faint thump of bass resonating through the thick walls and the soft, neon glow of the club's namesake. At the door, two hulking figures stand guard, their size and demeanor clearly indicating that this isn't the place for casual visitors.

Samuil, a man I've always seen as protective, maybe even a bit overbearing, seems to morph into something else as we walk. I've heard the stories, I've seen the scars, and I've even witnessed a few of his fights, but this? This is different. This is him in his element, the feared lieutenant of the Bratva, the man whose reputation is whispered about in dark corners and hushed tones.

I recall the late-night discussions, the quiet moments in the shadows when he'd share a tidbit of his world, always careful, always censored. But now, as we near the entrance, he looks taller, more intimidating. A palpable aura of power and danger surrounds him, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"You sure about this?" His voice cuts through my thoughts, deep and rumbling, carrying that signature blend of concern and command. "Last chance to bail."

I meet his gaze, the intensity of his eyes piercing through me. “Where you go, I go. Remember?” I smirk, “I’m your shadow for the night.”

He smirks back but says nothing, just nods, respecting my decision. He approaches the door, giving a curt nod to the guards.

“*TeHb*,” he utters the password. Shadow.

After a moment’s hesitation, one of the guards steps aside, granting us entrance. The door opens into the belly of the beast, pulling us into a world unknown, a world where the stakes are as high as the risks.

As I follow Samuil in, I can’t help but think that tonight, I’ll finally witness the legend in action.

Walking into the Black Diamond feels like entering a completely different world. The bland, almost foreboding facade is deceptive, hiding the opulence within. Gold accents shimmer in the dim lighting, set against rich, dark wood. The clientele is visibly elite, their attire ranging from high-end designer suits to designer dresses that probably cost more than most people make in a year. Samuil is in a suit, and I can’t help but feel a bit underdressed. Then again, I’d never been the evening gown sort of girl. Conversations meld into a low hum, interrupted only by the occasional shout or laughter.

In the center, cordoned off by plush velvet ropes, sits the poker den—a hive of activity where high rollers play for stakes I can’t even fathom. Flanked by stunning servers in tight, sequined dresses, they sip on champagne and high-end liquor as they contemplate their next move.

“So,” I lean in close to Samuil, trying to be heard above the buzz, “who are we here for?”

Without missing a beat, Samuil discreetly nods toward one end of the poker table. There sits a man who, though undeniably scruffy, drips with wealth. His suit, though well-tailored, can’t hide the sleazy demeanor that seems to cling to him. But what really grabs my attention is the mountain of

chips piled in front of him, a testament to either his skill or just sheer luck.

“Why don’t I go chat him up?” I suggest, already formulating a plan.

Samuil’s eyes flash with immediate rejection. “It’s not safe, Ana.”

“Hear me out,” I press on, my tone determined. “You walk up to him, he’ll see it from a mile away. But me? I’m just a woman looking to enjoy her night. Honey might be more effective than vinegar here.”

Samuil seems to consider it, though doubt is evident in his furrowed brow. I decide to press my advantage. Glancing down at his massive, scarred hands, I add with a smirk, “Or in this case, fists.”

He chuckles, albeit reluctantly, “Just be careful, okay?”

I nod, feeling a rush of excitement and trepidation. Approaching the table with a confident sway in my step, I prepare to engage with the snake in the suit. Time to see just how persuasive I can be.

The heavy scent of his cologne engulfs me as I approach, a sharp mixture of wood and musk, clearly expensive but applied too liberally. Stopping just beside him, I offer a bright smile. “Hello there.”

His dark eyes, quick and calculating, give me a once-over, lingering on my figure a beat longer than I’m comfortable with. But just as quickly, he shifts his focus back to the game, his fingers playing over his chips with a practiced ease.

“Company?” His voice is low and grating, drawing my attention back to his face.

I blink, slightly taken aback by the question. “Excuse me?”

With a smirk that’s too smug for my liking, he nods toward the exit. “Tell Yuri I’m good. Don’t need a working girl right now. Busy trying to up my winnings.”

I feel a familiar anger bubbling up, my hands twitching with the urge to connect with his smug face. But I rein it in,

opting for honey over vinegar as planned. “You’ve got the wrong idea. I’m not a call girl, just someone who’s intrigued by a man who seems to be on an impressive winning streak.”

He looks me up and down again, his smirk not wavering. “All you need to know is I have no interest in distractions while I’m at the table. Especially not from a pretty little thing trying to get in my good graces.”

I swallow my pride, reminding myself why I approached him in the first place. “Look, I just thought—”

He interrupts with a dismissive wave. “When I’m done for the night, maybe then. That is, if I find myself out of chips, needing some consolation.”

The clear insinuation in his words makes my skin crawl. I pause, carefully constructing my reply. “Let’s hope for your sake you keep winning then.”

He chuckles, seemingly amused. “Oh, I always do.”

I step away, my face neutral even as a cluster of emotions threatens to spill out. One part of me is ready to abandon the charade, to storm out in frustration. But another part, the ever-present strategist, reminds me there’s more at play than bruised egos. Whatever game we’re now engaged in, it’s bigger than a few snide remarks and petty jabs. I just need to figure out how to turn the tables in my favor.

I weave through the crowd back to Samuil, who stands with a sardonic grin playing on his lips. “Well, that looked... fruitful.”

Rolling my eyes, I retort, “Didn’t realize you brought me along for my skills in seducing sleazebags.”

He chuckles, though the sound lacks any real amusement. “I should’ve known better.”

I smirk, “Clearly. So much for that irresistible charm of mine.”

With a raised brow, Samuil asks, “What did he say?”

“He’s playing till he’s out of money. Said maybe he’d be up for a chat when and if that happens.”

Samuil's expression remains unreadable, the gears visibly turning behind those sharp eyes of his. For a moment, he's silent, his gaze fixed on the poker table, assessing the situation. Then, without a word, he strides forward, his aura of authority clear. He seats himself confidently, drawing attention immediately. I hold my breath, feeling the tension thickening in the air.

"Deal me in," Samuil says in a tone that isn't quite a request.

Van looks over, his expression one of faux surprise. "Look who's decided to join. But where's your money? You can't play without a stake."

It's evident he's trying to belittle Samuil, to assert dominance in his own domain. But I know Samuil. He's not easily rattled, and he doesn't play games he doesn't intend to win.

Samuil's jaw tenses for a moment, a clear indication that he's mulling over his next move. The moment stretches on, filled with a silent confrontation. The cards, the chips, the money—it's all a mere backdrop to the power play unfolding between them.

Samuil's confidence never wavers. Even in the tense ambiance of the underground den, he's an immovable rock. His eyes scan the table, the players, and then fall onto Van. Just when a hand concludes, and the other players' attention drifts to their winnings or their losses, Samuil leans in, addressing Van in a hushed but firm tone.

"How about we play for something other than money?" he proposes.

Van, trying to keep his facade of amusement, meets Samuil's eyes, clearly intrigued. "And what could possibly be more valuable than money to you?"

Samuil lets the question hang in the air for a moment, building the suspense. "Information."

Van's eyes narrow, his jovial demeanor dimming. "About what?"

Samuil leans in even closer, his voice a whisper that holds more weight than a shout. “You know exactly what.”

A pause ensues. Van’s false bravado starts to crumble, revealing the coward beneath. But then, with a sudden smug grin, he finds his voice again. “Alright, but let’s make this more interesting. If I win the next hand, I get to take your lovely companion out for the night.”

Samuil’s eyes flare with a dangerous spark. I can almost feel the heat radiating off him, the raw protectiveness clashing with the calculated risk he’s considering. He opens his mouth, ready to shut down Van’s audacious proposal.

But I beat him to it. “Sure,” I chirp, feigning nonchalance.

His head swivels to me, eyes wide in surprise. It’s a rare sight—Samuil caught off guard. “Ana—” he starts, his tone dripping with warning.

“No,” I cut him off. “It’s fine.”

He studies me for a moment, trying to decipher my motivations. But in truth, it’s not about the game, or Van, or even the dare. It’s about asserting myself, reminding him, and everyone else, that I’m not just a pawn or a prize. I make my own choices.

The tension at the table is now a living thing. Van, sensing an opportunity, shuffles the deck with a newfound enthusiasm as he chuckles and grins at Samuil. But beneath Samuil’s cool exterior, I can see the simmering rage. It’s not just the stakes of the game that are causing it. It’s the fact that another man sees me as something to be won or lost, a prize to be flaunted. The fact that I went along with it, even if in defiance, only fuels his anger.

As the cards are dealt, and the game progresses, I find myself grappling with mixed emotions of what I’m in the middle of. There’s the thrill of the gamble, the silent battle of wits and strategy playing out, but there’s also the tension between Samuil and me. Every glance we exchange, every subtle touch, speaks volumes.

Samuil's hand is strong. Anyone else at the table would fold against it. The friction in the room amplifies as cards are revealed, but there's an undercurrent of something else—I've been watching Van's every move, noting the subtle changes in his demeanor. There's a particular way he shuffles his cards around, a slight twitch of his wrist when he picks up certain ones.

He's cheating.

The realization is a punch in the gut, but I keep it to myself for now. If I'm right, we can use this against him.

It comes down to the last card. Van's face is the very picture of smug satisfaction as he reveals his winning hand. The reactions are immediate. Groans from some of the other players, an audible sigh from another. But Samuil, stoic as ever, remains impassive.

Van, gleefully rakes in his money, his eyes shifting to me. "Looks like you're my prize for the evening."

Samuil's jaw clenches. "The game isn't over."

Van laughs, looking between the two of us. "Seems to me it is. Unless you want to challenge the results?"

I can feel the hostility between them. Samuil's gaze is as cold as ice. He's weighing his options.

I touch Samuil's arm, drawing his attention. "Trust me," I whisper.

His eyes search mine for a moment, the internal struggle evident. Finally, he nods, although reluctantly. "You have your fun, Van," he says, voice dripping with disdain. "But remember, everything has a price."

Van chuckles, not taking the warning seriously. He reaches for my hand, attempting to pull me away.

I pull back, standing my ground. "I said I'd go with you. But don't think for a second that you can treat me like one of your paid companions."

He raises an eyebrow, intrigued and slightly amused. "Feisty. I like it."

We exit the den together, my mind racing, planning. If Van thinks he's won this game, he's got another thing coming.

I can't wait to show him what happens when you cross the Tsarina.

CHAPTER 11

ANASTASIA

The plush leather of Van's car can't disguise the sleazy atmosphere as we're driven through the city. Neon lights streak past, blending with the scent of his overpowering cologne. The back seat feels more like a predator's den than a vehicle. He's leaning back, arm stretched across the top of the seat, not even trying to hide the fact that his eyes are practically undressing me.

"You've got curves in all the right places," he comments with a smirk, eyeing me like a piece of meat.

I snort, feigning nonchalance. "You're very observant."

"And you're very tough. So many of these girls I spend time with, they're soft, too pampered for my liking. You're different."

His grin grows wider as he lowers his arm, his hand sliding over the seat, inching toward my thigh. But I'm ready. As soon as he touches me, my hand snaps out, catching his wrist in a vice-like grip. With a quick twist, I have him in a wrist lock that has him gasping in pain.

"Touch me without my permission again, and you'll lose that hand," I warn, my voice cold and unyielding.

He lets out a surprised laugh, his face reddening slightly from the pain but his eyes glinting with amusement. "You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

Releasing him, I lean back, allowing myself a smirk. "Trust me, you've only seen the tip of the iceberg."

The car pulls up to a swanky nightclub, its entrance teeming with patrons and a bright neon sign announcing its name. As we step out, the thumping bass from inside fills the air.

Van, rubbing his wrist but with a mischievous smile, offers his arm. “Shall we?”

I ignore the offered arm but walk beside him. “Lead the way.”

I make a mental note to up the flirtatiousness, a trait that doesn’t come naturally to me. I’m not one to bat my eyelashes at the boys, but if it means I can find out about who hurt my brother, it’s a small price to pay.

As we head into the club, I can’t help but consider my situation. With Samuil not around, I have a rare opportunity. I need to play my cards right, extracting as much information as I can without arousing suspicion. The game’s afoot, and I’m ready to play.

The club is opulent, dripping in golds and silvers. Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, their lights refracting and dancing in every direction, complementing the rhythmic beats blaring from the speakers. Plush velvet seats line the walls, with private booths encased in glittering beaded curtains offering some semblance of privacy.

While the place screams money, there’s also an undeniable layer of cheesiness. Golden statues that resemble Greek gods, with one sporting what seems to be modern-day sunglasses. The bartenders, though expertly mixing cocktails, wear flamboyant vests with too many sequins. Definitely not my kind of place.

Van, however, seems to be in his element. He strides in confidently, throwing wads of cash for the smallest of services. Every few steps, someone new approaches, each trying to one-up the other in their show of familiarity with him.

It’s a grotesque display, but it gives me the insight I need. Money, connections, a need for validation—Van wears his weaknesses on his sleeve. As much as I want to visibly cringe,

I bite my tongue, feigning awe at every turn. “You really know everyone, don’t you?” I say, batting my eyelashes for effect.

He grins, puffing up his chest even more. “Only the ones worth knowing.”

When we reach the bar, he doesn’t bother to ask me what I want. Instead, he orders the most expensive bottle of champagne, letting the numbers roll off his tongue, making sure I’m aware of the price as if spending that kind of money is an everyday occurrence for him. It might very well be.

With the bottle and an entourage of giggling women trailing behind us, he guides me toward a staircase. We ascend to the second floor where a private booth awaits. It’s secluded, draped in heavy velvet curtains and elevated, offering a panoramic view of the club below. The patrons seem like ants, scurrying about under the technicolor lights.

He gestures grandly to the booth, “After you.”

The game continues, and as we settle into our seat, I steel myself, ready to delve deeper, to prod and pry, searching for cracks in his armor. The night is young, and I’m just getting started.

Van lifts his glass in a toast, his smirk dripping with arrogance, “To unexpected pleasures.”

I raise my glass to meet his, and though I’m inwardly recoiling, I manage to muster a fake smile. “Cheers.” The champagne is smooth, a delightful burst of bubbles on my tongue. For a fleeting moment, I’m actually grateful for the luxurious drink, the sole perk of this entire situation.

But I can’t dawdle on that for long. It’s time to make my move.

In one fluid motion, I reach across the table, grabbing Van’s wrist and using his own momentum to twist his arm behind his back. Pushing him up against the back of the booth, I lean in close. He gasps, his face a mixture of surprise and pain. I can feel his pulse quicken under my grip.

“What the fuck!” he manages to spit out, trying to wrestle free, but I’ve got him locked in. “Where the hell did you learn

to—”

“My brother taught me everything I know,” I interrupt, pressing harder, enjoying the momentary power I have over him.

He winces. “Who the hell’s your brother?”

I smirk. “Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

With my free hand, I reach into the sleeves of his expensive suit, quickly finding the evidence of his deceit. Cards tumble out onto the plush carpet, revealing his tricks.

“I knew you would win,” I hiss into his ear. “I watched you carefully, saw how you were maneuvering cards from up your sleeve. You thought you had the upper hand, but you were never in control. We were.”

His eyes widen with realization. “You set me up!”

I twist his arm harder into his back, just enough to make my point. “Now, how about we have a real conversation?”

Van’s eyes dart around, looking for an out. In a last-ditch attempt, he throws the champagne from his glass straight into my eyes. I recoil from the sudden sting, releasing my grip. He seizes the opportunity, shoving me aside with a grunt. I stumble backward, blinking the liquid away, only to see him scrambling over the plush furniture, looking every bit the rat he is.

His escape plan is clear: get to the door, get out, and lose himself in the club’s crowd. He flings the door to the booth open with reckless abandon, but instead of freedom, he’s greeted with the broad chest of Samuil.

Van skids to a halt, nearly crashing headfirst into Samuil, who doesn’t so much as budge an inch. Van’s pale face twists in a comical mixture of surprise and dread. I can’t help but smirk at the poetic justice of it all.

“Going somewhere, Van?” Samuil’s voice is a deep rumble, dripping with venom.

Van gulps audibly, looking from Samuil to me and back. The fear in his eyes is obvious. I take a step closer, crowding

him. “Thought you could run?”

He’s trapped, literally backed into a corner, with Samuil on one side and me on the other. The realization that there’s no escape without significant pain has dawned on him, because he starts to stammer and stutter, “Look, I, I did, didn’t mean —”

Samuil’s patience is running thin. “Start talking. Now.”

Van’s bravado, what little he has left, crumbles entirely. His eyes dart between us like a trapped animal, and his voice shakes. “Viktor had a chat with me, wanted to know if I’d overheard anything suspicious. He had a feeling he was being watched. He didn’t specify, said he was suspicious of a certain group of people. But before I could relay anything, those thugs —”

“What thugs?” I press, eyes narrowing.

Van gulps again. “I don’t know, I swear. But there’s been talk, whispers about a new power player trying to stake their claim.”

“Names. Now.” Samuil’s voice cuts through, demanding and relentless.

“I don’t have names,” he says. “But I have something else.”

“What is it?” I demand, feeling very impatient.

Van’s rapid breathing is a sharp contrast to the stillness of the room. “He told me...” Van’s voice falters, “...he said he wanted a fresh start. Away from all this madness. He was going to bet against himself, throw the qualifier, and use the winnings. America was the dream.”

The information sinks in slowly, like ice through my veins. I cast a glance toward Samuil, his jaw tight as a shadow of hurt passes over his eyes.

“He wanted out?” Samuil’s voice is barely a whisper, disbelief painting every word. “He wanted out, and he didn’t tell me?”

Van looks on the verge of a breakdown, the weight of his betrayal clearly heavy on his conscience. “He wanted it to be a surprise. For you. For Ana. A way out for all of you. He said he had to make one final sacrifice for a fresh start.”

One final sacrifice? That sounds so much like Viktor. Always thinking about the bigger picture, always ready to bear the burden alone.

“We’ve been wrong this whole time,” I mutter, more to myself. “This wasn’t about turf or power. This was personal.”

Samuil nods, a new fire lighting up his eyes. “We need to find out who caught wind of Viktor’s plan. And more importantly, we need to figure out how.”

Van, sensing his immediate danger has passed, shifts uneasily. “Look, I’ve told you everything. Can I go now?”

Samuil gives him a long, hard look, clearly weighing the decision. Finally, he nods tersely. “Get out. And if you value your life, don’t breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Van doesn’t need to be told twice. He scrambles up and without so much as a backward glance, disappears.

I sigh, feeling the weight of this revelation. “Samuil, we —”

“Later.” His voice is gruff, clearly still processing. He moves to leave the room when I reach for the expensive bottle of champagne Van had ordered.

“What are you doing?” Samuil asks, his brows drawn together in confusion.

I smirk, twirling the bottle in my hand. “It would be a crime to let good alcohol go to waste. Besides,” I wink, “we might need it.”

His lips twitch into a reluctant smile. “Always one to see the silver lining, huh?”

“You know it.” Holding the bottle like a trophy, I follow him out of the club, both of us now more determined than ever to uncover the truth and get to the bottom of this.

CHAPTER 12

SAMUIL

I pull the bottle to my lips, taking another swig of the champagne. It's light and bubbly, a sharp contrast to the weight currently bearing on my mind.

Next to me, Ana moves with a silent grace, her form more subdued than usual. The bubbly liquid in the bottle we pass between us does little to lift the tension.

Her apartment building looms ahead, and as we reach the entrance, I can't help but break the silence, "You've been quiet."

She chuckles softly, "Considering the day, can you blame me?"

I can't, not really. The revelations, the danger, the newfound complexities in our relationship—it's a lot to take in.

"You are surprisingly gentleman-like," she teases, a playful glint in her eyes as I hold the door open for her.

I smirk. "Only for those I care about."

As we get to her front door, she begins fishing out her keys. But then she pauses, biting her lower lip, clearly wrestling with something.

"Ana?" I prod gently.

She sighs, shoulders slumping slightly. "I knew."

I raise a brow, "Knew what?"

“About Viktor. About his plan to move to the states.” Her eyes are filled with a blend of guilt and defiance.

Shock bolts through me, freezing me on the spot. “You knew? Why didn’t you tell me?”

She closes her eyes for a moment, collecting herself. “It wasn’t my secret to tell, Samuil. Viktor made me promise. He said he was going to tell everyone when the time was right.”

I’m struggling to process this. One of my best friends had plans to uproot his life and move continents away. And I had no idea. “How long?” My voice is sharper than I intended.

She flinches. “A few months.”

Every piece of the puzzle, every conversation, every hint I missed all start to click into place.

“You should’ve told me,” I growl, the hurt evident in my voice.

“I couldn’t betray his trust, Samuil. He’s my brother.”

Her simple statement hangs in the air between us, a chasm of emotions and unsaid words. I take a deep breath, trying to reign in the whirlwind of feelings. She had her reasons, just like Viktor did.

She unlocks the door and we enter her apartment. She closes the door behind me with a muted click. It’s a familiar space, one I’ve been in countless times, but tonight it feels different — charged with the undercurrent of our recent revelations.

She sighs, running a hand through her raven hair. It’s an unconscious gesture, one I’ve come to associate with her being deep in thought. She motions to her couch, a modern, sleek piece that I’ve always found comically small compared to the furniture in my own apartment. “Sit,” she says, her voice softer than before.

“Why?” I ask, struggling to find the right words. My heart feels tight in my chest, the thought of losing them, both of them, overwhelming. “Do you want to leave too? Is it something I did? Or didn’t do?”

Ana's eyes soften. "It's not about you, Samuil. Not everything is."

I can't help the flare of frustration. "Then why? Why keep this a secret from me?"

She takes a moment, searching for the right words. "Our dream, both Viktor and mine, has always been to make it big. To be professional MMA fighters, to stand on international stages and be recognized for our talent, not our family name or connections."

I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest, waiting for her to continue.

"Every time we've tried to make business connections, tried to secure deals or sponsorships, our family's ties to the Bratva have been a stumbling block. They're afraid, Samuil. Afraid of what being linked to us might mean."

I grind my teeth, the sting of her words hitting close to home. "So you think leaving Russia will change that?"

She nods, a sad smile touching her lips. "We have a better shot at making our dreams come true away from here. Where our name doesn't carry so much weight."

Silence falls between us, a heavy blanket of words unsaid and pent-up emotion.

I finally break the silence, my voice raspy. "I just... I wish you'd told me. I could've helped. Maybe found a way to change things here."

Ana reaches out, placing a gentle hand on my arm, her touch sending an electric jolt through me. "It's not that simple, Samuil. And it's not your responsibility to fix everything."

I snicker, looking away. The weight of it all feels crushing, and I'm left grappling with feelings of hurt, betrayal, and a burning desire to make things right. Whatever 'right' means in a world as tangled as ours.

Ana pushes a strand of hair behind her ear, her fingers trembling slightly, a hint of the vulnerability she's trying to mask.

She sighs, meeting my gaze squarely. “Samuil, there’s so much you don’t know.”

“Then enlighten me,” I reply, my voice more clipped than I meant for it to be.

She takes a deep breath. “Even though I was just a little girl when our parents were killed, that wound is still there. And every time we bump up against this world, it breaks open just a little bit. It still hurts even though it’s been so long now.”

I shift uncomfortably, remembering all too well the day I learned about her parents’ fate. My own involvement with the Bratva was only budding back then, but I had seen enough to understand the risks and the price of such a life.

She continues, her voice gaining strength. “But it didn’t stop there. Our grandparents, both of them, were thrown behind bars not long after. Crimes connected to the Bratva, of course. They didn’t last long in prison. Then our uncles, aunts, even distant cousins.... One by one, we lost them all. To bullets, to betrayals, to the damned choices that this life forced upon them.”

She looks away, and for a moment, I see the weight of her years, the weight of all the loss pressing down on her.

“All of it, every loss, every scar, is tied to the Bratva, to this world. And we’ve had enough, Samuil. We just want a fresh start, away from all this madness, away from the shadows that this life casts.”

I absorb her words, a myriad of emotions swirling within me. “You’re going to run away from everything you’ve known.”

She nods. “To protect our future, to ensure we don’t end up like the rest of our family.”

A long pause follows. I watch her, studying her features, seeing the determination etched into every line of her face. “I didn’t know about Viktor’s plan to throw the fight,” she admits. “But looking at it now, it’s a smart move. In doing so, he avoids the more dangerous rounds of the Death Match but still walks away with enough money to change our lives.”

I rake a hand through my hair, trying to process it all. “You’re trying to escape a legacy,” I murmur, a realization dawning.

Her eyes, dark and intense, search mine. “We’re trying to live, Samuil. Truly live, without constantly looking over our shoulders. Without fearing that every new day could be our last.”

The weight of her words settles over me, the implications of their choices, their dreams, and their struggles becoming all too clear.

The room grows quiet as I wrestle with my thoughts—the pressure of the looming tournament, the dangers of this life, Ana and Viktor leaving—all threatening to drown me. An idea, wild and reckless, sparks in my mind. I lean forward, eyes locked onto Anastasia’s. “Throw the next match. Just like Viktor was going to.”

Her eyes widen, taken aback. “What?”

“Bet against yourself,” I clarify, my voice as firm as iron. “Throw the match early on. The odds would be in favor of your opponent, anyway, given who you’ve been put up against to fight. People will think it’s just a slip, but we could make a lot of money if you play it right.”

Her face contorts in disbelief, eyebrows furrowing. “You’re asking me to lose on purpose?”

I swallow, searching for words. “Ana, it’s a way out. A way to gather enough to start fresh, away from here, away from the Bratva, like Viktor intended.”

Her stance grows rigid, disbelief clear in her eyes. “I’m not Viktor. I don’t know if I can lose on purpose.”

The desperation in her voice is palpable. It hurts to see her this way. “I can’t stand the thought of you getting hurt,” I confess, every word drawn from the depths of my being. “Not when there’s another way.”

She takes a step back, her breathing ragged. “It’s not that simple, Samuil. My pride—”

I cut her off, moving closer. “I know. But sometimes, the hardest choices are the ones that lead to a better life. I’d rather see you safe, away from all this chaos, than standing in that ring one more time.”

A conflicted look crosses her face, emotions at war. “Why?”

My throat tightens, the words I’ve held back for so long threatening to spill out. “Because I care about you,” I admit, voice rough. “More than I should. More than is safe in our world.”

CHAPTER 13

SAMUIL

Her eyes search mine, seeking the truth. Then, as if drawn together by an invisible force, our lips meet. The world fades away, the looming threats and danger evaporating in the heat of our shared passion. The kiss is desperate, a mingling of fear, longing, and need.

The passion between us is a raging fire, consuming everything in its path. The heat of the moment takes us, and clothes fall away one by one, landing carelessly on the floor. The world outside fades, leaving just the two of us in our own cocoon.

Ana's gaze is hungry, predatory even, as she teasingly runs her fingers down my chest, her nails scratching lightly, sending jolts of pleasure coursing through me. I watch, captivated, as she shifts, moving down my body, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

The heat of her breath against my skin is tantalizing. As she takes me into her mouth, my body tightens in response. The sensation is almost overwhelming, a combination of the pleasure she's giving me and the intoxicating intimacy of the moment. I can't help but watch as she works, her movements confident and sure.

It's not long before the pleasure intensifies, threatening to become too much. With a growl, I gently grip her hair, signaling her to stop. She releases me, her eyes shimmering with mischief, lips moist, a smirk of satisfaction playing at the corners of her mouth.

“So,” she breathes, her voice laced with pride, “you liked that?”

I chuckle, a deep rumble from the depths of my chest. “You have no idea.”

Ana laughs, her teeth catching her lower lip in a move that’s both innocent and seductive. We’re both caught up in the haze of desire, the raw intensity of the moment binding us together.

We continue our dance, teasing, tasting, touching. Every movement, every whisper, a promise of the pleasure yet to come.

I lift Ana effortlessly, placing her on the couch. A soft gasp of surprise escapes her lips, her eyes sparkling with a mix of excitement and anticipation. The wicked smile she wore moments ago now replaced by a look of longing. I meet her gaze for a heartbeat, savoring the raw emotion there before I make my move.

Slowly, deliberately, I move between her thighs. My hands grasp her hips, pulling her closer, aligning us perfectly. I can feel her trembling, a shiver of anticipation running through her. I lower my head, and the heady aroma of her arousal fills my senses. I pause for just a moment to drink it in, then with a firm and confident touch, I begin exploring her most intimate places.

The room is silent except for the sounds of our breathing and the soft moans escaping her lips. Every gasp and every quiver fuels my need to please her, to make her lose herself in the waves of pleasure I’m determined to bring her. She tastes like a combination of sweet nectar and fiery passion, and I’m intoxicated by it.

Her hands find their way to my hair, fingers threading through the strands, gripping and tugging with increasing intensity. I can feel the crescendo building, the tension in her body reaching its peak. I double my efforts, driven by the primal urge to see her come undone.

Her voice rises, filled with breathless pleas and moans. And then, she's there. I can feel her release as it courses through her, her body bucking and twitching with the force of it. Her grip in my hair tightens as she cries out, and for a moment, everything else fades away. All that matters is Ana, her pleasure, and the undeniable connection between us.

As the waves of her climax begin to recede, I pull back, looking up to see her flushed face, her eyes shining with satisfaction. The sight takes my breath away, and for a moment, we're locked in a wordless exchange.

Lifting her, I relish the sensation of her legs wrapping around my waist. She feels delicate and weightless, yet I'm fully aware of the fire and strength she harbors. I push her up against the wall, the cool surface a stark contrast to the heat of our bodies. The position is intimate, our faces mere inches apart, our breath mixing in the charged space between us.

I lean in, capturing her lips in a deep, soul-searing kiss as I start to move inside her. The rhythm is slow at first, each thrust deliberate and deep, drawing moans of pleasure from her. The sensation of having her pressed against the wall, the full weight of her body supported by mine, is intoxicating.

Her hands grip my shoulders, nails digging into my skin as the pace increases. The world narrows down to just the two of us, the sounds of our combined passion filling the room. As I feel her nearing the edge again, I focus all my energy on getting her over it, my movements growing more frantic.

When she climaxes again, it's as if a storm breaks inside her, and I hold her tightly, letting her ride it out. Her cries of pleasure echo in my ears, a symphony of satisfaction that leaves me elated and gratified.

Breathing heavily, she gives me a sultry look and with a mischievous glint in her eye says, "Sit." She nods toward a plush chair nearby.

Raising an eyebrow, I reply, "Bossy, aren't we?"

She grins, "You have no idea."

The sight of Ana's silhouette disappearing into the bedroom stirs something deep within me. My gaze lingers on the tantalizing curve of her hips and the strong, toned muscles of her legs. When she returns, the soft fabrics in her hand immediately catch my attention.

Raising an eyebrow, I ask, "What's this?"

A mischievous smile plays on her lips. "Payback time," she says with a wink.

She approaches me confidently, the glint in her eyes making it clear she's about to take charge. There's a thrill in the uncertainty, in not knowing what she has planned. Seeing this dominant side of her along with the tender moments we shared earlier strikes a chord within me, fanning the flames of desire.

Ana takes my hands and slowly binds them behind me. The fabric feels soft against my skin, but her knots are secure. I test their strength, pulling slightly, but they hold firm. She's done a good job.

She looks at me, satisfaction evident in her gaze. "Comfortable?" she teases.

I smirk. "Do I have a choice?"

She laughs softly, the sound sending shivers down my spine. "Not anymore."

Ana takes her position atop me, her movements graceful and deliberate. The feeling of her taking control, the sensation of her weight pressing down on me, the warmth and wetness as my cock slides deep within her is overwhelming, an intoxicating mix of pleasure and anticipation.

My bound hands amplify every other sensation, making me hyperaware of each touch, each movement. The control she has over me in this moment is exhilarating.

As she rides me, her movements are fluid, rhythmic. She leans forward, her breath warm against my ear, her moans a testament to the pleasure we're both experiencing. I can feel the tension building within me, the pressure intensifying with each thrust. She moves faster, in a perfect rhythm.

Unable to touch her, I focus on the sensations, on the sound of our combined moans of pleasure, the feeling of her skin against mine. Every so often, she leans down to capture my lips, her kisses a mix of sweetness and ferocity.

It doesn't take long for the building pleasure to reach its crescendo. She throws her head back, her silhouette framed by the dim light, a vision of pure ecstasy. I can feel her pussy clenching me tightly.

I grunt and come hard, shooting my load deep inside her body, the orgasm all consuming.

As the intensity of the moment fades, she unties the fabric, releasing my hands. I pull her close, our bodies intertwined in a comforting embrace.

“Quite the turnabout,” I murmur into her hair, breathing in her familiar scent.

She chuckles softly. “Just evening the score.”

The exertion from our passionate interlude leaves our bodies slick with sweat, and there's a pleasurable burn that settles deep within our bones. As we separate Ana takes a few steps toward the bedroom, and I note a vulnerability in her movement, a hint of softness that belies the tough exterior she so often showcases. I follow close behind.

She slides under the covers, her gaze beckoning me to follow. I do so without hesitation, moving to lie beside her. Her eyes seem to hold a silent request, a quiet yearning. She inches closer to me, and it's like an unspoken invitation, calling for the shelter of my embrace.

Eagerly, I wrap my arm around her, pulling her close, and she nestles against me, her head resting on the crook of my shoulder. As I feel the steady rhythm of her breathing, the rise and fall of her chest against mine, a profound realization washes over me. For all her strength and fierceness, for the walls she's built around herself, she still seeks comfort. And in this intimate space we've carved out for ourselves, she allows herself to be protected, cherished.

Her fingers find mine, intertwining effortlessly, and the gesture makes my heart swell with emotion. It's simple, but it speaks volumes. A silent promise, perhaps, that no matter how tough the world gets, we'll always have moments like these. Moments of solace, of tenderness, amidst the chaos.

I tighten my hold around her, feeling her body relax against mine. Her breathing deepens, signaling that she's drifting off to sleep, and I can't help but let out a contented sigh. Tonight has been a whirlwind of emotions—from the high stakes at the poker game to the intimacy we've shared—but lying with Ana, holding her close, feels like the perfect ending.

CHAPTER 14

SAMUIL

“Who’s the unlucky lady?” Viktor asks, a mischievous glint in his eyes. He tilts his head, making a pointed look at the mark on my neck.

Of course, he’d notice the hickey, I think to myself. Always observant, always aware. I should’ve worn a higher collar.

Viktor’s room in the hospital is surprisingly bright for such an early hour. The morning sun filters through the blinds, casting golden hues on his battered face. Despite the injuries, there’s an undeniable spark in his eyes. Being bedridden hasn’t dimmed the fighter in him one bit. A temporary setback for a man like Viktor. He’ll bounce back quickly, I’m sure of it.

Rather than answering his question, I glance around the room, taking in the fresh flowers on the bedside table, the cards from well-wishers, the hospital equipment beeping softly in the background. “You don’t have to play coy with me,” he continues with a teasing smirk, sensing my hesitation.

I shrug, looking away for a moment.

“Maybe there’s someone,” I admit, but I don’t divulge any further details. The thought of Viktor finding out about Ana and me is nerve-racking, to say the least. There’s no telling how he’d react, considering his protective nature toward her.

The weight of that secret adds a heavy atmosphere to the room, and I can’t help but feel a twinge of guilt for keeping him in the dark. Before the silence becomes too awkward, I steer the conversation in another direction.

“How are you feeling about the upcoming qualifier?” I ask, hoping to distract him. The Death Match looms large in our collective minds.

Viktor sighs, his fingers drumming on the bedsheet. “I won’t lie, it’s going to be tough, especially considering my current state. But I’ve been training and preparing long before this mess. I won’t let it sideline me.”

I nod, admiration for his tenacity evident in my gaze. The two of us are cut from the same cloth. Bratva blood running through our veins, always ready for a fight, no matter the odds. Yet there’s an underlying tension in the room, a mix of anticipation and uncertainty.

“You’ll get through it,” I reassure him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You’re one of the best fighters I know.”

He chuckles, wincing slightly at the pain the movement causes. “Thanks, Samuil. Means a lot coming from you.” There’s a brief pause before he adds, “Just promise me you’ll watch my back.”

“Always,” I reply without hesitation. We’ve been through so much together, faced countless challenges, I’d never let him down. Not now, not ever.

He gives me a knowing look. I can tell he wants to press me further about the ‘unlucky lady’, but he holds back, at least for now.

The conversation drifts toward other topics—the state of the Bratva, our plans for the future, the daily grind. Still, in the back of my mind, the thought of Ana lingers, making me both anxious and excited for what lies ahead.

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself for the impending confrontation. “Viktor,” I begin, my voice low and tense, “Ana’s fighting in the Death Match.”

The room’s atmosphere instantly changes, the air charged with immeasurable tension. Viktor’s eyes widen in shock, and then quickly narrow in anger. “You’re allowing this?” he spits, his voice filled with disbelief.

I push back a surge of defensiveness, trying to keep a level head. “It wasn’t my choice, Viktor. She’s doing this of her own free will. Besides, you of all people know how capable and determined she is.”

His face flushes with a mix of anger and fear. “That’s not the point. The Death Match isn’t just any fight, it’s more brutal and no holds barred than any other.”

I nod in agreement, knowing full well the gravity of the situation. “I’m aware,” I reply quietly, “and so is she. But she believes in her skills, in her strength. And so do I.”

Rubbing his temples, Viktor seems to age a decade in mere seconds. He exhales heavily, his gaze fixed on the far wall. “I should’ve told her no. I should’ve stopped her.”

“You know as well as I do that when Ana sets her mind on something, there’s no stopping her,” I remind him gently.

Viktor remains silent, but I can see the whirlwind of emotions in his eyes: anger, fear, uncertainty, and guilt.

Pushing forward, I dive into the other topic weighing on my mind. “Speaking of full disclosure,” I say, leveling a piercing gaze at him, “Why didn’t you tell me about the bet? About your plans to go to America with Ana?”

Viktor’s expression turns to one of frustration. “It wasn’t set in stone,” he admits, his voice edged with weariness. “Just a fleeting dream, a distant possibility. The idea of a fresh start away from all this chaos. Where I could keep Ana safe.”

“Clearly, fate has other plans,” I note with a touch of bitterness.

Viktor looks pained. “I didn’t want to burden you with it. Not until I knew for sure.”

Before I can reply, Viktor interjects with a sudden shift in mood. “You said Ana’s fighting. How did she do?”

A small smirk forms on my face, despite the heaviness of our conversation. “She won her first fight. Took her opponent down with ease.”

Viktor's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but then he breaks into a proud smile, even as the worry lines on his forehead remain etched deep. "That's my sister," he says, a touch of admiration evident in his tone.

I chuckle softly. "Yep. She's as fierce as they come."

The tension in the room slowly dissipates, replaced by a camaraderie born of shared concerns, battles, and secrets.

Viktor's gaze drops, and he draws in a deep breath before he speaks, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I was a coward, Samuil."

I furrow my brow, looking at my best friend, the man who's been through everything with me. "What are you talking about?"

"Not telling you about the move, about the bet... I didn't know how to bring it up," he admits, avoiding eye contact. I can see the turmoil in his eyes, the same struggle I've been dealing with about confessing my relationship with Ana.

A small ironic laugh escapes me. "Sounds familiar," I murmur, thinking of the secret I've been keeping.

Viktor looks up, catching my implication. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

The words sit on the tip of my tongue, ready to be released. But still I hold back, my hesitancy stemming from the complexity of our relationship and the fragile state Viktor's currently in. "We're practically family, Viktor," I finally say, my voice low and earnest. "Whatever it is, we should be able to share it. No judgments."

Viktor nods slowly, swallowing hard. "I didn't know how to say it. I thought I'd figure it out later. You know, when the time felt right. But now I see there's never a perfect time."

I want to confess so badly, to get it off my chest. The air between us is thick with the need for truth. But then a glance at the clock on the wall jolts me back to reality. Ana's match is starting soon, and I have to be there. She may be strong, but she shouldn't be alone.

Seeing the urgency in my eyes, Viktor quickly pieces it together. “Go,” he says, understanding in his gaze. “Be there for her. She needs you now.”

A mixture of guilt and gratitude washes over me. “Thank you,” I tell him. “For understanding. For everything.”

Viktor’s eyes are soft as they meet mine. “Thank you for always looking out for my sister. She’s lucky to have you.”

A warm tightness fill my chest at his words. It’s ironic, really. How much truth there is in what remains unsaid between us.

With a final, heavy nod, I turn and stride out of the room.



The frantic rhythm of my heart plays a discordant melody in my ears as I make my way through the dimly lit corridors, my steps echoing ominously. The fight should be starting soon, and the fact that Ana isn’t where she’s supposed to be is making every nerve in my body scream. This feels all too familiar, stirring memories of that fateful night with Viktor. The thought that she could be in danger sends a jolt of cold dread down my spine.

I push past the crowd, barely noticing the din of anticipation as the audience awaits the main event. My focus is on one task only and that is to find Ana.

As I near the changing rooms, I hear muffled voices. Tense, aggressive. My pace quickens, the sinking feeling in my gut becoming more pronounced. Turning the corner, my worst fears are realized.

My Ana is there, surrounded by five men. A quick assessment confirms she’s unhurt, but her stance is completely on the defense—body poised, eyes sharp, every inch the fighter. Yet there’s an undeniable vulnerability in the way they’ve cornered her. Their laughter is dark and menacing. Clearly, they’re enjoying the power play.

“Looking a little lost, sweetheart?” one sneers, his grin malicious. His eyes roam over her form, and a fierce

protectiveness flares inside me.

Another leans in, trying to intimidate her further. “Missed the way to the ring, did you? Don’t worry, we’ll show you.”

Ana’s voice, sharp and unwavering, slices through their taunts. “Back the fuck off,” she warns. But the odds aren’t in her favor. The heavy hostility feels like a powder keg ready to explode.

I take a moment, steeling myself, channeling every ounce of authority I possess. “Having trouble finding the exit, gentlemen?” My voice, dripping with icy venom, echoes in the hallway.

All heads turn toward me. A heavy silence fills the corridor. Their expressions are a mix of surprise and recognition, but it’s Ana’s eyes that capture my attention, stormy depths full of defiance and, if I’m not mistaken, a hint of relief.

The largest of the five steps forward, squaring up to me. “This is none of your business,” he snarls.

I smirk. “She’s my business.”

There’s a pause, a moment of stillness as everyone assesses the situation, trying to predict the other’s next move.

“Well, look who it is,” one of them remarks mockingly, realizing who I am. “Fists. Here to save the damsel?”

I crack my knuckles, the sound echoing loudly.

The immediate threat is clear, and though they have the advantage of numbers, they’re well aware of my reputation.

Ana’s voice cuts through the silence, “You boys might want to rethink your play.”

The atmosphere is electric, charged with potential violence. My gaze never leaves the group of men.

They say nothing, wicked, sinister grins on their faces as they form a half-circle around us, inching closer by the moment.

Finally, one leaps forward, letting out a battle cry as he swings his fist toward me.

Just like that, the fight is on.

CHAPTER 15

ANASTASIA

There's a distinct rhythm to fighting, one I've always been able to tune into. Every movement, every choice, becomes part of a unique dance.

With each pivot, dodge, and block, I assess the situation, noting each attacker's weak point and the best way to exploit it. The adrenaline fuels me, and my movements are calculated. These men, for all their brute force, lack strategy. And that's going to be their downfall.

Samuil, however, is a different story. He's a force of nature. Where I'm swift and strategic, he's just raw power and tenacity. I can't help but glance his way, watching as he delivers a blow that has one of our attackers staggering back, nose likely broken. His face is a mask of concentration and fury, and it's equal parts terrifying and exhilarating.

They probably thought they could overpower two people, and in most cases, they'd be right. But we're not like most people.

As the fight ensues, two of our attackers are down and out of commission, thanks to a combination of our skills and teamwork. We're gaining the upper hand and it feels like victory is within our grasp.

But then everything changes.

From the corner of my eye, I catch a glint, unmistakable and chilling. One of the remaining men has pulled a knife, the sharp edge reflecting the dim lights of the hallway. My heart drops, and time seems to slow.

The stakes have just skyrocketed.

Samuil doesn't see it; he's occupied with another of the attackers, trading heavy blows. The knife-wielding thug starts to advance toward him, a sinister smirk spreading across his face. Everything inside me screams to do something, anything to avert the impending threat.

I quickly launch a spinning kick at the nearest assailant to create some space, then, without wasting a moment, I sprint toward the man with the knife. Every second counts.

Just as he's about to reach Samuil, I tackle him from the side. The element of surprise works in my favor and he stumbles, but he doesn't let go of the knife. We grapple for control, the cold steel of the blade dangerously close to my skin.

All around the sounds of the brawl continue, but in this immediate space, it's just me, the thug, and that damn knife. I can't let him get the upper hand.

I use all my strength and momentum to push him off balance, but he's relentless. The blade flashes menacingly, casting eerie shadows on the wall.

Time has a strange way of stretching and shrinking during moments of crisis. As the knife-wielding man lunges, I try to reposition, to avoid the blade that promises pain and more. But I'm a split-second too slow, and I brace for the inevitable.

Suddenly, there's a blur of movement. Samuil is there, intercepting the attacker with the same fierceness I watched him use on the other men. The sheer force of his intervention pulls the man away from me, but not without a cost. I hear a sickening slice, and the world seems to tilt off its axis as I realize that Samuil's been cut, the dark stain blossoming on his side confirming my worst fear.

There's no time to freeze, no time to let the horror sink in, because the other attacker is on me. Relying on reflexes honed over years of training, I react. A swift elbow to his gut makes him double over, and a knee to his face sends him sprawling on the floor, unconscious.

Turning back to Samuil, my heart catches in my throat. He's wrestling the blade out of the hands of the man who stabbed him, using a blend of raw strength and sheer willpower. For a moment, it looks like a stalemate. Then, with a roar that's both anger and pain, Samuil gains the advantage, disarming the attacker and sending him crashing to the ground with a punch that probably rearranged the man's facial bones.

Silence descends, save for the labored breathing of the two of us and the moans of the incapacitated men around us. The metallic scent of blood is thick in the air. We've won, but at what cost?

Samuil's face is pale, sweat lining his brow, and there's a grimace of pain on his features. But he's standing, stubborn and strong, trying to act as if the wound is just a scratch.

"Samuil..." I breathe, rushing to him, my hands fluttering over his injury, not sure if I should touch or apply pressure.

He grunts, trying to straighten up. "I'm okay," he rasps, but the strain in his eyes tells a different story.

"You're not," I counter, my voice shaky. "You need medical attention, and fast."

He stares at me, the typical guarded look in his eyes slowly dissipating, showing me a rarely seen weakness beneath. It's a look that's equal parts gratitude, pain, and something more—something that sends a warm flutter through my chest despite the grim moment.

"We're gonna get out of here," I tell him, fiercely determined. "Together."

As Samuil pulls out zip ties, I raise an eyebrow. "You just carry those around with you?"

A smirk tugs at his lips, even as his face is tinged with pain. "Always prepared. Occupational hazard," he grunts, securing one of the men's wrists.

I snort, "Any other surprises in those pockets? Should I be worried or excited?"

His laughter is short-lived but genuine.

I help him zip tie the other men, ensuring they're all secured. Once we're certain they aren't going anywhere, my attention goes right back to the deep gash on his side, blood still seeping out. My fingers brush against the sticky wetness, my heart thudding loudly in my ears. "Why the hell did you do that?" I demand, torn between gratitude and anger.

His dark eyes meet mine. "Better me than you."

I open my mouth to argue, but my name booms over the intercom, jolting me back to reality. The next fight. My fight. It's about to start.

"I need to know you're okay," I murmur, torn between my duty in the ring and my need to care for Samuil.

He nods toward the direction of the ring, determination in his eyes. "Go. I'll be fine. Take the rage you're feeling and use it against your opponent. Win this for both of us."

Tears sting my eyes but I nod, planting a quick, fierce kiss on his lips. "Wait for me. I'll be back."

"And I'll be here, cheering you on," he replies, his voice filled with pride and unwavering belief.

With one last glance, I sprint toward the ring, ready to channel all my emotions, all my fire, into the fight ahead. For Samuil.

CHAPTER 16

ANASTASIA

The roar of the crowd surrounds me, a disharmony of voices, each baying for blood. The energy is intoxicating, a visceral wave of anticipation that makes my skin prickle and my heart race. In moments like this, I find it hard to remember a time when I wasn't a fighter. There's such a familiarity to it, and yet the thrill and exhilaration of it always feels brand new.

I take a moment to glance at the faces looking up at me; I'm mildly surprised. The crowd is chanting my name, a few holding up signs with my face plastered on them, my nickname of Tsarina written underneath. Seems I've gained a bit of a following. "We're popular today," I whisper to myself, smirking.

On the other side of the ring, the looming figure of a man sneers at me. He's a mountain of muscles, nearly a foot taller than Samuil, with a shaved head and a beard that can't quite hide the tattoos crawling up his neck. They call him "The Bulldozer," a testament to his reputation for leaving nothing but wreckage in his wake.

I appraise him critically, the memories of my conversations and passionate moments with Samuil flitting through my mind. This man, this brute, is a perverse caricature of Samuil—lacking the soulful depth, the cunning wit, and the quiet strength. Just a mass of muscle without any of the heart.

The Bulldozer steps forward, cocking his head to the side with a smirk, displaying yellowed, crooked teeth. "Ready to be flattened, little girl?" he calls, his voice booming.

A few members of the audience laugh, but I'm undeterred. I circle him, light on my feet. "We'll see who gets flattened," I retort, hoping my bravado sounds more confident than I feel.

No sooner had the words left my mouth than the gong sounds, marking the start of the match. The Bulldozer comes out swinging, each blow carrying enough force to level a building. I dodge to the left, then to the right, ducking beneath his wide arcs, feeling the gusts of wind with each missed strike.

Each of his moves is powerful but predictable, a rhythm I quickly pick up on. It becomes a gambol of aggression and evasion. The Bulldozer grunts in frustration, his missed blows only fueling his anger.

I take advantage of an overextended swing, sliding in close, landing a solid punch to his ribs. He grunts in pain, and for a split second, I see doubt in his eyes. I press my advantage, aiming for speed and precision over brute force.

Each time The Bulldozer's fist comes flying my way, I deftly evade, reading the trajectory of his next move before he even seems to be aware of it himself. His weight, intended to be his primary advantage, becomes the very thing that works against him. Each missed swing, each off-balance lurch forward exposes another weak point.

It's clear his usual tactics aren't working on me. In the next round, he tries a different strategy, coming at me with more restraint, attempting to corner me. Ducking beneath a particularly wild swing, I deliver a solid kick to his knee, followed by an uppercut that sends him stumbling back.

It's the final push I need. Using his backward momentum against him, I aim a final, forceful kick straight to his chest. The Bulldozer goes down like a felled tree, and I step back, chest heaving, arms raised in victory.

The audience roars their approval. The sound of their applause, the echoing chant of my name, should be intoxicating. But my mind isn't focused on the glory of the win, it's on Samuil. Without even collecting my prize, I dart out of the ring and make my way to the makeshift medical bay.

I find him seated on a bench, pressing a gauze pad to his side where blood has soaked through his shirt. He's pale, lips a shade lighter than they should be, and for a moment, my heart aches with fear.

He looks up, his usually fierce gaze softened with pain, but still alert. "You alright?" he asks, his voice rough.

"I'm fine, thanks to you," I reply, biting my lip as I survey the damage. "But... God, Samuil, you're bleeding so much."

"It was worth it to save you," he states simply.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I change the subject. "I won the match, though you probably guessed that."

"I heard the roar of the crowd and the chanting of your name." He chuckles, then winces. "All the same, I never had a doubt."

I hold his hand, and an instant comfort comes over me. The moment is tender, a brief respite in the midst of chaos. Despite the circumstances, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

The blood is soaking through the cloth and I'm growing more concerned by the moment, but Samuil's resistance is firm. "No hospitals," he growls as he sees the worry in my eyes, his grip on the cloth weakening.

I feel panic well up. "You're losing too much blood! We don't have a choice."

Samuil pulls out his phone with his free hand, shoving it into mine. It's already dialing. A familiar voice picks up on the other end. "Roman."

"Samuil's hurt," I blurt, voice trembling. "Knife wound. He won't go to a hospital. What do I do?"

Roman, unflappable as ever, answers without a hint of fear. "Meet me at the south entrance. Wait there."

Without hesitation, I help Samuil to his feet, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. The adrenaline pumping through my veins gives me strength as I guide him toward the exit Roman specified.

The chill of the evening is a sharp contrast to the warm, humid atmosphere of the underground fight ring. As soon as we get to the meet spot, a sleek black car with tinted windows pulls up—Roman’s signature ride. The back door opens, revealing a striking woman, perhaps in her late forties or early fifties. She’s dressed immaculately, hair pulled back in a neat bun, yet there’s an undeniable toughness about her, the kind of aura that speaks of experience.

“I’m Nat,” she says, eyes flicking between me and the wounded Samuil. Without waiting for a response, she continues, “Both of you, get in.”

CHAPTER 17

SAMUIL

The car speeds down the road, every jolt, every bump, every pothole, sending sharp pangs of pain throughout my body. I focus on my breathing, in and out, to steady myself and not give in to the pain.

Nat is a skilled doctor, not a novice, and she examines my injuries with clinical precision. She's seen and treated all sorts of wounds. Her hands are gentle but firm, pressing and assessing the extent of the damage. Each touch sends a shock through me.

"Easy, big guy," she remarks, noting my grimace.

"I've been through worse," I bite out, trying to put on a brave face. But the reality is, I know this time it's bad. Real bad.

She pokes at a particularly tender spot, and I can't suppress the grunt that escapes my lips.

"Don't be such a baby," she teases, her eyes twinkling playfully.

Chuckling, I retort, "Don't make me laugh. It hurts too much."

Her chuckle joins mine, the sound easing the seriousness of the situation. As we continue driving, the landscape begins to change to industrial and abandoned buildings, forgotten by most of the city.

We finally pull up to a large, nondescript warehouse. With its faded paint and old brickwork, it's the kind of place one

would easily overlook, making it perfect for covert operations. As we exit the car, I take a moment to stretch, grimacing at the pain it causes.

Ana, always observant, remarks, “You wouldn’t think it from the outside, but this place is actually—”

“State-of-the-art,” Nat finishes, opening the door to the warehouse. And she wasn’t exaggerating. Inside, it’s like stepping into another world. The interior is pristine—white walls, clean floors, and modern equipment. It’s a makeshift surgery center and urgent care clinic, but one that could rival any top-tier facility.

“This is impressive,” I admit, my eyes scanning the room, taking in the neatly organized instruments and top-of-the-line tech.

“I’ve learned in this line of work, you never know when you’ll need an off-the-radar surgery room,” Nat says, a hint of pride in her voice.

I nod, my respect for her growing. As she prepares her instruments, a thought lingers in the back of my mind—the people responsible for my injuries are still out there. And once I’m patched up, they’ll have hell to pay.

Nat’s fingers work deftly as she unbuttons my shirt, pushing it off my shoulders. Her gaze is unflinching, but I can sense her internal unease of the situation. The skin around the wound looks angry and inflamed, the crimson slash standing out starkly against my pale, tattooed skin.

Ana is by my side, her eyes filled with concern, darting between the gash and Nat’s face. Her voice is tight as she finally asks the question on both our minds, “Is he going to be okay?”

Nat’s eyes stay focused on the injury, her fingers gently probing the area around it. Seconds stretch into minutes. “It’s a superficial laceration,” Nat finally says, breaking the silence. Seeing our blank looks, she elaborates, “Meaning it’s a relatively shallow cut. It hasn’t hit any major arteries or vital organs.”

A wave of relief floods through me, the tight coil of worry in my chest loosening. Ana lets out a breath she probably didn't realize she was holding.

Nat continues, outlining her plan. "I'll clean the wound with antiseptic, apply some antibiotic ointment, and stitch it up to prevent infection and help it heal faster."

As she gathers the necessary materials, I can't help but notice her swift and efficient movements, confidence in every step. She smirks slightly, her eyes darting to the wound and then to mine. "You know, just because they call you 'Fists' doesn't mean that's all you should bring to a knife fight."

Despite the pain, I chuckle. Leave it to her to lighten the mood. "Duly noted," I quip back.

The sharp trill of my phone interrupts our banter. Ana pulls it out from her pocket, handing it to me after seeing Andrei's name flash across the screen. "Hey," I greet, my voice a touch strained as Nat starts cleaning the wound.

Andrei's voice is thick with concern. "Heard you got a little scratch. You alright?"

"Just a flesh wound," I respond, trying to sound lighthearted, but I can hear the edge in Andrei's voice.

"We got them," he says, pausing for effect. "The guys who ambushed you. Figured you'd want to have a little chat with them when you're up for it."

My lips curl into a predatory grin, the fire of anticipation lighting up my eyes. "Oh, most definitely," I growl, the promise of retribution in my voice.

Andrei's laughter rumbles from the other end, a sound filled with shared understanding. "Good. Rest up, big guy. We'll have our fun soon enough."

Disconnecting the call, I settle back, letting Nat work her magic. And as I feel the sting of each stitch, the image of those men, the ones who dared to hurt me and threaten Ana, fills my mind. They have no idea what's coming for them. No idea at all.



The warehouse is dimly lit, casting eerie shadows on the walls. There's a musky scent in the air, a mix of old wood and conflict. It's a familiar environment for both Andrei and me, a place where clandestine meetings are held, persuading people to talk.

Two men sit tied to chairs, a look of defiance on one, fear on the other. Andrei stands to the side, his tall, imposing figure filling the space. I step forward, standing in front of the defiant one.

"Let's get straight to it," I growl, my voice low and dangerous. "Who hired you?"

The man spits on the ground, a smirk curling his lips. "You're not going to get anything out of us."

I lock eyes with him. Then, in one swift motion, I throw a punch straight into his gut. He grunts, the wind knocked out of him, but I can see he wants to play it tough, mustering his strength. The other one looks like he's about to break any second.

Andrei joins in, leaning close to the fearful man's face. "We can make this long and painful," he whispers, his cold gaze never wavering. "Or it can be over quickly. Your choice."

The defiant one's voice is strained as he spits out, "You won't break me."

"I don't need to break you," I respond, my voice dripping with menace. "I only need to break him." I nod toward his companion, who now looks pale, sweat dripping down his brow.

The man's bravado crumbles for a second, his eyes darting toward his partner, and in that moment, I know we have them.

After another punch, and a threat from Andrei, the second man breaks. "Alright, alright," he pants, tears in his eyes. "Just stop, please."

"We were hired by the Romanians. Vasile Popescu's family," he says, voice quivering.

The name rings a bell. Vasile Popescu, the reigning champion. Ana's next and final opponent. Andrei and I exchange glances.

"Why?" I demand, wanting to hear it from his own lips.

The man gulps, wiping away sweat and tears. "They took out Viktor because he was the biggest threat. But now, with him out of the way, they're concerned about the girl."

I clench my fists. "Why?"

"They refuse to be humiliated by a woman," he says, his voice dripping with regret. "They'll do anything, use any trick in the book to ensure she doesn't win."

The atmosphere in the warehouse is charged. The weight of the information hits me like a ton of bricks. Ana's in even more danger than we thought.

Andrei's voice cuts through my thoughts, "We're done here." He signals for the men to be taken away, casting a final, threatening glance at them.

I exit the warehouse, the night air cold against my skin, the past moments events still fresh in my mind. The Romanian mob won't stop at anything, and it's clear that Ana's next fight is going to be the fight of her life. I need to convince her to throw the match.

The sting from the wound is a sharp reminder of how dangerous this world can be. As I press against it, I see a hint of fresh blood staining the fabric. The stitches from Nat's work still fresh, pull and twinge as I move. Her instructions replay in my mind, a stern warning to rest, not to exert myself, to let my body heal.

But duty and emotions push those rational thoughts aside as I brace myself to enter the main room where the family gathers. Every step reverberates with the weight of the information we've just learned.

I push the door open, finding a sea of familiar faces. My gaze instantly searches for Ana. Her eyes, fierce and filled with fire, meet mine. I can tell Andrei has already relayed

everything. She's ready for a fight, but not the one I'm expecting.

"How dare they? How dare they threaten me, threaten Viktor?" Her voice rings out, filled with defiance and anger.

"We need to strategize, Ana. Not charge in recklessly."

She steps closer, poking a finger into my chest. "I'm not going to be sidelined just because some guy can't handle losing to a chick."

I grab her wrist, the room's temperature rising with tension. "You need to think! They aren't above playing dirty. What happened to me tonight could easily happen to you."

A murmur of agreement from the family fills the room, but Ana's face only grows more resolute. "I can handle myself. I've always had to."

I can feel the frustration bubbling up inside me. "I don't want to see you hurt. I don't want you risking your life over this. There's always another way."

Ana's lips form a tight line. "You know, I thought out of everyone, you'd understand why I need to do this. This is for Viktor, for us. For our future."

Everyone is watching us, witnessing this raw confrontation. I know I need to be careful with my next words, but emotions are running high. "Ana, I can't lose you. Can't you see? I can't stand by and watch you step into a world where the odds are stacked against you."

She's getting angrier, her chest heaving with every breath. "You think I can't handle it?"

"No! It's not that. It's just—"

"Then what is it, Samuil?" she snaps, her voice breaking, eyes wet with unshed tears.

The room's deafening silence is pierced by the weight of my confession. A confession that I hadn't planned on making, at least not now, not like this.

“Because I love you!” I blurt out louder than intended. Every emotion, every feeling I’ve bottled up over the years, comes pouring out. “I’ve always loved you, Ana. Every moment, every glance, every laugh, every fight. I’ve always wanted to keep you safe, always wanted to be by your side. I can’t bear the thought of something happening to you.”

The room is so silent that you could hear a pin drop. Anastasia’s tough facade crumbles, her eyes wide, searching mine for any trace of deceit. But all she finds is raw, unfiltered emotion. My confession hangs in the air.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, each beat echoing the truth of my words. Ana’s eyes, previously so fiery, now look lost, the weight of my admission landing heavily on her shoulders.

“Perhaps we should give you two some privacy,” Andrei suggests, his voice soft, breaking the stillness of the room. Everyone else nods in agreement, ready to make a discreet exit.

“No,” I snap, the rawness of my emotions making my words sharp, “Don’t bother.”

Ana tries to reach out, her fingers barely grazing my arm. “Samuil—”

But I’m already moving, storming past family members, my steps heavy and determined. I can’t stay here. Not now. The need to escape, to breathe, to come to terms with the vulnerability I’ve just displayed only drives me out faster.

CHAPTER 18

ANASTASIA

The low hum of conversation from the family room fades as I step out into the cool evening air, pulling my jacket tighter around me. The Moscow streets are a kaleidoscope of city sounds and moving shadows. The late evening light casts a golden hue on the buildings, and the distant sounds of traffic serve as a constant reminder of the city's heartbeat.

Thoughts whirl around in my mind. Samuil's confession wasn't just shocking; it was earth-shattering. I've always seen him as my protector, as Viktor's best friend. Love, in that traditional, heart-fluttering sense, had never been on my radar when it came to him. Until now.

Each step I take feels automatic, like I'm being pulled by an invisible string, and before I know it, I'm heading toward his apartment. It's a route I've taken countless times, yet tonight, it feels foreign, uncharted.

His words replay in my mind. *"Because I love you! I've always loved you!"* The vulnerability in his eyes, the intensity of his confession, it was all too real. He's been in love with me. Me. Ana, the tough, no-nonsense fighter, the sister of his best friend.

The realization is a lot to handle. My heart races, and not just from the brisk pace of my walk. I have to see him. I have to understand.

His apartment building comes into view, an imposing gray structure against the darkening sky. I can feel the weight and

the uncertainty of the upcoming conversation bearing down on me.

Standing in front of the door to his place, the emotions bubble up again. My stomach's in tighter knots than before any fight. Maybe, just maybe, I feel the same way about him. But admitting that to myself, let alone to him, is terrifying.

Gathering my courage, I knock, waiting for him to open the door.

When he does, Samuil's eyes lock onto mine, searching. The silence between us seems to stretch on endlessly. Finally, I find my voice. "We need to talk."

He opens the door wider, the hint of a weary smile on his face. "Come in."

As I step into his apartment, memories come flooding back of all the times we've shared in this place laughing, strategizing for the next fight, or simply sitting in silence, each lost in our own thoughts. It's a space I know well, yet it feels so foreign.

Turning to face him, I take a deep breath. "Look, Samuil, I appreciate your concern. More than you know. And" I pause, looking away for a moment, trying to find the right words, "the fact that you have feelings for me... it's a lot to process."

He looks at me, an expectant expression on his face, waiting for me to continue. My heart races, but I push on. "I think I'm starting to feel something for you too. It's just that..." I try to find a metaphor he'd understand, "...it's like we're reading the same story, but you're a few chapters ahead of me."

Samuil snorts, a smirk pulling at his lips. "You know I don't like to read."

I chuckle, relieved at the attempt to lighten the mood.

The tense air feels lighter, replaced by an acknowledgment and acceptance of the journey we're about to embark upon. The unknown terrifies me, but there's a small flame of excitement, too. My heart is torn between caution and the urge to dive headfirst into this new chapter with him.

“I don’t want to rush you, Ana.”

I nod, feeling grateful. We sit down on his couch, close to one another, yet leaving enough space to allow each other to let this new revelation sink in.

As we talk, laugh, and reminisce about the past, I’m reminded once again of why Samuil has always held a special place in my heart. Even with all the raw emotion, confusion, and uncertainty of the future of our relationship, one thing remains unchanged—the undeniable comfort and safety I feel in his presence.

The atmosphere in the room changes, an electrifying charge developing between us. Samuil’s usually hard eyes soften as he looks down at me. We’re both vulnerable in this moment, and it feels so fragile, so real.

“Ana,” he begins, his voice almost trembling. “If it’s money you need, I can give it to you. You don’t need to put yourself at risk for the prize money. After what happened today, after almost losing you…” His voice breaks, and it hits me how deeply affected he was by the attack.

His eyes hold mine, unwavering. “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to you.”

The weight of his confession is like a heavy blanket, comforting yet overwhelming. Tears prick at my eyes, and I blink them away. My voice is small when I respond, “I don’t want to risk it either, Samuil. Not anymore.”

A look of relief washes over his face, and he nods slowly. “Good,” he says.

A comfortable silence falls over us. Samuil shifts closer, his massive arm curling around my shoulder, pulling me into his embrace. I nestle into him, my head resting against his broad chest. The steady thump of his heartbeat against my ear is soothing. I’ve never felt more protected and loved than I do in this moment. His warmth envelops me, chasing away any lingering doubts.

I lift my head to say something, anything, to break the trance. But as our eyes meet, all thoughts dissipate. The

intensity of his gaze takes my breath away. Words are no longer necessary. Our faces inch closer, a magnetic force drawing us together.

The world fades away as our lips meet, gentle at first, a soft caress. But the passion quickly ignites, the kiss deepening, our mouths moving in desperate need and desire. We move seamlessly, our clothes becoming obstacles that are hastily shed. The journey to his bedroom seems both endless and instantaneous as the soft fabric of his sheets caress my skin.

Being with Samuil this time feels different, so much more intimate now that he's expressed his love for me. The depth of our connection goes beyond anything I've ever experienced. For all his physical strength, it's these moments of emotional rawness that truly leave me breathless.

He hovers above me, his broad frame casting a shadow, and I can feel the heat of his body. He looks deep into my eyes, searching for any sign of doubt or hesitation. "Are you okay?" he says, the deep tone of his voice sending shivers down my spine.

Tears prick at my eyes, though I'm unsure if they're from the sheer emotion of the moment or the vulnerability of being so open with someone. I blink rapidly, hoping to conceal them from his sharp gaze. "Yes," I reply, my voice shaking slightly. "I'm really, truly okay."

He leans down to capture my lips once more. The kiss is soft and gentle, reassuring and grounding. His lips find the curve of my neck, tingles dancing over my skin as he kisses me over and over. His touch begins at my shoulder before moving down, cupping my breast. I gasp then moan as his fingertips gently squeeze my nipple.

My hand moves down, the tips of my nails teasing his thigh as I inch closer to his manhood.

"What changed? What made you finally admit your feelings?"

"Seeing you in the ring. Seeing how goddamn strong yet vulnerable you are. Fear isn't a normal emotion for me, but

with you, it's like a living thing. I needed you to know. I can't lose you."

Samuil's words warm my heart. I take hold of his cock, stroking him slowly, groans flowing from his lips. His hand moves over the flat, toned surface of my stomach, across the thatch of hair above my pussy, then finally between my thighs.

"Oh... oh..."

It's all I can say as he touches me, spreading my lips apart, his fingertips finding my most sensitive place, making slow circles around my clit. My back arches, and it's not long before I feel the stirrings of a climax.

He kisses me hard again, the pleasure building and building until I can't take it anymore. His lips on mine, his fingers inside of me, I release, my body filling with warmth as the explosion of pure ecstasy rips through me.

I grip his cock tightly, the sensation of his heavy length in my grasp bringing how good I feel to another level.

"I need this inside of me," I say. "Right now."

He rolls onto his back and I straddle him, careful not to disturb his injury.

I take him by the base of his length and guide him inside. I'm so wet, so ready, that his impressive size glides into me easily, my walls stretching around his thickness. I moan and grind into him as he pushes deeper, that familiar fullness making me feel so good right away. It's not long before he's bottomed out, holding fast for a few moments before I start to rock back and forth.

Every motion, every caress, carries an urgency, a depth of feeling that neither of us can deny. With Samuil, images seem more vivid, sensations more pronounced. As he moves within me, we form a perfect rhythm, one that's passionate, synchronized, and alive with energy. I can feel the raw emotion coursing through him, mirrored in the rise and fall of his chest, the fierce grip of his hands.

As our pace quickens, there's a beautiful desperation in our movements. I cling to him, our souls intertwined, as we both tumble into the abyss of pleasure.

The aftermath leaves us breathless, a tangle of limbs and sheets. I curl up next to him, my head nestled against his chest. His heart beats strong and steady beneath my ear, the sound lulling me into a sense of euphoria.

He tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear, his gaze intense and unwavering. "I'll always protect you, Ana. Always."

His words envelop me, their sincerity anchoring me to the moment, to him. A smile tugs at my lips, and I let out a contented sigh. As sleep beckons, I surrender to its call, knowing that with him, I'm truly safe.

CHAPTER 19

SAMUIL

The first light of dawn casts a pale glow across the room, gently illuminating the figure beside me. There's a quiet beauty in the way Anastasia sleeps, her face relaxed, free of the fierceness and determination she so often carries. Her chest rises and falls rhythmically, strands of hair falling across her cheek, and she seems so delicate, so vulnerable.

As I lay there watching her, an overwhelming need to protect her surges within me. It's more than just the Bratva lieutenant in me. It's personal, intimate. It's a silent promise I've made to myself, one that runs deeper than any oath I've ever taken. She's agreed to not fight in the Death Match and knowing that causes a heavy weight to lift from my shoulders.

I carefully slide out of bed, ensuring I don't disturb her. As I dress in the muted light, my thoughts turn to what lies ahead. The memory of our night together still lingers, but there's something I need to take care of.

Once dressed, I approach the bed, leaning over to brush a tender kiss on her forehead. Her eyelids flutter briefly, but she remains in the throes of sleep. It's a comforting sight, seeing her here, safe.

My wound, though still fresh, feels surprisingly better. Nat did good work. A quick check assures me it's healing as expected. No complications. That's something to be grateful for.

Stepping into the fresh morning air, the scent of impending rain hits me. The streets are quiet, the world seemingly at

peace, but I know better. Somewhere in this vast city, there are men who wish to do us harm, men who are threatened by Ana's strength and the power of our family.

The Romanians. The champions of this bloody fighting ring. They won't be expecting a visit, but then again, I've made a career out of being unpredictable. I need to make them understand, without a single punch or a shot being fired, if possible. However, if they push me, I'll push back harder.

In the end, nothing, and no one, stands between me and the safety of those I hold dear.

I check the message again, confirming the address. I didn't tell Andrei that I was going to be paying them a visit, and as the location leads me to a gritty neighborhood on the outskirts of Moscow, I begin to think that might've been a mistake. The Popescu safehouse looks no different than any other ramshackle building in the area, a calculated move, I'm sure. But it doesn't fool me. The aura of danger and secrecy is unmistakable.

Pulling into the uneven driveway, I notice a pair of broad-shouldered guards already waiting for me. Before I even turn off the engine, they're approaching, hands ready to ensure I'm not armed.

Stepping out, I flash a grin. "Careful there, boys. No need to mess up the handiwork one of your mates already did." I gesture at the stitched-up wound on my side. One of the guards smirks, though the humor doesn't reach his eyes.

After a brief, but thorough pat down, they seem satisfied that I'm not carrying any concealed weapons. They motion for me to follow them inside. The building's exterior might have been unassuming, but the inside tells a different story. A low-lit hallway leads to a central lounge area, filled with the scent of cigars and the faint sounds of an old Romanian ballad playing in the background. The place has the vibe of a sleazy underground club, with plush red velvet chairs and beads hanging over doorways. There's a bar stocked with an array of liquor bottles placed against mirrored shelves. While it's

meant to exude a sense of luxury, it makes me feel a touch claustrophobic.

They lead me to a corner where a man sits, dominating the space around him, making it clear he's the leader. Radu Popescu—I've heard of him. Tall with a thick, salt-and-pepper beard, his dark eyes are cold and calculating. His fingers are adorned with chunky gold rings, one for each of his exploits, no doubt.

"Samuil," he greets in a deep voice, thick with a Romanian accent. "Have a seat."

I settle into the chair opposite him, my posture relaxed but my senses on high alert. The game is afoot, and the outcome remains to be seen.

Radu reclines in his chair, swirling his glass of amber liquid. "Ah, Samuil, let us talk about the matter at hand, yes? Your little bird, Anastasia. A fighter, like her brother."

I nod, leaning forward on my knees, fingers steepled. "She's not to be involved. I've made that clear. We've settled our scores."

Radu chuckles, a low and menacing sound. "You think it's as simple as that? She poses a threat, that girl. And not just in the ring."

"She's out of the match. What more do you want?" My patience wears thin, but I keep my voice even.

"It's not just about the match, Samuil. The girl is symbolic. A sign of your Bratva's weakening hold." His smile is wolfish, a predator about to strike. "You think taking her out of that fight will save her? Our grievances run deeper than that."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued despite myself. "Explain."

He leans in closer and I can smell the strong odor of whiskey on his breath. "A few months back, your Bratva struck a deal with us, remember? We thought it was in good faith, but we soon found out the Antonov-Nicolaevich were better negotiators. By the time we realized we'd been had, it was too late."

“And now you’re out for blood. For revenge.”

Radu nods, smirking. “Precisely. We lost a lot of money because of that deal. Money that was supposed to secure the futures of our children, our families. Do you know what it’s like to promise something and then not be able to deliver?”

I don’t respond, just watch him closely, waiting.

“We want to make you feel the same loss and betrayal we felt. And what better way than by taking one of your own?” His gaze narrows on me, sharp and calculating.

“Ana has nothing to do with the deals between our families. She’s innocent in this,” I hiss.

“Innocent? No one is innocent in this world, Samuil. Not you, not me, and certainly not Anastasia Zaitsev.” His tone is mocking, and I feel a surge of anger.

The realization hits me hard. “This was a trap.”

Radu chuckles again. “You’re quicker than I gave you credit for. Yes, we wanted you here, with us. A valuable bargaining chip. You see, we don’t just want our money back. We want you to know what it feels like to lose something precious.”

I flex my fingers, itching to make a move, but I know the odds are not in my favor. I need to tread carefully if I’m to get out of this with Ana safe.

Radu leans back, sipping his drink, watching me intently. “Now, let’s discuss the terms of your stay, shall we?”

Radu smirks as he stands and circles the room, observing the lavish tapestries hanging on the walls. “You see, Samuil, your move has posed quite a problem for us. We’ve put a lot of money on our fighter to win. With Ana out of the picture, those odds are now skewed.”

I lean back in my chair. “Well, that’s unfortunate for you, isn’t it? She’s not fighting. You won’t get your little spectacle.”

Radu stops, his eyes locked onto mine, a predatory glint in them. “We have ways of ensuring she fights.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What are you planning, Radu? Threats? Bribery?”

A smile plays on his lips, and he takes a long sip from his glass. “Let’s just say that we have certain persuasive techniques.”

I grit my teeth, trying to keep my temper in check. “You touch her, and I’ll make sure you regret it.”

His laughter fills the room, a harsh, grating sound that sends a chill down my spine. “You’re in no position to make threats, Samuil. Look around you. You’re outnumbered.”

The other Romanians chuckle, their dark eyes watching me intently, ready to move at Radu’s signal. I’m acutely aware of the danger, but I refuse to let them see my fear.

Radu suddenly leans close, his face inches from mine, his hot breath on my cheek. “If Ana doesn’t fight, it won’t end well for you.”

His words hang in the air. I feel my pulse quicken, my heart beating faster. “She won’t fight just to entertain your twisted games.”

Radu displays an evil smile, his teeth glistening in the dull light. “We’ll see about that.”

Without warning, the Romanians pounce. I brace myself, but the onslaught is swift and brutal. They deliver blows to my face, my ribs, trying to break me. I struggle, attempting to break free, but it’s useless. The pain is overwhelming, and I grunt with each hit, trying to keep consciousness.

As they swarm me, adrenaline courses through my veins, temporarily dulling the sharp pain of my wound. Every ounce of training I’ve ever received kicks in. I’m a wild animal, cornered, desperate, and ready to strike back.

The first one lunges at me again, thinking he can use his sheer size to overpower me. I move quickly, dodging to the side, letting him run straight into a wall. He’s momentarily stunned, and I use that to my advantage, delivering a vicious right hook to his jaw, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Another one attempts to come at me from behind, but I spin around, elbowing him square in the face. He staggers back, blood pouring from his nose. The room is a chaotic flurry of flying fists, grunts, and shouts.

One by one, I fend them off. I throw quick jabs, uppercuts, dodging their punches with expert skill. My body moves almost on instinct. My brain registers danger, and I react. Every punch I throw is with the thought of Ana's safety. I need to get out of here to protect her.

A third thug thinks he has the upper hand, charging at me with a knife. But I catch his wrist in a vicelike grip and twist, the blade clattering harmlessly to the floor. Before he can react, I land a solid blow to his temple, dropping him like a sack of potatoes.

But as more of them continue to approach, I realize the odds are greatly stacked against me. I can feel my stamina waning, each breath more ragged than the last. Every punch I throw carries with it a little less power. I'm outnumbered, and time isn't on my side.

The guard outside sees an opportunity. He'd been watching, waiting for the perfect moment to join the fray. With a sick grin, he zeroes in on my wound, taking a running start and driving his fist right into the tender flesh.

The pain is an explosion, white-hot and blinding. It robs me of breath, of strength. My legs wobble, and despite my best efforts, I find myself on my knees, gasping for breath.

"Got him!" one of them shouts triumphantly, and the rest are on me again. It takes a dozen of them, maybe more, to finally subdue me. Some pin my arms, others my legs, effectively immobilizing me.

Panting and furious, I glare up at Radu. "You'll pay for this," I growl through gritted teeth.

He just smirks, looking down at me with a mix of amusement and pity. "That remains to be seen."

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, they stop. My vision is blurry, and blood drips from my nose and mouth. My

wound is torn open, blood seeping through my shirt. Radu stands over me, a triumphant look on his face.

“You see, Samuil? You’re not in control here.”

He pauses, letting the words sink in. “Now, let’s talk about Anastasia, shall we?”

CHAPTER 20

ANASTASIA

“You look miles away. What’s on your mind?”

Viktor gives me a sidelong glance, his eyes squinting a bit.

“Huh?” I snap back to the present, shaking my head slightly as if to clear it. Viktor is being released from the hospital today. He looks so much better and he’s healing at a much faster pace than the doctors expected. It’s his fighter’s spirit, I believe. His color is better, the dark bruises have faded to faint yellowish patches, and his energy is returning. Both eyes are now open, though still blackened. “Oh, just... things,” I say, attempting to wave off his question.

He snorts, a hint of the old Viktor shining through. “You were always a terrible liar, Ana. Remember when we were kids and you’d always sneak one pirozhki too many, then try to hide the fact that you’d eaten them? Jam all over your face, crumbs on your shirt, but you swore up and down that it wasn’t you.” He chuckles at the memory.

I can’t help but laugh too, recalling the absurdity of little me, thinking I’d fooled him. “I was five, and those pirozhki were really good!”

His smile fades a bit, replaced by a more serious expression. “You seem distant today. What’s going on?”

I hesitate, biting my lip. I’ve always been open with Viktor, but the complications of my feelings for Samuil have made things tricky. Add in the current danger and the treachery, and it feels like an explosive combination.

“The last time we spoke, things got intense between Samuil and me,” I admit cautiously. My face heats up, the memory of our last intimate moment together playing in my mind. I can still feel the heat of his touch, hear the intensity in his voice.

Viktor’s eyes narrow slightly, sensing there’s more to the story. “And?”

“I haven’t heard from him since early this morning. It’s not like him,” I say, my voice filled with worry.

My brother shifts uncomfortably in the bed, picking up on my anxiety. “Maybe he’s just busy. You know how things are with the Bratva. We can’t always be in touch.”

“Maybe, but I’m worried. My instincts are telling me something’s off.”

My brother eyes me suspiciously. “Why are you so worried about him all of a sudden?”

I realize I can’t hide things much longer if he’s already suspicious. I take a deep breath, deciding to confide in my brother fully.

“Viktor, there’s something I need to tell you.”

My heart skips a beat as my phone vibrates, the screen lighting up with Samuil’s name. But it isn’t a regular call—it’s a FaceTime request. That’s odd. Samuil never FaceTime’s me. Ever. Inhaling sharply, I answer the call.

Immediately, my heart feels like it’s been squeezed in a vice. Samuil, looking more vulnerable than I’ve ever seen him, is tied to a chair in a dimly lit room. His face is swollen and bloody, dark bruises marring his skin, his clothes stained with crimson red. My stomach churns with a mixture of dread and fear. My grip on the phone tightens to the point where I’m afraid I might crush it.

A cruel face appears next to Samuil’s—Radu Popescu. His smirk makes my blood boil. “Good evening, Anastasia. Hope we didn’t interrupt anything too important,” he says with mock politeness, glancing briefly at Samuil’s battered face.

My heart races as I try to figure out what to say, how to gain control of the situation.

“You filthy bastards! Let him go!” My voice trembles, and my eyes are burning with anger.

Radu snickers, brushing his fingers across Samuil’s face, causing him to flinch. “Oh, we will. But only if you do exactly as we say.”

“What do you want?”

“It’s simple,” Radu says, leaning into the camera. “You will compete in the Death Match fight. But know that if you don’t show up or if you try any tricks, we’ll finish what we started with Samuil here. And trust me, you won’t like the pieces you’ll get in return.”

I can barely breathe. Viktor is sitting next to me, clenching his fists, his knuckles white. I can see the anger flashing in his eyes, the realization dawning on him.

“That’s them,” he whispers, voice shaking with fury. “They’re the ones who did this to me.”

My thoughts race. I have to think of something, find a way out. I glance back at the screen, and Samuil’s eyes lock onto mine, the pain in them evident, along with determination.

“Don’t do it, Ana,” he rasps out, his voice weak but steady. Radu slaps him, and the screen jostles a bit. I feel a pang of fear and anger.

Radu’s face fills the screen again, his cold eyes analyzing my every move. “Clock’s ticking, Anastasia. You have a fight to prepare for.”

With that, the screen goes black. The room is eerily silent as I process what just happened. My head spins, anger, fear, and desperation making it hard to think. But one thing is clear: I need to figure out a plan, and fast.

When I turn to face Viktor, I find his eyes sharp and filled with a mixture of fury, pain, and a deep understanding. It’s clear he’s put the pieces together, recognizing the depth of my relationship with Samuil.

“I should’ve told you,” I begin, struggling for words. The sterile hospital lights make everything seem more exposed, more vulnerable.

Viktor’s gaze never wavers from mine. “You and Samuil?”

I nod, my throat constricting. “We’ve gotten close. Closer than I ever imagined. And I didn’t know how to tell you.”

A pensive silence follows my confession. After what seems like an eternity, Viktor finally speaks, his voice soft, “You should’ve come to me, Ana. Always.”

The weight of his disappointment hits me harder than any blow I’ve taken in the ring. I try to swallow the lump forming in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

Viktor’s eyes soften, but they remain filled with urgency. “Apologies later. Right now, we need to act.”

“You’re right,” I agree, determination flooding me. “We need to involve the family. Andrei needs to know what’s happening.”

I quickly pull up Andrei’s number, each ring echoing the drumming of my heartbeat.

The line connects, and his voice, deep and controlled, resonates in my ear. “Ana? It’s late. What’s wrong?”

The concern in his tone is evident, a testament to the deep ties that bind our family. I hurriedly detail the situation—Samuil’s capture, the Romanians’ demands, and our dire predicament.

Silence follows my outpouring, and I can almost picture Andrei, his brow furrowed in thought, planning our next move.

“We’ll handle this,” he finally states, the hard edge in his voice promising retribution. “Gather everyone you trust. We’re meeting at the base in an hour.”

A wave of gratitude washes over me. “Thank you, Andrei. We’ll be there.”

As I hang up, I share a look with Viktor. The resolve in his eyes matches mine. “We’re not letting them get away with this, Ana.”

I clench my fists, thinking of Samuil, alone and in danger. “They’ve picked a fight with the wrong family. They have no idea the storm they’ve just invited upon themselves.”



The gym is both my sanctuary and my battlefield. A place where I’ve always found solace in sweat and the sting of leather on my skin. But now every punch feels like it’s missing something, and every kick feels like it’s aimed at a ghost. The bag sways with the fury of my hits, but it can’t absorb the ache in my heart.

The metallic taste of anguish mixes with sweat on my lips as the echo of leather on leather fills the room. My mind drifts back to Samuil, to the rough texture of his hands and the softness in his eyes. I recall his confession, the raw honesty in his voice when he told me he loved me. I’d pushed him away then, not willing to admit the depth of my own feelings. But in the silence of the gym, away from prying eyes, I come face-to-face with the truth.

My heart aches knowing that deep down, I’ve always been in love with Samuil. The thought that I may never get to tell him, that he might never hear those words from my lips, fuels the fire inside me.

A sob catches in my throat, and for a moment, I let the dam break, allowing a few tears to spill. But only a few. Grief can’t help Samuil now, only action can. I draw in a shaky breath, wiping the tears and sweat from my face with the back of my glove.

I remember the times Samuil stood by me, bolstering me, his strength unwavering. Those memories steel my resolve. I won’t let those moments become mere memories. The fire that has always driven me in the ring, the flame that made me fight tooth and nail for every victory, now blazes even brighter. I’m fighting for something much more precious than just a title or respect. This time, I’m fighting for love.

The clock on the wall tells me it's time to leave, time to join the others and decide our next move. But before I go, I send one last powerful kick to the bag, letting out a roar of ferocity. It swings wildly on its chain, absorbing my violent impact.

Taking a deep breath, I grab my things and head to the door. A new purpose burns within me.

CHAPTER 21

ANASTASIA

Perched high above the Moscow skyline, the Bratva's HQ radiates power. Its floor-to-ceiling windows offer an almost panoramic view of the glittering city below. The penthouse, a stark contrast to the bustling streets, is all sleek lines and modern furniture, with muted tones and shining surfaces. Everything about it screams wealth and influence. It's designed to impress, and it never fails in its mission. But today, the luxurious décor fades into the background, overshadowed by what's at stake.

Soft chandeliers bathe the room in a muted glow, casting elongated shadows on the walls. I stand at the head of the long, glass-topped conference table, Andrei at my side. The room is filled with the most influential members of the Bratva—people I've grown up around, their faces familiar yet daunting. Viktor is with me and damn, his presence is a comfort I can't even begin to articulate.

I again explain the situation, keeping my voice steady, the gravity of it evident in each word. "Radu and his men have Samuil. They've made it clear that they will kill him if I don't participate in the Death Match."

Damien, always trying to prove himself, stands up, his voice surprisingly firm. "We need to show the Romanians that they can't play us. I'm ready to take a stand."

Roman nods in agreement. "Damien's right. We can't let Radu and his men dictate our fate. And we certainly aren't going to let one of our own remain in enemy hands."

Beside Roman, Valentina adds her thoughts. Her voice is calm, yet chilling. “In my time, we didn’t let enemies get close. We dealt with them silently, discreetly. There are ways to handle such situations without brute force.”

Roman looks over to me, his gaze piercing, yet somehow comforting. ” Whatever it takes, we will get Samuil back.”

The room fills with a renewed energy. One by one, members stand, showing their solidarity. It’s a sight to behold, the Bratva, united in purpose, ready to take on the mission of saving one of their own.

The room goes silent, all eyes trained on Andrei as he stands up. Being the eldest brother and the leader, there’s an aura of authority that naturally surrounds him. Andrei’s decisions carry weight. His voice, calm and measured, resonates in the vastness of the room.

“Ana,” he begins, locking eyes with me, “You’ll proceed to the fight. We need them to think they still have the upper hand. Keep your focus; we’re here to back you up.”

I nod, tightening my fists. “I’m ready,” I reply, determination lacing every word.

Andrei turns his attention to Viktor, who’s sitting next to me. “Vik, you’ll be in her corner, acting as her coach. It’s a believable move since you were initially the one supposed to be fighting in the Death Match. Stay close, watch her back.”

Viktor nods, his expression stony. “Understood.”

Leo and Roman are Andrei’s next picks. “Both of you will act as our backup on the floor. The moment things seem to spiral out of control, or if it becomes evident that they’re cheating, you break up the fight, understand? Create a scene if you have to.”

Leo grins, cracking his knuckles, while Roman, always the strategist, simply nods in agreement.

“We need to locate Samuil,” Andrei states. “I trust that you’ll trace that call. Pinpoint his exact location. We don’t have much time.”

Damien steps forward, eager to prove his loyalty. “And me?”

Andrei gazes at him, weighing his options, “You’ll be with me. Once we have Samuil’s location, we’ll head there to extract him. They won’t expect you, which can work to our advantage.”

Damien’s chest swells with pride. “I won’t let you down.”

Surveying the room, Andrei concludes, “Everyone knows their role. We’re not just up against the Romanians; we’re up against time. And remember, we do not fail in this.”

I look around, finding strength in the determined faces that surround me. We’re all bound by a common purpose—to get Samuil back.



The heavy thud of my heart feels as if it’s about to break through my ribcage. My palms are sweaty, and I can feel a tremor in my hands as Viktor laces up my gloves. The vicious roar of the crowd feels like a tidal wave crashing against my psyche, the sound too loud, too eager.

“Ana,” Viktor’s voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts, grounding me momentarily. “You’ve got this. You’ve trained hard. You know your strengths.”

I meet my brother’s eyes, searching for comfort, for reassurance. “I can’t think straight,” I admit, feeling the weight of the situation pressing down on me. “Samuil—”

Viktor places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “He’s strong. Andrei and Damien are on it. You focus on your fight. If you get distracted now—”

“I know, Vik, I know,” I interrupt him, taking a deep breath. It’s all so overwhelming—the danger Samuil’s in, the stakes of this fight, and the realization of my growing feelings for him.

To calm my nerves, Viktor begins discussing strategy, going over moves, reminding me about various sequences and

maneuvers. “Remember the patterns we practiced. Feint. Dodge. Use your speed. Don’t let him corner you.”

As he continues, a match attendant enters the room, carrying a tray with a bottle of water and some towels. “For you, ma’am,” the attendant says, holding out the tray to me.

I take the bottle, nodding in thanks, and swallow a few mouthfuls, hoping the cool liquid will calm the burning anxiety in the pit of my stomach. The attendant nods and quietly leaves the room.

Viktor, tries to inject some positivity into the conversation. “After this, we’ll go out. Eat like there’s no tomorrow. Laugh. Dance. Just like old times.”

I smile faintly, trying to imagine a world beyond tonight, beyond the fight. “Sounds good, Vik.”

We continue discussing tactics but as the minutes tick by, a peculiar feeling begins to take root. My head feels fuzzy, my limbs slightly heavier. The locker room seems to tilt slightly, making me grip the edge of the bench for support. “Vik,” I whisper, my voice barely audible, “Something’s not right.”

He looks at me, panic evident in his eyes. “What do you mean?”

I try to pinpoint the feeling, the sudden wave of dizziness that washes over me. “I think something was in the water.”

Realization dawns on Viktor’s face. “Damn it!”

Holding onto my consciousness becomes a battle, and every second seems an eternity.

The world tilts with every step, and my heart feels as though it’s been sealed within a vice, squeezing tighter and tighter with every beat.

My limbs feel weighted, each movement a struggle, and yet, there’s a fire igniting within me—a fire forged from anger, desperation, and vengeance. Because if this is how it’s going to end, I won’t go down without a fight.

Viktor’s voice is a distant echo, words of concern lost in the throbbing in my ears. He’s trying to convince me to retreat,

to seek medical help, but the noise, the lights, the tension in the arena, they all pull me toward the center stage.

I catch a glimpse of him from the corner of my eye—the Romanian brute they’ve matched me against. He’s known as “The Wolf,” a name that paints a vivid picture of his fighting style: ruthless, unyielding, predatory. They probably think I’m an easy win tonight, given my condition.

The announcer’s voice booms, momentarily drowning the din of the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, introducing tonight’s main event! From the right corner, weighing in at 205 pounds, the terror of Transylvania, The Wolf!”

The roar from the crowd is deafening, a cacophony of cheers and boos. My vision blurs, but I force myself to remain upright, to remain conscious.

“And in the left corner, Moscow’s own, the diamond of the Bratva, weighing in at 130 pounds, the Tsarina!”

There’s a thunder of applause and shouts. My name. My people. For a brief moment, pride swells within me, pushing back against the encroaching darkness. This is my turf, my arena, my fight.

The bell rings, signaling the start of the match. Every second counts. The poison—whatever it is—is fast-acting, and I can feel its icy tendrils wrapping tighter and tighter around my consciousness. I have to end this quickly.

The Wolf lunges, confident and hungry. But I’m the Tsarina, and I’ve been fighting my entire life. Not just against opponents in the ring, but against expectations, against the very world that sought to define and confine me.

We trade blows, his power against my precision, his brutish strength versus my lightning-quick reflexes. Every punch I throw is with purpose, every dodge and weave calculated. My movements become a dance, a rhythm only I can hear.

He lands a punch, pain exploding across my face, but I use it, channel it. With the crowd chanting, the spotlight on us, I realize this might be my last stand. If that’s the case, then I

will go down fighting. They will remember the Tsarina—not for her defeat, but for the valor she brought to the very end.

CHAPTER 22

SAMUIL

The ropes bite into my wrists, every twist and tug aggravating the raw skin beneath. But the pain is nothing. Not when she's in danger. Ana, fierce and unyielding, is now facing her deadliest match yet. And it's not so much against the Romanian brute as it is against treachery.

Through the heavy wooden door, I pick up fragments of their conversation.

"You should've seen her face after she took a swig of that drink," one of them says, laughing.

"The Tsarina is in for a royal surprise," another snickers.

The rage inside me grows, hot and wild. It feels as though I could set the world aflame with the force of my anger. My muscles tense, straining against the bonds.

One might think that with my size and reputation, I'd have escaped by now. But these ropes are thick, the knots expertly tied. They knew who they were dealing with, but they underestimated the strength that love can give a man.

The conversation outside becomes louder, more animated, as if they're rejoicing in their cleverness. Every word, every chuckle, fills me with a renewed energy. It's not just about the fight anymore, or about the family honor—it's about Ana. Her safety, her life.

I test the chair I'm tied to, rocking it back and forth. It's sturdy but not unbreakable. Using all my strength, I suddenly push off the ground with my legs, sending the chair crashing backward. The impact jars me, but the sound of splintering

wood tells me my gamble paid off. The chair breaks, freeing my legs, though my hands remain tied.

The voices outside the door halt. They've heard. They're coming.

There's no time. I use the shards of the broken chair to saw at the ropes, the sharp edges cutting through my bonds. The door handle turns.

With a final jerk, my hands are free. Ready.

The door swings open, and two surprised Romanians meet the full force of Samuil "Fists" Nicolaevich. Before they can draw their weapons, I'm on them—quick, brutal, and unyielding.

Their bodies slump to the floor, unconscious. Wasting no time, I retrieve the key from one of their pockets, unlocking the door and stepping out into a dimly lit corridor.

There's no going back now. I need to find Ana. The stakes have never been higher, and I have a promise to keep; to protect her, always.

My breath steadies as I carefully maneuver through the building, every shadow and sound a potential danger. I've learned from my years in the Bratva that evasion is as much a weapon as the strongest fist or the sharpest knife. But the universe, it seems, has other plans for tonight.

The guard rounding the corner looks as surprised as I do. There's a split-second pause and then we're on each other.

He swings first, his punch wide and wild. Years of training have honed my reflexes, and I easily sidestep, retaliating with a left hook to his jaw. He stumbles back, recovering quickly and charges at me, fists flying. We grapple, using the narrow confines of the corridor to our advantage, searching for weaknesses.

He's strong and knows his way around a brawl but I have something more potent: desperation. Each punch, each block, is filled with a burning need to get to Ana.

Just when I feel I have the upper hand, he pulls a gun from his pocket. Time seems to slow. He trains the black, deadly muzzle on me, a small smirk on the guard's face betraying his confidence.

But he underestimates me.

In a flash, I close the distance between us, catching his wrist in a vice grip. Using his momentum against him, I wrench the gun away, twisting it around with practiced precision. A loud boom sounds out, deafening in the tight space. The guard screams, clutching at his leg as blood seeps through his fingers.

Tearing a strip from his shirt, I quickly bind his wrists, ensuring he won't be a threat. Next, I stuff a cloth into his mouth to silence any cries for help.

My victory, however, is short-lived. Shouts echo in the distance, the rhythm of heavy boots growing louder.

Time to move. With the gun in hand and adrenaline pumping through my veins, I race down the corridor. I know I need to be smart about this. Head-on confrontations could get me killed, and that won't help Ana.

It's not just about brute strength now. It's about wits, timing, and a whole lot of luck. I pray that luck is on my side tonight.

The corridors seem endless, each turn leading to another stretch of dimly lit hallway. But that's the least of my concerns as the guards rush in, heavily armed. There's a heartbeat of hesitation, and then chaos erupts.

I dodge the first barrage of bullets, my back pressed flat against a corridor wall. Taking a moment to steady myself, I peek out, fire three quick shots, and manage to incapacitate two guards. One falls clutching his thigh, the other crumpling as a bullet hits his shoulder. The smell of gunpowder fills the air, mingling with the tang of fear and anticipation.

Using their momentary confusion to my advantage, I sprint to the end of the corridor, slipping into an adjoining room. Inside, I find a discarded lead pipe. Not the best weapon, but

it'll do. As two guards rush in after me, I swing the pipe, catching the first across the face and the second in the gut. He doubles over, giving me the chance to deliver an uppercut that sends him crashing into the wall.

Darting out the door and to the side, I dodge another round of bullets, using the walls as a shield. Every shot I take is calculated, aimed to immobilize. The sound of my pistol mingles with their automatic gunfire, creating a deadly symphony in the tight confines.

As I make my way through the maze, the cold grip of dread takes hold when I hear the growl of engines outside. My heart sinks at the sight through a grimy window: more Romanians than I care to count are spilling out of a van. All geared up, all hungry for a fight.

I duck back, mentally preparing myself. If this is how it ends, then I'm going out in a blaze of glory—for Ana, for the Bratva, for myself. I cock the pistol, getting prepared for what feels like a last stand.

But before the newcomers can storm in, a barrage of gunfire pierces the air. Shouts, screams, more gunfire, then an abrupt, eerie quiet. The sound of boots cautiously approaching, crunching on broken glass resonates from downstairs.

Gripping my pistol tightly, I inch forward, ready for whatever comes next. Andrei stands tall amidst a sea of incapacitated Romanians, his rifle smoking. Beside him, Roman—the Closer himself—is reloading, a smirk on his face.

“Ah, Sammy,” Roman calls out, glancing at the mess around him. “Looks like you started the party without us. Not very brotherly of you.”

My relief is tangible, my grin matching Roman's. “You always were fashionably late.”

In a world filled with violence and chaos, it's these moments of camaraderie that remind me of who I am, of what I'm fighting for. With my brothers by my side, we're unstoppable.

The aftermath of the battle is a bloody scene. Spent cartridges litter the floor and traces of gunpowder still hangs heavily in the air. But my focus is on the groaning man on the ground below me. Every muscle in my body is taut with tension as I pull him up by his collar, my fingers digging into his flesh, forcing him onto a nearby chair.

He tries to struggle, his eyes darting fearfully, but I give him a sharp punch, ensuring he stays put. I am consumed by raw fury. Every second counts, and I need answers.

Roman steps forward, his expression stern, "I'll translate." I nod, letting Roman take the lead for a moment. They exchange rapid sentences, Roman's voice growing colder and more demanding with each word.

"He said they used rat poison," Roman finally says. I feel a chill settle in my bones. The cruelty, the malicious intent behind the act, is staggering. But there's no time to dwell on that now.

"How does it work?" I ask, my voice sharp with urgency.

"It's a slow killer," Roman translates after another brief exchange. "Her increased heart rate during the fight will spread the poison faster. The symptoms are debilitating, and if it isn't counteracted soon, the outcome is lethal."

"Is there an antidote?" I shout at the Romanian, my patience waning thin.

He hesitates, clearly weighing his options. I tighten my grip on him, ready to shake the answers out if necessary. Finally, he relents and nods, explaining that there is an antidote, but it isn't something commonly found.

Andrei, who's been silent up to this point, speaks up, "Get Nat on the phone. Now."

One of our men quickly pulls out his phone, dialing Nat's number. The wait is agonizing, every second stretching out interminably. When she finally answers, she confirms the antidote's existence. It's a specific blend of chemicals that counteract the poison. She stresses that time is critical.

“We need to stop that fight,” Roman declares with finality, looking at me.

I nod, anger and dread hardening my features. “Andrei, see if we can secure that antidote ASAP. Roman, we’re going to that arena. We need to get to Ana.”

The room is a whirl of activity as everyone jumps into action. As I exit the building, I can only think of the ticking clock that is now Ana’s life. I won’t lose her, not like this.

CHAPTER 23

ANASTASIA

The Wolf lunges at me, a hulking mass of power, and I narrowly manage to sidestep his swing. But as I move, my limbs feel sluggish, the signals from my brain taking their sweet time to get there.

It's as if I'm wading through waist-deep water. The overwhelming sensation of nausea, coupled with sharp abdominal pain, is clouding my usually sharp instincts.

The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth; I must've bitten my lip. I force myself to move, to dodge and weave, relying on the reflexes honed over countless hours of training. But it's like fighting underwater, every action delayed, every motion like pushing through thick mud.

I hear the shouts and roars of the crowd, an indistinct maelstrom of noise, but it feels distant, muffled. My focus is solely on The Wolf. He grins maliciously, the gleam in his eyes telling me he's aware of my weakness, reveling in the advantage. It's that predatory grin, filled with overconfidence, that pushes me. With every fiber of my being protesting, I retaliate, landing a punch that momentarily staggers him.

But just when I think I've gained a fraction of the upper hand, my vision blurs, and my legs buckle. Only sheer will keeps me upright. I hear my brother screaming something, but it's like trying to understand someone through a thick pane of glass.

My breaths come fast and ragged, the edges of my vision darkening. I can feel The Wolf closing in, can practically feel

his breath on my neck. But somehow, with an adrenaline-fueled surge, I manage to block his next few punches, even countering with a few desperate jabs of my own. The bell rings, signaling the end of the round, and I've never been so grateful for a sound in my life.

Stumbling back to my corner, I collapse onto the stool. Sweat drips down my face, mingling with the tears that I can't hold back. My chest constricts, breathing becoming more and more laborious. A water bottle is thrust into my hand, and I take a long gulp, hoping against hope that it will wash away the poison coursing through my veins. It doesn't.

The Wolf smirks from across the ring, his cockiness evident. He knows he's got the advantage, however unjustly. I can see it in the way he leans back, relaxed, as if he's simply waiting to be declared the winner. The Wolf and his mob ties guaranteed this wouldn't be a fair fight from the start.

Viktor is yelling, the panic evident in his eyes, but his words don't register. The gravity of my situation is sinking in. The realization that this could be the end chokes me, the weight of it making the poison seem almost secondary. My vision narrows, my surroundings fading to a tunnel of blurred color and distant noise.

I may be down, but I'm not out yet. With the next round looming, I push away the fear and the pain, focusing on the task ahead. I don't know how much time I have left, or if I'll even make it through another round. But if this is my last fight, I'll be damned if I don't give it everything I've got.

The sensation in my chest is agonizing, my heart beating ferociously fast. Gasping for air, my gaze darts around, trying to assess the situation, feeling as if a dense fog has descended over the ring. The bell for the next round sounds out.

For a fleeting moment, the world goes dim, and I nearly succumb to the weight pressing down on me. Not yet, though. I have to win. Not just for me, but for everyone who's depending on me. For Samuil.

A deep, desperate breath draws in scant oxygen, and I use it to propel my body forward. I see the wicked gleam in The

Wolf's eyes as he advances, confidence clear in his swagger. But, as my brother has always said, overconfidence is a fighter's worst enemy.

Desperation and resolve drive me, fueling an unexpected surge of energy. My every instinct screams to tell Viktor to have the fight stopped, but I won't give in. My one and only chance is to strike with everything I have left. My opponent won't expect it, clearly thinking he has me cornered, beaten, defenseless. He moves in to deliver the final blow, but I'm faster.

Channeling every ounce of strength I have left, I drive my knee upward. It meets its mark perfectly, right between his legs. The impact is solid, and The Wolf's confident grin morphs instantly into a mask of agony. His scream pierces the din of the crowd, but I don't stop. I follow through with a fierce, powerful right hook, targeting the side of his head. The force of the blow, combined with his already off-balance stance, sends him careening back. He stumbles, his large form toppling over the ropes.

The sound as he hits the floor outside the ring is a dull thud that resonates louder in my ears than the roaring crowd. Although I've won the fight, victory feels so hollow, each breath a struggle, my own body on the brink of collapsing.

Around me, everything becomes a blur. The ref waves his arms, signaling the end of the match. The Wolf lies motionless outside the ring. The crowd's reactions are a mix of cheers, boos, and gasps. I've taken down the Romanian bruiser. It should feel triumphant, but instead, the poison in my system brings a shadow over the victory.

Barely able to stand, I sway on the spot. My vision narrows, dark spots clouding the periphery. I can see my brother approaching, his voice a distant murmur. My legs buckle beneath me, the cold, hard canvas of the ring rushing up to meet me. The last thing I hear before everything goes black is Viktor's frantic voice calling my name.



My consciousness teeters on the edge, darkness and muffled sounds fading in and out. Voices echo, like whispers carried by the wind, indistinct and far away. A crushing weight in my chest makes each breath an extraordinary effort. Every inch of my body aches, an accumulation of pain that drowns out any coherent thought.

As I drift, fragments of memories filter through—the ring, the crowd, the taste of victory tainted by the overwhelming sensation of something being terribly wrong. My mind’s haze is pierced by a singular regret—not being able to see Samuil one last time. Had I only known what was to come, I would have savored our last moments together, told him everything I felt.

A sensation of being lifted, cradled, envelopes me. It’s gentle and protective, the antithesis of the violence and danger I’d just faced. There’s a familiar scent, one that immediately tugs at my consciousness, a spicy, woody musk that’s unmistakably Samuil. But it couldn’t be, could it? The logical part of my mind argues that it’s just a trick, a wishful thought conjured by my dire circumstances. And yet the feeling of those arms, that scent... it’s a balm to my soul, and something deep inside me recognizes it.

Fingers brush my hair back, a soothing motion, as if trying to offer comfort. I attempt to open my eyes, to see if it really is him, but my eyelids feel impossibly heavy. The voices grow louder, more frantic, though the words remain unintelligible. But there’s one voice, low and urgent, that stands out from the rest, speaking directly into my ear.

“It’s going to be okay, Ana. Just hold on. For me. Please.”

Tears sting my eyes. If this is a dream, I never want to wake. The warmth of his embrace anchors me, preventing me from spiraling further into oblivion.

A sudden pinch on my arm pulls a sharp gasp from me. The sensation is jarring yet distinct amidst the haze—a needle.

In that moment, I let myself be carried away by that warmth, the steady heartbeat beneath me acting as a lullaby. A

fleeting, final thought crosses my mind that whether in life or in death, I'm glad I'm with him.

I surrender to the comforting embrace of sleep.

CHAPTER 24

SAMUIL

The sterile smell of the hospital is suffocating, the bright fluorescent lights casting an unwelcome, harsh glow over everything.

Doctors move in and out, their expressions tight, guarded. They murmur medical jargon, discussions about treatments, and potential outcomes. I don't need to understand their words to know that the grim reality right now is that it's touch and go, and Ana's life hangs in the balance.

A squeeze on my shoulder pulls me from my thoughts. Andrei stands beside me, his face a mask of calm, but I can see the storm brewing in his eyes. "We'll get them, Samuil," he says, voice low. "They'll regret ever crossing us."

Nodding, I look back at the door that separates me from Ana. They've barred me from seeing her, citing her need for total calm but the wait is unbearable. Every ounce of my being yearns to be beside her, to reassure her, to be her pillar.

But she's fighting her own battle right now and I need to prepare for the war that's coming.

"We gather the family," I declare, my voice steel.

Andrei nods, the agreement clear. "They wanted a war," he muses, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "We'll give them one they'll never forget."

I turn to Viktor, standing on the other side of me. I'm instantly met with a fist to the face. There's a brief sting, but I stand my ground, unmoving. I can't help but let a smirk creep onto my face. "That tickled."

Viktor doesn't return the smirk, his dark eyes boring into mine. "That was for sleeping with my little sister."

It was only a matter of time before Viktor found out. But hearing it so bluntly, especially after the blow, I can only offer a half-smile. "We didn't plan it, you know. It just happened."

Viktor takes a step closer, his expression darkening. "Look, Samuil, Ana's been through enough. She's strong, the strongest woman I know, but she's also been hurt too many times. And I swear," he pokes a finger hard into my chest, emphasizing each word, "if you ever, *ever* hurt her, I'll chop you up into tiny bits and feed you to the sharks."

For a moment, the weight of his words hang in the air between us. I don't break eye contact, letting him see the sincerity in my gaze. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you. She's special to me, Viktor. I promise you, I'd die before I let anything happen to her."

Viktor watches me for a few heartbeats, as if measuring the depth of my conviction. Then, with a slight nod, he replies, "Just remember that promise."

There's always been an understanding between us, an unspoken bond forged in the fires of family loyalty and love. With a sigh, Viktor claps a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Just... take care of her, alright?"

I nod, feeling a new weight on my shoulders, one of a deeper trust along with the responsibility of protecting his little sister on a whole other level. "Always."

Viktor's eyes find mine with a mix of hesitation and understanding. "I'll stay with Ana," he says. His voice, usually so hard and unwavering, cracks with a hint of emotion. "She shouldn't have to wake up alone."

My gaze shifts to the room's entrance. The very thought of Ana lying there, weak and broken, such a contrast to the woman warrior I've come to adore, makes my heart clench. "Viktor," I begin, "I promise you. I'll make them pay. Every last one of them."

Viktor nods, his jaw clenched, unspoken sentiments of brotherhood, duty, and vengeance understood between us. “Good,” he says, finally. “But before you go, she’d want to know you were here. Even if she doesn’t wake up, she needs to hear your voice.”

I’m taken aback, surprised at the opportunity Viktor is granting me. “Just a few minutes,” I say.

He nods understandingly. “Of course,” he says, and steps aside.

I slowly enter the room. The steady beeping of the heart monitor fills the silence, and the antiseptic smell of the hospital is stifling. She’s lying on the bed, looking so fragile and pale, her fiery spirit dimmed. The sight tears at my heart.

Walking to her bedside, I take her hand in mine, the coldness of her fingers sending shivers up my spine. The Ana I know is passionate, fierce, a force of nature. Seeing her like this, lifeless and vulnerable, feels like a cruel joke.

“Ana,” I whisper, my voice choked with emotion. “It’s me, Samuil. I’m here.”

I gently squeeze her hand, hoping for even the slightest response. But she remains still, the steady rise and fall of her chest the only indicator of her life. I lean closer, my lips close to her ear.

“I love you,” I say, the words spilling out, raw and unfiltered. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you again. I promise you, I’ll protect you, always. No matter what.”

There’s no response, but a warmth envelops me, a connection that goes beyond the physical. It’s as if, in her own way, she’s reassuring me.

With one last lingering glance, I gently press my lips to her forehead, sealing my promise. I step back, determination filling every fiber of my being.

Exiting the room, Viktor stands waiting, his gaze seeking answers in mine. I simply nod, letting him know it’s time.



There's an uneasiness in the air as Andrei, Roman, Damien, Leo, and I sit around the worn wooden table in the Bratva safehouse. The dim overhead light casts a grim ambiance that perfectly matches our mood. The blueprints of the Romanian warehouse lay sprawled in front of us. Every corner, every entrance and exit, are marked in detail.

Roman leans forward, a glint of deep purpose burning in his eyes. "Their operations run out of this warehouse. Drugs, weapons, their entire network. If we cripple this, we cripple them."

Damien points at a side entrance. "There's a weak point here. Minimal guards. We can enter from this point and plant explosives."

Andrei nods in agreement. "Once inside, we split. Damien, you and your team handle the goods. Secure whatever they've got, and make sure it's ready to be shipped out. Roman, you target their records, every shred of evidence, every deal they've made, wipe it clean. Leave them blind."

Roman smirks, "Consider it done."

I meet Andrei's gaze, a silent understanding passing between us. "I'll head straight for Radu. I want to look in his eyes when he realizes what's coming."

We delve deeper into planning, discussing every detail, every possible scenario, everything that could go wrong and the backup plan if it does. This isn't just about revenge; it's about sending a message, one that will resonate through every corner of the underworld.

Hours go by, but time seems to stand still. It feels like an eternity and a blink all at once. The clock soon reads eleven-thirty p.m. We gear up, ready to take the fight to the enemy.

The cold Moscow air hits us as we step outside. The city, usually so alive, seems to hold its breath in anticipation. Snow blankets the ground, untouched, pure. A stark contrast to the chaos we're about to unleash.

The night is silent, save for the distant hum of the streetlights and our synchronized footsteps crunching the snow

beneath. As we approach our vehicles, we go into dark mode. Every move from here on out is based on trust, on the expectation that each one of us knows our part and will execute it flawlessly.

As the clock nears midnight, the world fades away. There's no hospital, no Ana fighting for her life, no weight of responsibility. There's only the mission, the vengeance, the reckoning that our enemies are about to face.

Tonight the Romanians will regret ever crossing paths with the Bratva. Tonight is for Ana, for everything they've taken from us. I'm going to make sure they pay tenfold. With righteousness and resolve in my heart, I prepare for the fight ahead.

CHAPTER 25

SAMUIL

The growl of our vehicles' engines fills the stillness of the night. Our convoy of blacked-out vans snakes its way toward the warehouse, through the clear coldness, a heavy weight of anticipation bearing down on all of us.

Inside the lead van, Andrei sits beside me, focus and determination set in the sharp lines of his face. It was his decision to put me in charge tonight, a trust I value and a weight I bear with pride.

With one glance over my shoulder, I lock eyes with the men behind me—battle-hardened and loyal to the bone. My throat tightens. I clear it, grabbing a small mic attached to the dashboard. Connecting with the other vans, my voice fills the enclosed space, resolute and clear.

“We’ve always had a code,” I begin, my voice steady. “Violence is a last resort. Unfortunately, tonight is one of those nights when it’s most likely a necessity.”

A murmur of agreement ripples through the van, and I imagine it echoing through the others as well.

Roman chimes in, his smirk evident in his voice. “Also, fellas, word has it they’ve got quite the stash at their HQ. Let’s say there’ll be bonuses for everyone after this.”

A few chuckles break the tension. Trust Roman to lighten the mood before a battle.

Our vans approach the designated area. The towering silhouette of the warehouse looms against the moonlit night, an ominous reminder of what lies ahead. The distant rumble of

the city fades, replaced by the steady beat of my heart and the whispered prayers of my men.

As we pull to a stop, hidden from the immediate view of the warehouse, I prepare to exit the van, the door sliding open smoothly. The cold air fills my lungs, sobering and sharp.

With a final look at my brothers and my men, determination courses through me. “It’s time,” I declare. “For Ana, for our family, for Moscow.”

Weapons ready, hearts steadfast, we move into the shadows with expert precision, prepared for the *mêlée* ahead.

Roman walks up to me with a grin. “You know, for a guy named Fists, that was quite the Shakespearean performance back there,” he teases.

I snort, nudging him playfully with my elbow. “What can I say? I’m a man of many talents.”

We gather, forming a small circle as the rest of our foot soldiers fan out, securing the perimeter and watching for any unexpected moves from the Romanians. Andrei, ever the strategist, pulls out a rudimentary map of the warehouse. Roman, Damien, Leo, and I lean in to study it. The five of us have been through countless operations together, our bond forged through shared danger and a dedication to the family.

“Alright,” I begin, pointing to the east side of the warehouse. “There are fewer guards here. We’ll approach from this angle. Roman, Leo, you’re on distraction. Set up on the west side. Damien,” I pause, meeting his eyes, “You and your team will take the north side. I want those guards dropped silently. We can’t afford any alarms.”

Damien nods, the gleam in his eyes showing he’s up for the challenge. “Consider it done.”

I continue. “Once we’re in, we group together, form a tight unit, and push forward with overwhelming force. We want them confused, scared. That’s how we get the upper hand.”

With everyone in agreement, we split up, getting into our respective positions. The distant hum of the city provides a deceptive calm, belying the intensity of the situation.

I creep closer to the warehouse, the solid ground beneath my boots centering me. Every step is calculated, meticulous, muted. Up ahead, I spot the first patrolman. He's pacing, distracted.

Closing the distance between us in a few silent strides, I come up behind him. Using one arm to clamp over his mouth, I pull him backward, using my other hand to execute a pressure point maneuver that leaves him unconscious but alive. Setting him down gently, I signal to the rest to move forward.

With every takedown, our confidence grows. But we're also acutely aware that the true battle lies ahead.

We regroup on the opposite side of the warehouse, the lot now fully secured. Andrei, Damien, Roman, Leo, and I meet in a tight huddle, the rest of our crew waiting a few steps back, their gazes alert and weapons ready. The distant rattle of a passing train echoes through the night, momentarily shrouding our conversation.

"Alright," I begin, my voice low and focused, "What comes next is what the Americans call 'shock and awe.' We go in hard and fast. They won't see it coming."

Leo grins, twirling a knife in his hand. "I like it."

Damien nods in agreement. "We've got one shot at this. Let's make it count."

I lock eyes with each of my brothers. This isn't just about vengeance for Ana, it's about setting a precedent, asserting our dominance in a world that respects nothing but power.

Roman claps a hand on my shoulder. "Lead the way, Fists."

Approaching the main entrance, Roman and Leo plant small charges on the heavy doors. In a coordinated explosion, the entrance shatters inward, immediately drawing the attention of everyone inside.

We don't give them a chance to react. Bursting in with overwhelming force, the vast interior of the warehouse becomes a chaotic battlefield. Bullets fly, but we've trained for

moments like this, and our shots are precise and calculated. Every trigger pull has a purpose.

I spot two men rushing me from the side. Swiftly sidestepping, I deliver a punishing blow to the first one's midriff, sending him sprawling. The second one is met with a non-lethal shot to the leg. He goes down, howling in pain.

A quick glance around the warehouse confirms we're working as the cohesive unit we've always been. Damien and a few of our men expertly disable a group of Romanians trying to flank us. Roman, laughing maniacally, throws a flashbang into another group, disorienting them long enough for Andrei and his team to sweep in and incapacitate them.

The Romanians, despite their numbers, are outmatched. But what they lack in skill, they make up for in determination. I see one of them rushing Leo, a knife glinting in his hand. Without hesitation, I aim and take a shot, striking the man's arm. The knife clatters to the floor just inches from Leo, who nods his thanks.

Our momentum is relentless, each member of our team knowing their role, executing it with precision. The warehouse begins to quiet down as the last of the Romanians are subdued.

We regroup in the center, breathing heavily but intact. Roman, ever the comic, looks around and whistles. "Well, that was fun. Anyone up for round two?"

I shoot him a wry look, but there's a smile tugging at the corner of my lips. "Let's just make sure we've secured the place first."

The din of battle has diminished on the ground floor as our men establish their dominance, pushing Radu's goons to the fringes. I take a moment, sweeping my gaze across the vast expanse of the warehouse. The organized chaos is a testament to our training and precision. Roman and Damien are ensuring that their men bind and secure the Romanians, while Leo and Andrei join me, forming a triangle of wary anticipation.

Craning my neck, I eye the looming second floor. Dim lights cast elongated shadows through the metal railings. I

can't see much from here, but instinct—and intelligence from our sources—says Radu is up there.

“He’s there,” I assert, nodding toward the looming metal staircase. “Radu’s planning his last stand with his elite. They’ll be tougher, sharper.”

Leo clenches his jaw, while Roman reloads his gun with a malicious focus that’s almost scary. Andrei scans the situation, his calculating mind no doubt tallying the potential threats.

I turn to the sea of our soldiers, locking eyes with the most seasoned among them. “Secure the grounds. Lock down the exits. No one in or out,” I command, my voice carrying over the vastness of the space. Their nods of affirmation are swift and confident.

Turning back to my brothers, I see the same fire of resolve reflected in their eyes. “Let’s end this,” I say.

Without another word, we ascend, our synchronized footfalls echoing in mutual vengeance. The higher ground beckons, and with it, the viper we’ve come to strike down.

The layout of the second floor is a labyrinth of hallways and chambers. While our foot soldiers keep a tight grip on the ground floor, my brothers and I form a tight, cohesive unit as we advance.

Andrei signals to a closed door, his ear pressed against it. We all know that Radu is a snake, but his exact location is a mystery. The doors we pass could lead to ambushes or empty rooms.

But as we proceed, my growing confidence starts to overshadow caution. We’ve already faced down so much tonight, and the taste of victory is within our grasp. That’s when a piercing cry, young and filled with terror, shatters the silence. A woman’s scream follows, slicing through the cold air.

Every nerve-ending fires, driving me in the direction of the distress. I can hear Roman and the others following close behind, our focus on the dark corridor ahead and that singular door at the end.

Without hesitation, I kick it open.

The scene before me takes a moment to register. Radu, the man responsible for so much pain and evil, is not standing defiantly before us, weapon drawn. Instead, he's cowering, using his own wife and child as human shields.

His eyes, always cold and calculated, now gleam with a mix of fear and malice. "Samuil," he hisses, pushing his terrified wife and child further in front of him. "It seems you've finally got me cornered."

My brothers fan out around me, their expressions a mix of rage and disgust. Andrei's eyes dart to the child, a boy no older than six, while Roman's grip on his weapon tightens visibly.

"Radu," I growl, struggling to contain my anger. "You piece of shit. Using your family like this? Even for you, this is low."

He smirks, pointing his pistol in our direction from behind his wife. "We all do what we must to survive. Now, you're going to let me and my family walk out of here. Got it?"

Roman chuckles darkly. "You think we'd let you waltz out after everything you've done?"

Radu's eyes dart around the room, assessing his options, of which there are few. "I don't think you have a choice."

I take a deep breath, reigning in the fury threatening to overtake me. The innocent lives in front of me dictate my next move. "Release your wife and child, Radu," I say, my voice steady and firm. "Let them go. Then you and I can settle our business."

Radu hesitates, his gaze flicking between my eyes and the exit behind us.

Damien speaks up, his voice soft yet cutting. "Do you really want your son to see his father as nothing more than a coward?"

A tense silence envelops the room. For a heartbeat, nothing moves.

CHAPTER 26

SAMUIL

The ticking of a clock somewhere in the distance seems unbearably loud, the entire world narrowing down to this one room. Every heartbeat pounds in my ears. Radu's family are huddled before him, their eyes filled with anticipation and fear.

"Fine!" Radu spits.

With a sudden move, Radu pushes his family toward us, his eyes darting back and forth between me and the door they'd just run out of.

Radu produces a gun and points it straight at me, his finger twitching over the trigger. Time seems to slow, every millisecond stretched and distorted. My instincts scream at me to act, to pull my own gun and fire. Killing is not unfamiliar to me. It's a dark part of the world I inhabit.

In a split-second decision, I close the distance, my training and reflexes taking over. My hand wraps around the gun, wrenching it from his grip with a force that sends it skittering across the floor. Radu's eyes widen, filled with a mix of shock and anger, but he barely gets a chance to react as I drive my fist into his gut. He doubles over, wheezing, and drops to his knees.

Roman steps forward, glaring down at Radu. "You should've just stayed down, mate."

Andrei nods, giving me a look of approval. "Well done, brother."

I stand over Radu, his once commanding presence now reduced to a pathetic state, gasping for breath on the floor. The weight of it all finally hits me, a rush of adrenaline along with fear, then relief. I've taken many men down, ended countless threats, but this... this was personal.

"Samuil," Roman speaks, concern evident in his voice, "You okay?"

I nod. "I am." I gaze down at Radu. "He's not worth another death on our hands. He's done."

Kneeling down beside Radu's crumpled form, I can see the panic and surprise in his eyes. It's a look I've seen before—defeat. But there's something else, uncertainty. He's waiting for the death blow, that final moment that most men in his position would expect, even hope for.

"You should be dead," I tell him coldly, my voice barely above a whisper. The silence in the room is heavy, every breath audible. "It would be easy, definitely justifiable."

Radu's gaze shifts to the door. I can see the calculations spinning in his mind, wondering if I'm the kind of man to use his family as leverage.

I think of Ana, of the future we could build. "You deserve to die. But you've caught me in a good mood, and I'm not the kind of man to leave a child without a father and a woman without a husband." I lean closer, so he can feel my breath, my intensity. "But that doesn't mean you get a free pass."

Radu swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Samuil —"

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. "You're finished here in Moscow. Whatever power, whatever respect you thought you had—it's gone." I pause, letting the reality sink in. "How you spend tomorrow, that's your business. But I'd advise you to remember this moment, remember this mercy."

His eyes meet mine, searching for any hint of a trap, but he finds only cold resolve.

"You and your family have until the end of the day. If you're still in Moscow after that, it won't matter where you

hide. We'll find you." The underlying threat is unmistakable.

The weight of defeat presses down on Radu, and he nods slowly. "We'll go."

As Radu pushes himself up, I grab his arm, yanking him close. "Make sure your next life doesn't intersect with mine. Because next time, you might not find me in such a charitable mood."

He gulps, the reality of his near-death experience making his face pale. "Understood."

Releasing him, I watch as he stumbles toward the exit, every step that of a defeated man. I can hear the murmurs of my men outside, but a heavy silence fills the room. We all glance and nod at one another, the understanding of our brotherhood clear.

Roman steps in, breaking the moment. "That was..." He searches for the right word, then settles on, "unexpected."

I chuckle. "Life's full of surprises. Let's just hope he heeds the warning."

"He'd be a fool not to," Damien says, watching Radu's retreating form.

As the adrenaline starts to wane, a sense of fatigue washes over me. But it's not over yet. There's still work to be done, a city to secure, and a woman I need to see.

"Let's move out," I command, ready to put this night behind me.

Descending the stairs, the echo of my boots is drowned out by the subdued murmurs of the Romanians being held down by my men. The large warehouse space is a hive of activity, but there's a sense of order. After all, we'd gone in with a clear plan, and executed it to perfection.

I walk straight up to the closest man, looking him directly in the eyes. "By tonight, every one of you will leave Moscow. Understand?" My voice is cold and direct.

He nods vigorously, fear evident in his gaze. "Yes, sir. Understood."

I continue down the line, repeating the command. I can see the relief on many of their faces—they expected death tonight, not a second chance. And though their loyalty to Radu has been shattered, my words serve as a warning of what awaits them should they fail to heed my instructions.

As I finish, Roman approaches with a grin, nudging a crate with his boot. “Look what we’ve got here.”

I glance down to see stacks of unmarked bills, weapons, and other items that Radu’s gang had been hoarding. It’s quite the haul, and it’s all ours now.

Andrei claps me on the back, his face serious. “You handled that well. You sure you’re just an enforcer?” His tone is one of respect, mixed with genuine curiosity.

One corner of my mouth ticks up into a smirk. “I have many skills, brother. Enforcement just happens to be one of them.”

Andrei raises an eyebrow, clearly amused. “With leadership like that, ever thought of running your own operation?”

Before I can reply, my phone begins to vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out to see Viktor’s name flashing on the screen. I answer, expecting an update on Ana’s condition, hoping for news that she’s awake and asking for me.

But Viktor’s voice is rushed, panic edging his words. “Samuil, it’s Ana.”

My heart sinks, a cold chill seeping into my bones. “What happened?”

There’s a pause, and I can almost hear the weight of his words before he speaks them.

“You need to get here. Now.”

CHAPTER 27

SAMUIL

The drive to the hospital is a blur. Each passing second feeling like an eternity, but finally, the bright lights of the hospital come into view. The tires of the car screech in protest as I pull up, not bothering to find a proper parking space.

As I jump out of the car, Roman, Andrei, and the rest of my brothers spill out behind me. Without a word, we rush into the main entrance. I barely notice the curious stares of the hospital staff and visitors as we sprint toward Ana's room.

The door is slightly ajar. The silhouette of a doctor stands in front of it. As I get closer, his features come into focus, tired lines on his face, exhaustion in his eyes.

"Doctor," I say, my voice a low growl. "What's happened to Ana?"

He looks at me, clears his throat, and begins to explain. "The poison she was exposed to had a more insidious effect than we'd initially understood. The antidote did save her life, but it didn't fully expel the toxins from her system."

I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. "What does that mean?"

He pauses, choosing his words carefully. "The poison has affected her heart. We have been working for hours to stabilize her. She's not awake yet, but we're monitoring her closely."

Every word he says feels like a punch in my gut. My brothers are silent, absorbing the gravity of the situation. I see the pain mirrored in their faces.

But something about the doctor's demeanor nags at me. His eyes dart around, and he's avoiding direct eye contact. I step closer, towering over him. "What aren't you telling me?"

He swallows hard, the pulse on his neck quickening. "Ana's heart is delicate now. The trauma from the poison and the subsequent treatments has left it vulnerable. We have done everything we can, but—"

"But what?" I demand, the fury in my voice unmistakable.

He hesitates before letting out a heavy sigh. "She is still not out of the woods."

The room goes silent. I feel a cold rage bubbling inside me, but at the same time, an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

"She's strong," Andrei says after a beat, his voice firm. "She'll pull through this."

The doctor nods, his face sympathetic. "She's in good hands. We're doing everything we can."

But that isn't enough for me. Without another word, I push past the doctor and step into Ana's room. The sight of her lying there, pale and fragile, tears at me. I approach her bedside, taking her hand into mine. Her skin feels cold, but her pulse, although faint, still beats rhythmically under my touch.

I lower my head, feeling the weight of the situation settling in.

Whatever it takes, I will make sure Ana pulls through this. No matter the cost.

There's a soft knock on the door before it opens, revealing Viktor's towering frame. He steps inside, pausing for a moment to gaze at his sister. I can see the pain in his eyes, the same pain I feel.

"Samuil," he says, his voice breaking the silence, "I heard about the mission. You guys did well."

I nod, my voice barely audible. "Thanks."

“It’s not the same without her, is it?” Viktor comments, his eyes on Ana.

“Nothing is,” I admit, feeling the loss of her presence, her positive spirit.

Viktor chuckles softly, taking a seat next to me. “You know, when Ana was about ten, she decided she wanted a treehouse. Our father told her it was too dangerous, that she was too young. But she was adamant. So she started building one herself.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued despite my worry.

“She collected scraps of wood, nails, anything she could find. She even stole a hammer from the toolshed,” Viktor continues, a glint of pride in his eyes. “For weeks, she worked on that treehouse, ignoring our taunts and the endless scrapes and bruises she got. One day she fell, twisted her ankle real bad. We all thought that would be the end of it. But the next day, there she was, climbing up the tree, determined to finish what she started.”

I can’t help but smile, imagining a young, stubborn Ana building a treehouse with sheer will and determination.

“That’s Ana for you. Stubborn as hell, never backs down from a challenge. Even when the odds are stacked against her.” Viktor says, a fondness lacing his words.

My heart swells with pride. That’s the woman I love. The same woman who, against all odds, wormed her way into my heart, breaking down the walls I’d built around myself.

Viktor’s expression shifts, growing serious. “The doctors told me there’s a good chance she might never wake up.”

I take a deep breath, feeling a renewed surge of determination. “That doesn’t matter.”

Viktor looks at me, confusion evident in his gaze. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” I pause, finding the right words, “Ana is a fighter, in every sense of the word. She’s faced worse and

come out stronger. I won't accept this fate for her. And I won't ever give up on her."

Viktor studies me for a moment, his gaze piercing. Then, slowly he smiles. "Maybe you are the right man for my sister after all."

I look back at Ana, her face peaceful, a stark contrast to the battle she's fighting within. With everything in me, I vow to stand by her, to fight for her, just as she would for me.



Days turn into weeks. My hair grows longer, and my beard becomes unruly. The sharp contours of my face are buried beneath the scruff. But I barely notice. I can't. All I see, all I feel, is her. Ana.

The walls of the hospital room have become my world. The rhythmic beeping of her heart monitor is my new anthem. I wake up to it. I fall asleep to it. Every soft exhale, every flutter of her eyelids makes my heart race with hope.

Viktor comes by often, bringing food and fresh clothes, trying to coax me to eat, to shower, to *live*. But every bite tastes like ash in my mouth. Every shower feels like a hollow attempt to wash away the despair.

"Samuil," he says one day, pulling up a chair beside me. "You can't keep doing this to yourself."

"I'm not leaving her," I reply, my voice raw.

"It's not about leaving her," Viktor says, his voice gentle but firm. "It's about finding a balance. For both your sakes."

I glare at him, but he doesn't flinch. "She's my sister, Samuil. I love her. But I can't watch you destroy yourself. She wouldn't want that."

Andrei, Roman, Damien, Leo all visit in rotating shifts, each trying to pull me from the vortex of hopelessness I'm spiraling into. They bring stories of the outside world, of our business, of the empire we're building. I know they're just trying to help, to distract me. But it all feels so distant, so trivial. What's an empire without its queen?

Roman even jokes about my hair, saying, “If you’re going for the wild man look, you’ve nailed it.” A chuckle follows. “Might scare off the nurses, though.”

Then, one evening, as the golden rays of the setting sun filter through the blinds, casting a warm glow on Ana’s pale face, her brother walks in with purpose. He stands at the threshold, his gaze alternating between his sister and me.

“You love her,” he states. It’s not a question.

“With everything I have,” I reply, my voice breaking.

He smiles, a hint of sadness in his eyes. “Then you know she wouldn’t want you to wither away like this.”

I look away, unable to bear the weight of his words. The truth of them.

“She’s fighting, Samuil,” Viktor continues. “Every moment, she’s fighting to come back to us, to you. And while she fights, you need to live. For her. For both of you.”

His words sink in, hitting hard. I know he’s right, I know I need to summon the strength to live for her, to manifest her coming back to us. Then it happens.

I’m in Ana’s room, watching the rise and fall of her chest, silently willing her to wake up, to feel my undying love. Suddenly, her eyes flutter open, searching the room, finally settling on me. I hold my breath, unable to speak.

A tidal wave of relief crashes over me. For weeks, hope was a dwindling flame, but in one single moment, it roars back to life in a fiery blaze. Her face, once lost in an expressionless realm I couldn’t reach, regains a spark of vitality. Every fear, every nightmarish thought that has plagued my restless nights, evaporates.

My heart, which had been clenched in dread, swells with joy, thudding loudly in my chest.

She’s back.

The weight of a thousand chains lifts off my soul as her gaze meets mine. In this moment, the world resets, and everything feels possible again.

She blinks, and I can see the haze of drugs is clouding her focus. But there's a twinkle there, a spark. "Samuil," she whispers, her voice raspy but filled with warmth.

I lean closer, gripping her hand. "Hey, tough girl."

A slow smile stretches across her lips. "I had the most amazing dream." She blinks, clearing her throat. "You won't believe it."

I chuckle, playing along. "Try me."

She takes a deep breath, her eyes distant. "I was in the center of a massive arena, flooded with blinding lights and deafening cheers. And I was wearing MMA gloves, landing every punch I threw, every dodge was perfect."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "You, an MMA fighter?"

She nods, a hint of pride in her eyes. "Not just any fighter. The ultimate fighting champion. Every match was a victory. Every opponent met the mat."

I can't help but laugh. "I would say that might be a tall order for someone your size. But then again, I've seen you fight."

She smirks, and I can see her fire returning. "I was unbeatable. The crowd went wild with every takedown. But what made it truly special..." She hesitates, her gaze softening, "... was you."

"Me?" I ask, genuinely surprised.

Ana nods. "You were right there in the front row. Not as my coach, not as my manager, but as my biggest fan. Every punch I threw, every victory, every moment there you were, cheering me on, roaring louder than anyone else."

My throat tightens at the imagery. "Sounds like a good dream," I whisper.

She nods, wincing slightly. "It was. But waking up to you here, that's even better."

Silence stretches between us, comfortable and warm. I caress her cheek, the rough pad of my thumb tracing her soft

skin. “Ana,” I murmur, my voice thick with emotion. “I love you. More than I ever thought possible.”

She smiles, her eyes glistening with tears. “I love you too, Samuil. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before.”

CHAPTER 28

ANASTASIA

A gust of crisp air greets us as we roll out of the hospital, but all I can focus on is the damn wheelchair I'm in.

"Just so we're all clear," I start, adjusting the shawl draped over my legs, "this is a temporary setback. Not some new lifestyle choice."

Viktor chuckles, while Samuil gives my hand a gentle squeeze. I notice Andrei trying to hide a smile.

"Nobody's questioning your resilience, Ana," Samuil murmurs, his voice soft but the humor in it unmistakable.

"Yeah," I shoot back, though the edge in my tone is playful, "because if they did, they'd get a firsthand demonstration of how a woman in a wheelchair can still kick ass."

Sandra slides in next to me. "You always did have a way with words," she says playfully.

Viktor raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing at his lips. "Leave it to my sister to turn recovery into a threat."

I shrug, a small smile betraying my tough facade. "Gotta keep you boys on your toes."

There's a shared moment of lightness between us, but the trauma of the past weeks still hangs heavy. It's clear to see in the lines of concern etched across Samuil's face, in the furrow of Andrei's brow, and in Sandra's tense posture.

Samuil clears his throat, disrupting the short-lived joviality. "So, the plan," he starts, avoiding my eyes for just a

fraction of a second too long, “is for Ana to stay with me while she recovers.”

Viktor nods. “Makes sense. Your place is more accessible than the family estate, and it’s closer to the hospital if... well, you know.”

“I don’t need constant supervision,” I interject, feeling the prickling sting of my pride. I don’t mean that entirely, but the words still leave a slightly bitter taste in my mouth.

Sandra places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “It’s not about supervision, dear. It’s about being surrounded by loved ones who care for you and will aid in your healing.”

“And who can also keep an eye on Samuil, make sure he doesn’t smother me,” I tease, shooting a side-glance at him.

Samuil rolls his eyes, but there’s no hiding the warmth and affection in his expression. “Trust me, with your stubbornness, even a battalion couldn’t smother you.”

Andrei grins. “That she got from Viktor.”

My brother shrugs, mock offense on his face. “Guilty as charged.”

The atmosphere is lighter now, the banter pushing away the shadows of worry, if only for a little while. I know the road ahead won’t be easy. The memories of the poison, the excruciating pain, the weeks lost in unconsciousness—they all lurk in the recesses of my mind. But now surrounded by those I hold dear, I let myself bask in the present. The jokes, the laughter, the shared understanding that we’re in this together.

The hum of the car engine combines with the gentle rhythm of the streets. I stare out the window, the steady progression of Moscow’s architecture flashing by. The world outside feels like a distant memory, even though I was only confined for a few weeks. The familiar scenes—the vendors selling pirozhki, the kids running around in the parks, the grandeur of the historical buildings—all of it makes me draw in a deep, satisfied breath.

“I’ve missed this,” I say, more to myself than to Samuil. The city looks the same, yet to my freshly appreciative eyes, it

seems to sparkle just a bit brighter.

Samuil's voice interrupts my reverie. "The world missed you, too."

I chuckle at his sentimentality but can't hide the smile that lingers on my lips. As we weave through the streets, a realization suddenly strikes me. I turn to Samuil, an eyebrow raised. "You know, I've been out of it for a while, but I'm pretty certain you don't live anywhere near this hospital."

His grip tightens momentarily on the wheel. "Observant as ever," he says, flashing me a half-smile. "There's been a change of venue."

"Change of venue?" I echo, curiosity piqued. "What do you mean?"

He takes a deep breath. "I realized, after everything that's happened, that my old apartment was woefully inadequate for your recovery. It wasn't big enough, wasn't safe enough."

Before I can demand a clear answer, he makes a turn and we pull up in front of a stunning structure in the upscale neighborhood of Khamovniki. Towering over the neighboring buildings, the facade of the condo gleams in the afternoon sun, a mix of modern architecture and classic Moscow elegance.

I'm almost speechless. "Samuil... is this..."

He parks the car and turns to me, a hint of apprehension in his eyes. "Yes. Welcome to our new home. At least for now."

I blink, trying to process the grand gesture. "You got this place for me?"

He runs a hand through his hair, a sheepish grin on his face. "Well, for us. Look, Ana, it's not just about the space or the safety. It's about creating an environment where you can heal, where we can be together without any concerns." There's a pause. "And if you hate it, it can be temporary."

My heart swells, a mix of surprise, gratitude, and love. "Samuil," I whisper, my voice choked with emotion. "You didn't have to..."

He cuts me off with a gentle finger to my lips. “I wanted to. For us.”

I lean in, pressing a soft kiss on his cheek. “Thank you,” I say, my voice filled with a depth of emotion words can’t capture.

Pulling back, I cast a wry smile. “Though, if I knew getting poisoned would get me a penthouse in Khamovniki, I might’ve considered it sooner.”

Samuil laughs, shaking his head. “Only you, Anastasia. Only you.”

The gentle hum of the electric doors greets us as they glide open, revealing an expansive lobby that’s the epitome of modern elegance. Polished marble floors reflect the gentle illumination from the chic pendant lights, while minimalist furniture pieces, each more artistic than the next, punctuate the space. I can’t help but marvel at the sheer opulence; it’s as if we’ve stepped onto the pages of an architectural magazine.

As Samuil pushes the wheelchair, we bypass the sparkling water feature in the center of the lobby, moving past the uniformed concierge who greets us with a nod. The lift is as swift as it is silent, and within moments, we’re at the penthouse level.

The doors open to a living space that takes my breath away. The first thing that strikes me is the light—a panorama of Moscow stretches before us through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The city’s famous spires, domes, and skyscrapers are all on display, their details painted by the soft hues of the setting sun. A lavish open concept living area beckons with plush sofas, abstract art, and a sleek fireplace built into a marble wall.

But as striking as the interior is, it’s the view that captivates me. “It’s incredible,” I whisper, my gaze fixed on the horizon, where the silhouettes of the Seven Sisters seem to pierce the evening sky.

Samuil leans down, his breath warm against my ear. “You haven’t seen the best part yet.”

He steers me down a corridor, and with every turn, the anticipation builds. When the doors to a large room swing open, I'm left stunned.

Before me lies a state-of-the-art gym, the kind one would expect in a high-end fitness center, not a personal apartment. It's outfitted with everything: weights, cardio machines, resistance bands, mats, and a mirrored wall that stretches the entire length of the room. Off to one side is a designated space for my physical therapy.

"You did this for me?" I'm barely able to get the words out, my emotions threatening to bubble over.

Samuil shrugs, the tiniest smirk playing on his lips. "Thought you might want to get back into fighting shape once you're ready. But first things first—recovery."

The realization of what he's done, how deeply he's thought about my needs and my passions, crashes over me like a tidal wave. I feel tears stinging my eyes, not of sadness, but of overwhelming gratitude and love. Impulsively, I pull myself up from the wheelchair, balancing precariously for a moment. Samuil moves to steady me, but I wrap my arms around him first, pulling him into a tight embrace.

"Thank you," I whisper against his neck, feeling the warmth of his skin, the steady pulse beneath.

He pulls back slightly, looking down into my eyes. Without another word, I lean in, pressing my lips to his. It's a kiss filled with promise, with hope, and most of all, love.

I take a deep breath, the weight of everything that's happened hitting me. "Samuil," I begin, my voice shaky, "I've been such a fool. How did I not realize sooner just how deeply I felt about you? Every day I wonder why you didn't just give up on me and find someone else, someone easier to deal with, someone who didn't have so many walls up."

He chuckles, a deep sound that rumbles from his chest, causing me to look up, slightly miffed. "What's so funny?" I demand in a tone sharper than intended.

Samuil grins, his eyes holding a hint of mischief. “Anastasia, for all your toughness, your strength, and your resilience, you’ve still got a lot to learn about love.”

Confused, I tilt my head and narrow my eyes, a small smile forming on my lips. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he leans in, closing the distance between us, until his lips are hovering just above mine. “With love, Ana,” he whispers, his warm breath brushing against my skin, “there’s no such thing as giving up.”

Before I can respond, his lips are on mine, a soft, lingering kiss that communicates everything words can’t.

CHAPTER 29

ANASTASIA

One month later...

The metallic clang of the weights and the rhythmic thud of punches being thrown onto the bags fills the room. As sweat drips down my temple, I circle Samuil, my gaze fixed on him. He moves effortlessly, a graceful dance of power and precision. I, on the other hand, still feel slightly off-balance. The recovery, the poison, the weeks in the hospital have taken a toll on me.

“Come on, Ana,” he growls, smirking a little. “You’re holding back.”

I grit my teeth, frustrated. “I’m trying, Samuil.”

“No,” he corrects with a sharp edge to his tone, “you’re thinking too much. Stop being afraid. Stop holding back. Come at me.”

I hesitate for a split second, the shadows of recent events tugging at me. But when I look into Samuil’s hopeful eyes, I feel a rush of adrenaline. Suddenly, all my worries, my doubts, the haunting memories... they all fade away.

With a roar, I lunge at him. Our sparring intensifies. Every time he tries to land a punch, I deflect, dodge, or take it head-on. We create a rhythm of movements based on power and speed.

Finally, finding an opening, I unleash a barrage of punches. One, two, three, each finding its mark. Samuil grunts, trying to block my advances, but I press on, feeling that

familiar fire ignite within me. My limbs move fluidly, each strike more confident than the last.

And then, just as suddenly as it started, it ends. I step back, panting, my chest heaving. The sharp sting of sweat in my eyes is proof of the effort. Samuil, looking just as winded but with a proud gleam in his eyes, smirks.

“Told you,” he says with a huff, wiping sweat off his brow. “I knew you had it in you.”

I can’t help but smile, my exhaustion making the gesture a little lopsided. “I guess I did. Thanks, coach.”

He chuckles, extending a hand to help steady me. “Always here to push you, even when you want to punch me for it.”

“Especially then,” I quip, taking a deep breath. Despite the pain and the exhaustion, there’s a newfound confidence blossoming within me. With Samuil by my side, I feel unstoppable.

The cold bite of the bottled water is refreshing against my parched throat. We sit on the plush mat by the massive window, the sprawling cityscape of Moscow stretched out beneath us. It’s breathtaking, with golden domes, silver spires, and the winding Moscow River shimmering under the afternoon sun. The very heart of Russia, in all its splendor.

“That’s where I grew up,” I point, gesturing to a cluster of buildings on the distant horizon. I share tales of childhood mischief, of sneaking out at night with Viktor to raid the local bakery, and our wild sprinting escapes from the neighborhood babushkas who’d chase us with their brooms.

Samuil chuckles, his eyes dancing with amusement. “Over there,” he gestures to a gritty but charming section of the city. “I got into my first fight. Was defending a friend. Lost two teeth but gained respect.”

We share more memories, letting the nostalgia wash over us, but then I notice a shadow crossing Samuil’s face. His gaze becomes distant, thoughts deep and unreadable. It’s unlike him, so naturally, I have to prod.

I lean into him, playfully nudging, “Out with it. What’s brewing in that mind of yours?”

He looks deep into my eyes, his own reflecting the hues of the twilight outside. “Remember when you spoke of a dream to experience life beyond these borders? Beyond the threats and constant watchfulness?”

I raise an eyebrow in amusement but let him continue.

“To maybe live in America?”

My heart skips a beat. “America?” The audacity of such a thought—uprooting from Moscow, my home—feels overwhelming and exhilarating at the same time.

He holds my gaze, unwavering. “Imagine, Ana, building our life on our terms. We could be in a place where we write our own narrative. Set up our own gym, train fighters, and maybe, just maybe, find a bit of a normal life.”

A chuckle escapes me. “Us? Normal? But it is intriguing.” I search his face, half-expecting to find this all to be a jest. Instead, all I encounter is heartfelt seriousness.

He interlaces his fingers with mine, the warmth of his touch grounding me. “Every day, I think of how we can rewrite our story, Ana. Why not start a new chapter? An American chapter.”

The gravity of such a shift is undeniable. A fresh life, unfamiliar streets, new challenges, so much of the unknown. Yet as I peer into Samuil’s eyes, glowing with hope, the idea seems less intimidating. If there’s anyone I’d embark on such a journey with, it’s him.

“America,” I whisper, the very name swirling with a mix of dreams and promise. “I’ll be the fiercest MMA coach that country has ever seen.”

His laughter resonates throughout the room, causing a wide grin to spread across my lips. “I’ve no doubt about that.”

The warmth of our bodies radiate a heat born not just from exertion but emotion. With the vast expanse of Moscow stretched below, it feels as though we’re suspended in our own

world. There's an intimate quietness between us, only interrupted by the sounds of our shared breaths and the din of the city below.

Resting my head on his broad shoulder, the immediate rush of Samuil's familiar scent engulfs me. The aroma is intoxicating, reminding me of nights wrapped in his embrace, conversations whispered in the dark, and moments when words weren't necessary. His presence has always felt like an anchor, grounding me even in the toughest times. My senses heighten, drawing me closer to him, and I revel in the sheer physicality of the man next to me. His body, chiseled and firm, has always been a source of both comfort and desire. Lifting my head, I look up into those piercing eyes that never fail to draw me in. The light from the setting sun casts them in a golden hue, making them all the more mesmerizing. "You know," I begin, a playful edge to my voice, "there's something else other than fighting that I feel recovered enough to do."

His grin is instantaneous, mischievous, and completely understanding. There's no need for me to elaborate further. We've always had this uncanny ability to read one another, to know exactly what the other is thinking without uttering a word. "Round two in the bedroom?" he teases, his voice dropping to that sultry tone I know all too well.

A chuckle escapes my lips, my heart rate spiking not from the earlier physical exertion but from the promise of what's to come. "You're on."

CHAPTER 30

ANASTASIA

The path from the gym to the bedroom feels electric, a trail of desire and anticipation. As we step into the dimly lit room, the ambient light from the city paints the walls in a soft, shimmering glow. The bedroom is another testament to Samuil's taste—minimalist yet luxurious. A massive king-sized bed sits in the center, draped in deep blue sheets that mirror the evening sky. Tall, mirrored wardrobes stand opposite the window wall, reflecting the city lights and adding a touch of depth to the room. Recessed lighting in the ceiling provides a soft illumination, creating a perfect cocoon for the night.

We're drawn to each other like magnets, and our lips crash together in a fervor that only grows more insistent with every passing second. The world blurs in a mix of heat and passion. I can feel my heart racing, everything is amplified—the sensation of his lips against mine, the texture of his stubble grazing my skin, and the weight of his body as it bears down on me with a gentle assertiveness.

Suddenly, a sense of dizziness sweeps over me. It's not from the intensity, though that's certainly a factor. I pull back slightly, trying to catch my breath. Immediately, Samuil's face registers concern. "Ana, are you okay?"

Wooziness notwithstanding, my wits haven't left me entirely. I smirk, tilting my head with a teasing glint in my eye. "What can I say? You're the only man who's ever had the power to make my head spin like this."

He chuckles, a rumbling sound that vibrates through his chest and sends tingles down my spine. “Well, I always aim to be unforgettable.”

I laugh softly, my fingers tracing the lines of his face, appreciating every rugged detail. “Trust me, you are.”

Our lips meet again, our pace more deliberate but no less passionate. Our clothing becomes a hindrance, and we work together to rid ourselves of the barriers, revealing skin that begs for contact.

The sensation of cool silk against my heated skin makes me shiver as we tumble onto the bed. Samuil’s weight presses me into the plush mattress, and every instinct urges me to pull him closer, to feel even more of him. The vastness of the room shrinks, leaving just the two of us in our own intimate universe of longing and love. Every sensation, every touch, is magnified. We’re rediscovering each other, a journey of affection that has only grown deeper with time and trials.

Samuil and I are a tangle of limbs and passion, our lips fervently seeking each other’s. Every brush of skin and fleeting touch sends shivers down my spine. It’s intense and intimate, yet something keeps tugging at the edge of my thoughts.

I find myself pulling away, a sudden hesitation causing me to break our heated connection. Samuil immediately senses the shift in my demeanor, concern shadowing his eyes. “Hey,” he says, fingertips caressing my face, “what’s going on? If you’re not feeling up for this, we can stop. No pressure.”

My heart swells at his sensitivity. “It’s not that. Trust me,” I say with a laugh, “I’ve never been more ready.”

His brows furrow, a mixture of confusion and curiosity. “Then what is it? Talk to me.”

With a mischievous grin, I let out a playful sigh. “Ever since that time with the... you know, the bondage? I can’t get it out of my head.” My cheeks warm slightly as I confess. “Even during my recovery at the hospital, the memories of it, of us, occupied my mind. A lot.”

Samuil's eyes darken with intrigue, a hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Really? Well, if that's what you want, I'm more than happy to oblige."

I feel a thrill of anticipation as he retrieves a set of silken restraints from the bedside drawer. Gently but firmly, he binds my wrists and ankles to the four corners of the bed. The soft material feels cool against my heated skin, the sensation of being tied down both exhilarating and oddly comforting.

With every move Samuil makes, I can't help but quiver in anticipation, waiting for what comes next. His touch is tender yet focused, and the restraints make every caress, every kiss feel amplified. It's a delicate balance of trust, submittal and pleasure, of giving and taking control.

Samuil knows exactly how to draw out the sensations, how to build the anticipation to an almost unbearable level. Each touch, each teasing stroke, is intended to drive me wild, to push me closer and closer to the edge.

I lose myself in the intoxicating combination of gratification and vulnerability. The world shrinks down, leaving only Samuil and me in the intimate space of our bedroom, the incredible connection between us growing deeper. The feeling of being restrained while also being stimulated is electrifying.

Samuil's mouth finds my most sensitive spot, every sensation amplified. The feeling of his lips, the teasing flicks of his tongue, and the intensity in his eyes as he watches my reactions only increase my pleasure.

I concentrate on my breath, my heart pounding in my ears. The silk bindings, taut against my wrists and ankles, the trust we share, the vulnerability I'm allowing myself to give is incredibly arousing. It doesn't take much more before waves of pleasure crash over me, pulling a deep moan from my throat.

But Samuil isn't done with me yet.

With skillful hands he adjusts the restraints, maneuvering me effortlessly onto my knees. The change in position, the

sense of exposure, sends another thrill through me. He's behind me now, his length pressing into my folds, his hands firm on my hips.

I can feel the power in his movements as he drives his cock deeply into me. The sensation is overwhelming, making me gasp. Each thrust, each movement, sends jolts of pleasure radiating through me. It's raw and primal, the way he takes control, and I revel in it.

It feels so different this time. The vulnerability, the trust, the complete surrender—it's intoxicating. I lose myself in the rhythm, in the feel of him. There's no thinking, no hesitation, just pure, unadulterated need. And as he pushes me closer and closer to the edge, I give in completely, waves of pleasure washing over me once again.

It's intense and powerful. And when it's over, the world comes rushing back, leaving me breathless and sated.

Samuil's fingers, gentle and deliberate, untie the restraints, freeing me. The feel of the bindings linger on my skin, a faint reminder of the exhilaration I just experienced. When he turns me over, I'm met with the warmth of his gaze, those intense eyes reflecting a need just as powerful as mine.

I pull him down, wrapping my legs around his waist, guiding him to the depth I crave. His weight atop me, the feeling of his body pressing into mine is exactly what I crave. My hands, now free, roam the expanse of his back, feeling the play of muscles under the skin, the heat of him. Every touch, every kiss, feels intensified.

The world narrows again, the focus solely on the rhythm of our heartbeats, the slide of skin on skin, the sounds of our mutual desire filling the room. This has gone beyond physical; it's emotional, it's spiritual. I realize, as our movements grow more desperate, that my feelings for this man are deeper, more profound than I could have ever imagined. It's a love so strong it's nearly unbearable.

With a final thrust and a guttural grunt, Samuil's cock twitches and spills deep inside of me, causing my pussy to clench around him as I come along with him.

He collapses beside me, our breaths ragged, our limbs entangled. I nuzzle into his neck, placing soft kisses on his skin, reveling in the afterglow. We lay there, our bond strengthened by the profound intimacy we just shared. Everything feels right, perfect.

The quiet hum of the city outside the window accompanies the rhythmic rise and fall of Samuil's chest beneath my head. As we relax into the moment, I can feel a tension in his frame, a hesitancy in the way he runs his fingers through my hair. He's holding something back, and I know him well enough to recognize it.

"Okay, spill it," I say, pushing myself up on an elbow to look him in the eyes.

He meets my gaze, a softness, a newfound vulnerability filling his eyes. "We need to get approval from the Bratva to leave, and it's not guaranteed," he says. There's a pause, an unfinished sentence hanging there.

"And?" I prompt, raising an eyebrow. I've faced down some of Moscow's fiercest fighters. Cryptic hints don't stand a chance.

He chuckles, probably at the stubborn set of my jaw. "It's not just that, Ana." The pause is longer this time, and I wait patiently. "There's something else I've been considering, but I'm not sure how to bring it up."

Curiosity piqued, I sit up. "You've got my full attention, so out with it."

He seems to take a moment, searching for words. Then he deflects. "How about this? We get dressed, head out for dinner, and discuss everything there. It's been too long since we had a nice night out. A celebration for your recovery. We could both use it."

His tactic doesn't completely fool me. He's trying to shift the conversation, probably to buy himself time to figure out how to approach whatever's on his mind. But I can't deny that the prospect of a night out, especially after being confined to a hospital room and this penthouse, is tempting.

I ponder his offer, looking for any hint in his eyes, then sigh. “Alright, but only if it’s somewhere fancy. I’ve been living in hospital gowns and sweatpants for damn near two months. I want to wear something that makes me feel like a woman again.”

His smile broadens, revealing that mischievous spark I’ve come to adore. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER 31

SAMUIL

Lavish wooden panels and art pieces depicting Russian folklore surround me. Seated in an old leather chair, I wait, every muscle taut. The anticipation builds with each ticking second from the grand clock that dominates one wall.

Andrei and Sandra make their entrance, and their presence immediately fills the room. Both have a distinct air of authority; Andrei's frame exuding power, and Sandra, with a hidden grace that clashes with the sharp edge she's known for.

"Samuil," Andrei greets, a hint of curiosity in his eyes.

"How is Ana recovering? We haven't seen her since she left the hospital," Sandra inquires, her gaze unwavering.

Andrei's stern face betrays a hint of concern as he adds, "She's been through a lot. The Bratva owes her."

I nod, the memories from her time in the hospital flashing in my mind. "She's tough, as you both know. Every day, she's regaining strength. The scars run deep, but she's healing, both physically and mentally. The penthouse gym has been invaluable to her recovery. She's been training, slowly getting back to her old self."

Sandra's lips curve into a slight smile. "That's good to hear. She's got a fire in her, that one."

Andrei nods in agreement, "Always knew she was a fighter. When she's ready, tell her the Bratva awaits her return."

"We all do," Sandra adds, her tone sincere.

I nod respectfully. “I trust you’ve been keeping well?”

Andrei takes a deep breath, his eyes piercing. “We’ve had our hands full with Radu and his antics. We’ve got our best on him, watching his every move. He’s currently out of the city, laying low. What’s more intriguing is that his family isn’t with him. Seems they didn’t take kindly to his business tactics.”

Sandra cuts in, her voice chilly, “The man’s digging his own grave. But I’m guessing we have bigger matters to discuss.” Her piercing gaze meets mine, her nod subtle but meaningful. “What brings you here?”

Clearing my throat, I lean forward. “It’s about Ana and our future. With everything that’s happened, we’re thinking it’s time for a fresh start.” I let the implication hang in the air, their eyes probing for more.

Andrei’s brow furrows. “Are you saying you want out?”

Sandra’s voice carries a note of caution. “Choices have consequences, Samuil.”

Drawing a deep breath, I choose my words carefully. “No. I don’t want out. What I’m saying is that I want to commit more deeply to the Bratva. I believe we can make it even stronger. With Ana by my side, with our combined skills and determination, we can be an even greater asset.”

Andrei leans back, surprise evident on his face. “You want to stay and expand our influence?”

Sandra observes me closely, looking for any sign of insincerity. “Why? Why now?”

“The challenges with Radu, the dangers Ana faced... they’ve only solidified my belief,” I say with conviction. “Our strength, our unity, they’re unmatched. Leaving now would mean turning our backs on a legacy. On family. And I can’t—we can’t—do that.”

A tense silence ensues, the ball now squarely in their court. After what feels like an eternity, Andrei nods slowly. “Your loyalty is clear, Samuil. We’ll always need men like you. Especially in these trying times.”

Sandra smiles thinly. “Loyalty is the backbone of the Bratva. If you’re willing to commit to this idea, so are we.”

The room’s atmosphere is electric, charged. “We’re thinking about America,” I say, drawing their interest immediately. “There’s opportunity there, untouched territory. We’ve been dominant here; it’s time to stretch our wings, mark new territories.”

Andrei arches an eyebrow, the weight of my words sinking in. “That’s ambitious,” he remarks cautiously.

“Ana and I have discussed it at length. We know the risks and the challenges.” I pause, watching Andrei’s face, seeking any sign of approval or disapproval. “But we’re ready and willing.”

Sandra’s eyes glitter with interest, maybe even admiration. “You always had the fire, Samuil. To want more, to be more. Starting your own empire sounds just like you.”

“It won’t be easy,” Andrei warns, his voice heavy with caution. “America is a different playing field.”

I nod. “I know. But the Bratva has always adapted, always evolved. I believe we can make this work.”

The room grows silent as Andrei and Sandra exchange glances. “We’ll need a moment,” Andrei finally says.

“Of course.” I step outside, leaving them to discuss.

Walking to the bar, I order a stiff drink. Waiting for a decision is always the worst part, the uncertainty. As I’m sipping my whiskey, my phone buzzes. It’s a text from Ana.

Can’t wait for tonight. Dressing up or casual?

A smile forms on my face. *Your choice. Though I never say no to seeing you dressed to the nines.*

Flattery will get you everywhere. Be prepared for a surprise then.

I chuckle. *Always am when it comes to you.*

A warmth spreads through me. But a tension knots in my gut along with it, reminding me of the other significant thing

planned for tonight. Something even bigger than discussing Bratva plans. I push the thought away. One thing at a time.

My whiskey is nearly drained when Andrei's voice rings out. "Samuil, let's continue." I down the last sip and make my way back. Whatever their decision, I'm ready.

The weight in the room is palpable as I retake my seat, feeling the pressure from Andrei and Sandra's combined gaze. Their expressions are inscrutable, faces painted with practiced neutrality.

"You've always been ambitious, Samuil," Andrei begins, the tone of his voice low and measured. Every word he says raises my curiosity, the wait unbearable.

"However," Sandra continues, her eyes fixed on mine, "sometimes ambition isn't enough."

My stomach clenches. It feels like I'm watching my future slip away. I knew this was a gamble, but I hadn't anticipated how hard it would hit me if it didn't pay off.

"But," Andrei says with a hint of a smile, "it's not just about ambition. It's about proving oneself."

Sandra nods in agreement. "Your handling of the Radu operation, it was masterful. You showed skill, strategy, leadership, and raw determination. It wasn't just a success; it was a statement."

Andrei leans forward, placing his palms on the table. "We've been discussing an expansion for some time now. New York City, to be precise. It's tough ground, but we think you're up to the task."

My heart thuds heavily in my chest. "You mean—"

Sandra smirks, "We're giving you the green light. The Big Apple is yours. Consider it a promotion of sorts."

Andrei chuckles, "Make us proud."

It's rare for me to be caught off guard, but this? I hadn't expected such an outcome. For a moment, I'm uncharacteristically speechless. "Thank you," is all I manage

to say, the weight of the responsibility, the trust they're placing in me, settling heavily on my shoulders.

As I leave the room, my stride more confident than when I entered, I can't help but feel on top of the world. New challenges, new horizons, and a future ripe with promise. I can't wait to share the news with Ana.

The city that never sleeps better be ready for us.



The air inside the tailor's shop is scented with aged wood and leather, providing a rich aroma that blends with the musk of freshly pressed fabrics. The opulent surroundings stand in stark contrast to my raw, ink-laden skin. As the tailor assists me into the sleek, charcoal-grey suit I'd requested, I can't help but smirk at my own reflection. The sight of someone like me—rugged, marked by life's battles, clad in a suit that could grace the pages of a high-end magazine—is an irony not lost on me.

"A perfect fit, Mr. Nicolaevich," the tailor, an old man with spectacles resting on the tip of his nose, comments.

I nod, still struggling to reconcile the duality of the image before me. There's a gnawing sensation in my gut, an unfamiliar flutter. Damn, I'm nervous and it's been years since I felt like this. But I square my shoulders, masking any hint of my internal conflict. Tonight is significant, and I've got a part to play.

Exiting the shop, the sight of my private car, sleek and black against the evening hues, welcomes me. Nikolai, my trusted driver for special occasions, stands by, ready to take me to this all-important rendezvous.

As we approach the penthouse, the anticipation of the evening ahead envelops me, but all those thoughts evaporate the moment I see Ana. Standing there, bathed in the soft glow of the building's entrance lights, she's the embodiment of ethereal beauty. She wears a flowing midnight blue dress, its fabric hugging her curves, cascading down to the floor in a soft shimmer.

The gown contrasts beautifully against her fair skin, and the silver pendant resting on her collarbone only adds to her allure. Her raven-black hair is pulled up in a loose updo, allowing stray wisps to frame her face. Her eyes, usually fierce and determined, tonight hold a glint of mischief, framed by delicately applied smokey eyeliner.

I momentarily forget to breathe. She's always been beautiful, but tonight? She's transcendent.

As she gracefully makes her way to the car, I rush to open the door for her, like a teenager on his first date. Once she's seated inside, I can't help but be overtaken by emotion. I walk around to the other side and get in beside her.

"Ana," I begin, searching for the right words, "I've seen you in many lights, in many roles. But tonight, you look like something out of a dream. Absolutely breathtaking."

She smiles, that radiant, heart-stopping smile of hers. "Why, thank you, Samuil. You don't look too bad yourself," she teases, her gaze appreciative as she takes in my attire.

I chuckle, the moment's intensity lightened by her playful jab. But in the silence that follows, our interlocked fingers speak volumes of the night ahead.

Inside the dimly lit car, the intimate atmosphere lends itself to whispered conversations and shared secrets. I reach into the mini bar, retrieving a chilled bottle of champagne, its label boasting of its age and pedigree.

"How about a little bubbly to start the evening?" I suggest, pouring the liquid into two flutes, the bubbles rising with a tantalizing sizzle.

A flicker of conflict crosses Ana's face. For a heartbeat, she looks like she's going to say yes, but then she hesitates. "I think I'll pass tonight," she murmurs, a hint of unease in her voice.

I nod, setting the second flute back on the tray. "No problem." But internally, alarms start ringing. Was it just a simple refusal, or was there something more? She'd hinted earlier that she had something on her mind. Is it related to her

last checkup? The poison from the attack had taken its toll, and every appointment since has been tense, filled with worries about any lasting damage.

I banish the grim thoughts, forcing a smile on my face. “Everything okay?” I ask, my voice deceptively casual.

Ana nods, her gaze distant for a moment before refocusing on me. “I just have some things on my mind. Let’s enjoy tonight.”

My relief is short-lived as my mind goes into overdrive, mulling over the ‘what-ifs’. But I rein in my fears, reminding myself that tonight is about us and the promise of a future together.

The car soon pulls up to our destination. The restaurant is one of Moscow’s finest—a grandiose establishment that’s retained its old-world charm. The façade is majestic, with intricate carvings and large arched windows adorned with flowing drapes. As we step inside, the interior takes our breath away.

Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting a soft golden glow over the space. The floor is a gleaming expanse of polished wood, and large round tables draped in crisp white cloths are spaced generously apart, ensuring privacy for each patron. The walls are painted in muted golds and reds, with elegant patterns reminiscent of a bygone era. Grand paintings of Russian aristocracy line the walls, each frame lit up by a dedicated light.

Waiters in crisp uniforms move around gracefully, attending to the guests with a practiced ease. The sound of a live string quartet fills the air, their melody a blend of classic and contemporary, setting the perfect mood for the evening.

Ana’s eyes widen in appreciation. “This is stunning, Samuil.”

I grin, taking in the ambiance. “Only the best for tonight,” I murmur, escorting her to our table, which offers a prime view of the room and the musicians.

As we settle in, the unease from the conversation in the car lingers, casting a shadow on an otherwise perfect setting. Yet I vow to myself that whatever it is Ana needs to share, we'll face it together, as we always have.

Our waiter, a tall man with slicked-back hair and a quiet grace, arrives with a bottle of wine. As he pours the deep red liquid into my glass, Ana gently places her hand on his wrist, signaling her choice to abstain. The waiter nods in understanding, setting down sparkling water for her instead. I note her refusal of alcohol again but decide not to press her at the moment.

With a deep breath, I lean in closer to Ana, making sure my voice is for her ears only. "I met with Andrei and Sandra today."

Her eyes, bright and ever curious, meet mine. "And?"

A smirk forms on my lips, "We're going to New York. We've been approved."

Her face lights up, the infectious energy of her happiness making everything else insignificant. Without a moment's hesitation, she lunges forward, throwing her arms around me in a tight embrace. I hold her close, my own joy reflected in hers.

But that isn't the only thing I want to tell her, and as I pull back, there's a glint in my eyes that she recognizes, a hint of mischief, of something left unsaid. "There's something else," I say.

Ana's eyebrows quirk in intrigue, her radiant smile never leaving her face.

"Ana," I begin, my voice thick with emotion. "From the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew you were different. Not just because of your strength and resilience, but because of the fire you carry within you. You've faced down every challenge that's come your way, and you've done it with grace, with fury, and with a heart full of passion."

I pause, my throat tightening with the weight of the moment. The din of the restaurant seems to fade, and all that

exists is the woman in front of me, her sparkling eyes locked onto mine. “Every day with you feels like a blessing, a gift, a joy I never thought I’d find. I want every tomorrow to be ours, to face every challenge and cherish every triumph as a team. Together.”

By now, the patrons at the neighboring tables have turned their attention toward us. The low murmur of conversation halts, replaced by an electric anticipation in the air. I take a deep breath, my heart pounding.

I hesitate for a heartbeat, then reach into my pocket, feeling the slight weight of the velvet box. Everything fades away as I pop it open. Inside, an exquisite ring gleams back at me. The central diamond, radiant-cut and flawless, is surrounded by a whirl of smaller stones, all set in a solid platinum band.

For a split second, I lose myself in its shimmer, hoping it conveys all the words I can’t find right now. The room waits in baited anticipation, all eyes on Ana.

“Anastasia, will you marry me?”

The world seems to hold its breath. Then, with tears glistening in her eyes, she whispers the word that seals our fate.

“Yes.”

The room erupts in applause, the joy of strangers celebrating in our happiness. I pull her close, sealing our promise with a fervent kiss.

As the din of the celebration recedes and the room returns to its usual hum, Ana’s beaming face is replaced by a more contemplative expression. The change isn’t drastic, but I’ve come to know every shade of emotion that plays across her face, every twitch and nuance. Her fingers trace the rim of her sparkling water glass, her thoughts seemingly far away.

My curiosity piqued, I lean in, pressing her. “Hey,” I murmur, my voice low and intimate, “You seemed like you had something on your mind earlier. What was it?”

She takes a deep breath, a faint smile touching her lips. “Honestly, Samuil, it was just concern about our future. The steps we’re taking, the life we’re building. But,” she adds quickly, her eyes darting to the ring now adorning her finger, “you’ve given a rather convincing argument about our path forward.”

I chuckle, but there’s an uneasiness gnawing at the back of my mind. “You sure that’s all?”

Her eyes, always so open and expressive, meet mine. “Just the typical worries. But with you by my side, I know we can conquer anything.”

I want to believe her, to trust that it’s just the enormity of recent events causing her to be so reflective. Yet a part of me can’t help but wonder if there’s something more. There’s a depth to her gaze, a hesitancy I can’t quite place. But I decide not to press further, not tonight. Tonight is about celebration, about the future we’re forging together.

The evening proceeds with laughter and shared stories, the delectable cuisine a feast for the senses. Still, as we toast to our future and relish in the warmth of our engagement, a small part of me remains vigilant, wary of the possibility of lurking shadows beyond our horizon.

CHAPTER 32

ANASTASIA

Two months later...

Samuil's large, rough hand envelops mine, his fingers warm and reassuring. "How does it feel, Ana?" he asks, his dark eyes searching my own.

The vastness of New York City stretches beneath us, the iconic skyline piercing the horizon like a jagged crown. Skyscrapers, cabs, vendors, the noise, the crowds of people... it's all so overwhelming. I've seen pictures, of course, and movies that romanticize the city. But witnessing it in real time, with the sun casting long shadows over its buildings and streets, is something else entirely. It feels like I'm about to step into a dream.

The soft hum of the private jet surrounds us, luxury leather seats and champagne flutes, all markers of our new life. A life that feels both surreal and exciting.

I glance once more out of the window, taking in the vast urban sprawl below, and turn back to Samuil with a grin.

"Honestly? I feel like a queen ready to conquer."

His lips twitch into a pleased grin, and he pulls me close, planting a lingering kiss on my lips. "That's my girl," he murmurs against my mouth.

As the moment stretches, a flicker of thought nudges me. Hidden amongst our belongings, carefully packed in one of the moving boxes, is a secret. A cherished surprise that I've been holding for the past few weeks. The anticipation bubbles up inside me, and I can't help but imagine the perfect moment to

share the news with Samuil. The joy, the expectations, the next part of our lives waiting to unfold.

But for now, I push the thought away, choosing to savor the present moment.

“We’re starting a new chapter here,” I say, looking out the window again. “New challenges, new memories, new... everything.”

He squeezes my hand. “We will overcome anything New York throws at us.”

The jet starts its descent, the city growing larger and more detailed with every passing second. The Statue of Liberty, Central Park, the serpentine course of the Hudson River, it’s all there, waiting for us.

“We’re going to make it big here, Samuil. I can feel it,” I whisper, the vastness of our future spreading before us, promising and enticing.

He leans in, his voice a husky whisper in my ear. “Together, we’ll own this city.”

The rush of cool New York air greets us the moment we step off the jet, instantly replacing the sterile plane atmosphere. The distant hum of the city beckons, and as I take in the expanse of the airport tarmac, a sleek black car pulls up, its windows tinted against the sharp afternoon sun.

The city moves past us in a blur, every honk, shout, and distant siren feeling like an intimate whisper in my ear. The towering skyscrapers, billboards with larger-than-life faces, and the flowing mass of pedestrians... it’s all so exhilarating. New York City. The place I’ve dreamed about for what feels like eternity is now my reality. I can’t help but press my face to the car window, soaking in every minute detail.

Beside me, Samuil watches with an amused smile, his hand resting on my knee. “Like a kid in a candy store,” he murmurs.

I grin, feeling giddy. “Can you blame me? Look at this place! And I get to share this with you.” I squeeze his hand in response.

We weave through the streets, every turn revealing a new sight, a new wonder. And then we're in Midtown, the beating heart of Manhattan. Our car slows in front of a grand building, its facade gleaming in the evening sun. We've arrived.

As the elevator ascends, there's a thrill of anticipation. The doors slide open to reveal a sprawling penthouse, with floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing a panoramic view of the city. My breath catches.

"Welcome to the Nicolaevich-Zaitsev headquarters," Samuil says, a hint of pride in his voice.

I walk over to the windows, the city lights beginning their nightly dance. "It's perfect," I whisper.

He wraps his arms around my waist from behind, his chin resting on my shoulder. "You know," he begins, his voice low, "you don't have to be a part of all this if you don't want to. We could find you something less dangerous."

I turn to face him, searching the depths of his eyes. "You're giving me the option to retire from this life?"

His nod is slow, deliberate. "Only if it's what you want."

A smirk forms on my lips. "And let you have all the fun? Not a chance." The fierceness in my voice is unmistakable. This is our dream, our empire. No way I'm stepping away.

His laugh is deep, genuine. "I had a feeling you'd say that."

I trace a finger down his cheek. "We're in this together, always."

As Samuil gets lost in the joy of setting up our new home, the weight of my secret bears down on me. The perfect moment presents itself when he eagerly starts unpacking. My heart thumps wildly against my ribcage as I scan the room, my gaze falling on the stack of boxes. I spot the one with the tiny butterfly sticker I had discreetly placed before we left Moscow. My hands shake as I reach for it.

"Hey," I call out to him, trying to keep my voice steady. "Why don't you start with this one?"

He raises an eyebrow, his interest piqued. “Something special in there?”

“Very,” I respond with a nervous smile.

He sets the box on our marble kitchen counter, the sunlight streaming through the expansive windows illuminating it. He slices through the tape sealing the box, the knife seeming to shine with purpose.

As he pulls back the flaps, everything seems to stop. Inside, nestled among the packing materials, lies the telltale stick with two bright pink lines, the signal of our future.

His hands, strong and often unyielding, tremble slightly as he reaches in to pick up the stick. The quiet reflection in his eyes speaks volumes. He’s lost in the wondrous realization of what this means.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Are you happy, Samuil?”

His response is immediate. “Ana, I’m not just happy. I’m over the moon! This goes beyond any dream I could’ve ever imagined.”

With the vast skyline of New York serving as our backdrop, he pulls me into a tight embrace. The city’s heartbeat merges with our own, and it feels as though the entire world is celebrating with us. And in this city of dreams, anything is possible.

CHAPTER 33

SAMUIL

“You’re far from home, Russian.”

The dimly lit backroom of “El Canto” reeks of aged rum and hushed secrets. Bare bulbs cast long shadows as merengue music faintly penetrates from the main floor. Across from me sits Carlos “Caribe” Rodriguez, head of the Rodriguez Syndicate, a formidable Dominican crew known more for their cunning than brute force. Their operations weave through the Five Boroughs, a web of influence that even the traditional big players have learned to navigate around.

Carlos, dark eyes sharp under hooded brows, assesses me. I return the look, showing no fear.

“And yet, New York feels familiar,” I reply, my tone measured. “Busy streets, crowded markets, opportunities around every corner.”

Carlos smiles, a slow-spreading, confident grin. “And what makes you think the Rodriguez Syndicate needs what you’re selling?”

“Expansion,” I say, simply. “You have the West, I’ve got my eyes on the East. Alone, we’re formidable. Together, unstoppable. The market’s big enough, Caribe. Why waste time and resources clashing?”

His fingers drum on the table, a rhythmic sound of contemplation. “You’ve got balls, I’ll give you that. Walking into my territory, proposing partnership.”

“It’s a proposal built on mutual respect,” I counter, reaching for the shot glass filled with amber liquid. “For traditions, territories. No overstepping, just handshakes.”

Carlos laughs, the sound rich and genuine. “You’re something else, Samuil. But I’ve heard about you, about your Bratva. Ruthless. Efficient.”

“War’s expensive,” I shrug, “Bad for profit.”

His gaze lingers on mine, calculating. Then, nodding slowly, he says, “Alright, Russian. Let’s give this a go. *Tentativamente.*”

My lips twitch in a near-smile. “That’s all I ask.”

Carlos extends his hand, and I grasp it firmly. In our realm, this means more than any signed contract. “Hope you’re ready for New York, Samuil. It’s wilder than any beast you’ve tamed before.”

“I’m looking forward to the challenge,” I respond, a hint of a threat underlying my words.

Exiting “El Canto,” the cacophony of New York engulfs me, a stark contrast to the tension-filled quiet of moments ago. This new alliance promises a fresh chapter in a city that constantly evolves. But as with everything in this life, only time will tell if it was worth the gamble.

New York’s noise is unrelenting—sirens, chatter, car horns, street performers, the distant hum of the subway. Buildings scrape the sky, pedestrians dart in every direction. Yet as I stroll through its convoluted streets, there’s a smile tugging at my lips. This city, with all its chaos, feels right. Three weeks in, and already the landscape of its underworld is shifting under the weight of our presence.

The Bratva’s reputation has always been one of resilience and tenacity, and New York offers a unique challenge, a convergence of ambition, diverse cultures, and relentless competition. But more than my desire to establish our territory, there’s a personal yearning driving me.

Fatherhood.

The very word used to seem alien, a distant concept reserved for others. But now, the anticipation of our child, the blend of Ana's fierce spirit and my own unyielding resolve, stirs emotions I'd never expected. I imagine cradling our baby, watching as their little fingers grip mine. Those moments of vulnerability, of pure unadulterated love have become a beacon, guiding my every step.

I come across a small flower stall, its vibrant colors contrasting the gray cityscape. The elderly vendor, her skin weathered, her eyes sharp, greets me with a nod. I've frequented her stall over the past week, and for good reason. Among the roses and lilies, she sells *Gvozdika*, a Russian variety of carnation. The rich red petals, their fragrance subtly sweet, are a rare find in this sprawling metropolis—the only one in the city, as far as I can tell.

“For the missus?” she asks, wrapping a bouquet for me.

I nod. “Same as always.”

The vendor smiles knowingly. “It's the little touches of home that keep us grounded. Enjoy your evening.”

Flowers in hand, I weave through the crowds, the anticipation building. Every step brings me closer to our safe haven, to Ana. I can almost feel her presence, the warmth of her embrace, the softness of her lips. The city may be vast, daunting, a beast of its own, but in her arms, everything falls into place.

The sun begins its descent, casting an orange hue upon the streets, and I hasten my pace. The challenges New York presents—both professional and personal—can appear enormous, but with Ana by my side, they feel surmountable.

Rounding a corner, the familiar facade of our apartment building comes into view. Thoughts of the Bratva, of alliances and territories, fade. In this moment, it's about family, about us.

The streets might be filled with the unknown, with potential and pitfalls, but tonight, they lead me home. To her. To us. And the promise of the life we're building together.

As I push through the grand double doors of our upscale apartment complex, the lobby is a hushed symphony of sophistication. Polished marble, muted gold accents. But my focus isn't on the luxury. I catch the young woman at the reception desk casting a glance my way. A tinge of unease paints her features.

“Mr. Nicolaevich,” she greets, her voice a little shaky. “The security installation team finished their job on your penthouse a few hours ago. All set now.”

Security installation? I hadn't scheduled anything. I narrow my eyes, searching her face for signs of deceit. “Who authorized them?”

Her eyes widen slightly. “I thought you did. They had all the proper paperwork.”

My heart rate quickens. Every instinct, honed over years in the underworld, screams danger. I clutch the flowers tighter, feeling the fragile petals crushing beneath my grip.

Without another word, I dash to the elevator, jamming the button for our floor. The gold-trimmed doors slide closed with agonizing slowness. Seconds tick by, feeling like hours. My mind races, conjuring up the worst scenarios.

Finally the penthouse level. The doors glide open.

The foyer shows signs of a struggle. Vases shattered. Furniture askew. And no Ana.

My heart clenches, a steel vice of dread. Panic, an emotion I rarely let myself feel, threatens to surface. I rush into the living area, then the bedroom, calling out her name, hoping, praying she'll answer. But the silence is oppressive, mocking.

A crisp white envelope lies on the floor, a stark contrast to the dark hardwood. With trembling fingers I pick it up, pulling out the single sheet of paper inside.

It's the ultrasound of our child. And there's writing on the back. Rage running through me, I slowly turn the paper over.

Romanian script dances before my eyes. Radu. Even though the language is foreign to my Russian tongue, I

recognize the cruel flourish of his handwriting. That bastard.

Swearing under my breath, I pocket the note. I need it translated, and fast. Radu's vendetta has always been a looming shadow, but to go this far, to travel across the world, to take Ana...

Shaking off the initial shock, my mind sharpens, shifting into rescue mode. Every second counts. I can't afford mistakes.

Exiting the apartment, I make a quick stop at the front desk. The receptionist, sensing my urgency, meets my gaze with apprehension. "Do you have footage of the team?" I growl.

Nodding hastily, she taps into the security system, pulling up a video. Grainy figures, donned in utility outfits, make their way to the elevator. Their faces are obscured, but one sports a tattoo on his neck—a Romanian symbol.

"That's all I need," I snap, storing the image in my mind.

I storm out of the building, rage igniting every cell. I should have killed the fucker instead of giving him another chance.

But more than anything, deep down beneath the fury and fear, a single thought dominates—I will get Ana back. No matter the cost. Radu will learn, in the most brutal of ways, the price of harming the ones I love.



The hum of the city does nothing to drown out the icy storm inside me, the unrelenting anger that boils just beneath the surface. My phone buzzes, a beacon of hope in my hand.

Andrei's name flashes across the screen. The hope is short-lived. A pang of desperation hits me as I quickly answer, "Any word?"

"Not yet," Andrei's gravelly voice replies. There's a pause, a heavy exhale. "Roman's here with me. We've translated the note."

I clench my jaw, waiting.

“It says, ‘The ties of blood cannot be broken, but they can be stretched and tested. You took something precious from me, and now I’ve taken something precious from you. Let’s see if you can reclaim what’s lost before it’s gone forever,’” Roman recites, his tone grim.

Every word is a knife to my chest. Radu’s twisted game. I know he’s playing with me, trying to rattle me, but I won’t let him win.

“Samuil,” Andrei starts, his voice heavy, “The entire Bratva is at your disposal. Whatever you need.”

I inhale sharply, wrestling with the desperation clawing at my insides. “I appreciate that, but Radu knows it too. He’s anticipating our every move.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. I’ve always known I could depend on Andrei, but the Atlantic separates us. Even at their fastest, hours would be lost. Hours Ana and our child might not have.

“I’m getting on the private jet with Roman and some of our best men,” Andrei continues, determination in his voice. “We’ll coordinate from the skies on our way over, relay information, anything we can do.”

“But” Roman interjects, “it might very well be up to you, Samuil. You’re on the ground. You’re closest. And I think Radu planned it this way, to make it personal. To trap you in a one-on-one fight.”

I clench the phone tighter. Alone. The shock of the realization is immense. But beneath the burden, there’s something else — resolution. If Radu wants this to be personal, then that’s what he’ll get.

“I’ll find her,” I state, my voice steely. “Radu will regret the day he crossed me.”

Andrei’s voice softens for a brief moment, a blend of camaraderie and concern. “I know you will. Just remember, you’re not entirely alone. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

I nod, even though they can’t see it. “Thank you, Andrei. Roman.”

“We’re with you, Samuil. Always,” Roman replies.

The call ends, leaving me alone in the heart of New York, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of a city that feels both like home and a strange land. I shove the phone into my pocket, determination surging through me.

If Radu wants a war, he’s got one. Every ounce of my being, every skill I’ve honed over the years, will be dedicated to bringing Ana home.

The sun sets over the cityscape, casting shadows that mirror the darkness threatening to engulf me. But in that darkness, there’s a fire—a beacon of hope and perseverance.

For Ana. For us.

I’m coming.

CHAPTER 34

ANASTASIA

The world around me sluggishly stitches itself back together.

Cold, hard concrete presses against my cheek. My wrists chafe against what feels like coarse rope. The familiar, almost comforting scent of an old warehouse fills my nostrils: dust, rust, and stale air.

Blinking slowly, I try to dispel the haziness that cloaks my vision, and fragments of memories lash at me.

The smartly dressed security team in the pristine white shirts and black pants. The official-looking paperwork they showed me. My naivety in believing them. Radu. His cold, vengeful eyes locked onto mine, just as I let down my guard. The vicious glee that twisted his features.

Then the weight of two, no, three men on me. Their gloved hands prevent any struggle. The sharp sting of a needle puncturing my skin followed by a chilling rush through my veins. Darkness was quick to claim me.

Now, anger bubbles inside, replacing the fear that momentarily gripped me. I walked right into his trap. God, how could I be so stupid? Shifting slightly, I try to get a sense of my surroundings. The dim, musty warehouse filled with neglected wooden crates and old machinery, shadowed in the weak light filtering in through grimy windows high above.

In the distance, the faint sound of water dripping echoes, almost in sync to the thud of my heartbeat in my ears. I feel a sudden rush of panic. Not for myself, but for the life inside

me. My hand instinctively tries to reach for my belly, but the tight restraints make it impossible.

The thought of any harm coming to our child twists my insides, the terror raw and visceral. Radu can't possibly know, can he? I have to get out, have to protect our baby.

Summoning every ounce of strength, I work on the ropes binding my wrists. They bite into my skin, but I persevere, twisting and wriggling. Thoughts of Samuil fuel me. I imagine his panic, his determination. He is turning the city upside down to find me, of that I am certain.

But I can't just wait, helpless. Minutes, hours, time blurs as I work on the bindings, pausing only to listen for any signs of movement outside my makeshift prison. My mind races, strategizing escape routes, contingencies, anything to get out of this hellhole.

And then, the smallest of victories, the ropes slacken just a bit. It isn't much, but it is a start. A surge of hope bolsters my resolve. Tears of frustration, fear, and fury sting at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Radu won't see me broken. He wants to see me helpless and afraid. I won't give him the satisfaction.

Because one thing is for sure—he underestimates the depths of my will. The strength that fighting in the ring instilled in me isn't just physical—it's mental, emotional. Radu may have captured the Tsarina, but he is about to face her wrath. And I'll make him regret the day he ever thought he could use me as a pawn in his sick game.

The rasp of metal against metal jars me from my concentrated focus on loosening the ropes, and I immediately still. The heavy door, set into the far wall, groans open. Through it steps Radu, his face a mask of smug satisfaction.

His dark eyes lock onto mine, and a malicious grin curls his lips. Without thinking, I summon what saliva I can and spit in his direction, my tone dripping with venom.

“What have you done to me, you bastard?” He only chuckles, casually sidestepping the pool of saliva.

“Oh, Ana,” he tsk-tsk’s, feigning disappointment. “Is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“Just tell me what you put in that injection,” I shoot back, my voice tight with suppressed rage and fear.

He ambles closer, maintaining a leisurely pace, savoring every moment of his perceived triumph. “Midazolam,” he says with a nonchalant shrug. “A simple sedative. And don’t worry your pretty little head. It won’t harm the baby.”

A jolt of surprise runs through me. The revelation, however, only strengthens my resolve not to let him see my fear.

“So you’re using an innocent, unborn child in your twisted games now?” I spit, disgust evident in every word. “Have you sunk that low?”

Radu’s smile widens, not at all deterred by my accusation. “You see, Ana, having you and the unborn brat in my hands just makes this all the more enjoyable for me.”

The chill in his voice sends shivers down my spine, but I’m not about to let him see that. “How do you even know about the baby?” I demand, my eyes narrowing.

Leaning in close, so close I can smell the stale tobacco on his breath, Radu whispers, “Do you think you can just waltz into New York and not be noticed? I’ve had eyes on you two since you set foot in this city.” His eyes gleam with a combination of triumph and madness. “Every step you take, every breath, every whispered word in the dark, I know. And I wait, planning, ensuring my revenge is perfect.”

Cold fury bubbles up inside me, and I yank against the ropes binding me. The bite of the fibers against my chafed skin only serves to make me angrier. “Whatever you want, Radu, it’s between you and me. Leave Samuil and our child out of this.”

He chuckles darkly. “Oh, don’t worry. Your precious Samuil will play his part soon enough.” The promise of more pain, more suffering, hangs heavily in the air between us. He stands up straight, his face darkening. “You and that mutt of a

husband took everything from me,” Radu spits. “Now it’s my turn to strip everything away from you.”

I can’t help but let out a derisive snort. “Everything that happens to you, Radu, is of your own making. Did you expect to go up against the Bratva and waltz out with no consequences?”

His reaction is swift and brutal. The back of his hand collides with my face, sending a sharp pain through my cheek and causing my head to snap to the side. I taste the metallic tang of blood on my lips, a fresh cut stinging from where his ring made contact.

I slowly turn my head back to face him, my glare unyielding. “You’ll regret that.”

He simply rolls his eyes, looking bored. “Oh, Ana, always so defiant. Such a tough girl. It will be all the more satisfying when I finally break you.” His voice drops to a threatening whisper. “And you will break, *Tsarina*.”

I square my shoulders, letting the icy facade of the *Tsarina* mask any hint of emotion. “You underestimate me, Radu. You always have. And that’s your biggest mistake.”

His wicked laughter echoes through the room. “Sit tight, my dear. Your execution will come soon enough. And I promise, you’ll be praying for it by the time it does.”

He turns on his heel and exits the shadowy space, the door slamming shut behind him, sealing me in with the weight of his threat.

The moment he is gone, I refocus on the task at hand. There isn’t a second to waste. My fingers, previously numb from the tight bindings, begin to regain sensation as I diligently work on the knots. I have to escape. For me, for Samuil, for our unborn child. The stakes have never been higher.

The room is suffocatingly quiet once Radu leaves, punctuated only by my own labored breaths. The ropes are thick and coarse against my wrists, but a new spark of determination burns deep within me. Every twist and turn of

my fingers seems futile, every little movement barely causing a shift in the tight bindings.

And then, with a determined yank, I feel the first thread give. My heart races, a bead of sweat rolls down my temple, but I focus. Slowly, the ropes loosen. Just before letting them fall, I scan every inch of the room. No blinking red lights, no little black orbs; it seems I'm not being watched by electronic eyes. Good. The last thing I need is someone monitoring my every move.

With a huff of relief, I discard the now useless ropes to the ground. Rising to my feet, my muscles ache, but I push the pain aside. Now is not the time to dwell on discomforts. I need to get out of here. My eyes land on a set of metal slats on the far wall. They are embedded tightly, but desperation is a powerful motivator.

Drawing from every bit of knowledge I have about securing and breaking out of such places, I scan the room for anything that could be of use. Finding a thin, discarded metal rod, I wedge it into the slats and apply as much pressure as I can muster. The metal groans, then with a final heave, shifts just slightly.

The gap isn't much, but it is enough to peer through. I find myself staring at the outside world, a vast expanse of grey warehouses, looking almost identical. My heart sinks. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. How will anyone find me here? But then, a splash of color catches my eye.

A truck, its side painted with various flowers, makes its way into one of the warehouses. I squint, trying to get a better look, and there it is—the Gvozdika. A bright, radiant red flower that Samuil often brings me. It is more than just a favorite; it is our silent love language. Each petal a testament to our journey together.

A small smile tugs at the corners of my lips. It could be a coincidence, or it could be a beacon, a clue signaling my whereabouts. Samuil is clever, and I have no doubt he'll piece it together. But sitting around, waiting for rescue, isn't my

style. I am the Tsarina. And while that flower truck might lead him to me, I'm not going to leave it all up to fate.

I will fight, and if Radu thinks he can hold me captive, he is sorely mistaken. I begin to take in every detail of the room, every potential exit and weak point. The time to act is now.

CHAPTER 35

SAMUIL

The sharp ringtone pierces the air, yanking me from my thoughts. Carlos' name flashes on the screen, and I steel myself for whatever games the Rodriguez Syndicate leader has in store.

"Carlos," I greet tersely.

"Samuil! To what do I owe the pleasure so soon after our little chat?" The hint of amusement in his voice grates on me, but I keep my tone steady.

"I'm calling in that favor you owe me."

A chuckle ripples over the line. "Didn't take you long, did it?"

Ignoring the jibe, I get to the point. "Radu, a man from my past, has taken something, someone, important to me."

There's a contemplative pause. "Why should I get involved in your old grudges?"

"Because this isn't just about an old grudge," I snap, struggling to maintain my patience. "Radu isn't the kind to be content with a small piece of the pie. If we don't deal with him now, it won't be long before he's gunning for your territory too."

Carlos seems to weigh my words for a moment. "Maybe. But what's in it for me?"

I smirk, even though he can't see it. "You lend me a trio of your best men, and when this is over, I'll owe *you* a favor."

The line goes quiet for no longer than a heartbeat, but it feels like an eternity. Finally, Carlos chuckles, the sound rich and deep. “You’re a clever man, Samuil. It’s not often someone offers me a favor. Very well, you have a deal.”

“Good. Send them to my location. I’ll text you the details.”

“Done,” he replies. “But remember, Samuil, favors are a two-way street. I expect you to honor our agreement.”

“You’ll have your favor,” I assure him, a predatory smile tugging at my lips. Mutual favors, in this world of ours, are how the most solid relationships are built. Carlos and I are now bound by a debt that can’t easily be shrugged off, and I intend to use that to my advantage.

As the call ends, satisfaction hums in my veins. But the momentary respite is shattered by another incoming call. The number is masked, but that only makes me more certain who it is.

With a deep breath, I answer, “Radu.”

Radu’s voice drips with malicious glee as he speaks, every word deliberately chosen to taunt. “Samuil. How’s it feel knowing you’re not the big, bad wolf anymore?”

My fingers grip the phone tighter, but I keep my voice calm and cold. “What do you want?”

“Ah, straight to the point. I wanted to hear you beg, maybe even cry a little,” he jeers.

“You won’t get that satisfaction from me.” A raw fury simmers just below the surface, but I refuse to let it show. “Put Ana on.”

Radu’s laughter, throaty and vile, sears my eardrums. “That’s exactly why I called. I thought you might like to see her.” Suddenly, the voice call shifts to video. My heart lurches in my chest as Ana’s bruised face comes into view.

Every mark, every blemish on her face fuels the inferno of rage inside me. But through it all, her eyes—those fierce, resilient eyes—glint with defiance.

“Samuil,” her voice is steady, even with the hint of pain lacing her tone. She offers me a weak smile. “The baby is fine. I can feel it.”

My throat tightens, emotions threatening to pour out. She’s the embodiment of strength, even in the face of such adversity. But before I can respond, Ana leans slightly closer, her gaze unwavering. “Remember the Gvozdika. It’s important.”

Gvozdika? The red flower. But what is she getting at? I try to grasp the hidden meaning, the unspoken message she’s trying to convey.

But before I can piece anything together, Radu’s twisted visage is back in the frame, a smirk of twisted achievement playing on his lips. “See? She’s alive... for now.”

“You touch her again, and you won’t live to see another day,” I growl, barely managing to keep my voice level.

His laughter fills the line again, the sound making my skin crawl. “I’ll let you stew on that for a bit. I’ll call again when I feel like it.” The call abruptly ends, plunging me into a world of silence.

I stand there for what feels like hours, the weight of the situation pressing down on me, the cryptic reference to the Gvozdika echoing in my mind. It’s a clue, a lifeline she’s thrown out to me, and I’m damned if I don’t catch it and pull her to safety.

The room around me blurs as thoughts race through my mind, plans forming and reforming. One thing’s for sure—I’ll burn the world down if it means getting Ana back safely. Whatever Radu thinks he’s gained, he’s about to learn that you never corner a wild animal. Especially not one with everything to lose.

The gears in my mind grind into motion, connecting the dots. The distant beeping of a truck backing up during the call, the slight echo of the space she was in. It had to be a warehouse. And that reference to the Gvozdika, the flower that has woven its way through so many memories shared with Ana. It’s a rare species outside of Russia so there’s likely a

main vendor or distributor in the city, a single point of delivery, a starting point. I think back to my favorite vendor of where I just recently bought a bouquet but I can't be certain she's the only one in the city that sells Gvozdika.

I quickly dial Andrei, my fingers moving with purpose. After a couple of rings, his voice, slightly distorted by the jet's cabin air, answers. "Samuil?"

"Andrei, I need you to do something for me," I say, cutting straight to the chase.

"Of course. What is it?"

"Just listen," I snap, trying to keep my emotions in check. "Find out where the Gvozdika flower gets delivered in New York, the main distribution location."

Silence. Then, "The what?"

"The Gvozdika, Andrei. It's important," I insist, voice hard as steel.

His confusion is apparent but then, "Alright. I'll do it. But why—"

I don't let him finish. "Just do it."

"Got it. Roman? You hear that?"

"Loud and clear," he says near Andrei.

I hear Roman jump into action in the background. I can almost visualize him, fingers flying across a keyboard, eyes scanning multiple screens. Roman's sleuthing has saved us more than once, and I silently pray this will be another one of those times.

It takes mere moments before I receive a message. The swift ping pulls my attention to the screen. It's from Roman. I click on it, and the information unfolds before me.

Scanning through the details, a singular location stands out. A central distribution point in the heart of Queens, where a truck carrying unique flowers delivers. It's a lead, and right now, it's all I've got.

I breathe out a sigh of gratitude. “Roman’s got it,” I inform Andrei.

“Good. Keep me posted. We’ll be there as soon as we touch down.”

I quickly tap out the address to Carlos. Even in the vast city of New York, with its millions of secrets, technology ties it all together. The immediate ‘ding’ of a message received from Carlos gives me a burst of newfound hope.

Men will be there in an hour.

Succinct, just the way I like it.

My mind shifts gears, transitioning from the cerebral to the visceral. I head toward a concealed closet in the apartment. Behind a layer of suits and jackets, a panel slides away to reveal my personal armory. My fingers move over the cold steel of a compact MP5 submachine gun, checking it for readiness. Next, a Glock 19, my reliable sidearm, loaded and holstered. A K-Bar knife is strapped to my ankle, its sharp blade glinting menacingly under the soft LED lights.

I take a deep breath, grounding myself. Each weapon is an extension of my will, my determination. I check the magazines, load the rounds, and feel the familiar weight settling comfortably on my body. It’s a feeling that, over the years, I’ve come to both dread and find solace in.

Dressed in a black tactical outfit, I blend seamlessly with the incoming nightfall. My leather gloves grip the balcony rail as I step outside for a moment. The view from my penthouse apartment is breathtaking, and I appreciate it, even in my current state of mind. New York City sprawls beneath me, a network of lights, sounds, and life.

Above, the night sky is painted with stars, sparkling high above the hard concrete jungle below. But the city doesn’t inspire its usual awe. Instead, it feels like a massive, intricate maze, one I’m about to dive into headfirst.

I think of Ana, bruised but unbroken, her cryptic message, and the promise of our future together. The stakes have never been higher.

As the wind rustles my hair and the distant sounds of sirens pierce the air, my resolve hardens. The city is filled with both danger and opportunity. And tonight, it will witness the downfall of Radu.

No more games. No more waiting.

Tonight, there will be no mercy.

CHAPTER 36

ANASTASIA

Every beat of my heart sounds like a clock ticking down, counting the minutes and seconds of my captivity. The walls of this grim room have become all too familiar, but I've never been one to get comfortable in a cage.

Listening closely, I've learned the patterns of my captors. The heavy, overconfident tread of one guard who stops outside my door longer than the others. The softer, hesitant steps of another. Their chuckles, conversations, coughs—all telltale signs of their locations and intentions. I've mapped out their routines in my mind, predicting their every move.

"You hear me in there, little one?" I murmur, hand splayed protectively over my stomach. The child growing inside of me is both my vulnerability and my strength. I don't know the guarantee of how I'm going to protect us both, but I'm damn well going to try. "We're getting out of this. You and me, together. Just hang on a little longer."

After hours of working the lock on the door with a metal filing I found, I was able to unlock it. After listening for the guards, I push the door open cautiously, peeking into the dimly lit corridor. Just a few steps down the hall, the overconfident guard stands, back turned, lazily checking his phone. Perfect.

Moving with the silent grace and precision of a panther stalking its prey, I approach him. My steps are muted, but my heart pounding is almost deafening in my ears. He doesn't hear me coming—and that's his last mistake.

I remember the combat training sessions I endured, the moves and holds that were ingrained in me. In one fluid motion, I slip my arm around his neck, pulling him into a chokehold. His eyes widen in shock and his fingers claw at my arm, but I'm relentless, using his surprise against him.

Within moments, his struggles weaken, and he crumples unconscious to the ground.

Every second counts. Swiftly, I strip him of his weapon, a knife, and anything else that might be of use. It's a start, but I need more if I'm going to face off against Radu and his thugs.

Grabbing the guard's radio, I tune in just in time to hear chatter. They're getting restless, discussing a potential move.

I quickly retreat to a corner, blending into the shadows. This game of cat and mouse has only just begun, and I'm ready. Whatever it takes, I'm getting out of here, and Radu's reign of terror ends tonight.

The cavernous expanse of the warehouse seems to stretch out endlessly before me, rows upon rows of stacked crates and shelves. The overhead lighting casts long, treacherous shadows that could hide danger, or in my case, offer concealment. The smell of old wood and the faint, familiar scent of tobacco fill the air.

Each step I take is calculated, every breath measured. The guards, I quickly notice, converse amongst themselves in Romanian—thick accents dripping with the familiar cadence of my old adversaries. It's a bittersweet realization; while it gives me the advantage in understanding them, it also tells me they are likely Radu's last remaining loyal men, which means they won't go down easily.

I glide from shadow to shadow, using the stacks of crates as my cover, noting each exit and potential weapon at my disposal. It's a tactical dance, one I've perfected over the years. My confidence grows with every guard I manage to evade.

Until...

There's no mistaking the sensation of being watched, of eyes tracking your every move. I feel him before I see him. Turning, I come face-to-face with a behemoth. The guard's sheer size is intimidating, his hulking frame making him look like a human wall. His shaved head, thick neck, and cold eyes that hold a gleam of recognition leave no room for doubt, he's been expecting me.

There's a split-second standoff. Two predators sizing each other up, calculating the risks, the odds.

But time is a luxury I don't have, especially with a baby to consider. Rushing headfirst at a man like this in normal circumstances would be risky, but now? Now, it's sheer madness. Yet this is how Radu plays his malicious game, always pushing me to my limits, forcing me to take impossible risks.

With a deep breath, I launch myself at the giant, aiming for his center of gravity. The element of surprise is on my side, at least for the moment. As I anticipate, he sidesteps, but I'm ready. My training kicks in. Using his momentum against him, I pivot, driving the heel of my boot into the back of his knee. He grunts, staggering forward, but he's far from defeated.

He roars, swinging a meaty fist in my direction. I duck, but the force of his blow creates a gust of air that ruffles my hair. Knowing full well I can't trade blow for blow with this mountain, I use his size to my advantage.

While he's busy trying to land a hit, I'm moving, striking the soft spots—the sides of his knees, his groin, the hollow of his throat. Quick, incapacitating moves. My aim isn't to overpower but to outmaneuver.

Suddenly, he lunges, catching me off guard. The world tilts as I'm pinned against a stack of crates. His beefy hand encircles my throat, squeezing. Panic flares, but I suppress it. Reaching into my pocket, I wrap my fingers around the guard's knife I'd taken earlier.

With a swift motion, I drive the blade into his side, just enough to make him release his grip and stumble back, gasping in pain.

I don't waste any time. I sprint away, knowing I've only bought myself a few precious seconds.

Heart racing, breath ragged, I understand now more than ever what's at stake.

CHAPTER 37

SAMUIL

The Queens warehouse district is dead silent, save for the distant sound of horns beeping in the city beyond. The night's thick, humid air clings to my skin as I pull up. Waiting for me are the Dominicans, three men sent by Carlos, their expressions a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

I step out of the car, sizing them up with a quick glance. They're heavily armed, ready for a fight. It's obvious they respect the situation, but it's equally evident they're wondering why they're here, working with a Russian instead of handling their own affairs. There'll be time for introductions and alliances later.

As we approach the entrance, I'm immediately struck by the eerie silence. Not the suffocating silence of an empty warehouse, but the unsettling stillness, the aftermath, that follows a skirmish. It's a sensation I'm intimately familiar with.

What I see next confirms my suspicions. Strewn across the floor are several guards, unconscious or worse. These men didn't go down without a fight, but they've been bested by a superior adversary. I smirk to myself; that's my Ana.

But pride is a fleeting emotion, replaced instantly by the high-pitched clang of metal and muffled shouts from above. My heart jumps as I realize that's where she is. And that's where I'm headed.

The Dominicans, sensing the urgency, fall into formation behind me. We move swiftly, my every sense heightened,

pulse pounding loudly in my ears. The staircase looms ahead, and as we ascend, the sounds of combat grow louder, more desperate.

And then I see a sight that stops me in my tracks.

Ana, my fierce, formidable woman, is locked in a dance of death with the hulking brute I'd glimpsed earlier on the video feed. Even from this distance, I can see the ferocity in her eyes, the sheer will to survive, to protect our unborn child. Her movements are swift, precise, each strike a testament to her skill.

I'm about to intervene when I witness the sheer brilliance of her tactics. Using the thug's size against him, she feints left, drawing him into a false sense of security. And then, with a rapid, almost ballet-like move, she pivots, slamming her elbow into the base of his skull.

The man crumples, hitting the floor with a thunderous crash.

Ana's gaze meets mine, a mixture of exhaustion, relief, and that fierce spirit that I've always admired. Even covered in grime and sweat, she's still the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

Without a word, I cross the distance between us and pull her into my arms. The Dominicans stand a respectful distance away, their eyes wide, clearly impressed by the spectacle they've just witnessed.

She stands there, surrounded by the aftermath of her own doing, her chest heaving from exertion. Turning her sharp gaze to the Dominicans, she smirks, "You didn't really think I was going to sit around and wait to be rescued, did you?"

I chuckle, stepping forward with a glint in my eye. "Darling, I was genuinely looking forward to returning the favor after you bailed me out."

A soft smile crosses her lips. "Always keeping score, aren't you, Samuil?" she murmurs, her fingers brushing the rough stubble of my jawline.

I capture her hand, pressing a gentle kiss to her knuckles. “Only when it comes to you,” I murmur, our banter masking the intensity of the relief flooding through me. For a brief, shining moment, all is right in our chaotic world.

But that reprieve is shattered by the ominous creaking of a door and the distinct sound of a chambered bullet.

We spin around to face the new threat, instinctively moving closer together. From the shadows emerges Radu, eyes wild and manic. The yellow light casts ghastly shadows across his face, enhancing the crazed look in his eyes. His fingers twitch around the grip of a semi-automatic pistol, its barrel gleaming ominously.

“Ah, the reunion,” he spits with a venomous sneer. “It warms my heart, truly. How touching.”

The Dominicans tense, hands inching toward their own weapons. But I gesture for them to stand down. This is personal. And as much as Radu wants to play games, I can see the desperation lurking behind his manic gaze. He’s cornered, and that makes him even more dangerous.

“Radu,” Ana’s voice is firm, unyielding, “it’s over. You’re outnumbered, outgunned. There’s no way out of this.”

But Radu only laughs, a bitter, mocking sound. “Oh, Ana. Always the tactician. But you forget one thing. When a man has nothing to lose, it is then that he becomes the most dangerous adversary.”

His finger tightens on the trigger, and I instinctively position myself in front of Ana, ready to shield her with my body. My own hand grips the butt of my sidearm, every muscle coiled and ready to strike.

We’re at an impasse. The hostility in the room is intense, every heartbeat echoing like the distant drums of war. The Dominicans watch silently, their allegiance clear, but none willing to make the first move, not with Radu’s gun so clearly aimed in our direction.

Ana’s voice breaks the tense silence, softer now, almost pleading. “Radu, think of what you’re doing. Don’t throw

everything away.”

But Radu’s laughter is even more sinister this time. “Moscow was the beginning. And now, I will end this, one way or another.”

My mind races. I need to disarm him, but any wrong move could be fatal and Ana could get hurt. We need a plan, a distraction. I cast a sidelong glance at Ana, trying to communicate silently. She gives the slightest nod. We’ve faced impossible odds before, always as a team. And this time will be no different.

Just as I’m about to make my move, Radu’s eyes, full of fury and madness, fixate on me. With a swift, almost fluid motion, he raises his gun, aiming squarely at my chest. Time slows to a crawl, each millisecond stretching into an eternity as the deadly gleam in Radu’s eyes matches the lethal intent in his grip.

I barely have time to register the impending threat when a blur of movement catches my eye. Ana, with a grace and agility that never ceases to amaze me, lunges, pushing me to the ground just as a deafening shot rips through the air. The bullet meant for me goes astray, embedding into the wooden pillar behind where I once stood.

Using momentum, I twist us, positioning myself to break her fall. Without hesitation, I draw my sidearm. The cold metal feels reassuringly solid in my hand. I don’t give Radu a second chance. A single shot rings out, and just like that, the specter from our past has taken his last breath. He stands frozen for a moment, an expression on his face that suggests he’s not quite sure what just happened.

Blood begins to spread through the fabric of his shirt around his heart. He weakly places his hand there, looks down, then drops.

The thick silence that follows is broken only by our ragged breaths. I push myself up slightly, surveying the scene before settling my gaze on Ana.

She smirks up at me, strands of her hair disheveled, eyes alight with that fiery spirit that drew me to her all those years ago in Moscow. “Well, I think we’re even now,” she retorts playfully, her fingers playing with the collar of my shirt. “For all the rescuing, I mean.”

A chuckle from the sidelines draws our attention. One of the Dominicans, a wiry man with a face that tells tales of battles past, grins at us, revealing a gold tooth. “You Russians,” he says, amusement evident in his voice, “you really do things differently, don’t you?”

The tension in the room, previously so thick you could cut it with a knife, begins to dissolve, replaced by camaraderie and relief.

Ana and I, however, are lost in a world of our own. For a brief moment, the danger, the chaos, and the bloodshed fade away, leaving just the two of us. I lean in, capturing her lips with mine. The kiss is a culmination of everything we’ve been through, the fear, the adrenaline, the anguish quickly diminishing.

We pull apart, our foreheads resting against each other, as the world slowly comes back into focus. In that moment it was clearer than ever that no matter what life throws at us, we will face it and conquer it together—always.

Not like I ever had a doubt.

EPILOGUE I

SAMUIL

One year later...

The events of the last year and a half changed everything. For a man who always prided himself on his steely control and composure, the new rhythm of my life has brought unforeseen challenges that have spun me on my heel. Tonight, we're leaving our son, Niko, for the first time. My gut churns with nerves. The stronghold of the Bratva? Child's play. Leaving my child? A different game entirely.

Elena, our nanny, is already a fixture in our home. Andrei had insisted on her and flew her in from Moscow, a professional who had been with Bratva families for years, caring for their most precious assets. She's impeccably qualified but handing over the responsibility for my son is another matter entirely.

"Remember, he likes the blue blanket, the one with the cartoon dinosaurs. It calms him down," I instruct, pacing slightly.

Elena nods, suppressing a smirk. "Mr. Nicolaevich, we've gone over this. I've got everything noted down."

"And the lullaby. The one Ana sings. You know it, right?"

She hums a few bars, her gentle voice filling the room. "Yes, I've got it."

I run a hand through my hair, pausing when I realize I've started to fidget with my watch—a nervous tick of mine. "The monitor is fully charged, right? Just in case I want to check in?"

She holds it up with a patient smile. “All set. You and Ms. Zaitsev enjoy your evening out. Niko is in good hands.”

Hesitating at the nursery door, I take a deep breath and peek inside. The soft light of the nightlamp casts a warm glow over the room, and there, in his crib, is my world. Niko, with his thick black hair, inherited from his mother, and my deep, rich brown eyes, is the perfect blend of Ana and me.

He stirs slightly in his sleep, little fingers clutching the edge of the blue dinosaur blanket. I step closer, the weight of the love I feel for him pressing warmly against my chest. The very essence of him, that unique mix of vulnerability and strength, brings a smile to my face.

“Look at you,” I whisper, marveling at the miracle of our son. “You’re going to be a king one day. Remember that.”

His peaceful breathing is the only response, but it’s enough. Taking one last glance, I silently promise him that I’ll always be there, watching over him, keeping him safe.

With a heavy heart, I step out of the room, nodding to Elena. “Take care of him.”

Her nod is full of understanding. “Always.”

And with that, I make my way out. The strength of our family, the bonds we’ve forged, and the future we’re building together in this vast, sprawling city is exciting and unmatched. I trust Elena because Andrei trusts her. But for now, it’s time for Ana and me to reclaim a bit of ourselves, even if just for an evening.

Navigating through the neon-lit streets of New York, my thoughts can’t help but wander back to nearly two years ago, the memories of that night lingering like fresh ink on parchment. The Wolf. The mere name sends a shiver down my spine, evoking memories of the near-fatal fight. Ana’s grit, her indomitable spirit, fighting for her life, the poison coursing through her veins, putting her on the brink. It was an agonizing chapter of our lives that I’d kill to erase.

A dark chuckle escapes my lips as I think of the Romanians, especially Radu. A supposed ‘kingpin’ brought to

his knees by the very woman he dared to hurt. The fact that his wife, quick to remarry a plain, law-abiding, legitimate businessman, was a delicious twist to the tale. An amusing end to the mighty Radu's legacy.

But tonight is not about them. It's about Ana. Her comeback. A fresh start, a new chapter in the chronicles of Ana Zaitsev, the formidable fighter. My pulse quickens with a mix of anticipation and nerves. She's always been a force of nature, but after such a hiatus, how will she fare?

The car slows, pulling up to the venue, the thumping beat of music pulsing through the walls. The air is electric, filled with energy and excitement. This is underground New York, where the fights are brutal, raw, and draw crowds hungry for action. It's a world far removed from the glitz and glamour above, but it's a world where Ana thrives. A world where she's a legend.

I pay the driver and step out, adjusting the collar of my shirt. The entrance is guarded by two massive bouncers. Recognizing me, they nod, letting me pass without a word. A narrow hallway leads to a massive room that's alive with activity. The fight hasn't started yet, but the atmosphere is thick with anticipation.

Spotting a familiar face, I make my way to Andrei, who's talking animatedly with a few men. As I approach, he catches my eye and grins. "Ready for the show?"

I nod, my smirk matching his. "Always."

We talk strategy, odds, and potential outcomes. But truthfully, I'm only half-listening. My mind is on Ana. How she's feeling, her mindset, her preparations.

Suddenly, the crowd's roar reaches a crescendo, pulling me back to the moment. The lights dim, and a spotlight hits the cage. There she stands, my Ana, looking fierce, her body honed to perfection, every muscle taut, ready for battle. The sight of her sends adrenaline surging through my veins. This is her domain, her kingdom, and tonight, she's here to reclaim her crown.

In the midst of the crowd, our eyes meet. A fleeting connection amidst the sea of faces, and in that moment, all my worries dissipate. I see the fire in her, the unwavering determination, the sheer will to win. And I know, deep down, she's got this.

The dance of battle unfurls before me, a ballet of raw power and finesse. With each passing second, Ana moves with an elegance that belies the brutality of her strikes. There's a fire in her eyes, a determination that's impossible to miss. It's in the arch of her back, the set of her jaw, the way she pivots on the balls of her feet.

As her opponent launches a series of aggressive strikes, Ana parries and counters, her every movement proof of years of training. She's a symphony of controlled violence, a force of nature that leaves nothing but devastation in her wake. With each connection of her fists or feet to flesh, I feel a rush of pride. The very woman I married, the love of my life, is a force to be reckoned with.

Any lingering fears about her health, any whispers of doubt that tried to creep into the recesses of my mind, are banished. This is not a woman weakened by her past. This is the Tsarina, a legend reborn.

And then, in a blur of motion, it happens. With a series of rapid jabs followed by a powerful roundhouse kick, Ana sends her opponent sprawling to the canvas. The room explodes in deafening applause, the thunderous roars of the crowd cementing her undeniable victory. My heart swells with pride, admiration, and a fierce love that's hard to put into words.

Before the announcer even declares the winner, before Ana's hand is raised in victory, I'm already on my way to her, pushing through the throngs of people. Every step is fueled by an overwhelming need to hold her, to wrap my arms around her and pull her close.

When she sees me heading toward her, she jumps off the platform, breaking into a sprint, quickly closing the distance between us. I meet her halfway, lifting her off her feet in a tight embrace. Her arms wrap around my neck, her face buried

in the crook of my shoulder. I can feel her heartbeat against my chest, a rapid staccato that matches my own.

“Tsarina,” I murmur into her hair, my voice thick with emotion.

She pulls back, a mischievous grin playing on her lips. “Did you doubt me, Samuil?”

“Never,” I reply, capturing her lips with mine. The kiss is fiery, filled with passion and a depth of feeling that words can’t capture. We break apart, foreheads pressed together, lost in the intensity of the moment.

“I told you I was back,” she whispers, her breath warm against my skin.

I chuckle softly, tightening my grip around her waist. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The night’s energy doesn’t wane, even after the fight. The four of us spill into the cool New York air: Andrei, Viktor, Ana, and myself. The city’s lights glow in the distance, a mirage of opportunity and potential. And tonight, the city is ours.

“Where to?” Viktor asks, ever the enthusiast. His eagerness always brings a smirk to my face.

“Let’s show you our New York,” Ana says, her voice carrying the hint of mischief I’ve come to adore.

The night progresses in a blur of neon lights, clinking glasses, and laughter. From the vantage of a rooftop bar, we toast our successes while the city sprawls beneath us, a living organism of hopes and dreams. The familiar sight of Times Square, the distant silhouette of Lady Liberty... it all feels more vibrant tonight, infused with the thrill of Ana’s victory.

Over drinks, Andrei updates us about Moscow. “The Bratva has never been stronger,” he claims, his voice filled with pride. I nod in agreement, proud of the empire we’ve built across oceans.

“We’ve been busy too,” I chime in, eyes fixed on Ana’s. “New York has been good to us. But there are other cities,

other opportunities. Expansion is on the horizon.”

Ana’s eyes shine with ambition. “There’s no stopping us, not now.”

The conversation flows from business to personal stories. Viktor regales us with tales of his latest escapades in Moscow. Ana and I share snippets of our life in the city—the little Italian deli we’ve come to love, the hidden jazz bar that feels like a time capsule, the park where we often take our son.

Yet amidst the laughter and chatter, there’s an underlying current of anticipation, a magnetic pull between Ana and me. Every touch, every glance exchanged is a silent promise, a reminder of the intimate world that awaits us.

The night wears on, and as much as I enjoy the company, the pull toward home grows stronger. Ana seems to feel the same, her fingers frequently finding mine, her gaze lingering a bit longer.

“It’s been a great night,” I say, finishing off my drink. “But I think it’s time we head home.”

Ana nods in agreement. “Yes, it’s been fun, but...”

Andrei chuckles, cutting her off. “Say no more. Go home, you two. We’ll manage just fine.”

Viktor raises an eyebrow in mock indignation. “What? You think we can’t handle New York on our own?”

Ana laughs, pulling me closer. “Oh, I’m sure you can. But try not to burn down the city while you’re at it.”

Andrei grins. “No promises.”

We say our goodbyes amidst laughter and hugs. The city that never sleeps fades into a backdrop, and all I can focus on is the woman beside me.

The drive home is quiet, filled with the unspoken words and promises that always seem to flow between us. When we finally step into the familiar confines of our apartment, the world outside ceases to exist.

Tonight was about celebration, about victory, and about family. But now, it's about us. Just the two of us, and the love that's always burned brightly, no matter the odds.

As the apartment door clicks shut behind us, there's a momentary silence. The earlier bustle and energy of the evening seems to fall away. First things first, our son.

We make our way to his room, treading softly on the plush carpet. I push open the door, and the soft glow of a nightlight illuminates the form of our baby boy. His even breathing, his tiny fists curled beside his head, the soft mop of dark hair on his scalp... it's all so perfect, so utterly heartwarming.

"He's so peaceful," Ana murmurs, standing beside me, her voice brimming with maternal love.

"And strong. Look at him," I reply, the raw wonder evident in my voice. Every day, every glimpse of our child feels like witnessing a miracle. I think of the nickname I've given him—my little "Orel," my eagle, a name that denotes strength, freedom, and a touch of the wild.

We spend a few moments more watching him. Then, silently deciding it's time to let him sleep undisturbed, we retreat from the room.

Elena is waiting in the living room. "All went well?" I ask, even though I know the answer.

"All went well. Still sleeping like an angel," she replies with a fond smile, gathering her things.

We exchange pleasantries, and after ensuring her transportation is taken care of, we bid her goodnight. The apartment door clicks shut once more, leaving Ana and me in a cocoon of silence and intimacy.

She turns to me, her eyes shimmering in the dim light. "Quite the evening," she teases.

I smirk, moving closer. "Yes, it has been, Tsarina. Back in the ring after so long, and still undefeated."

Ana chuckles, playfully shoving me. "Always the charmer, aren't you, Samuil?"

“I learn from the best.” My voice drops an octave, and I pull her close, my hands finding the curve of her waist. She meets my gaze, her eyes alight with mischief and desire.

There’s no need for words. The space between us closes, and our lips meet in a searing kiss. It’s all fire and passion, a heady mix of the love we’ve always shared and the heightened emotions of the night.

The journey from the living room to our bedroom is a blur of discarded clothing and hungry kisses. We’ve been together for years, but the electricity, the sheer intensity of our connection, has never waned.

The world narrows to the feel of her skin against mine, the way her body arches into my touch, the soft, breathless sounds she makes. There’s a rhythm to us, a dance of passion and love that’s become second nature. It’s fierce, tender, all-consuming—a perfect storm of emotions.

Afterwards, as we lie entwined in our bed, the New York skyline casting its glow into our room, I marvel at our journey. From Moscow to New York, from Bratva battles to the birth of our child, through poisonings and proposals, we’ve remained unbreakable.

I pull her closer, whispering words of love into her ear, grateful for every moment we’ve shared and every moment yet to come.

EPILOGUE II

ANASTASIA

Years have passed since our tumultuous first days in New York, and the sprawling mansion in Westchester stands as a testament to our journey. We bought it as our personal escape, our countryside estate. It reminds me of grand Russian dachas. When the city feels too close and suffocating, this place is our sanctuary.

Setting the massive oak dining table with the finest China, a young, familiar voice reaches my ears from the living room, “Мама, я люблю тебя.” (Mama, I love you.)

I grin, leaning against the doorway. There’s Niko, my determined boy, bearing my jet-black hair and his father’s deep brown eyes, practicing his Russian. It’s crucial he keeps that bond to our heritage. His grandmother, Sandra, gleams with pride at him, every syllable he utters.

“Отлично, мой мальчик!” (Excellent, my boy!) she claps, her joy infectious.

Niko spins around, spotting me. “Mama, did I say it right?”

“Perfectly, my love,” I assure him, my chest bursting with pride. He dashes to me, his arms encircling my waist.

The room gradually fills with our boisterous, loving family. Andrei, now more silver-haired, animatedly talks with Viktor, both men’s vodka glasses swinging with their passionate gestures. Our familial bond is still ironclad after all these years.

Samuil, every bit the proud family head, ensures everyone is comfortable and provided for. Our gazes lock occasionally, words unspoken but sentiments understood.

As the evening unfolds, Niko is the main attraction. His tales of school, sprinkled with Russian phrases, elicit laughter and admiration.

A moment to ourselves, Samuil and I step onto the balcony. The setting sun casts a gold shimmer, transforming our gardens into a realm from a fairy tale.

“We’ve crafted this place in our image,” he observes, his voice tinted with amusement.

I chuckle. “After what we spent renovating, I’d certainly hope so.”

His eyes are mischievous. “Only the best for my queen, right?”

We watch the celebrations, content. Then, the conversation shifts.

“Speaking of the best,” he begins, and I sense what’s coming. “The Bratva’s stronghold in New York is unassailable. We’ve marked our territory.”

I reflect on the challenges, the late night negotiations, the alliances formed in shadowy corners. “Smaller players folded. The big fish? They understood crossing us wasn’t an option.”

Samuil’s eyes gleam. “The message was clear. We’re here, and we demand respect.”

“Our risks, our sacrifices,” I muse, “It’s all paying off.”

In the midst of our fervent discussion, Andrei’s form darkens the doorway. His voice is playful, but the intent is obvious. “Really? Business talk, here and now?”

Samuil laughs, drawing Andrei close. “The city’s pulse never stops, neither does ours.”

I smirk, sipping my drink. “For tonight, let’s pause. For Andrei’s peace of mind.”

Andrei's chuckles fill the air. "At last! Come, Viktor's about to spill some tales of a naive Samuil from our Moscow days."

I tease Samuil, "Now, that I can't miss."

He groans, pulling me close, "Just remember, I've got dirt on both of you."

Laughter, lightness, and love fill the night, our empire's weight lifted, if just for an evening.

I lean back against the plush couch, the soft hum of conversation filling the room. Damien, with his hair slicked back and a gleam in his eye, takes center stage. He speaks of his grand plans for Moscow, and I'm captivated. Damien's not just all talk; he has the makings of a gamechanger. It's a sentiment shared by many in the room.

The clink of glasses and shared laughter wash over me. This new family of mine... they've enveloped me with warmth, love, and trust. In a world that's shown me its ugliest facets, being around them always feels like home.

My eyes wander to the French doors that lead to the garden. The sight of children playing under the darkening evening sky fills my heart with warmth. Their laughter, genuine and uninhibited, is the very sound of hope. I allow the scene to fill my senses, letting the joy and contentment seep in. After everything, moments like these, are worth their weight in gold.

A sudden break in the conversation yanks me back. I catch Leo's voice, tinged with annoyance. "We're out of Polugar."

The room murmurs in response. Polugar, a beloved Russian bread wine, has been the drink of choice tonight. An event without it feels incomplete.

"I'll go get some," I offer, standing up and smoothing down my dress. It's a good opportunity to stretch my legs and maybe find a quiet corner for a few moments.

Viktor gives me a nod, his eyes expressing gratitude. "You sure? I can send someone."

I wave him off. “It’s fine. The store’s not far, and besides, a little walk might do me good.”

Damien looks up, his eyebrows raised. “Need company?”

I shake my head, smiling. “Thanks, but I’ll manage. Continue with your tales, and by the time I’m back, I expect the room to be buzzing with even more excitement.”

He chuckles. “That’s a promise.”

As I head toward the door, I feel Samuil’s hand brush mine. The touch is fleeting but filled with warmth. “Be careful,” he murmurs.

Always the protective one. “Always am,” I reply, with a wink.

Stepping out, the evening air is cool against my face. The city’s lights twinkle in the distance, only adding to the serene beauty of Westchester. It’s moments like these—the stillness, the solitude—that I cherish. I’ve grown to appreciate the balance between the hustle of the empire and the tranquility of the rare quiet moments.

The store isn’t far, and my heels click rhythmically against the pavement. The night is alive with the sound of distant cars, whispers of trees, and the faint din of the neighborhood. The importance of family, blood or chosen, reverberates in my mind. They are the backbone, the support system. In this tumultuous journey, they’ve been the anchor, keeping me grounded.

Reaching the store, I find the familiar bottle and make my way to the counter. As I pay, my thoughts wander back to the party, to Samuil, to our life together. I think of the future, of Niko, of the legacy we’re building.

The sun casts sharp, contrasting shadows on the pavement as I exit the store. The slight breeze rustles the trees lining the street, carrying with it the faint laughter and sounds of a city alive and bustling. I begin my walk back, the bottle of Polugar secure in its bag, my thoughts adrift in the warmth of family and the legacy we’ve crafted.

Before I've taken more than a few steps, a soft voice interrupts my reverie. "Aren't you the Tsarina?"

I turn to find a small group gathered a short distance away. Among them, a little girl no more than ten, her eyes wide with awe, clutches a notebook and pen. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a ponytail, revealing a face flushed with excitement.

I offer a half-smile, my tone playful yet firm, "Last I checked."

She hesitates for just a moment, glancing up at what I assume is her older sister, before stepping forward. "Can I have your autograph?"

The sincerity in her voice warms my heart, and I nod. "Of course."

As she hands me the notebook, her sister pipes up, a teasing note in her voice. "She wants to be just like you when she grows up."

The little girl shoots her a reproachful glance but doesn't deny it. She looks up at me, determination burning in her eyes. "I want to be as strong as the Tsarina. Can I be?"

I crouch down to her level, meeting her gaze directly. "Absolutely," I tell her. "But remember, it's not just about the strength you show in the ring. It's about the strength you carry in your heart. And it's important to have people who love you and support your dreams. They'll help you get there."

She absorbs my words, her eyes never leaving mine. Finally, with a fierce nod, she murmurs, "I have my sister."

I glance up at the older girl, who's watching the exchange with a proud smile. "Then you're already halfway there."

The air around us is charged with a shared understanding. This isn't just about fighting. It's about life, aspirations, and the unwavering spirit needed to chase them.

With a newfound confidence, the little girl grins. "Thank you, Tsarina."

I stand up, handing her the notebook. "Keep that spirit alive, and always fight for what you believe in."

She clutches the notebook to her chest, beaming, while her sister offers a grateful nod. “Thank you,” she says, her voice carrying an undertone of respect.

With a final wave, I turn and continue on my way, and I can’t help but note the extra spring in my step. Recognition is one thing; inspiring a new generation is something else entirely. The weight of that responsibility isn’t lost on me. It’s a reminder of the path I’ve chosen and the impact it has on others.

The lively resonance of clinking glasses and the murmur of conversation pull me into the embrace of my family. The Polugar, smooth and potent, flows from the bottle into glasses, the liquid’s shimmer echoing the vibrancy of the gathering. With every pour, I relish the simple pleasure of being surrounded by the ones I cherish.

Toasts are raised, stories exchanged, and laughter fills the air. This is the warmth I had craved for so long, and it’s now interwoven into the fabric of my life. We’ve all faced trials and tribulations, but today, it’s about the joy that binds us. It’s about the love that runs deeper than blood.

As I make my way into the kitchen to grab more food, the fragrance of the rich dishes hits me all at once, making my stomach churn ever so slightly.

Samuil follows close behind, his presence unmistakable even if I don’t turn to see him. The rhythm of our lives has grown so synchronized that our movements often mirror one another. We maneuver around the kitchen with ease, gathering platters and checking on the still-warming dishes.

“You know,” I begin, the words slipping out before I can contain them, “I’m thinking of taking a bit of a break from the ring.”

He pauses, a forkful of salad halfway to his mouth. “Really? Why?”

Damn. I hadn’t meant to let that out, not yet anyway. My sharp gaze meets his curious one. For a split second, I debate sidestepping the subject, but the truth always has a way of

revealing itself. Instead of verbalizing it, I guide his hand and place it gently on my stomach.

“Let’s just say, I won’t be in fighting shape for a while,” I tell him, holding his gaze, letting the implication hang in the air between us.

His eyes widen, darting between my face and where his hand rests. The realization doesn’t dawn immediately, but when it does, the transformation of his expression is profound. A mix of wonder, elation, and a touch of disbelief floods his features. The revelation rests between us, emotions raw and pure.

“You mean...?” he starts, his voice laden with emotion.

I nod, a grin breaking out on my face, mirroring the joy reflected in his eyes. “Yes. Looks like the family’s about to get a bit bigger.”

For a long moment, we stand there, absorbed in our shared bubble of happiness. The noises from the party outside feel distant, muffled. This moment, right here in our kitchen, surrounded by the aromas of home-cooked food and the warmth of family just beyond the walls, feels like the very essence of life. Full, overflowing, and deeply satisfying.

Samuil pulls me into a tight embrace. Words aren’t necessary. The synchronized beating of our hearts conveys everything that needs to be said.

Pulling back, Samuil offers that familiar smirk, mischief sparkling in his eyes. “Well, Tsarina, it seems we have some news to share.”

Chuckling, I link my arm with his. “We do. But first, let’s savor this moment a little longer.”

With that, we make our way back to the patio doors, ready to embrace the next chapter of our lives. The joy, the challenges, the shared dreams await us. And as the sounds of the party grow louder with each step, we pause, taking a moment to breathe it all in before stepping into the whirlwind of congratulations and jubilation.

The End

**I hope you enjoyed Anastasia and Samuil's love story.
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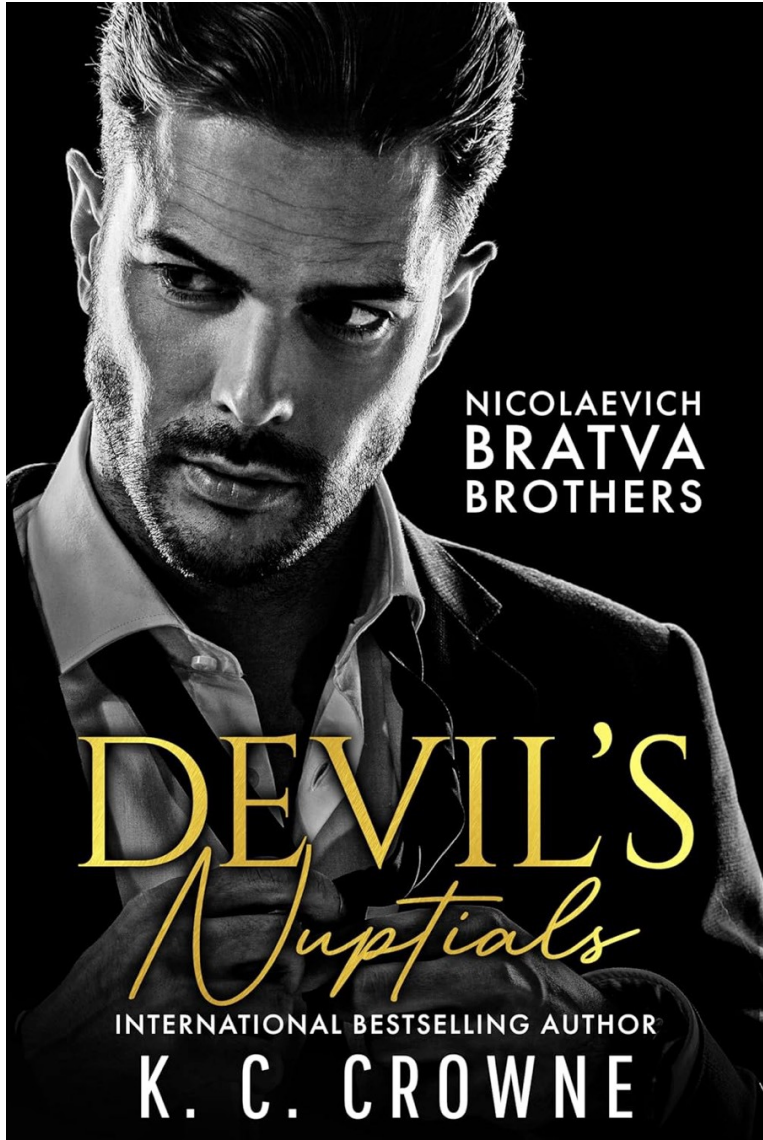
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DEVIL'S NUPTIALS
(PREVIEW)



NICOLAEVICH
BRATVA
BROTHERS

DEVIL'S
Nuptials

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K. C. CROWNE

CHAPTER 1

MARIYA

“Don’t cause me any trouble.”

The phrase flutters like a moth around a candle flame, never too far from the center of my thoughts. It wasn’t a statement brimming with the warmth of fatherly concern; rather, it was cold, a stark reminder of the shackles that now bind me. The final decree before I was given away, like an unwanted heirloom, to a man known only for his ties to the Bratva and his supposed ruthlessness.

I cradle the wine glass delicately between my fingers, the crimson liquid shimmering under the soft glow of the setting sun. Taking a sip, I let the rich flavors dance on my tongue, but even the finest of wines seem bland against the backdrop of my current predicament.

From the balcony of this magnificent home in Rublyovka, one of Moscow’s most prestigious neighborhoods, I can see the vastness of manicured gardens, each more opulent than the last. It’s a paradox—such beauty surrounding a life that feels void of it.

The sun dips low, casting long shadows that seem to stretch out, reaching, much like the life that has been chosen for me—a life stretching endlessly in a direction I hadn’t foreseen.

A light evening breeze whispers through the trees, rustling leaves in a soft, serenading dance. Birds return to their nests, their evening songs filled with a freedom I can only envy. It’s ironic, isn’t it? I’m in one of the most luxurious

neighborhoods, in a grand house with every comfort imaginable, yet I feel more caged than ever before.

The ceremony was a quiet affair, merely a business transaction finalized with a ring and papers. No white dress, no veil, no gleeful celebration with friends and family – and no happy groom. Only the weighty realization that I was now bound to a stranger.

The more I think about it, the more it seems like a peculiar dream—marrying someone without so much as seeing their face. The Bratva Lieutenant, as everyone whispered, remained an enigma, only punctuating the mysterious circumstances under which this union was formed. I wonder if he ever stares at the sunset, lost in thoughts like I am now.

With every passing moment, the garden below becomes a canvas painted in shades of twilight. The hues of pinks, purples, and deep blues merge, reflecting the turmoil in my heart. Is this what my life has become? A tapestry of uncertainties?

A soft sigh escapes my lips. I can't help but think of the novels I've cherished, the tales of love and sacrifice. Here I am, living in a storyline I'd only ever read about. And yet, unlike the characters in those pages, I don't have the privilege of a preordained happy ending.

Setting the wine glass down, I wrap my arms around myself. There's a chill in the air, hinting at the approach of winter. Or maybe, the chill is more from the cold reality setting in. Tomorrow, I'll meet my husband.

“Don't cause me any trouble.” Father's words ring again.

In Moscow's social circles, whispers travel faster than the speed of light. And in such circles, the Tarasov family's financial dealings are a subject of passionate gossip, discussed in hushed tones over crystal glasses of champagne. Everyone knows, or at least they think they do, about our family's dire indebtedness to the Bratva.

My father's ambitious run for mayor, with its lofty promises and glitzy campaigns, was funded with money that

wasn't truly ours. It's said that debts are like chains, and these chains are made of unyielding steel, forged by the Bratva's merciless hands. Publicly, we are the Tarasovs - a family of prestige and power. But behind the velvet curtains, the truth is uglier. We are entwined in a dangerous dance with the most feared organization in Russia.

My sister, so radiant and full of life, was the first to pay the price for our father's ambition. She was betrothed to a Bratva lieutenant a few years ago, her dreams and aspirations snuffed out in an instant. I watched with a heart heavy as stone, as she was taken away to a life of uncertainty. It was the stuff of tragic novels—except it was real, and it was happening to us.

And now, it seems, history has a cruel way of repeating itself. The weight of the family's debt has fallen on my shoulders, pushing me down a path eerily similar to my sister's. My life, with all its dreams of flower shops and quiet moments among petals and leaves, was signed away with the stroke of a pen.

Now, I find myself gazing at the walls of this house—a beautiful, sprawling estate in the heart of suburban Moscow. The gardens are vast and lush, the rooms grand and opulent. To any outsider, this house would be a dream, but I see it for what it truly is—a gilded cage, its bars invisible but ever-present.

Damien Sidorov. The name sounds like a melody from a song I've never heard, and yet, it's a name that's going to be intrinsically tied to my life from now on. He's the man to whom I've been promised, but he remains an enigma. All I have are whispers and fragments: that he's half-brother to the notorious Nicolaevich brothers, that he's ambitious, and that he's been entangled in the Bratva's web for far too long.

Yet, for a man whose reputation precedes him, Damien remains unseen, almost ghostly. I wonder if he's as apprehensive about this union as I am. Has he watched me from afar, studying the woman he is to call his wife? Or is this just another transaction to him, as straightforward as any business deal?

I drift from room to room, my footsteps echoing in the vastness of my new home. Every piece of furniture, every draped curtain, seems to hold secrets of its own. But amidst this opulence, I feel more lost than ever. There's an uncanny silence that blankets the house, only interrupted by the distant sounds of nature outside.

There's an old saying that knowledge is power. But as I stand here, surrounded by the unknown, I feel anything but powerful. I am Mariya Tarasova, the daughter of a politician, now the wife of a Bratva lieutenant, and yet, I am but a stranger in my own life.

In the quiet solitude of the evening, I find myself yearning for a glimpse of Damien, to put a face to the name, to see the man who holds the keys to my cage. Perhaps, in his eyes, I might find answers to the countless questions that swirl in my mind.

The soft shuffling of footsteps breaks my reverie, and an imposing figure strides into the room. Broad-shouldered and with a chiseled jawline, his very presence feels like a barrier—intended, no doubt, to keep me in line. His close-cropped dark hair and cold grey eyes convey a stern authority that makes me instinctively straighten up.

“Oskar,” he announces in a deep baritone, though I already know his name from the hushed whispers of the household staff. “I’m assigned to ensure your safety.”

I nod, swallowing the apprehension that has suddenly clawed its way up my throat. “Why the need for protection inside the house? Am I in danger?”

His lips barely twitch. “It’s protocol. For everyone connected to the Bratva.”

Wanting to understand more about this curious situation I’ve found myself in, I press on, my voice barely a whisper. “Where is Damien?”

“He will be here when he wants to be,” Oskar responds flatly, shutting me down before I can pry any further.

Confusion wars with frustration within me. “Then what am I supposed to do here? Am I a prisoner?”

A ghost of a smile plays on Oskar’s lips, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Mr. Sidorov has provided you with an unlimited spending account in your name. The house and everything within it is yours to explore. You have the freedom to live as you wish.”

“But?” I sense there’s more, an unspoken condition to this apparent freedom.

“But,” he echoes, confirming my suspicions, “you are not to cause any trouble for Damien.”

I’m baffled, trying to piece together the fragments of this strange puzzle. “Why is he doing this? Marrying me and then.. giving me everything, yet nothing at all? Who is Damien Sidorov?”

Oskar looks at me for a long moment, as if sizing me up. “Damien is a man with many layers. You would do well not to peel them back.”

His words hang in the air, leaving a chill that seeps deep into my bones. A man with layers. A man who has given me a life of luxury, yet remains an elusive shadow. A husband in name only, it seems.

Before I can question Oskar further, he turns on his heel, leaving me alone once again with my thoughts. The enigma that is Damien Sidorov weighs heavily on my mind. But for now, I’m left with more questions than answers about the man to whom my life is inexplicably tied.

Well, *would* be. I’m not about to stay prisoner forever. Tonight, I’m making my escape. Two days in this place has been long enough.

The heavy cloak of night stretches over the horizon, and the vastness of the house falls into a deep stillness. It feels as though time itself has paused, a hush over the world as it anticipates my next move. I stand by the window, feeling the gentle touch of the lace curtains on my fingers. Opening the

window, the night's breeze whispers promises of freedom, urging me on.

With every ounce of caution, I begin my descent, the ivy that clings to the house providing just enough foothold. Each step is a delicate blend of fear and exhilaration, but with every inch I lower, the grip of my past life loosens just a bit more.

Once on the ground, the cool touch of dew-kissed grass caresses my feet. I let out a quiet sigh of relief. The edge of the property beckons, and thoughts of Finland — of liberty and a fresh start — propel me forward.

The trees at the boundary rise like ancient guardians, their silhouettes carved against the moonlit sky. I can't help but feel a poetic allure as they stretch before me, a forest threshold between the world I know and the one I yearn for.

Although every rustling leaf, every whisper of the wind, makes my heart race, I refuse to let fear dictate my pace. I push on, navigating the woods with determination as my only guide.

As I near the fence, a rush of adrenaline propels me. This is it. The final barrier. With a surge of strength, I grasp the top, pulling myself up. The cold metal bites into my palms, but the pain is inconsequential compared to the taste of freedom so close at hand.

With one final effort, I drop to the other side, the world outside the Sidorov property stretching infinitely before me. There's no Oskar, no watchful eyes. Only the night and the promise it holds.

I can't help the sly smile that graces my lips, the thrill of the escape making me feel more alive than I've felt in years. With newfound energy, I hurry off, the shadows of the night my only companions. The weight of the Bratva, of Damien, of obligations, all fade into the distance as I embrace the path of the unknown.

CHAPTER 2

DAMIEN

“Mr. Sidorov,” he begins, his accent thick, “Your proposal intrigues us. However, you’re relatively new in this game, aren’t you? Tell me – why should I trust you?”

Each moment within the dimly lit room is charged with tension, expectations resting on my shoulders. Ahmet Sahin, representative of the Turkish mafia, sits across from me, his dark eyes dissecting every word, every gesture, gauging my worth.

Ahmet Sahin exudes an aura of quiet authority. Middle-aged with a graying beard meticulously groomed to sharp precision, his skin holds the olive tone of Mediterranean heritage. Every inch of him speaks of a man accustomed to power, from the expensive silk suit that clings to his broad frame to the silver ring bearing an intricate emblem that adorns his pinky finger. Flanking him on either side are two imposing bodyguards, both dressed in dark suits.

Their silent, watchful demeanor contrasts starkly with their bulging muscles, making it clear that they are more than capable of handling any threat. Both constantly scan the room, exuding an air of unspoken menace.

In a calculated move to display both vulnerability and trust, I have come alone—a stark contrast to Ahmet’s well-guarded entourage. It’s a risk, but in this game, sometimes risks are the only way to earn respect.

I smile thinly, allowing confidence to paint my exterior. “Every great player has a beginning, Ahmet. And believe me,

I've prepared extensively for this. The Black Sea route is profitable, efficient, and ripe for our collaboration."

He studies me, lips curling in a contemplative smirk. "Your Bratva is known for its reputation. However, you're a wildcard. Why should I make a deal with you?"

Ah, the constant reminder of my 'place'. I could almost hear the Nicolaevich brothers' voices echoing Sahin's sentiment. One of them, but also not. My half-blood status has been both a curse and a challenge. "Because I have something to prove," I say, letting a hint of vulnerability slip. "And those with something to prove often work the hardest."

He nods slowly, seeming to approve of my words. Good – he's willing to listen.

The conversation continues, with details discussed, numbers agreed upon, strategies plotted. My heart races with the implications of this deal. It's a ticket to recognition, to proving that the blood of the Nicolaeviches, diluted or not, still courses through me with strength and ambition.

My thoughts are interrupted by the soft ping of a text message. I pull out my phone discreetly, eyes scanning the words. It's from Oskar.

The Nightingale has flown the coop.

Damn it. The girl. Mariya. She was supposed to be the least of my worries, a simple debt repayment. Yet here she was, turning out to be the pain in the ass I hadn't anticipated. I stifle the surge of emotion. Now's not the time.

I pocket my phone, hoping the brief interruption hasn't cost me any leverage. "Apologies, Mr. Sahin. Where were we?"

He raises an eyebrow but continues the discussion, evidently intrigued enough to overlook the momentary distraction. The two of us negotiate, discuss, and eventually agree on preliminary terms.

But as our meeting concludes, and as Sahin's footsteps echo into the distance, I can't shake off the weight of Mariya's

escape. The Nightingale, a codename fit for her delicate appearance but apparently ill-suited for her cunning.

The irony isn't lost on me. Here I am, trying to prove my worth to the Bratva, to my family, and yet I can't even keep a young florist within the walls of my home. I sigh, knowing that while the potential success of this deal might bring me closer to my family's respect, this misstep with Mariya could set me back in their eyes.

I need to find her. The Nightingale might have taken flight, but I'll be damned if she's escaped for good.

The familiar, pulsing heartbeat of Moscow under the cloak of night welcomes me as I exit the building. Neon lights cut through the darkness, casting vivid splashes of color onto the wet asphalt below. The hum of distant music from late-night clubs drifts on the air, and the city feels alive, an urban behemoth thriving in the twilight hours.

My driver stands rigidly at attention next to a sleek black car, its contours reflecting the city lights. Before I can give him any direction, he opens the door for me, understanding the urgency without the need for words. As we take off, the streets of Moscow blur past me. Buildings adorned with glitzy billboards and modern skyscrapers contrast sharply with the elegant gold-domed churches and historic architecture. Even at this hour, the traffic is thick, but my driver weaves through with a practiced ease, understanding the weight of the situation.

Arriving at my apartment in the city, I barely spare a glance at its interior. Instead, I'm drawn to my office, where a discreet command center has been set up. Walls of screens display live footage from various cameras scattered throughout the city, and it doesn't take me long to locate Mariya's image on one of them.

I was prepared for any possibility. There's a reason for the adage, 'trust, but verify.' I've made sure Mariya is always within the scope of my watchful eyes. I'm aware of the optics—this surveillance, this encroachment upon her privacy—it borders on obsession. But Andrei made it clear: the

importance of this union outweighed personal discomfort. Our world thrives on alliances and power dynamics; emotion has no place here. The cameras, the undercover agents blending seamlessly with the crowd, the microphones picking up whispers and footsteps—all of it was necessary. A part of me wonders if Mariya, intelligent as she is, knows just how closely she's being monitored.

Leaning against the cool surface of my desk, I can't help but focus on the small screen showing Mariya's progress through the city. Each step she takes is a symbol of her defiance, and though I hate to admit it, there's a begrudging respect that takes root in my chest. The irony isn't lost on me: in our world of power struggles and dark dealings, this delicate florist could very well be my greatest challenge.

A beep interrupts my musings—a message from Andrei, no doubt seeking an update on the situation. With the Tarasovs holding considerable political sway and a pivotal development deal on the horizon, Mariya is the lynchpin in our plans. A marriage of convenience, of strategy. I don't need to love her, though, considering the glimpses I've caught of her spirit, I suspect that might be a challenge in and of itself. My duty is simple: keep her close, keep her controlled. For the sake of the Bratva and the power we've fought so hard to maintain.

The dim glow from the bank of monitors provides the only illumination in the apartment, casting a blue-tinged hue over everything. This isn't the lavish house that Mariya thinks is my residence. This is my sanctum, a place in Moscow's dense heart where I retreat to when the weight of the Bratva world grows too stifling. Here, there are no pretenses, only the bare truth.

A camera feed shows Mariya boarding a train, her silhouette easily distinguishable among the throngs of passengers. Finland. A wise move. The security on these rails is more relaxed than any airport. For a brief moment, I can't help but marvel at her resourcefulness. It stings, the realization that this spirited young woman sees her life with me as a prison from which she must escape.

I key in a quick message to Oskar, instructing him to shadow her and bring her back unharmed. There's no pride in this command, only the hard tug of responsibility.

Leaning back in my chair, I rub the bridge of my nose, feeling the first tendrils of a headache creeping in. In some twisted way, I thought that by granting her freedom, by not suffocating her with my presence, she might find a way to coexist with the peculiar circumstances of our union.

However, now I question the wisdom of such a decision. Maybe I should've been clearer, stricter. But deep down, the thought of truly imprisoning her, of caging that spirit, is abhorrent to me.

Our worlds couldn't be more different. The Bratva, with its layers of shadows and intricacies, is no place for a soul like hers. I've seen the toughest men crumble under its weight. Mariya, with her floral dresses and eyes full of dreams, doesn't belong in this gritty reality. It's not that I doubt her strength, but I fear the things she might be exposed to, the darkness that could taint that luminous spirit.

With a sigh, I turn away from the screens. I never intended to know her, to integrate her into my life. It was simpler that way. The more she knew, the more she could get hurt, and there was enough blood on my hands without adding hers to the tally. This distance, this aloofness, it isn't cruelty. It's protection. A shield I erect around her to keep her from the harshest truths of my existence. If she resents me for it, so be it. Better resentment than the pain of our world.

As the hours roll by, and the anticipation of her return grows, a thought surfaces—one that I had pushed deep into the recesses of my mind: If she truly wanted to run, to break free, could I blame her? Could I honestly begrudge her that freedom, when every fiber of my being screamed to protect her from the very world I was a part of?

With a heavy heart, I pour myself a drink, hoping that the burn of the alcohol might provide some clarity. But the only thing that remains clear is the uncertainty of our intertwined fates.

CHAPTER 3

MARIYA

The rhythmic thrum of footfalls echo throughout the vast expanse of the Yaroslavsky Railway Station. Bright overhead lights cast stark shadows on the marble flooring as hundreds, if not thousands, of souls weave their way through, each with a destination, a purpose. In this tidal wave of humanity, I feel like a singular droplet, swallowed by the ocean's vastness.

Every step feels strangely magnified, each breath a tad heavier. I've always found solace in solitude, but this? This is a chaos I never imagined. Here, among the swirling mass of commuters, travelers, and fleeting faces, I'm both lost and conspicuous all at once.

I catch glimpses of families with children, businessmen in crisp suits, students in lively chatter. Yet amidst this pulsating heart of Moscow, a surge of panic rises, making my chest tight. The oppressive feeling of being watched, of being recognized, sits heavy in my gut. A restroom sign beckons, and I quickly take refuge.

The sterile lights of the bathroom mirror my own tumultuous feelings. I approach the sink, the cold metal pressing against my fingertips. My reflection stares back, a stark contrast to the woman that was just a day ago in a pristine garden surrounded by roses. Today, there's no floral dress, no neatly combed hair, just a girl in a nondescript hoodie, coat, and jeans.

I let out a huff of amusement. Here I stand, looking the polar opposite of a Bratva trophy wife. No finery, no

ostentatious display of wealth, just the bare essentials. I give my reflection a smirk. There's power in this simplicity, a camouflage that the gaudy opulence of my recent past could never afford.

My hand reaches up, adjusting my bag on my shoulder, checking the zipper for the tenth time, ensuring my few belongings and passport are secure. I pull the hood over, letting it shroud my features further. While the soft fabric brushes against my skin, it also serves as a protective barrier between the old world I'm fleeing and the new life I so desperately seek.

I inhale deeply, the familiar scent of the hoodie bringing a semblance of comfort. My mother used to say that change was the only constant in life, and standing here, on the precipice of my greatest escape, I realize the depth of her words.

With newfound determination, I push open the bathroom door and step out. The cacophony of voices, the shrill whistles of trains, they all blend into a singular hum, a soundtrack to this pivotal moment. Each step forward is a step away from a life that was chosen for me, to a path I now carve for myself.

As I move further into the throng, merging with the crowd, the weight on my chest lightens, replaced with a heady mix of fear and exhilaration. The world is vast, filled with endless possibilities, and I'm ready to embrace it all.

The murmurs of countless conversations and the echo of footsteps blend into a rhythmic cadence that punctuates the vastness of the station. A voice calls out, piercing through the ambient noise, announcing the departure of the train to Helsinki. A shiver of excitement courses through me as I clutch the train ticket a little tighter. That little slip of paper, so unassuming in its appearance, represents my passage to a new dawn, to freedom.

Heartbeats quicken, echoing the urgency of my steps. My fingers trace the edges of the ticket, feeling its worn texture. The world around me blurs into streaks of colors and indistinct shapes, but my destination is clear. The platform approaches,

and the gleaming exterior of the train awaits, promising both escape and adventure.

Stepping onto the train feels almost surreal. The warm, cushioned seat cradles me, offering solace after the mad dash. My fingers slide over the ticket, lingering on the printed words — a destination I've long dreamt of. With a triumphant smirk, I let my hood fall back, allowing a cascade of hair to tumble down. The events of the past days feel like a dream, and for a moment, I indulge in the notion that I've outsmarted the elusive Damien and that overbearing shadow, Oskar. Every clang of the doors, every hiss of the train's engine, feels like a victory note in the song of my liberation.

But freedom is fickle. The moment I let my guard down, reveling in the comfort of the plush seat and the rhythmic sway of the train, fate plays its cruel hand. The soft rustle of a newspaper being folded reaches my ears, pulling my attention away from the fleeting landscapes outside. A familiar face, chiseled and stern, with piercing eyes that never miss a detail, peers at me from across the aisle. Oskar.

His lips curl into a smirk, his voice dripping with mock sweetness. "Going somewhere?"

For a second, time seems to stop, and I'm trapped in a bubble with just Oskar and my dashed hopes. The bravado that fueled my escape, the euphoria of outsmarting them, it all crumbles, leaving behind a heaviness in my chest.

I let out a resigned sigh, meeting Oskar's gaze head-on. The soft, poetic musings that painted my world moments ago have been replaced by a steelier resolve. "Always one step ahead, aren't you?"

He chuckles, leaning back, eyes never leaving mine. "It's part of the job."

The weight of Oskar's gaze is palpable, casting shadows on my newfound hope. His presence, once a mere annoyance, now carries an undeniable threat. The dim lighting of the train car seems to glint off his features, emphasizing the severity of his intent.

“You have two options,” he says, his voice a low rumble that barely rises above the ambient noise. “Come with me willingly, or I can carry you out, kicking and screaming. Make no mistake, I will ensure it’s a spectacle everyone remembers.”

For a fleeting moment, I feel the walls close in, my circumstances pressing down on me. But defiance flares, burning brighter with every beat of my heart. I lean in, close enough that our breaths mingle, and my voice takes on a biting edge. “You think you can intimidate me? Threats might work on those who tremble in your shadow, but I’m not one of them.”

His eyes flash with surprise, momentarily taken aback by my audacity. But I press on, fueled by the raw emotions churning within. “You can drag me back, parade me like some trophy you’ve won. But know this, Oskar: I’m not some fragile porcelain doll. Every move you make, every step you take, I’ll be waiting, watching. And when the moment is right, I *will* escape.”

A beat of silence follows, tension stretching taut between us. Then, with a resigned exhale, I add, “Fine. I’ll come with you. But only because causing a scene would give you too much satisfaction. Not because I’m afraid of you.”

His features remain inscrutable, but there’s a hint of grudging respect in his eyes. “Very well. It seems we understand each other.”

I rise from my seat, my movements deliberate and unhurried. As we make our way out, a part of me can’t help but wonder if this little act of rebellion will cost me. But another part—the fiercer, wilder part—whispers that this is only the beginning.



The cool embrace of night greets me as I alight from the car. It’s said that homecomings should be comforting, but the towering house in front of me feels less like a haven and more like a fortress. Each window, each brick, each silent sentinel tree stands as a reminder of the walls built around my new life.

Oskar opens the door and gestures for me to enter. I pause for a moment, taking a deep breath. Every step feels heavy, a testament to the burdens I've shouldered throughout the day. As I proceed, the quiet wraps around me, contrasting with the earlier cacophony of the train station.

"Where is he?" The question leaves my lips before I even process it, my voice carrying my exhaustion and frustration.

Oskar raises an eyebrow, "Who?"

"Don't play games with me," I retort, my voice sharp. "Damien. My husband. Or whatever he is. Where is he? Or does he intend to play hide and seek with his new wife?"

Oskar's gaze lingers on mine, a momentary flicker betraying a hint of sympathy. "He's giving you space," he finally says. "It's safer for both of you."

A sardonic laugh escapes me. "Safer? You say it as though he's some wild animal I should be wary of."

Oskar's voice remains even, "It's not about him being a threat. It's about the world we inhabit. Trust isn't a luxury we can afford."

I look around the vast expanse of the room, feeling the weight of solitude pressing down. "Can I at least call him? Speak to him?"

His expression darkens slightly. "Wouldn't be secure."

A bitter chuckle rises in my throat. "What about a letter then? I promise I won't lace it with any poisons."

Oskar studies me for a moment, the ghost of a smile dancing at the corner of his lips. "A letter... perhaps that can be arranged."

The very thought feels archaic, a relic of a bygone era. Yet, the idea appeals to me. Pen and paper, devoid of the trappings of technology, might offer me a tangible connection in this intangible world.

As I make my way to my room, the tension in my shoulders seems slightly less. A small victory, perhaps, in a sea of battles. The quiet whispers of ink on paper might just be

the medium through which I find my voice. In this silent world, it's the muted echoes that often resound the loudest.

The silence of my room welcomes me, the dim light from a single lamp casting gentle shadows on the writing desk. As I sit, the cold touch of the pen against my fingers steadies me.

I think of all the words I could write, the tales of my heartbreak, my anger, my newfound determination. But in the end, it's simplicity that calls to me. The power of a few, poignant sentences.

To the man who believes chains are an acceptable gift for a bride,

You may have me now, but you will regret not letting me go. By the year's end, I promise to make freedom my most treasured possession and divorce my fondest gift to you.

Your ever-determined 'wife', Mariya.

A mischievous smile crosses my lips as I finish. With one final flourish, I press my lips against the paper. The soft imprint of my lipstick stain, a deep shade of rebellious crimson, is left behind. A little token, a silent vow, a whispered warning.

As I allow the ink and lipstick to dry, a fire of determination ignites within me. I'm already planning, plotting. Every corner of this place will be inspected, every possible exit weighed. I may have been halted tonight, but the journey is far from over. The desire for freedom courses through my veins, as unyielding as the promise written on that page.

I fold the letter neatly and leave it on the desk, the crimson kiss facing upward like a battle standard. Tonight, rest will refuel my spirit. Tomorrow, the chessboard of escape awaits my next move.



END OF PREVIEW

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.C. Crowne is an Amazon Top 10 bestseller.

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