

A R U S S I A N M A F I A R O M A N C E



*Quined*  
**PRINCE**

SOROKIN BRATVA BOOK ONE

NAOMI WEST

# **RUINED PRINCE**

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A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE (BOOK ONE OF THE  
SOROKIN BRATVA DUET)

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

NAOMI WEST

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# **RUINED PRINCE**

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BOOK ONE OF THE SOROKIN BRATVA DUET

A wedding is supposed to be the happiest day of a girl's life.

For me, it was a nightmare.

Because the man I'm promised to isn't exactly Prince Charming.

And the way I ended up on this altar isn't exactly the stuff of fairy tales.

You see, my family isn't like yours.

My father and brother do... things... that should never see the light of day.

Things like wagering me at a poker game to be the wife and baby momma of a dark-eyed devil.

One hand of cards.

One terrified girl at stake.

If I win, I'm going to run, not walk, to the nearest exit, the nearest taxi, the nearest airplane out of Chicago.

But if I lose...

Well, let's just say Roman Sorokin has some very specific plans for his new bride.

**RUINED PRINCE** is the first book in the Sorokin Bratva Duet. The story will continue in the second and final book of the duet, **RUINED BRIDE!**

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## LILY

Everything was about to crumble around me. My whole life, right on the verge of burning to ashes. But for one blissful instant, I thought I was going to get out of there.

It didn't take long to see how utterly wrong I was.

That heartbreak won't come for a few hours, though. Right now, I'm busy staring at the letter in my hand like it's the best damned thing ever put to paper.

*Congratulations, Lily Benedetti, it begins. You have been accepted to the Marcus Institute for Vocal Arts at Julliard.*

I read it again and again, still waiting for it to truly sink in. I've been accepted to Julliard. As in *THE* Julliard. The best musical university in the country. Maybe even the whole world.

And—this part bears repeating—it's in New York City. As in *THE* New York City. A kajillion miles away from anyone who shares the last name that has haunted me my entire life.

I'm bursting with a million emotions at once. It isn't just the pride of knowing Julliard only accepts eight percent of its applicants and I'm now one of the elite chosen few. Or that merely the name of the university on a résumé opens doors like nothing else.

No, it's mostly because my soon-to-be home is half a country away from the Benedetti mafia's stomping grounds. If I had my way, it would be on the other side of the planet.

But this is good.

This is a start.

This is enough.

*New York.* I can already smell the fall breeze rushing down Fifth Avenue. Can already see all the sights in all the seasons: Central Park blooming with greenery in the summer, Rockefeller Center lit up like a constellation at Christmas, Times Square crowded to the gills as the ball drops at midnight on New Year's Eve.

And the shopping. Oh God, the shopping. Vibrations of happiness shoot through me.

New York has everything I've ever wanted. The school of my dreams—a place that will make me a superstar singer—and freedom, and adventure.

Maybe even love.

I'd picked out a college boyfriend a long time ago—in my imagination, that is. He'll be artistic. Gorgeous. Sensitive. And so in love with me that it will drip from every poem he writes and every portrait of us he paints to hang in his loft, where we'll spend our weekends in bed reading and talking and... you know, everything else one does in bed.

We'll be invited to the best parties and know the coolest people. We'll sip lattes at the campus coffee shop and make love until the sun comes up over the skyscrapers.

My heart does a tango behind my breastbone every time I close my eyes and picture my future. It's how I know this is the right thing.

I look around my bedroom. Not much to miss here. It hasn't been redecorated in years, though it's still kind of grand and showy with its crystal chandeliers—three of them in a line hanging from the vaulted ceiling—plush snow-white carpet, and ice-blue paint with glitter on the wall.

Mama was in her winter wonderland stage of decorating when I was twelve and she changed out my princess bedroom set for something more “grown-up.” I’ve always hated it. Wanted to burn it all down and start fresh, to make it my own.

But now? There’s no need to redo.

I’ll be leaving it all behind so, so soon.

There’s so much to do before I turn my back on Chicago forever. Packing, preparing, buying books and clothes and all the things I’ll need in Manhattan.

Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of my life. I can’t freaking wait.

Right now is bedtime, though. I’m exhausted—happy-exhausted, but exhausted nonetheless—from daydreaming all evening, ever since the letter arrived. I slip into bed, pull my plush comforter over my shoulders, and twist around until I’m comfortable.

Which, of course, is when my bedroom door bursts open.

Leo, my arrogant asshole of an older brother and the man responsible for roughly fifty percent of the danger in my life, barges in.

“Get up,” he barks.

His tone pisses me off immediately. “Screw you,” I snap. “Get out of here.”

He never comes into my room or speaks to me unless it somehow benefits him. That should’ve been my first clue.

But I’m still buzzing on Julliard joy, so I don’t take heed the way I should have.

*Strike one, Lily.*

Instead, I snuggle deeper into the blanket and brush a finger against the letter I just tucked under my pillow for safekeeping.

That doesn’t deter him. He strides over to the edge of the bed, grips my blanket, and tears it away in one swift motion.



“It wasn’t a question,” he snarls. “I said, get the fuck up and get dressed.” He gives my flannel pajamas a scowl. “And do something with your face. Cover all that pimply shit on your forehead.”

He clearly missed *Be-Nice-To-Your-Baby-Sister Day* at Big Brother School. He missed *Basic Human Decency Day*, too, I think.

Unfortunately for Leo, I’m not in the mood to let the prick ruin my happy mood. “Thanks but no thanks,” I tell him. “Now get out.”

When I sit up to retake the corner of my blanket, he yanks me out of bed by my elbow and shoves me toward the bathroom. I stumble into the wall and smack my skull with a surprised cry.

He grimaces. “You’re so pathetic. I can’t even decide—”

As I open my mouth to retort, he rears back his hand. I flinch and snap my jaw shut.

Leo nods, smugly satisfied. “That’s what I thought. Now, get fucking dressed and put some makeup on. Father wants to see us.”

I bury a sigh behind a cough and move a little faster, heading to the dresser for a pair of yoga pants. But he snatches those out of my hands, too.

“What the hell, Leo?”

“No. No. No. For fuck’s sake, try dressing like you have a little class.” Instead of waiting for me, he goes to the closet and tugs a dress from the hanger.

I laugh out loud when I see what he’s chosen. It’s a nightclub dress. A little black dress. A *look-at-me-shaking-it-on-the-dancefloor* dress.

By definition, very much not classy.

“Seriously?” I ask. “Unless we’re going to Club Ten, silver sequins and spaghetti straps with a skirt that barely covers the curve of my ass is inappropriate.”

“Just put the fucking thing on and get ready. He’s waiting.”

Leo's impatience would normally be comical, especially because the glower reddening his eyes and hardening his lips into a tight little line makes it look like he smoked a joint.

But it's late, and I'm not in the mood for him to treat me this way.

"Fine," I snap. "You want the dress? I'll wear the stupid dress. But get out of here so I can get dressed without you perving all over me."

This time, it's me doing the shoving. Not that it does much good. At five feet tall in heels and a hundred pounds after a big meal, I'm not exactly Hercules. Leo could overpower me with his pinky finger.

He shoots me another withering look, then stalks out, yanking my door shut behind him.

If it wasn't for whatever this meeting is with Papa, I would've crawled back into bed and let Leo wither on the vine for as long as possible. But then we'd have to go through the whole thing again and again until my brother gets his way.

Lather. Rinse. Repeat. Leo is an asshole, but he's a stubborn one.

So instead of bitching or crawling back into bed, I do as I'm told—though only because Papa is every bit as bad as Leo when he comes to getting what he wants, if not a thousand times worse.

As I wiggle into the dress, my mind is racing. What could be so important at midnight that I need a party dress and caked-on makeup to accommodate? I'm not sure. But if Leo is this riled up already, it doesn't portend anything good.

I shudder and hurry up. The sooner I get started, this sooner all this will be over with and I can go back to fantasizing. Back to my New York loft, my New York boyfriend, my New York life.

Before I manage my last swipe of mascara, Leo is back in the doorway, still scowling. He jerks the wand from my hand, shoves it into the tube, and tosses the whole thing into the sink.

"Good enough."

Then, as if I wasn't already turning to move beside him, he curls his fingers into the crook of my elbow and drags me through the house.

Mom's Mercedes and Leo's Jag are the only cars in the sixteen-bay garage. All the other Benedetti family vehicles—Dad's Corvette, his Porsche, my Alpha, the family Beemer, Leo's Ducati—are gone.

I frown at the oddity, but I don't have time to ask what happened to all the vehicles before Leo deposits me into his car and slams the door shut.

The interior reeks of his cologne, as if he'd used it to clean the dash—a laughable thought since Leo does literally zero manual labor, not even for himself. I sneeze twice as he slides in behind the wheel.

“Knock that shit off,” he says. “We don't want them to think you're disease-riddled.”

“It's a sneeze, Leo. What the fuck you want me to do?”

If Leo had a slogan, it would be *All disgust, all the time*. It's in the look on his face, the tone of his voice, in every stance and glance. This is him really laying it on thick, though. Maybe if I wasn't so irritated by his noxious behavior, I would have taken a second to decipher his comment and then jumped out of the car at the first red light.

But I don't. I miss the nuance altogether.

*Strike two, Lily.*

He cranks the volume up and music blares through the custom sound system. The bass cranked to eleven makes it pretty much impossible to hear anything else besides the *thump-thump-thump* of hardcore hip-hop.

Leo is in his gangster rap phase—unless he's riding with our father, of course. Then it's all Berlioz and Bocelli. Anything to convince Papa that he's completely and utterly devoted to our Italian mafioso heritage.

Sometimes, it's hard to believe I'm related to this muscle-bound asshole. If we didn't share Mom's light blue eyes and Papa's coal black hair, and if I hadn't grown up watching him fail repeatedly at trying to emulate our father, no amount of arguing would've convinced me.

*Soon, you'll never have to see any of these people ever again, I remind myself.*

That brings a slight smile to my face.

Leo jerks the car onto Morgan Street and peels out toward the manufacturing district. I don't spend a lot of time in this part of town, with good reason: it's gross and creepy. I can't think of any good reason for my presence to be required here at one in the morning on a Tuesday.

We whip into an alley and speed between two large buildings. Then we screech to a halt in front of an old metal warehouse with broken windows and stacks leaning out of the roof.

This thing is straight out of a Saw movie—dark, dank, ugly as hell. I shiver. Going into a rat-infested warehouse in the middle of the night isn't exactly high on my bucket list.

When he kills the engine, the music dies with it. I take a minute to let my ears adjust to the silence and stop ringing.

“What are we doing here? I'm dressed like a Dancing With the Stars contestant in the skeezy industrial part of Chicago. Some explanation would be nice.”

“Just shut up and get out of the fucking car.” He speaks through gritted teeth like I'm the one annoying him.

I ought to tell him to stick it where the sun don't shine. But instead I comply. Maybe it's because I'm stupid.

Or maybe it's because fate knows what's coming next, and I'm helpless against it.

I stand up and shimmy my too-short dress down over my ass. The night breeze is chilly. “Why are you such a dick?” I say as Leo comes around to grab me again.

He cocks his hand back again like he wants to hit me, but I lift my chin. “Do it, asshole,” I spit defiantly.

He rolls his eyes and his hand falls by his side. “Just shut the hell up and try not to embarrass the family, okay?” He stalks toward a rusty metal door at the side of the building and yanks it open.

The place smells like burned oil. My heels click-clack against the concrete floor as Leo leads me through a narrow gap between the silent machines to another door with black paper over the window.

This time, he holds the door open for me to walk through.

That should’ve been another clue. Leo Benedetti doesn’t hold doors for anyone. Not even for our mother. But I let him usher me into the room with his hand on the small of back.

Trusting and oblivious.

Naïve and stupid.

And it’s about to cost me everything.

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**LILY**

A layer of cigar smoke and old man cologne coats the air. I stifle a cough so as to keep my brother's annoyance to a minimum. He's already nearing his boiling point.

Walking further into the room, I find a spot a few feet back from Papa's chair and wait for him to notice me. He's seated with his back to me at a green felt-covered poker table alongside five other men.

Four of them are older than time, faces wrinkled like testicles, ugly as hell.

The fifth one is neither old nor wrinkled nor ugly. In fact, he looks like he stepped off the front page of GQ. Cut jaw, dark stubble, hair swept back carelessly from his forehead. His jaw is clenched cruelly tight.

The table is littered with mounds of chips, glasses of whiskey on the rocks, and playing cards. I notice a few other things piled up in the middle: cash—lots of it—more chips, and, gleaming under the dingy overhead light, my father's Rolex.

My father stands when he finally notices me in the corner of his eye. "*Caramia!*" he croons.

He rushes to me, takes my hands in his to appraise me, then nods approvingly to Leo like my idiot brother is responsible for how I look.

To be fair, I suppose I have to give him partial credit for that one. He'd picked out this ridiculous dress and forced me to put on makeup.

“Beautiful, beautiful,” Papa murmurs as he tows me towards the poker table. My stomach does a barrel roll.

There are no chips in front of the chair my father just vacated. I would’ve focused on that, but truth be told, I’m a little distracted.

Because the fifth player is staring right at me.

His face is half-cast in shadow from the lone overhead light. His smoldering gaze burns from my calves to my throat, warming every spot in between.

I let Papa’s body shield mine from view. No need for anyone else to see my trembling.

My father turns to the men at the table. “My friends, this is *mia preziosa*, Lily.”

*His precious.* He says it more like he’s talking about a new car than a daughter. But it’s sweet by Papa’s standards, so I decide to take it as a compliment.

“She’s beautiful and smart. Will make a great wife.” He does a flourish and steps back as if they all need a look of me without him in their view.

I stand there uncomfortably in front of these men while they ogle me.

And, to be honest, in that moment, some dumb part of me is proud that my father is bragging on me so highly. Honest-to-goodness *proud*.

God, I’m stupid.

So, so stupid.

“Papa, what’s going on?” I whisper.

Leo sneaks over and jerks me by the shoulder as soon as I speak. “Shut up,” he hisses.

When Papa nods, Leo leads me away from the table and to an empty chair by the back wall.

“Sit.”

I cross my arms and glare at him, but he just squeezes my shoulder in his hand until I wince in pain and plop down onto the seat.

“Keep your mouth shut and look pretty,” he adds.

It’s only then that alarm bells start to go off in my head.

Way too little.

Way too late.

*Will make a great wife.* That’s what Papa said.

“... She’s my most prized possession,” he is saying now.

I do a double take. *Possession?*

“And,” he continues, “a virgin.”

My mouth falls open. Suddenly, my heartbeat is pounding in my ears louder than the bass in Leo’s car.

Something very, very wrong is happening.

I can’t see Papa’s face, but it refuses to process in my head that he’s actually speaking about my virginity in a room of dirty old men.

They each turn to leer at me—four pairs of creepy old man eyes, drinking me in like whiskey. I squeeze my legs tighter and shrink down like I can disappear altogether.

Only the handsome one doesn’t bother to look. He just flicks a poker chip back and forth across his knuckles with effortless skill.

At least, until my father rests a hand on the man’s shoulder and addresses him directly.

“What do you say, Roman? What credit is my daughter’s hand in marriage worth?”

*What the fuck?*

I’m sure as hell not getting married to anybody. Not for a very long time, and certainly not to a geriatric mobster playing poker in a warehouse until the



wee hours of morning.

And abso-fucking-lutely not to Roman Sorokin.

Not that tyrant.

Not that savage.

All the blood drains from my face as I finally put the handsome face to a name. The Sorokin Bratva is synonymous with bloody brutality, and as its don, Roman is the one responsible for that reputation.

He finally turns—slowly, melodramatically, like he knows this is a moment that will change both of our lives forever—and sets his gaze on me.

Even from here, those eyes look so dark. So violent and possessive that I can't help but shiver uncontrollably. I want to twist away so I don't have to see him anymore, but Leo still has a painful hand on my shoulder, rooting me in place.

I've been wondering since the moment we walked in here: *Why?* Why is Leo holding me in my place? Why am I being ogled like a prized Monet up for auction?

Finally, I have my answer: because my father is selling me into wedded slavery for a hand of fucking poker.

With the realization comes panic, and with the panic comes crippling nausea. My stomach churns.

I have to get out of here. Quick.

Before I end up as the virgin sacrifice at this altar of the damned.

With no plan, no forethought—just a primal need to act so as to save my destiny from whichever one of these evil bastards gets dealt the best cards—I stomp Leo's foot with the heel of my stiletto.

He bellows in pain. That's my window of opportunity. I lunge forward from the chair towards the door to make my escape.

And honestly, I get close.

Close enough for my fingers to brush against the cold metal handle.

Close enough to turn it and open the door just a crack.

Close enough to smell the air outside of the room.

But that's as close as I get before Leo recovers in time to snare me by the shoulder, whirl me around, and deliver the slap he's been threatening since the moment he barged into my bedroom.

*POW!* He hits me hard enough across the face that I see stars. I slump into the chair, dazed and confused, a hand pressed against my stinging cheek and horror surging through my body like poison.

"Give me the fucking shoes," he grunts.

Tears leak down my face. When I don't move fast enough for his liking, he bends down and rips the high heels off my feet.

An uncontrollable sob shakes through me. When the hiccups follow because I still can't catch my breath, Leo raises his hand again.

"Shut up or you'll get another."

A throat clears at the table. Leo lowers his arm. He looks up, makes eye contact with whoever interrupted, and shrugs.

But his hand falls to his side and he retreats back into the shadows a few yards away from me.

My cheek is throbbing now, my head spinning. I glance across to the men at the table. The older ones have resumed playing cards. Only Roman, the most dangerous man here, is still paying any attention to me. Everyone else is engrossed in the game, throwing in their chips, shuffling through their hands, laughing at something or other.

But Roman keeps watching.

Another wave of fear washes cold over me. I shiver.

There is no one to help me here. No one in this room who gives one single shit about me. I am the next item up for bid...

And I'm all alone.

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## ROMAN

This night has taken an unexpected turn.

Prior to his little girl's arrival, Arturo Benedetti had lost two buildings in the industrial district, all his southside rents and holdings, and a golden wedding band—which he chose to wager, interestingly enough, just *before* his Rolex.

Now, he's added his daughter to the pot.

His young, nubile, long-legged, virginal daughter. Offered up like a lamb to the wolves.

Arturo's gambling addiction is one thing. But this crosses a line. To wager someone so young, so fresh-faced, so innocent, to this crowd? It is a sin to say the least. Unforgivable.

I intend to take full advantage.

"Sit and play, Arturo," I intone. "I'll extend you credit for one more hand."

He grovels at my side. "Thank you, Don Sorokin," he whines. "I'll remember this kindness, I swear!"

I wave him off. "Deal the cards. I'm getting bored."

Subtly, I nod to my brothers, Misha and Kaz, who take up stations near the door. Just last week, Arturo snuck out without making good on his wagers. If there is one thing I hate, it is having to hunt down an old man on foot and make him cough up what he owes.

Especially when Arturo is old enough to be my father. And also old enough to know much, much better.

I'd never do something so fucking cowardly. Then again, I'm nothing like Arturo Benedetti. He is old; he is weak; he is stupid; he is a craven asshole and an utter pussy.

I am none of those things.

But because he is quite the Houdini when he owes someone money, I have no choice but to take precautions. The other men at the table clearly agree with my assessment. That's why two of Floriano's men stand next to mine, and two of Gianpaolo's men guard the other exit.

The old man to my left is Floriano Verratti, tonight's illustrious host and the boss of Chicago's preeminent Italian mafia family. He is already salivating over the fresh meat seated off behind her father with sheer terror written in her eyes.

Arturo's girl must just now be realizing what her dear old daddy has done. Because there's no fucking way could she fake this kind of horror.

Wide eyes. Heaving chest. Quivering lips.

Only the truly innocent can be so genuinely afraid. And the Benedetti girl has the kind of innocence that speaks to me in the most primal way.

It's easy to see how she would be the perfect wife. Trainable. Bendable. Breakable.

Off to my left, Floriano growls under his breath as if he can read my thoughts. A warning, perhaps? Staking his claim to the girl?

I hold back a chuckle. I'd like to see him try.

Time for the next hand. Another one of the players, an underboss for the Albanian mafia named Besnik, deals the cards. "Let the games begin," he cackles. He has white hair that sticks up at all angles from his scalp and a belly that jiggles like a bowl full of jelly.

The pot grows in the middle of the table as players place their bets. But Floriano never takes his beady little eyes off the Benedetti girl. Even the wart

in the center of his forehead seems to be staring at her.

This fucker doesn't have any business even looking at a fragile little fawn like that, though. Much less leering at her like he can see her through her clothes.

Though to be fair, she is wearing little more than a sequined handkerchief. No wife of mine would ever wear that in public. It leaves too much to be gawked at. Too much cleavage and thigh exposed.

When I win her, I'll rip the dress off her and make her stand naked for me—only me—until she understands precisely who she is and is not allowed to let see her.

Floriano, old enough to be her father's father, runs his hand over the crown of his bald head and throws back the whiskey left in his glass.

I frown. That is his tell, his giveaway. The *mudak* must have a good hand.

I, on the other hand, am stuck with a pair of twos. There is nineteen grand in the pot, not counting the watch or the girl.

And I have a fucking pair of twos.

Arturo gulps hard. That's his tell: he doesn't have shit.

Gianpaolo, another Italian like Floriano and Arturo, keeps his cards face down on the table and fiddles a chip between his fingers like he is going to make it disappear. I haven't figured him out yet. But he hasn't even looked at the girl, so I'm not overly concerned.

I do know that he has a daughter about her age. Not sure if that is why he isn't interested in her or if he has his own reasons for acting like she doesn't exist. It doesn't matter to me either way.

The Benedetti girl shifts, crossing one leg over the other. Floriano groans like a bitch in heat.

Maybe his distraction will be my benefit. He is one shimmy of her shoulders away from shooting his load in his fucking pants. That has to leave him vulnerable.

I push the entire pile of chips in front of me to the center of the table. It's more than twenty grand.

"All in."

Arturo sweats and tugs at his collar. His bet is already made. It doesn't exactly set him up as a favorite for Father of the Year.

His girl's whispered, "Papa, please" doesn't even earn her a glance.

Another drop of sweat rolls a trail down the side of Floriano's face. He stares at the stacks of his chips, then from the pot to the girl and back.

It doesn't take him long to decide. He pushes his bet in, then pulls out his wallet to make up the difference between what he has and my twenty grand. He looks to Gianpaolo, who promptly folds.

That leaves me, Arturo, and Floriano all-in. Time to show what we've got.

I splay out my cards. "Pair of twos," I growl. I know it isn't enough—but the game isn't over just because the cards say it is. I always have another trick up my sleeve.

Arturo waits for a long, dramatic pause before he reveals his hand. "Full house, sevens over jacks," he crows. He's grinning like a triumphant fool.

Floriano nods queasily and looks down at his own cards. With a sigh, he flips over three queens. "I guess..."

It isn't enough. Arturo wins.

At least, that's what he thinks. For one moment.

Until, as Arturo arcs his arms to sweep in the pile of chips, money, and possessions, Floriano chortles.

"Wait, wait, *mio amico!* Not so fast. I'm not finished." His accent is thick with the sounds of his native country and his uncontained glee.

That's when he throws a fourth queen onto the table.

Every shade of color drains at once from Arturo's face. Floriano's four queens beat Arturo's full house.

He loses after all.

Floriano wins.

The girl belongs to the Verrattis now.

Behind Arturo, his daughter whimpers. Silent tears slide down her cheeks. She should run now. If she moves fast enough, she might actually succeed in escaping this time around. Her first attempt earned her a cold cock across the face from that shithead brother of hers. But right now, he is distracted by Floriano's theatrics.

She eventually sees this is her last opportunity to escape. But she hesitates for a moment too long.

And that costs her everything.

To her credit, she does try. She must feel the moment slipping away, because just then, she turns her body in the chair and vaults upward like she is going to dive straight through the cold steel wall to get away from the fate her father has just gambled her into.

I lean back in my chair and watch, amused.

Kaz and Misha move to block the exit, tense and ready. She dodges away from Floriano's man on the left, but runs straight into the chest of his guard on the right.

The goon wraps both arms around her and lifts her into the air. She bicycles her legs frantically. Her tiny dress rides up to reveal a sheer scrap of lacy fabric between her legs.

*Fuck me*, I curse silently. My cock throbs in my pants.

Back at the table, Arturo grabs Floriano by the front of his shirt and shakes him frantically. "You cheater, you *bastardo!*"

Floriano shoves him back and wheezes a bit from the exertion. "I won fair, *mio amico*. Don't worry, though: I will treat your girl like a princess." He waves his bodyguard over. "Bring her to me. I will show her the pleasure of a real man's touch."



Arturo lunges again in desperation, but Floriano's free-handed goon holds him back as Floriano flicks his tongue at the girl in the most gruesome pretense of pussy licking I've ever been witness to.

Arturo bellows in wordless rage. Gianpaolo and Besnik watch, unmoved.

This whole fucking thing is about to devolve into madness. The girl has gone from quietly crying to shrieking and begging.

Her father is struggling aggressively and he's nearly worked free of Floriano's man. No doubt he's going to lunge straight for Floriano's neck if he gets the chance.

Then: "Wait!"

My own voice surprises me. As if it came from someone else.

I pause while I decide what to say. I'm not chivalrous enough to give a fuck about saving the girl. But neither am I willing to lose a prize like her to a beast like him. If anyone is going to fuck her into submission, it shouldn't be an old man who can't get it up without a purple pill and a goddamn tire pump.

It should be *me*.

"One more hand," I say to him. "Winner takes all."

Floriano throws his head back and laughs like I told a joke. "I am already the big winner of the night. Why play more?"

He stands directly in front of the girl and leans in, tongue out, to lick the side of her face. She screams and jolts her skull back into the face of the bodyguard holding her.

When bone hits bone, the goon roars and flings her to the side while he cups his now-bleeding nose and groans.

I smirk at the outburst. Beautiful *and* feisty. What a combination. My dick agrees via another aching throb.

"I have all of Arturo's southside holdings," I remind everyone.

When Arturo threw such a lucrative area of the city's drug trade into the pot I won earlier, Floriano almost gagged with envy. Arturo roars in fury again as I offer it back up. I'm tempted to silence him permanently. But that can wait: just as I expected, the offer is enough to catch Floriano's attention.

"And in return?" Floriano asks, licking his chops.

The business on the southside is huge. Were it not for Arturo's gambling problem, that territory alone would've been enough to keep three generations of Benedettis lounging on Easy Street for the remainder of their lives.

Too bad he's a fucking loser.

Floriano stares at me while I consider my ask. I want the girl, of course. My cock twitches just thinking of everything I'd like to do to her.

But I can't let Floriano know just quite how hungry I am to taste the Benedetti princess.

"Along with everything you won tonight, I want the cartel's Grand Avenue connection."

That's a prize in its own right. I've been working to expand my footprint in the drug trade, and this is the perfect chance to cut in. Then I can force Floriano out altogether. Once that's done, the entire drug trade in Chicago—north, south, east, and west—will belong to the Sorokin Bratva.

We will be invincible.

Floriano purses his lips, clicks his tongue against his teeth, and smooths his hand over his chin like he is wiping away drool.

Right when he is on the verge of agreeing, I hold up a finger.

"And," I add slowly, "I want *that*." I point at the girl.

Floriano looks at the girl again. At me.

At the girl.

Back to me.

Then he smiles, confident and stupid, and gives a curt, one-nod agreement. “Deal.”

To my side, Arturo is fuming. His fingers curl into a fist. “Roman Sorokin, you *bastardo!*” He jabs a finger in my direction as Leo slides between us and holds his father back. “You will never have my precious Lily.”

“*Precious*, you call her? So precious you gambled her away. Doesn’t sound all that precious to me, Arturo.”

“My men will kill you before you lay a finger on her!”

I laugh hollowly and shake my head. Sure they will. Empty threats. The man who controls the money controls the employees. As of tonight, that means I am in charge.

I’m getting tired of Arturo. Not in the mood to end him—yet—but neither do I want to listen to his bitching and complaining anymore.

I flick a wrist at Misha, and he promptly drags the bellowing Arturo from the room. Kaz stays near me in case Floriano needs an adjustment to his attitude as well.

The day Kaz can’t handle Floriano Verratti and his puny bodyguard solo is the day he hangs up his Glock. And I’ve been known to break a jaw or two if the situation demands it.

In this world, reputation is as important as holdings and money. Fortunately, the Sorokin Bratva has both.

I look to Gianpaolo. He is the only one without anything to gain by screwing me over. And so much to lose if he dares to try.

“Go ahead,” I tell him. “Deal the cards.”

**LILY**

What the actual fuck is happening? Grown men are gambling over which one is going to claim me as their prize. My own brother is slapping me around like a prizefighter.

And all of it has been sanctioned—admittedly, that’s a pretty nice word for what he’s done here—by my own father.

I haven’t given up hope yet. I can still escape. I can run. I can hide away until... until they get tired of looking for me, I guess. Because they will give up eventually. Right?

I stare for a second at Roman Sorokin as he plays this hand against the ugly fat fuck who tried to lick me. I’m about ready to gag on the memory alone, but when Roman glances at me—maybe “smolders” at me is more accurate—suddenly, he is all I can think about.

The man has a stare that, from anyone else in the world, would make my knees weak. From him, it only makes my stomach tremble.

He is gorgeous, yes.

But also dangerous.

Deadly.

The devil in a designer suit.

A man like Roman doesn't need me. He undoubtedly has women lined up to share his bed any night of the week. So wanting me for himself isn't likely. He'll probably sell me at one of the skin auctions I've heard rumors about. Find a high bidder who will pay big bucks for a virgin mafia princess.

Or maybe he wants to kill me just to prove a point. To show my father and everyone else who is the biggest, baddest crime boss in all of Chicago.

Fuck. I have to get out of here. Neither choice works for me.

But the cards have been dealt and I have no option but to wait. To stare. And to plan.

Two doors. Five guards. Five men at the table. I'm a singer, not a mathematician, but even I can see that the odds don't look good for me.

Roman exchanges one card. Floriano takes three.

The old Italian twists to look at me, winks, leers some more. My stomach churns and cold sweat drips down my forehead. The likelihood of my getting away is shrinking by the second.

"You playing, or do you fold, Floriano?" asks Roman. The impatience deepens his voice and fear sends goosebumps over my skin.

In response, Floriano throws his cards down. "Pair of kings."

That is good for him. Kings. High cards. A pair.

Roman smirks and nods at me, then softens his smile. I hope to God it's a rueful smile. Regretful, you know? Like a *sorry-I-lost* grin.

Because both men might want to do disgusting things to me... but Roman will relish making me suffer in the process.

Between the two, I know which fate I'd prefer.

Then he throws down four aces.

Four.

Fucking.

Aces.

*Oh God.* Fear bubbles in my guts and demands I do something to get out of there. One more try. One more desperate gamble.

I don't think or speak; I just move. I fake left, duck right—and this time, I make it.

I explode out the door before anyone can make a move to stop me. I race through the warehouse, bare feet slapping against the floor as my father and brother bellow after me. I don't stop or look back.

Then I'm out on the street, running.

Every P.E. class in school and every minute I've ever spent at the gym is paying off. I measure my breaths, pump my arms, and sprint for my life while the men in pursuit lag behind.

Except one. I can hear his footsteps. I don't have to guess to know who it is.

I can't let him catch me. He would punish me for running. Maybe even kill me now instead of waiting for later.

I surge ahead, turning out of an alley and onto the street. Five men chasing a girl in public will be noticed. They'll have to stop.

But no. They keep coming.

I take another turn. Another. Another.

And then, like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, I see a police car sitting in the parking lot of an abandoned building.

Salvation. The cops will save me. The cops will protect me.

I run to them like my life depends on it, mostly because it does. But what I didn't know in that moment is that it wouldn't be enough. Nothing can truly keep me safe.

Not from Roman Sorokin.

**LILY**

I race ahead to the cop car. When the officer in the passenger seat turns on his flashlight and aims it my way through the open window, I can finally breathe again.

I'm safe.

Of course, I'm going to need a Xanax, a bubble bath, and a pedicure like no other to recover from this nightmare. But that will all come later.

The police officer climbs out of his car and stands by the door. I sprint around and throw myself into his arms. His hands remain at his sides while I cling to him, sobbing—half with tears, half with hard breathing after the sprint away from Roman and his men.

“Please,” I beg, “you have to help me. Those men are chasing me.”

But when I point behind me and looks, there is only one lone guy. And it's not Roman. It's not any of the men I thought were chasing me, actually.

It's just a city garbageman, on his way home after a shift by the looks of him. He gives me a weird sideways glance as he sweeps past where us on the sidewalk and keeps on going, leaving us behind.

No sign of Roman.

No sign of his men.

No sign of anyone.

The cop I've thrown myself against is younger than my dad but older than Roman and not built nearly as well. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives me a squeeze, then strokes his thumb across my skin where my throat and collarbone meet. It is a little too weird to be comforting, but maybe he is just a touchy guy. I'm not about to be picky about my rescuers.

"It's going to be okay." His name tag reads *Officer Johnson*. He smiles down at me. The rise and fall of my breathing has my breasts straining against the fabric of my dress, and I can't help but notice how his eyes linger there a little longer than is probably professional.

My sense of unease starts to build. Just then, the cop's partner—Albertson, according to his badge—gets out of the driver's seat. He walks around the car and comes to stand just behind Johnson, arms crossed, his back to the danger I'd just run from.

That too seems wrong.

But he has a gun. Even if someone snuck up on him, the odds are in his favor, right? At least, I hope so, because his good odds are my good odds at this point. I'm weaponless, shoeless, phoneless.

All I have are the boys in blue to keep me safe from the monster in black.

The night is dark, no moon or stars in the sky. The only light comes from a single lamppost on the other side of the street a block down. The whole place reeks of trash and sewage—*eau du Chicago*, I like to call it—but I am in the safest place I can be, planted right between these two big, beefy policemen.

For the first time since Leo barged into my room and ordered me to get dressed, I feel safe.

My heart is still beating hard enough to hurt and my stomach aches. But I'm not being chased by a homicidal maniac or his hooligans. Count that as a win.

I look over my shoulder at the alley I just ran down. The men I thought were chasing me are gone. But no way am I taking any chances on my own. I'm not going more than an arm's length away from these cops until the sun's up.

Roman Sorokin is out there somewhere, convinced he's won me fair and square. And a man like Roman always collects his bets.



No matter what he has to do to get them.

I turn back to the second cop, Officer Albertson. He's eyeing me skeptically. "Well, they *were* chasing me, I swear, and I don't know where they went now but you have to believe me, there were a ton of them, and they had guns I think, or maybe knives, I'm not sure, I didn't have time to look, I just had to run because—"

Albertson cuts me off. "Slow down, little lady. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

His partner pulls out his phone and walks away to make a call. Whatever—I only need one of them to listen. It doesn't matter which one.

I do as he says. I take a deep inhale, let it all rush out in an exhale, and start telling the whole story, from the time Leo pulled me into his car up until Roman won the final hand of cards against Floriano. I am so flustered, I go against everything I've ever been taught and name names, even.

Well, all the names except my father's. Even though he is the one who started this whole mess. Papa needs help—serious, professional help, the kind you get from a woman with a clipboard in a two-thousand dollar pantsuit and ten fancy Ivy League diplomas on her office wall—and he won't get it if he is stuck behind bars for trafficking his daughter.

Albertson just stares at me as I push the words out in a rush.

"So yeah," I finish. "I know that sounds insane, but I swear it's true. We should get away from here. These are really dangerous guys and—"

He looks me up and down again. "Pretty girl like you should be home in bed with her man," he remarks.

My jaw drops.

He is either hitting on me, hasn't listened to a word of what I'd told him, or he just doesn't care about the danger I am in. The danger we're *all* in.

But does any of that matter? Despite the skeezy way his glances keep straying to my breasts, he's my last resort. I need to trust him to get me the hell out of there.

I'll be able to figure out the rest later. For now, I have to just play along.

So I smile. "You know what? You're right. He's probably worried about me."

Albertson nods. "Mhmm." He places his hand at the small of my back as he turns to walk us both toward the rear of the car. "You get in, and I'll call into my dispatcher and let her know I'm 10-76 with a victim. We'll get you to the station, and you can call someone to come get you."

I breathe out a sigh of relief. That sounds like a hell of a good plan to me. "Thank you so much. I was so scared." I almost hug him again with sheer freaking gratitude, but I manage to restrain myself.

He nods and ushers me to the rear door on the driver side. He closes it after I slide in, then walks around the vehicle to talk to his partner, who's wandered back to the car.

It's quiet and warm in here. Finally, I can relax. Breathe normally again.

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the seat as the policemen stand outside, talking and gesturing.

But after a few minutes pass, I sit up again. They've been out there a while and I really want to get out of this area so we're not such easy pickings for Roman. What is taking so long?

When I look out of the window, Officer Albertson glances inside the car at me, then quickly away. He nods to his partner. They walk around to get into the front seats. The dome light flicks on.

I start to babble as they climb in. "I can't thank you guys enough for getting me out of here. I was so scared before, and I appreciate this more than you can imagine..."

Neither cop answers as we pull away from the curb. The feeling of unease that flared when the cop first stroked my collarbone is back now with a vengeance. I can't put my finger on it. Just a tingle in the air, like static electricity before a thunderstorm rolls in.

We pass down darkened city streets, headed for the precinct downtown. I know this city like the back of my hand. Which is why my discomfort spikes to record levels when the turn that ought to take us to the precinct headquarters rears up on our right...

And we turn left instead.

I clear my throat nervously. "Um, shouldn't we be going the other way?"

We're picking up speed now, headed away from downtown now and deeper into the industrial district. The police station is twenty or thirty blocks back in the rearview mirror.

Johnson turns to look at me from the passenger seat. He has blonde hair and a California surfer boy look. On a normal day, I might've been attracted to him.

But nothing about today is normal.

His eyes, blue and bright, remain wide and level. "Busted water main," he explains. "Street's closed. We have to detour."

"Oh. Okay." I settle back against my seat.

That makes sense—until Albertson takes another wrong turn. Then another.

As shops and storefronts give way to warehouses and factories, the knot of anxiety in my stomach doubles and triples in size. My heartbeat climbs back up into my ears and hot blood rises in my cheeks.

"Excuse me, officers, sorry to be a pain, but I'm pretty sure we're a little turned around..."

This time, Albertson speaks. "Shut up."

He brakes and puts the car in park. And when I look out the windows, I see where we are: back at the warehouse I ran from.

Even if I hadn't recognized the smokestacks, I would've recognized Leo's Jag and the black Mercedes SUV with SOROKIN on the vanity plate.

*Oh God.* They brought me back. I should've known. Of course a criminal like Roman Sorokin would have the entire police force in his back pocket.

Corrupt bastards.

Is there no good left in this world?

Is there no one who cares about my safety?

A moment after we park, the ugly old guy, the one who'd been chasing me, my brother, and the bastard of the hour to come out.

I try the door handle. Locked.

Oh, fucking fuck. I am so stupid.

As I sit trapped in the backseat, Johnson gets out of the car, saunters over, and shakes hands with one of the men from the room.

The ugly old guy, Floriano, scowls. Leo crosses his arms and glares like I am the family embarrassment.

But Roman, standing behind them all at the edge of the shadows, just smiles. He is loving this way too much.

And yet I can't help drinking him in. He is tall and built, with corded muscle in his arms and shoulders. He has dark hair shining under the streetlamp, and eyes like storm clouds.

Gorgeous.

Dangerous.

And now, firmly back in control.

I try not to cry, but the tears are imminent and there's nothing I can do about it. *Focus, girl*, I snap at myself. *Think*.

I'm not even out of the car yet. And if I have my way, I might not ever get out. *Thanks but no thanks. Guess I live in here now. Send snacks*.

I search around me for a weapon. Something, anything I can use to fend off anyone who tries to pull me out of this car.

There isn't much, though. Obviously, they don't exactly keep the tire iron in the backseat of a cop car where the criminals go. No wayward handgun or

baton, either. Not even a toothpick I could use to poke out an eyeball or pierce an artery.

So that's where I'm at. Barefoot, dressed like I just came from a raunchy night on the town, without even my purse. I'm helpless. Hopeless. A damsel with a bad case of distress and nary a knight nearby.

I'm not just screwed; I am completely and utterly doomed.

Then the door pops open.

I scream as Officer Johnson reaches in. He curls his fingers around...

A big handful of air, because I've instantly scooted as far against the opposite door as I can.

"Get over here, girl!" he grunts. He is bent half inside the car, muttering curses—when the door I'd shoved myself against swings outward.

I tumble out onto the ground ass over heels. "No!" I spring to my feet and plaster my body against the rear fender. The men crowd me in a menacing semi-circle.

There's no room to the left, but maybe, just maybe, there's enough open space to the right. If I am careful, do a fast bob-and-weave around Old & Ugly, I might have a chance. Fourth time's the charm, right?

I take one step, and—like he can read my mind—Roman moves coolly to block my escape. A tower of imposing man and glowering eyes.

"Where do you think you're going, *kiska*?"

His voice shoots a bolt of heat to my belly. I don't want to like the way he sounds or stands or looks. And it is probably not a bright shining moment for me that I find his smug smirk as attractive as I do.

When even arrogance looks good enough to make me forget my fear—for just one millisecond, but still—there's no denying I've surpassed "screwed" into the next worst thing, or the thing beyond that, even.

He nods at his goon. Before I could figure out what the nod means, the goon in question grips my upper arm and drags me around until I have a nose-to-

chest view of Roman.

My entire body trembles. Up close, he is even bigger. Even more imposing.

And scary. Very, very fucking scary.

“I want to go home,” I whisper to him.

He chuckles. “As you wish.” He steps back, but his goon holds on as Roman takes his time pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shaking one out and lighting it.

As he exhales a stream of smoke, he looks me up and down.

My skin heats everywhere his gaze touches. But I ignore the sensation and focus on hating him with every fiber of my being. I refuse to find one thing about a ferocious crime boss attractive. My automatic bodily reactions will have to get with the program and figure out that the rest of me despises this guy.

The trembling increases to a full-on shiver as he smiles again and leans in. “You know,” he remarks, “I’ve always wanted a pet of my own.”

“Get a dog.”

He laughs again. It’s not a nice sound. It’s cruel and sharp, like daggers of ice. “Put her in the car, Misha,” he orders. “She wants to go home? Well, then let’s do as the princess asks.”

There is no mistaking his subtle jab—we aren’t talking about the same “home.”

I glance at my father, who’s finally deigned to come outside with the other Sorokin thug. “Papa, please!” I cry out.

There is almost nothing I wouldn’t do in that moment to have my father rescue me. To have him at least fight for me. To do something more than shrug.

Same for Leo. I am his sister, aren’t I? The same little girl who worshipped him when I was too young to know any better?

But they both stand silent.

“Bastards,” I sob. “You fucking bastards.”

Though I said it in a whisper, Roman hears. He freezes in his tracks, pivots, and stalks back to me.

“We’ll have to do something about that mouth of yours.”

He takes my cheeks in his fingers and squeezes, smiling again as if punishing me with pain gives him great delight. He runs his finger of the hand holding the cigarette down the side of my face. I don’t flinch, though I can feel the heat from his cigarette on my skin.

“Such a pretty little virgin,” he muses as he turns my face from side to side, examining me like a prize horse.

I don’t need compliments. Especially not the backhanded kind. I need to get the fuck out of here, away from this asshole.

But Roman isn’t finished. He tilts my head and brings his lips to my ear. “I’m going to enjoy breaking you. Making you into the perfect little wife.”

My eyes widen. I see everything. Every fleck of gold in his sinister eyes. I would probably be able to see the future if I focused hard enough, but who wants to see their own demise at the hands of a tyrant bully who...

Wait. I can’t have heard him right. *Wife*? He certainly doesn’t plan to marry me. I’m way too young. Too inexperienced. Not to mention, too determined to hate him.

I try to spit at him, but he senses it coming and pinches at the hinge of my jaw until I can’t do more than whimper in pain.

“Put her in the car, Misha. In the trunk, if you have to.” He shoots me a meaningful look. “And if she makes a fuss, knock her out so we don’t have to listen to her fucking screams.”

My throat closes and my knees buckle as he walks to his SUV and climbs into the backseat.

This is the man who owns me now.

And there isn’t one fucking thing I can do about it.

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## ROMAN

“Let’s go home, Dan,” I say to my driver.

Not like he needs the instruction. It is late and I’ve never been the kind of man who stays anywhere but my own place in Lincoln Park. After years in my service, Danilo knows me well.

I lean back in the seat and stare ahead, deliberately not thinking of big blue eyes full of innocence and fear.

The streets of Chicago, even at this hour, bustle with people. Dan navigates through them and leaves the city behind, passing through iron gates until the lights of my home burn in front of us. I let out a sigh of contentment when I see it.

It is the kind of home befitting a Sorokin. Grand and sumptuous, the kind of place that imposes its will on you from the second you step foot on the grounds.

The rooms are mostly empty, though. I need a family to fill the space. I need heirs to cement my bloodline’s hold on the Bratva throne.

A young, moldable beauty like the girl I won tonight is the perfect choice. Beautiful, but young enough to be trained to understand what I expect from a wife.

Plus, besting Arturo and Floriano both in one evening makes this an even sweeter victory.

Danilo pulls into the drive. We don't stand on the formality of him opening a door for me. I let myself out of the car, walk inside, and wait in the foyer for my brother to deliver Lily Benedetti.

I'm not kept waiting for long. Hardly a minute after I step in, Misha arrives in the second car. He hauls open the door and drags the girl inside. Red rims her eyes and colors her cheeks, but she isn't crying, isn't struggling, isn't dragging her heels and clawing at Misha's bulk the way I thought she might have done.

Instead, she keeps her spine rigid and her chin up.

What a shame. I like seeing her struggle.

She jerks out of Misha's grasp then turns to give him a shove as she hisses, "I won't suffer this indignity."

That makes me laugh. There is no limit to the indignities this spoiled princess brat will suffer in the days to come.

"Stop it." My voice is low. Laced with the promise of a threat. "I won't suffer your dramatics."

She snarls at me like a feral cat. I cock an eyebrow and stare back until her twisted lip slips into its regular position—pouty, plump, and perfect for what I have in mind to do to it.

I follow Misha to the door. I'm about to shut it when he turns on the top step to chuckle at me.

"Good luck with the brat," he cackles.

I push the door closed in his face and exhale slowly before I turn to her again. We're alone now.

"Come. I'll show you to your room."

The inside of the house is opulent but brutal, with clean lines and metal accents, from the ceiling beams in the dining room to the shelving in the kitchen pantry. Lily is trying not to look impressed as we walk through the primary living room. But I know damn well she's floored by this.

Her shithead father could never do half of what I've done here.

She doesn't speak but walks to one of the paintings hanging in the corner and stares. I stand behind her for a moment and wait patiently.

When she still doesn't move, I look up and consider the painting. It's various shades of abstract blue splattered on a canvas. The frame is iron and black. Something dark and throbbing lives at the center of it.

"Does it speak to you?"

She moves away, shooting me a cold glare as she meanders into the foyer. She keeps her lips sealed tightly.

"If your plan is not to speak to me, then you have my thanks. I prefer the silence to your whimpering."

"You're a kidnapper," she spits.

I smirk. "Kidnapper? Hardly. I won you."

"A human being can't be *won*, asshole." Her voice matches her glare. Either one might burn the whole house down.

But she won't get far speaking to me that way.

I move closer, forcing her back until the wall stops her going any further. "Someone should've told your father that."

I intend to remind her—now, later, as many times as it takes and as often as possible—that she is property. *My* property, to be specific.

And saying it aloud reminds me also: I don't need the entanglements or complications of a relationship with a woman. I need to satisfy my needs and go about my business.

It's not like she won't benefit. She'll be the woman of the house. She'll have money and servants and anything she can dream of waiting at the snap of her fingers. Queen of the castle—so long as she remembers her place.

We walk from the living room to the formal dining area.

"Pretty big table for a guy who has to purchase his friends," she sneers.

I laugh. Her little barbs are adorable. “We aren’t friends, you and I. I have friends. I don’t sleep with them.”

She steps underneath the light and glows like she’s lit from within. All those inches of silken skin beg to be caressed and tasted. I want her, right fucking now. On the table, on the floor, I don’t give a fuck where.

She tilts her head up to look at me, her jaw set tight in defiance. “Joke’s on you then, ‘cause I’m not sleeping with you, either.”

I saunter close and lean into her face. “You’ll spread your legs eagerly when the time comes.”

She doesn’t back away or show fear.

Matter of fact, she even takes a swing at me.

I catch her wrist out of the air before she makes contact. “Now now, princess,” I scold. “That’s not very nice.”

“Fuck you. I won’t spread a goddamn thing for you. Not today, not ever.”

Feisty, this one. With eyes flashing and those luscious lips pulling into a tight, angry line. I lean into her face and whisper three little words: “Yes, you will.”

Then I lay my hand at the small of her back and guide her out of the dining room toward the stairs. When I touch her, even through this ridiculous sequined dress, she has to stifle a gasp.

Whatever her perfume is, I am going to buy her a thousand bottles of the stuff, because it’s driving my senses wild—flowery, something scented with roses and citrus. Makes me want to breathe her in and never exhale.

We walk side by side up the stairs. “Where was I? Ah, yes, the tour of the house. Bedrooms to the left, office and storage and more bedrooms to the right.”

She stops at the top of the steps and turns to me. “What kind of game are you playing?”

“I don’t play games.”

“Sure feels like you do.” She waves her hand around. “What’s the point of all of this? Acting like some cheesy host, like we’re on a fucking reality TV show.”

She is everything Arturo said she was. I’d listened to her father brag about her all night before her arrival. *The perfect eighteen-year-old. Smart as a whip, voice like an angel. Beautiful and innocent and determined and driven.* She is all the adjectives, according to her father.

What he didn’t mention was saucy and feisty. Dour. Stubborn. Disrespectful.

“The point is that your father bet you. Like property. So I own you. Like property.”

Her eyes narrow and her lower jaw offsets as she parts her lips. “Property, huh?” she says acidly.

“And with my property,” I add, “I do as I please.” I smile and crowd her against the wide wooden railing that lines the landing. “Make no mistake: you *are* property. You, the house, the car. Not a lot of difference. I use them when I want. Discard them when I’m done. Are you starting to understand?”

Her cheeks pink, then go fully red. She curls her fingers into fists. But she swallows hard as I move closer until we’re pressed fully together, and she has to look up—way up—to see me.

“Will I be sleeping in the garage with your other property?” she asks.

I wonder if she knows how beautiful she looks when she’s angry. Like a siren, making my cock jump with every bat of her eyelashes. She is young and naïve now, but someday, she will realize her power and it will be game over.

I have to break her before that happens.

Her eyes flicker with distrust when I press my cock into her firm, flat belly. She sucks in a short breath.

“No,” I tell her. “I have other plans for your sleeping arrangements.”

I step back to let the tension simmer. Lily smooths her hands down her dress. “How old are you?” she squeaks.

“Old enough to know what I want and take it. No more questions. Come on.”

Two rooms wait at the end of the hall—one mine and the other hers, as of tonight—connected by a passageway.

“This is your room.” I lean against the wooden armoire while she glares at me.

She doesn’t look at the pillow top bed with the metal canopy rail and gauzy curtains, the plush comforter, the sheets that are softer than clouds, or the closet she could fit half of Arturo’s house inside.

Instead, she glowers at me. “You know, I think I’d rather live in the garage.”

“Careful: that can be arranged.” I pull out my phone and hit a button. “Send Igor.”

While I wait, I watch Lily purposefully not look around her. Instead, she takes a seat in the overstuffed chair in the corner—back straight, knees locked together, feet on the floor.

She is going to love what I have in store for her next.

“Listen to me, because I’m only going to say this once,” I tell her. “There’s nothing but open air outside these windows. They are connected to an automatic alarm controlled by”—I hold up my phone—“this. I’m leaving your door unlocked. But I can change that at any time.”

“So I’m a prisoner.”

“If that’s the word you prefer.”

“What word do you prefer?”

I grin. “Guest.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes. “What a way to treat guests. People must be dying to visit you.”

I lean against the wall and survey her. “Tell me, princess—what do you know about me? What have you heard?”

She turns up her nose. “Nothing you want to know.”

“Humor me.”

She hesitates for only a moment before answering. “Fine. That you’re the devil. You show no mercy in your brutality. And you’re as ruthless in your business as you are with anyone who crosses you.”

My ego does a fucking jig. It is always nice to hear my reputation is intact.

“So you know I won’t think twice about going to your father and ending him, your mother, your piece of shit brother—all of them—if you step one fucking toe across the lines I give you. And then I will hunt you down and punish you every day for as long as I let you live.”

I want her to give me another gasp.

I want to hear her fucking fear.

But apparently, we have more work to do. Because Lily just nods—slowly, delicately.

“Fine.”

Satisfied, I walk to the door and open it. As expected, Igor is waiting outside. He looms at the end of the hallway, massive and silent.

The most loyal of all the men in the Bratva’s employ, Igor will sit outside her room all night, do whatever I tell him, and thank me for giving him the opportunity to serve. Men like him are rare. I pay him accordingly.

“Watch her,” I instruct him. “Around the clock.” I walk to the armoire, pull it open, and hand him a tablet connected to the camera in her room.

I want her to know he can see everything. *I can see everything.* And we will both be watching.

“Questions?” I ask Lily.

“Fuck you, you monster.”

I smile and walk over to her chair. The smile doesn’t falter as I snake my hand out to snare her by the roots of her hair and twist her face upward until she’s forced to look into my eyes.

“Don’t worry, princess. I *will* be fucking you. But not until you are on your knees begging me to take you. Begging me to fuck you until you scream my name.”

She shivers. “Never going to happen.”

I stroke my thumb across her juicy lower lip. I expected her to recoil, but she doesn’t move. If this is her ploy to make me want her—well, fuck, it is working.

“Oh, it’s going to happen,” I whisper. “One way or the other, little virgin...” I give her hair a sharp little tug. “... You’re going to beg.”

Then I let her go. There will be more to come, but this is a long game. Tonight is just the first step of many.

I turn to Igor as I stride to the door. “She’s not to be let out of your sight. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

I walk down the backstairs to the kitchen. Kaz and Misha are at the counter, drinking beers.

“Want one, *sobrat?*” asks Kaz, offering me a bottle.

I shake my head. Tonight, I want something stronger, something to knock the edge off of spending the last half-hour with a sassy siren who doesn’t have the self-preservation instincts to sense the terrifying danger she is in with me.

I pull a glass and the bottle of bourbon from the cabinet, pour three fingers, and knock it back in one go. After I repeat the process twice more, I glance at my brothers. Both are staring at me.

“Bad night?” Misha inquires.

Misha is ten months to the day younger than I am—and about two seconds from an ass-kicking if he doesn’t lose the smirk. He knows damned well the night I’ve had.



Before I can answer, Kaz slaps him in the chest. He is older than me, but far more reckless. Impulsive. Unsited to the mantle of don, which is why it passed into my hands instead of his when our father stepped down.

“Did you see Arturo’s face when you won the Benedetti family jewels? Too bad Pop wasn’t there. He would’ve made Arturo eat those cards.”

“I could’ve made him eat the cards if I wanted. But with all these in-wars going on, I can’t be fucked to deal with that insignificant little *krysa*.”

It isn’t worth my energy to bother with Arturo when I already have the Irish and the Yakuza to deal with.

“I thought Floriano was going to blow a vein,” Misha says. “He couldn’t wait to get the princess back to his castle and let her ride his little pony.”

Kaz laughs. “Jesus, fuck, Mish. Have you been watching Disney movies again? You could’ve just said, ‘Floriano wanted to fuck the pretty girl and couldn’t believe his bad luck when Roman won.’ Spare us all the graphic fucking imagery.”

Misha rolls his eyes. “If I want to bore us all to sleep.” He looks at me and shrugs. “Shithead brothers: can’t live with ‘em... Actually, that’s pretty much it. Can’t live with ‘em.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, suck my dick,” Kaz retorts. “Roman, what are you going to do with the girl?”

I twist my mouth from side to side like I need a minute to think. I don’t want them to know how much time I’ve already devoted to thinking about it.

But the answer was set in stone hours ago.

“Marry her. Fuck her. Knock her up. Fuck her again.”

“You’ve always been a man who knows what he wants,” he laughs. “Still, she’s pretty young for you. What are you now? Forty?”

“Twenty-six, *mudak*.”

Kaz grins. “Fuck. That’s way too old for her. You’re practically old enough to be her dad. You should let me have her.”

“I’ll cut your dick off if I see you even look twice at her.”

“Ooh, big brother is jealous.” Misha backhands Kaz’s pec.

“This one is mine. Get your own.”

Kaz shakes his head. “Where’s the love? It’s not like we can just go to the casino and place bets on our own little virgins.”

“Wouldn’t win if you did,” I chuckle. “You’re both shit at poker. Now, tell me what you heard from Floriano’s guys tonight.”

Kaz grimaces, shifting back into business mode. “Floriano plans on making a move on O’Malley. Wants to get the bootleg business, apparently. So there’s a shipment coming in this weekend. They’re bringing half a dozen trucks in off the docks. I’ve got the route and details on my computer. The only question that remains: are we going to intercept?”

Both he and Misha wait expectantly for my reply. I wait for just a moment to build the suspense. Then I smile and nod. “Fucking right we are.”

My brothers grin along with me. Nothing is more satisfying than expanding our empire—especially when we gain by ripping shit out of the hands of our enemies.

This weekend, we’re going to show the O’Malley clan and Floriano Verratti precisely who they need to fear.

And then I’ll come home and teach Lily the same.

**LILY**

It is hard to decide who deserves my wrath more: Papa, the fat ugly guy who should've won that last hand of cards...

Or that son of a bitch Roman Sorokin.

I would've hated every minute of suffering with that disgusting pig of a man, Floriano—but at least I wouldn't be trapped in limbo, waiting to find out my fate.

Men like that old ogre don't have the kind of sadistic patience that Roman possesses.

But no. I'm the biggest loser of all. Worse off than Papa, even. I'm stuck in a gilded prison cell with cameras watching me from every corner—and on the other end of those cameras is a man who is planning sick games to play with my body.

Images swirl through my mind. Too many to resist.

*Him kissing my throat while his hands skim my up my thighs...*

*Dragging the dress up over the curve of my ass, then up my ribcage, until cool air swirls under the fabric...*

*Until my nipples pebble...*

*Until my back arches all on its own, exposing me to him...*

I don't know if the cameras have microphones, but I stifle my moan anyway. I can't be lusting after Roman Sorokin.

But my body is telling a different story. My panties are wet, and my nipples are begging to be touched.

I'll be damned if I let my body betray me, though. So I stare at the ceiling. I sit up and punch my pillow. I flop from one side to the other and back again, I count sheep—and all the while, I focus on hating Roman Sorokin with every fiber of my being.

I hate the dreamy thought of his hands on my belly, sliding up over my breast to my throat. But hating it just makes it more intense.

At some point, I fall asleep—sort of. It's hard to tell where sleep starts and reality ends. In this half-dream, half-fantasy, Roman is in my bedroom. He leans in and presses his lips against my ear.

“Touch yourself,” he orders.

When I don't move to obey, he pulls me to my side and slaps his hand against my bare ass. I gasp as a thrill shoots straight to my core.

“Touch your pussy.”

Dream Roman spreads my legs apart, then slips his hand up my thigh and around to my ass again.

The second spank stings worse than the first. I whimper but drag my fingers down between my breasts and over my stomach to my clit, just like he'd ordered me to.

I moan as I circle myself, dip inside—once, twice, again and again, deeper each time.

“Don't you dare come until I tell you,” he rasps. His hands keep exploring me, threatening spank after spank.

But it is too late to hold back. I am already falling over the edge, crying out, rocking my body as he brings his hand around to spank me again in punishment.

Each strike only makes my cries more urgent, my orgasm more desperate.

I want more.

I want to be spanked harder, harsher, again.

God help me: I want Roman Sorokin.



I wake up with a gasp.

Want Roman Sorokin? No, the fuck I don't. Dream Me might have, but she is apparently a horny skank and cannot be trusted.

Maybe if he wasn't the kind of guy who literally kills to get what he wants, I might've had a crush on him. Might've wanted to work out my daddy issues with the ever-darkening imprint of his hand on my ass cheek. Might've even considered turning over my v-card to him.

But not so long as I am his hostage.

As long as he pretends to own me, I won't be a willing participant to anything. A lousy compliment or the sight of his tight ass in those tailored suit pants isn't going to convince me otherwise.

Before I start thinking about his body again, I sit up. The sun streams in the window. This is another day. And maybe in the light of said day, I'll be able to figure out how to get the hell out of here.

Because no way, no how, am I going to stick around and have Roman Sorokin think he has the right to tell me what to do.

*Touch your pussy.* I shudder at the hazy, dreamy memory.

Dream Me might've submitted. Live-and-In-Color Me is going to tell him to touch his own fucking pussy. Real Me is going to fight this beast tooth and nail until I am free.

I stand and swing my legs off the bed. My dress isn't meant to be slept in and half the sequins stay stuck on the sheets behind me. A few more flutter to the

lush carpet. I unzip and step out of it, then walk to the bathroom in my underwear.

On the marble countertop, I find a fresh toothbrush still in the package and a tube of unopened toothpaste.

As I brush, I pee and check all the cabinets. I find extra toilet paper, tampons, assorted lotions and bath oils, shower gel in ten different varieties and scents, towels so thick they could double for pillows.

The shower beckons. The temptation to wash last night off of me—the lingering stain of everything from my monstrous brother to the poker game and the dream of Roman—is too strong to resist.

I step into it and crank the knob to the highest heat setting. Water cascades over my body, taking with it the grime of yesterday and the memory of my father's betrayal.

I can't think about him or let the hurt in. If I do, I won't last here. I'll just fall apart and Roman will win.

No way in hell am I going to let that happen.

Of course, I might be more convincing if I wasn't dripping on his bathmat, wondering how I am supposed to navigate the day wearing either a party dress that is now more pathetic than festive, or this towel wrapped around my body like a robe.

Then, acting on a hunch, I check the armoire and find a sliding drawer full of panties. Another has bras exactly my size all lined up in neat rows.

*How could he have known...?*

I take a deep breath, brace myself, and throw open the doors of the walk-in closet.

An aria might as well be playing with lights from the heavens shining down on all the designer dresses and jeans and, oh my God, the shoes. Pumps and sandals, slingbacks and stilettos, flats and sneakers and boots.

All in my size.

What on earth? Did he measure me in my sleep? Did he know my father was going to throw me into the pot as part of the evening's poker winnings?

Or is he just the type of pervert who has a type, and the last hostage in this room was my exact size and had my exact appreciation for all things name brand?

It doesn't matter and I don't have time to think about it. Morning has come, and I am breaking out of this prison.

Somehow. Someway.

I get dressed in a Helmut Lang tank and a pair of Rag & Bone jeans. When I'm ready to go, I open the door—and immediately come face to chest with the man himself.

“Good morning, *kiska*.”

I bristle, then sigh. “What do you want?”

But oh God: if this is how he looks when he wakes up—perfectly combed and pressed, in a pair of fitted jeans and a navy henley—then I can tolerate maybe one more day here.

*No. No. No.* No tolerating. Who gives a shit what he looks like in the morning? Not I.

“At least you don't look like a street walker anymore,” he remarks. He gives me a shameless onceover. Every inch of my skin sizzles.

“Funny. You still look like a kidnapper.”

He doesn't take the bait. “We have guests,” he informs me.

“You mean *you* have guests. I don't live here, and there is no such thing as ‘we.’”

He still doesn't bat an eye at my venom. “As I said, we have guests. You can either come downstairs to greet them on your own or I'll throw you over my shoulder and carry you down. Up to you.”

“Let me rephrase: fuck you.”

He arches an eyebrow. One hand twitches at his side, ready to make good on his threat.

Before he can do that, I immediately dance past Roman into the hallway. “Get away from me,” I warn him. “I can walk.”

He shuts the door to my room as I reach the steps. “Wait.”

Pretending I can’t hear him will never work because he has a voice that caresses me like a physical touch. So no matter how bad I want to defy him, I stop on the top step of the staircase and wait until he joins me.

“If you misbehave,” he says in a quiet rasp as he approaches, “I will punish you. That is a promise, not a threat. Do you understand?”

I mimic him in a high falsetto: “*‘Do you understand?’*”

But when I try to keep going down the stairs, Roman reels me back to him by my wrist. “If you test my patience, I will turn you over my knee and spank you until you cannot sit. None of that *‘Please spank me, Roman’* bullshit from your dreams. This will be real, and you will know I mean what I say.”

My jaw drops open.

He heard me. God only knows how, but he heard me.

*No. No. No.*

Roman searches my face for a moment longer. Evidently, he finds what he is looking for—or at least something close enough to it to satisfy his need to control my every thought. Whichever one it is, he lets go of my wrist and struts off down the stairs without another word.

I follow him into the kitchen, chastened. Four people are in there already. The man who drove me back here last night, an older version of him, another dark-haired Sorokin clone, and a woman who can only be Roman’s mother.

The woman smiles serenely. So serenely that I have to assume she is completely unaware her son is a world-class monster.

“Mother, Father, this is Lily Benedetti,” Roman says.



So I was right about the mother. That means the older man is the infamous Grigor Sorokin, former don of the Russian Bratva. Which probably makes it safe to assume the other two laughing idiots are Roman's brothers. I vaguely recognize them from last night's horror show.

The woman smiles and walks over to me. "I'm Nataliya."

The men chew slices of bacon between low, throaty chuckles. I am their morning entertainment, apparently.

And then my chauffeur speaks. "He won her in a poker game."

"Indeed. How is Arturo?" Grigor is a black-haired, golden-eyed old man. Tall, dark, and brooding, like Sean Connery without the accent or the charisma.

The older brother speaks up first. "Needs a big dose of Gamblers' Anonymous, but his loss is Roman's gain." He grins at me.

Roman, who misses nothing, slides his arm around my shoulders. I shiver at the touch, but I can't seem to find my voice. I feel like an animal at the zoo.

"His loss is definitely my gain," Roman rumbles.

If we were in a 90s sitcom, that line might've been accompanied by a little peck of a kiss on top of my head. Sweetness incarnate. But in this nightmare, the bastard grabs my ass instead. When he gives it a light swat, I almost groan.

That stupid dream is going to haunt me all day.

His father nods. "And what do you plan to do with her?"

Both brothers look away. But Roman's gaze is unwavering. "I'm going to marry her and then she's going to give me a baby."

His mother and I each look at him and exclaim, "What?" in very different tones.

Hers is soft and happy.

Mine is loud—a "*what the fuck*" without the fuck.

Roman looks down at me and smiles, smug and too arrogant. “I need a wife and a son. You will give me both.”

My jaw drops for the second time in as many minutes. Damn near bangs the floor before it occurs to me just how badly I need to escape. Like, my-ass-is-on-fire-and-he-has-the-gasoline-can kind of escape.

“Why me?” I say again in a tiny squeak.

Grigor answers for his son. “In our line of work, a wife and children ensure our legacy continues. A don needs to protect his legacy above all else.”

The older man smiles at his sons like he would never dream of betting them on a shitty hand of poker. Must be nice. Fatherly love at its finest.

Grigor Sorokin is a name that frequently gets cursed around the Benedetti family dinner table. But he is right about the wife-and-baby thing. My mother always says she got pregnant as soon as she could to make sure my father didn’t go wandering or staying out all night with the boys. We are an insurance policy against a deadly world.

That isn’t the life I want. I am a singer, an artist. No way am I wasting my talents on lullabies for some squalling little Sorokin princes.

I don’t want that with anyone, to be clear. But especially not with a soulless monster like Roman Sorokin.

“I have the cathedral booked for day after tomorrow,” he informs me. His dark eyes flash.

I start to panic at once. Everything is happening so fast that I just cannot possibly process it. This can’t be my life. It has to be some bad dream. I just need to wake up. All of it is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Less than a day ago, my future was bright. In fact, the Juilliard letter is still at home under my pillow. My golden ticket, my Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card—so close and yet so very far away.

Now, there’s no Juilliard in my future. There’s just a horrible wedding to a terrifying beast—and the wedding night to match.

So yes, it’s a dream. A bad one. It simply has to be.

But I blink twice and pinch my own arm, and when I pop my eyes back open, I am still in this frigid tundra of a colorless kitchen with a family of Sorokins staring at me.

“No.” I scream the word in my head, but out loud, it emerges as only a whisper.

I want to scream it for real, to tear the walls down, to bury these people in the rubble of their own insane greed. But the lump in my throat won’t allow it. Tears slip down my cheeks.

“Please, no.”

“Come, come,” his mother chides. “Blubbering won’t do. The Sorokin men don’t know how to deal with a crying woman. Just best if you learn now not to do it.”

I don’t give a damn what the Sorokin men are adept at handling. This is my life and I’ve been sold to a bully and a tyrant and a barbarian all rolled into one man.

A man who thinks I belong to him.

When the tears still won’t stop, Nataliya tuts and leads me out of the kitchen to a downstairs room. It’s something like a fashion studio, weirdly enough. Mannequins line the mirrored walls, wearing expensive fabrics, and two racks of white wedding dresses stand waiting for us in the middle.

She pulls us inside, shuts the door behind her, and leaves me standing there while she crosses over to the rack of dresses and starts flicking through.

My tears dry up after a minute or two, although the sobs still come every now and then like earthquake aftershocks.

“Mrs. Sorokin...” I croak.

I want to get her attention and beg her to help me get free of this place. Take pity on me. But she ignores my plea and instead holds up a trumpet-style dress in lace so white it has a blue tint.

“Have you stopped crying? Good. Get undressed.”

Like her son, she is no-nonsense, and I am her new play-toy. Her dress-up doll. God only knows how far any of them will take this before they come to their senses.

If they ever do, that is.

“I don’t want—”

“It wasn’t a question, *lyubimaya*. Take your clothes off.” Her voice is subzero.

I gulp and nod. What choice do I have? She is as crazy as her son. Who knows what she’ll do to me if I don’t obey? Or what she’ll tell Roman to do to me on her behalf?

So I slip out of the tank and jeans and stand shivering in my bra and panties while she works the dress off its hanger.

“Come now.” She holds it out for me.

After I step into it, she tugs it over my hips and laces the corset back, murmuring to herself under her breath.

When it is properly secured, we both look in the mirror at my reflection. The dress is beautiful with its stitching and lace overlay, but she doesn’t seem pleased with it.

“No, no, no. This won’t do.” She clucks in distaste and sets back to work pulling the corset knots loose.

I let her do it. She could probably do anything she wants to me right now and I wouldn’t resist. I’m just too numb, too dazed, too speechless. None of this feels real.

A new flood of tears cascades down my cheeks. Trying on your wedding dress is supposed to be one of the happiest moments of a girl’s life. To have it happen like this is nothing short of horrifying.

She finishes unlacing the back. The dress falls into a white puddle around my feet. I step out again and wait while she selects another for me to try.

The second one is barely wriggled into place before she's muttering under her breath again.

"Absolutely not. You don't have the hips or the bust for this." She wrenches it off, scratching me in the process, and throws it carelessly across the room.

The next hour is a blur. Dress after dress gets plucked off the rack, tugged into place, and immediately discarded. In the process, I learn that my boobs are both too big and not big enough, that my shoulders are skinny, my collarbone protrudes, my hips are either too wide or too high or too narrow or too low, and that my coloring doesn't work for anything.

It's not exactly a confidence booster.

But I don't care. I don't have the capacity to care. It's all a dream anyway. That's what I tell myself. Like Dorothy in Oz, I'm gonna wake up again at any moment and this will be a fun story I'll tell my New York boyfriend over coffee and croissants.

After what feels like eternity, Nataliya comes over holding a princess gown with crystals sewn into the tulle and a beaded bodice. We go through the same song and dance.

She holds it out. I step in. She pulls it up over my waist.

But this time, no insults. And as she zips me in, she gasps. "Yes! Oh, you are the vision my Roman deserves."

What her precious Roman deserves is one of those bright orange prison jumpsuits. Instead of saying that, I glance at her. In my softest, most plaintive voice, I ask her, "What's he really like?"

It's a stupid question. Why do I care about what he's really like? But it comes out of me before I can think to second-guess it.

"He was an adorable baby," she says wistfully. "But... this life changes a man."

She smooths a hand over my still-damp hair. It is a tender gesture. Almost motherly. Which only makes me shiver and choke back more tears.

“It’s made him hard before his time,” she continues. “And he has a difficult job. One he will pass to his own son when the heir is old enough.”

“He kills people,” I clarify. One of us has to say it. If she won’t, I will.

“Sometimes, his justice is hard.”

I scoff. “That’s just another way of saying I’m right.”

She narrows her eyes. “The Sorokin Bratva goes back generations, and the women in this family do not concern themselves with anything more than taking care of the children and making a good home for our husbands. Do you understand that, Lily?”

I mumble and shrug.

She grabs my chin and forces me to meet her gaze. “I asked you a question, dear.”

*Like mother, like son*, it seems. Both obsessed with twisting me to suit their sick needs. “Yes,” I mutter. “I understand.”

She nods and looks at me in the mirror. “This is the dress,” she says firmly. She gives the bodice a tug, then a push up, and suddenly, I have cleavage.

Nataliya nods again, satisfied. But I have never felt more repulsive. I look like a sparkly marshmallow with tits. Who is marrying a murderer whose photo is probably in the dictionary next to the word “evil.”

And I only have two days to find a way out of it.

## ROMAN

I spend the afternoon trying to work and trying equally as hard not to watch Lily on the security monitors on the wall in front of my desk.

She's dividing her time between sulking, pouting, crossing and uncrossing her arms, and mumbling to herself. She wanders from the gym to the garden, from the garden to the library, from the library to the kitchen.

At one point, I even think I'm going to have to chase her down myself when she goes to the front door, opens it, and steps outside.

But she turns around and comes back in. Her brow is wrinkled with anger, but she doesn't try to leave again. Instead, she goes back to her regularly scheduled programming.

And because every room is wired for video and sound, I see and hear it all.

I watch the sway of her hips. The way her tongue swipes her lips and the way her lips glistens after. The bounce of her tits when she walks.

It is enough to make a man think of nothing but fucking her. I've had a hard-on for so long that my dick is starting to ache.

The footage from last night isn't helping matters. I've re-watched it twice already. Lily, caught in the throes of a fevered dream, still wearing that damned dress, and the sound of her voice whimpering for me to spank her...

"*Blyat'*," I curse out loud.

I consider jerking off to relieve the pressure. But I have a desk full of things that need my attention. No time for shit like that.

Besides—when the time is right, I’m going to give the little *printsessa* every bit of me she can handle.

I turn my gaze to the city map in front of me. The route for tonight’s O’Malley clan shipment is outlined in red. The parallel lines on either side mark the routes my trucks will use to cut it off and seize it for ourselves.

When the shipment is in hand, we’ll circle around to the warehouse to deposit the goods for safekeeping. I have armed men ready to handle things if Floriano gets the idea to take back the cargo he thinks he is going to steal for himself.

I run through the other preparations. Trucks are gassed. Drivers are on standby. The weapons cache is stocked and ready.

All looks good. So now, I have a late night appointment with Floriano Verratti and two of the city’s most prominent Irish bastards—Ian and Dugal O’Malley.

They just don’t know it yet.

I’m feeling good, ready to take what already feels like mine...

Then I make the mistake of glancing up at the monitor in front of me again to see Lily.

She’s in the library, curled up on a sofa with a blanket over her legs and a cup of something on the table next to her.

It’s a cozy scene. A beautiful woman, in my house, nestled amongst my things. So why does something about it make my chest feel tense?

Before I can contemplate the sensation, Misha bursts through my door. Not something he does often, so I look up.

“Roman,” he blurts, “I just got word. Josip is in Old Town, and he heard one of Verratti’s men talking about the raid. They’re moving into position now.”



I tighten my fists in savage pleasure. Now this is a distraction I can give my full attention to.

“Then let’s go. We’ll meet in the usual place.”

I never take meetings in the mansion if I can help it. I’m smart enough to know the right amount of money has the power to compromise anyone enough to plant a bug in my house. Or hack into my security system. Or try to plant a spy in my operation.

And not only do I have to stay abreast of the other crime bosses and their families, I also have to keep my eye on the FBI, the ATF, the local PD, and probably a hundred other initialed agencies on top of that. An alphabet soup of people trying to fuck me over and take what’s mine.

I’m not taking chances.

“Put two extra men on the house,” I tell Misha. “And tell them to keep an eye on the girl. A very careful fucking eye.”



Misha drives us to the marina with Kaz next to him up front and me in the back. When we arrive, we park and walk together to the yacht.

In the dining area below deck, my men are waiting for me, assembled and armed. There isn’t much left to do. We know where we are going to hit and when, and that shit is half the battle. No inspirational rallying cries needed.

They know what to do—kill.

They know why they’re killing—because I ordered it.

And they know how it should be done—as bloody as fucking possible.

“Remember why we’re here, boys,” I tell them. All eyes are fixed on me. “To remind the Irish who runs this goddamn city, and to send Floriano a message that his insolence will never be tolerated. Remember, the Bratva has only this rule: if one bullet does the job, make sure to add a second and a third. Some messages require a lot of shots.”

The roar comes back like thunder, fifty voices in unison: “Yes, don!”

Then we disperse.

We depart in two waves. The first will let Floriano know we’ve arrived. The second will show him we mean business.

As for the Irishmen? Well, those poor bastards won’t know anything until it’s far too late.

I drive a car in the first wave. I want my face seen, so that whichever son of a bitch runs back to Floriano can tell him just who stole this treasure from right beneath his nose.

We pull up on the site quickly. Half a dozen other cars sweep alongside mine like a hail of death.

My car hasn’t even stopped rolling yet when I jump out of it and aim my assault rifle at Naldo, one of Floriano’s associates, standing at the edge of the shadows. He takes two shots to the face and drops like a rock.

Bullets fly and blood soaks the pavement. Thirty or so of Floriano’s soldiers are shooting back. They’re outnumbered and outgunned, but well-entrenched. It is going to be a long fight if I don’t do something fast.

“Cover me!” I yell to my men and my brothers.

Then I stand from behind the cover of a parked car and walk proudly into the street, shooting anything that moves. If it blinks, it falls to my bullet. No man who survives today will miss that the don of the Sorokin Bratva led the battle.

To my left, I see motion—one shot later, it’s stilled. A dead Italian falls gurgling into a storm drain.

To my right, movement again—and again, I snuff it out just as quickly.

My ears are ringing from the sound of gunfire. I spy another target and aim. But when the rifle clicks and no shot fires, I realize with a grimace that I’m empty.

Instead of changing magazines, I sling the rifle to my back and withdraw a knife from the sheath on my belt. The blade is smooth on one edge, serrated

on the other, and it slices through Verratti men with just the squishing sound of wet blood and metal sawing bone.

No mercy. No reason to spare a single man.

I kill one, two, three poor bastards with the blade in rapid succession. I'm the Grim fucking Reaper, stalking from hiding spot to hiding spot and ridding my city of the Italian rats.

And then I see him: Niccolo Verratti. Floriano's nephew. He's young, and he wears his stupidity where courage and common sense should be.

He steps out of his hiding spot, a Glock in one hand and a Ruger in the other, both aimed at me. But his hesitation is my opening.

I rear back and throw my blade, quick as a flash of lightning. It finds its home in the soft skin at the base of his throat.

His eyes go wide, wider, wider... and then the light in them winks out. Both guns fall from his hand. Niccolo's corpse follows.

Real fights aren't like they are in the movies. This one doesn't stop just because I killed the leader. Bullets keep zinging. Men keep falling—Verratti men, exclusively—into pools of blood in the streets.

I stride to Niccolo's corpse, yank my knife out of his throat, and clean it on his shirt.

Then I get back to work.

## ROMAN

When it is over, only one of my men is injured. Not bad for a night's work. But the time has come for us to go. We leave Floriano's men dead or dying where they fell while sirens wail in the near distance.

We make quick work of the Irish a few hours later. It's not nearly as bloody as our skirmish with Floriano's men. They never see us coming.

And then, almost as quick as it began, the loot is ours. My men take it off to my warehouses, where it'll be re-packaged and sold off as Sorokin goods.

I ride off with Misha and Kaz. The adrenaline is so thick in the air I can taste it.

"This is the kind of night that demands a good fucking to celebrate," Kaz sighs happily.

Misha throws his head back and howls, still rippling with bloodlust and aggression. "I'm going to get cleaned up, then I'm going to Mama Chen's," he announces.

Mama Chen's is an underground whorehouse. Misha can get whatever piece of ass he wants and it is all free—because we own it.

Kaz grins. He's still wired from the battle, too. "I'm going to see Mary Kate. She's gonna wash me down then fuck me dirty."

I nod, but my thoughts are elsewhere. My baby brothers have grand plans to release their own pent-up energy.

All I can think about is Lily waiting at home. Safe and sound, beautiful and innocent.

“Come with me to Mama Chen’s.” Misha watches me in the rearview. He would have a fucking meltdown if he knew I’m sitting in the back of the car thinking about my bride-to-be when I could be fucking a professional. “You can get off as many times as you want all night long.”

I shake my head. “I have other plans.”

I fire off a couple texts, then lean back and tune my brothers out as they argue to determine who is going to have the better night.

I focus instead on my own immediate future. On the woman waiting for me.

Sometime between when their bickering starts and the time we part ways back at the mansion, I make a decision: Lily is going to go into this marriage a willing participant. I don’t want to have to drag her kicking and screaming down the aisle.

I will if I have to, of course. But the idea of breaking down her resistance until she gives me exactly what I want—willingly—is much, much more appealing.



Igor is waiting in the foyer for his evening instructions. “Send those bastards to hell, boss?” he asks when I walk in.

“Irish and Italians alike.”

He grins. “That’s what I like to hear.”

I give him a curt nod. “Tell the girl to dress for dinner and be downstairs in thirty minutes.”

I’m starving. The adrenaline has slaked off, but the hunger remains. At first, it was a hunger to fuck. But since I’m denying myself that satisfaction—for now—food will have to suffice.

I go to my quarters and shower. My cock is hard at the thought of Lily under this roof somewhere.

But once I decide something, I never change my mind. For some godforsaken reason, I want Lily to remain pure until she is my wife. Only then am I going to delight in relieving her of the burden of her virginity.

I crank the shower to ice cold to drown out the fire in my limbs. It works for all of three seconds before more thoughts of Lily spread-eagle on her bed crop up in my head.

Grimacing, I get out of the shower, dress, and walk down to the dining room, focused on control. I've never been the type of man who gives into impulse. One little Italian brat will not change that.

Until I see her.

She's waiting at the archway that leads into the formal dining room. She's dressed in a shimmering white dress, mid-thigh hemline, tits pushed up, fuck-me pumps on her feet.

Walking perfection.

I take a deep breath and double down on my self-control. Stalking over to the table, I pull out the chair for her.

“Sit.”

She hesitates, lingering at the entrance. I wonder for a moment if she's going to start off this evening by defying me.

But then she sighs, strides over, and sinks down into the seat without a word. I ignore her scowl and go take a seat of my own.

She is so fresh-faced—not a trace of makeup—that she almost glows. Alabaster skin and naturally ruby-colored lips. With doe eyes in the lightest shade of blue, and black hair she's pulled partly into a clip at the top of her head while the rest hangs long down her back.

The table is dressed with golden plates, expensive wine, flickering candles. Seeing her by candlelight is an entirely new and not unwelcome experience. Waiters come in through the kitchen doors and gingerly set down plates

heavy with fragrant food.

Artichoke bruschetta. Lobster bisque with garlic butter-brushed toast points. A summer tomato and feta cheese salad. Crab ravioli swimming in a decadent red sauce. Juicy cuts of roast beef with crisped potatoes on the side.

When it's all been served, I look up at her. "Eat."

I don't wait to see if she's still considering disobeying. Instead, I cut into my roast beef like a man who's just discovered food. The first bite is practically a fucking orgasm. I close my eyes and let the taste sink into my tongue.

I want to enjoy it, and for the most part, I do. But the other hunger, the one I am ignoring—my hunger for Lily—is by far the stronger of my two appetites. It is getting harder and harder to deny it.

I force myself to take a few more bites before I set my fork down and look at her. "Tell me about your family."

"You don't have one of your own to be worrying about?" The bite to her tone is almost endearing. "My family is none of your business."

"That's funny. Your brother doesn't act much like he cared about you."

She shrugs. "Leo cares about Leo."

"And what does Lily care about?"

"I care about going home." She pokes at her potatoes, pushes them into a mountainous pile, and sighs.

"Going home?" I laugh. "To the people who sold you?"

"My mother is there," she snaps.

"Do you think she doesn't know?"

Lily narrows her eyes and stares. She wants to tell me to fuck off, I'm sure. Wants to claw my eyes out. No way can she hide anything with that expressive face. It shows every emotion, telegraphs every thought.

I chuckle inwardly. It is going to be easy to break this one.

“Let’s try a different line of questioning. What are your ambitions?”

Her answer is fierce and immediate. “To get away from you.”

“What makes you think I would ever let that happen?”

“What makes you think you can stop it?”

*Bad move, kiska*, I tut in my head. *You’ve gone too far now.*

I sigh and dab at my lips with my napkin. I take care to fold it neatly and set it down next to my plate.

The silence builds. The tension builds. Lily’s fear builds.

Then I make my move.

I shove my chair back, whip around the corner of the table, yank her from her seat, and clear the table with one arm. Plates full of food clatter to the floor and erupt.

I don’t give a fuck. Let them break. Let everything break.

Her most of all.

When I toss her on her back and cover her body with mine, she whimpers in terror. “You can resist and fight,” I snarl in her face. “In fact, I hope you do. It will make it so much sweeter when you submit. You *will* be the wife that was promised to me.”

In response, she spits. Right in my fucking face.

I pause for a moment. There are some indignities I simply refuse to suffer. Time to prove that to her.

I drag her out of the dining hall and up the stairs, one step at a time. She fights back, slapping and clawing. It doesn’t do a bit of fucking good.

At the top of the stairs, I keep dragging her down the hall. I kick open the door to her bedroom and shove her inside. She staggers a few steps in, then turns to face me again.



One strap of her dress has fallen off her shoulder, revealing a pale slice of skin. Her hair is messed up from the struggle up the staircase and her chest is rising and falling with every ragged breath.

That fire in her eyes—I can't decide if I want to extinguish it or build it higher and higher until it burns us both to ashes.

“I will sleep with you right now if you let me leave,” she says with fierce determination, like she is trying to negotiate a tough deal.

“Big, brave words.” I look her up and down. “But you don't have much room to bargain here, Lily Benedetti. You're going to get fucked no matter what you offer. Take your clothes off.”

Silence.

Tense, pulsing silence.

Then, to my surprise, she does exactly what I want.

She doesn't break eye contact as she slips her arms out of the dress. It slides down her body to pool at her feet. She doesn't cover herself. Miles of untouched skin left exposed. The last few inches are covered by a see-through bra and a tiny triangle of lace panties covering her pussy.

She lifts her head. Defiant to the end.

“Good girl,” I say, nodding. I want badly to drag this out, to make her burn underneath my gaze. To drink in the sight of that perfect body. To devour it.

But I have a better idea.

“Now go to bed.”

I pull the door shut, lock it, and retreat to my room.

I slam the door behind me and strip down naked. I am hard enough to cut glass. I wrap my hand around my cock and shudder. Closing my eyes, I see her face. I imagine her lips parted, the tip of her tongue gliding all the way up and down my length.

The second and third strokes of my cock bring deep groans from my chest. And on the fourth, my legs buckle.

I sink to the carpeting. Precum drips from the tip and I use it, smoothing it down the shaft and picturing Lily's sweet mouth working in tandem with my fist. I imagine pumping in and out of her lips, twisting her hair around my hands.

I jerk my shaft, seeing in my mind's eye those taut nipples, that bare space between her creamy thighs...

The release is swift, intense, and all-consuming. I sputter as I erupt. The world blackens and reduces down to one thing: her name in my head. Her shape in my mind's eye.

Eventually, slowly, consciousness returns. Along with another thought...

*This might have been a mistake.*

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# LILY

The lock clicks, and I am alone.

I'm also naked, or close enough to it, which is fine by me since that dress was hideous. The kind of thing Leo's whores are always wearing.

My breath still comes in short huffs. A bead of sweat rolls from the nape of my neck down my spine.

I feel so dirty standing in his house bare. The shower calls to me, just about as much as the desire to scream into my pillow over and over again about how much I hate the bastard who brought me here.

Shower first, though. I strip off the rest of my underwear, get in, and settle back against the tile wall to let the hot water roll down my body.

There are a thousand reasons to despise Roman Sorokin. Not the least of which is the future he intends to deny me. The lover I should've been able to choose. The artist. The guy who would let me...

Walk all over him? Who wasn't near alpha enough for me? Who wasn't as handsome or as powerful as Roman?

*Fuck.*

Even my imagination doesn't let anyone else measure up to the man just across the hall. He'd cleared the table like a fucking Viking and pinned me to the surface. His lips had been mere centimeters away. Close enough for me to smell the wine on his breath, feel the heat of every exhale, see the flecks of

color in his eyes.

And, of course, to feel his dick throbbing at my core.

My pussy pulses. It's insanely depraved: how I'm aching for the man holding me captive, the same son of a bitch who locked me in this room in the first place.

I twist the shower knob to ice cold. This has to be hormonal. Some change in my body chemistry due to my captivity. A lack of vitamin E, D, one of those letters. I just need to get my head on straight again.

As soon as I am rinsed free of soap I don't remember slathering on my skin, I climb out of the shower and towel off, then go to bed.

Had I given a moment's thought to what I might be waking up to, I might not be in such a hurry to go to sleep. As it is, I don't even put on pajamas before I crawl under the covers and fall asleep just like the old cliché says: before my head hits the pillow.



Morning comes one moment later.

That's how it feels, at least. I wake to a flurry of noise in the hallway just outside. Then the door flings open, and Nataliya blows in, holding the dress she chose yesterday like she is riding a cloud of white tulle. Another woman I don't recognize is testing the heat of a curling iron. A third is setting up her palettes of color and makeup brushes.

It all hits me at once.

This is my *wedding* outfit.

This is my *wedding* day.

There really is no way out. My throat closes and my eyes burn.

"No." I scoot back into the headboard and pull my knees to my chest. "No. No. No." It's pitiful, but that is all the defense I have: a refusal that means nothing. Angry tears leak down my cheeks.

Nataliya looks over her shoulder at the tall woman arranging the makeup station, dressed in a formal bridesmaid's gown. "Waterproof mascara only. Don't want to ruin the pictures with black lines running down her face or staining the dress." She turns her attention to me. "And you—hush now. You're going to live."

Her faux-concern is almost touching. I would've told her to go fuck herself, but no way am I getting words around the lump in my throat. Besides, once I start full-on crying, I can't figure out how to stop. Not while one woman I've never met does my hair and the other daubs foundation over my tear-stained cheeks.

Tears flow, my shoulders shake, and there isn't anyone less helpful at getting me into my wedding dress than yours truly. My legs are made of cement. My arms don't move at all. My guts ache the whole damn time.

The life I'd always dreamed of is about to end in a blur of shimmering lace and a satin corset bodice.

Nataliya slaps me lightly on the cheek, just enough to startle me. "Stop this now," she orders. "Do not make a fool of my son or you will be punished a hundred times over."

Her threats don't change anything. I couldn't control myself if I tried.

The next hour goes by in a blur. I am poked and prodded, made up and dressed down. The tears come and go, come and go. I am numb to it all.

Nataliya and her two assistants dress me like I am a helpless little china doll. White lingerie, fastened around me with quick, efficient hands. The white wedding dress, hiked up around my hips and the corset knotted around my ribs, tight enough to make me gasp.

I don't let myself look in the mirror. That would only make things worse.

And then, just when I thought all hope is lost, someone else enters the room.

My mother.

My father is behind her, wearing an Armani suit. She's in this season's Chanel, I notice. Suddenly, they're Rockefellers? Papa was broke enough to

gamble his daughter away, but still had enough money to buy such fine outfits?

If they're so rich, then what the hell am I doing here?

"Mama!" I throw myself at her, trying to navigate the ten thousand yards of fabric between us. "Please get me out of here."

She pulls the corner of her lower lip between her teeth and shoots my father a look. "I can't, Lily. Your father... did what he did. We can't go back now."

If her last look at him is pointed, this one—with the lower half of her jaw offset and her eyes drawn into narrow slits—is meant to cause actual physical injury.

But my father doesn't seem to notice or care. He steps closer to me, in front of my mother. He put an arm around my shoulder and in spite of everything, it feels bizarrely good to be comforted by the man who'd read me bedtime stories when I was a girl.

Maybe I am just desperate for anyone to tell me things will be okay.

Even if it is the man who put me here in the first place.

He leans over to whisper in my ear, "Be patient, *cara mia*. I will rescue you."

*Be patient?* How the hell does he propose I do that?

Like I am somehow supposed to "patiently" walk down the aisle.

"Patiently" keep my mouth shut.

No, fuck that. Fuck patience.

I don't know what to say back to my father. It is just too much—all of this is. So I say nothing at all.

Which is probably just the way he wants it.





# LILY

The drive to the cathedral, with me stuck between Nataliya and my mother in the back of an armored town car, doesn't stop the tears.

Neither does the walk down the aisle, with all the leading kingpins of the criminal underworld and their various felonious spawn arranged in the pews and watching in grim silence.

Nor does the handsome beast standing at the end of the aisle in his own Armani, fitted like Giorgio showed up and did the measuring himself.

I can't focus on the big picture; that just makes my sobs come harder. I try to concentrate on tiny details instead.

Through the haze of my tears, I can see everything.

My mother dabbing her eyes with a linen hankie.

My brother smirking like he caught me with my hands in the cookie jar and is about to snitch.

Roman standing solemnly on the altar like he might have finally come to his senses.

Hope stirs in my belly at that last sight. I look over at my father, who's holding my elbow with his eyes fixed straight ahead. There is no comparison in power or authority between him and the man waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

No one in this room compares to Roman Sorokin.

Not even close.

It feels like we sprint down the aisle. In the blink of an eye, I find myself at the foot of the altar. My father kisses me on the cheek and lets go of me. I try not to let him see me shuddering, holding back sobs.

Then there's nowhere else to go but up. I mount the steps one at a time. I barely trust my own legs to keep me standing, but somehow, I make it.

And I take my place on the altar in front of the don.

Since the moment I woke up, this whole thing has felt like a nightmare, an out-of-body experience.

Up until now.

Looking at Roman, it feels suddenly real. The numbness that got me through this morning vanishes under his gaze. His hot, searing gaze consumes me, claims me before either of us has spoken a word of our vows.

He glances at me, then away, then back again. But his eyes betray him. His eyes want me.

And that information is useful.

It doesn't make it easier to say my vows, though. The priest goes through his droning introduction. I barely hear it until he turns to me and instructs me on what to say.

I try to obey, I really do. I know that some godforsaken punishment awaits me if I don't cooperate fully with all these eyes on me.

"I, Lilianna..."

But the words die on the edge of a sob.

At some point, I'm not sure when, Roman has taken my hands into his. Now, he squeezes my knuckles together painfully. He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Say it." His whisper is laced with latent threat.

That fires me up. So be it. If this monstrous son of a bitch wants his fucking vows, then by God, he'll get them.

"I, Liliana, take you, Roman, to be my lawful wedded husband. Rich, poor, sick, health..." *Whatever.*

I finish, then add a sarcastic smile at the end. I don't, to my everlasting credit, call him a "bastard" in front of God and all of his lowlife colleagues filling the cathedral. But I do have to concentrate on clamping my lips shut before that particular word escapes.

He lets go of one hand to pull a rock the size of Gibraltar from the inside of his suit jacket. My jaw nearly drops as he offers it to the priest.

There is a blessing of the bands, whatever that means, before the priest hands the ring back to Roman, then gives me a plain silver band. "Slip the ring on the third finger of his left hand," he tells me.

The priest is insistent on directing traffic, as if this isn't the most familiar Tab A-Slot B situation in the entire world. Everyone old enough to comprehend a Hallmark movie knows how this goes.

But I do as directed because I'm not brave enough to make a run for it with all the monsters in this cathedral with us. I don't have another choice.

"With this ring, I thee wed."

Roman slides my ring over my knuckle. I stare at it, try not to let my hand fall under its weight, and wait.

"With this ring, I thee wed."

He doesn't add "*for the purpose of forcing my demon spawn into your uterus,*" as true as that is. Of course, that might've ruined the illusion of his perfect ceremony.

The priest smiles. He puts his clammy hands up, touches the top of my head and the top of Roman's, and says a prayer for our happiness, our godliness, and our fertility in creating sacred life.

Then he looks at us each in turn and says the words I've dreaded since I woke up.

“By the powers vested in me, by God in heaven and the state of Illinois, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Just like that, we’ve arrived at the final and most daunting dread of my day. Roman tugs me as close to him as the skirt will allow and threads his hand into my complexly braided hair.

To the neutral observer, it might look like newlywed enthusiasm. But I’ve seen enough of Roman to know what it actually is.

It’s power. It’s domination. It’s a hot, primal claiming.

And then he’s kissing me.

His tongue forces my mouth open. My body, being a traitorous bitch, melts. The only thing holding me together is the corset top and Roman’s arm wrapped around my waist.

He goes deep and demanding, using his kiss to say what his hands and his words have already told me countless times: *You’re mine*.

When he pulls back, I moan, tingling and shaking and needy. The stroke of his thumb along my cheekbone is a phantom feeling I can’t wish away.

Everything that follows is nothing but a blur. A prayer happens, I think. Some “go in peace” words, maybe. Nothing that leaves a lasting impression.

For however long it lasts, I stand in front of my—*gulp*—husband and just tremble.

I wonder if all brides feel this... thing that almost lets me forget how I ended up here, kneeling next to my—*gulp*, again—husband.

When it’s done, we walk back down the aisle side by side, not holding hands or touching, like fellow soldiers headed into battle.

We stand in a receiving line as the criminal crème de la crème of Chicago parades past. There are nods, kisses on the cheek, a couple quick hugs from people who don’t understand boundaries.

But mostly, Roman exchanges solemn glares with his guests. I, on the other hand, get mostly looks of pity. A few, “*Oh, you poor girl*” whispers, which

do just about nothing to boost my morale.

Then my own family comes out. My mother hugs me like she never wants to let me go, but eventually, she does. My father smiles, as if that is reassurance aplenty, then he lays his hand on my shoulder and gives me one somber nod. Neither of them say a word.

Leo doesn't even stop to make eye contact. He simply saunters to his car—illegally parked in a handicap space out front, for the record—and speeds away.

Nataliya and Grigor bring up the rear. Grigor embraces his son while Nataliya throws her arms around me and whispers, "I'm pleased that you didn't make a fool of yourself." She pulls back and smiles. "And soon there will be a child!"

I don't say anything to that, either. What is there to say? I don't have a vote here. I am just a plaything, an ornament—and soon, the closest thing to a surrogate this family has.

When we finally walk out of the cathedral's foyer, my husband—oh, Lord, I hate how it is getting easier to think of him like that—puts his hand at the small of my back. He keeps it there as the guests throw rice over our heads on our way to the limousine.

I can't wait to get to wherever the reception is to be held so that can be over soon, too. For this entire day to be over so I can go to my room and forget all about my husband—nope, I take it back, it's still too hard to say.

Maybe some Russian vodka will make this all happen faster.

In the limo, Roman is scowling like I just kicked his dog. I stare out the window for a second, away from him and his beautiful glower.

When I turn back, his gaze softens.

"Stop staring at me," I snap.

"I like looking at the things I own."

I turn away immediately, cheeks reddening. I don't look at him again.

He sighs and clears his throat to get my attention back. “We need to discuss the rules.”

“Great. Can’t wait. The floor is yours.”

“Don’t make a scene. Don’t act like anything other than the perfect wife you’re supposed to be. Do that and I won’t punish you later. Do you understand?”

“As long as you continue to speak English, it’s safe to say I understand.”

“Ah,” he says, unbothered. “*Je vais profiter de vous donner une fessée plus tard.*”

I wrinkle my brow, not least because his French accent is flawless. “French? I would’ve thought if you were going to threaten to spank me, you would’ve said it in Russian. You do your countrymen no justice.”

“I was born in the United States.” He cocks his head. “*E quando ti sculaccio, urlerai.*”

I’m fairly sure that’s Latin. Multilingual. Holy hotness.

But he is wrong about what he says. So wrong. And also, I’m underselling myself a little bit here. I understand more than English. I know what he said to me in French. I know what he said to me in Latin, too.

*I’m going to enjoy spanking you later.*

*And when I spank you, you will scream.*

I don’t answer until the limo rolls to a stop at the entrance to the city’s most exclusive country club. I don’t wait for the chauffer to come to the door before I shove it open.

I leap out as best as I can in this floofy dress, turn to stick my head back in the limo, and say as searingly as I know how, “You’re wrong, motherfucker. I won’t be screaming when you spank me. I won’t give you the fucking satisfaction.”

Roman just chuckles. “As long as you know what’s coming, I’m sure the rest will work itself out.”

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# LILY

“Congratulations, Roman!”

The woman offering her well wishes leans in for the obligatory kiss on the cheek. Roman has given out thirty-plus already in the hour we’ve been here, making the rounds, accepting the least sincere best wishes and cheers ever concocted. I hear a couple “hats off to you” and even a “felicitations.”

It might’ve been heart-warming if not for the farce of it all. And if not for the fact I want nothing more than to run screaming from my own wedding reception.

Roman keeps his hand on my lower back as we move onto the trophy wife of the next scary Chicago gremlin. This one is a blonde with a Jackie O. hairdo and a Rose from Titanic hat. The one after her has a June Cleaver vibe, complete with pearls and the low-heeled pumps, and a voice like Fran Drescher’s Nanny, nasally and loud. She congratulates us, same as the others, then Roman leans in and lets her kiss his cheek. When she comes for mine, I recoil. Roman scowls at me.

For everyone else, he has a smile, a chuckle, a grin. Laughs like he has another person hidden inside him who doesn’t mind being social and normal and nice. A *kind* Roman. A *sweet* Roman.

The real Roman is still in there, though.

But he saves that darkness for me.

I see glimpses of it throughout the night. When any man looks at me too long or speaks too softly, he ushers me away, a low growl always vibrating in his chest. Part of me finds it almost... endearing.

The other part of me wants to punch him in the balls and run screaming for the hills.

But even if I decide to flee, Roman has goons stationed at every exit. Big, burly mouth-breathers ready to body slam me if I venture near an exterior door without my husband holding my hand or guiding me like some kind of weird ventriloquist dummy.

“Darling.”

Well, I can't have heard that right. But I turn to him anyway just to make sure he isn't addressing some other skank with that much warmth in his voice.

There's no one nearby us, though. For the first time all day, it is just him and me.

“Shall we eat?” His breath warms my ear.

To anyone who isn't me, this probably looks like a private moment between the happy couple. I want to scoff in his face, *Who are you calling 'darling,' asshole?* But truth is, I'm starving.

So instead, I let him guide me to our designated spot at the center of a long linen- and lace-covered table decorated with vines and greenery and candles and flowers and strings of twinkle lights from one end to the other.

I can't help feeling the sting of anger in my chest as we sit. Roman stole this from me—my dream wedding.

Maybe it was just a silly little girl fantasy, but I always had a vision in my head for how I thought it would go for me. There would've been tall vases of flowers—lilies, of course—for centerpieces, frosty blue up-lighting behind the table where I'd sit with my bridesmaids and the groomsmen. I would have silver table runners and sparkling lights on the ceiling. My bridesmaids would wear silver and the groomsmen would dress in the same shade of blue as the lights for their ties and vests. My father would have walked me down the aisle under some extremely different circumstances, and I would've been

in a sheath dress, not this gaudy tulle monstrosity.

Most of all, there would be a husband waiting on the altar who adores me. Who wants to love me, not destroy me.

But no.

Roman Sorokin took that dream and shattered it.

The fake smile I've had plastered on all day wastes away beneath my bitterness. I hope the photographers are occupied elsewhere. If they start snapping candid in this direction, it's going to look like a funeral dinner in wedding clothes.

An army of waiters files out of the kitchen bearing plates. Roman leans into me and smiles. Another fake intimate moment.

"You're doing well. Better than I expected."

"Gee, thanks for the report card."

Sarcasm feels a bit like spitting in the wind, but what else I can do? I can't fight back. I can't scream in his face. I can't slap him for the things he is putting me through or whatever horrors he still has planned for later.

Nataliya moves a candle out of the way so she can see me. "Sit up straight. You look like a hunchback."

*Well, if I look like I am carrying the weight of my new life on my shoulders, and like my shoulders aren't strong enough to lug that and all the anguish that said new life has brought down on me, then maybe so, yeah. I probably look like I should be ringing the bell at Notre Dame.*

I swallow back that mini-rant. It's not worth wasting my breath. So I just nod, straighten up, and push my chest out like she wants.

She nods in satisfaction. "Good. And smile. This isn't your funeral."

On the other side, my husband speaks to his father, but keeps one hand on me under the table, the added weight of it lying on the eighty pounds of skirt covering my thigh. I swear I feel the heat of his touch despite all that fabric.

Everyone ignores me while we eat—except for Nataliya, who is displaying an impressive eye for detail in all the ways I’m fucking up right now.

“Chew slower. You don’t want to make a scene by choking on your broccoli.”

“Noted.”

“Also, you are going to want to stay sober,” she says as she takes my wine glass and finishes it. “So you enjoy your first night with Roman.”

“As you wish.”

“And again, smile. No. Not like that. You look ill. Less teeth.”

I sigh. This is going to be a very long night. I need a minute to myself, to breathe, to recalibrate. “I’m going to the bathroom,” I announce to no one in particular.

Nataliya stands right along with me. She loops her arm through mine. “You’ll need my help so you don’t ruin that dress.”

So much for a brief moment of solitude.

She starts talking as we carve through the party towards the restrooms. “You know, Lily, I’ve been a Sorokin wife since... well, let’s just say a very long slice of forever. And I’ll tell you this: it takes some patience and some understanding, not to mention self-discipline, to be the arm candy of a Sorokin man.”

It would be easy to ignore her right now. She’s the mother of my worst nightmare, and she’s not exactly sunshine and roses herself.

But I intend to survive this ordeal. If Nataliya has anything to tell me that might help, I’m all ears.

“Tell me more,” I say—only a little bit sarcastic.

She stops and turns to face me. “Submit,” she says urgently. “Or be broken. Those are your only two choices.”

Never mind. I don’t want her advice after all.

I make quick work of the bathroom. As quick as I can in my current getup, at least. Nataliya holds up my skirts while I pee, which is equal parts helpful and horrifying. At the moment, though, it's the least of my concerns.

We return to the banquet hall from the restroom, and Roman walks toward me. It could be because I'm actually a little tipsy from the wine I managed to drink before Nataliya finished it for me, but I stop for a second to stare at him.

He is truly beautiful. Tall and graceful. Stormy and seductive.

But, I remind myself, he is also cold. Callous. A murderer. I want to turn away, to crawl out the bathroom window if I have to, but get away by any means necessary.

Caught in between these two polar opposite emotions, I stand silent. Immobile.

I need to get a hold of myself now more than ever. *Do something*, for fuck's sake.

But I just stand.

Roman approaches. He offers his hand. It is, weirdly enough, the most human gesture I've ever seen from him. Not controlled, not pre-planned. Almost... whimsical.

"It's time for our first dance."

I swallow. Why does that feel so momentous? *None if this is real*, I remind myself. *None of this matters*.

But it does matter. It matters a lot.

"Can't wait," I reply.

I slip my palm over his and let him guide me in a circle around him. Then I am in his arms, pressed against his chest.

I barely hear the music as he whirls me and twirls me, holds me close, flings me out and reels me right back in with effortless grace. And the whole time, my heart beats like a hammer against my breastbone.

His scent, the feel of his body, the alcohol in my veins—it all works together to tear down any defense I might've tried to put up.

The surroundings aren't helping. It's a little harder to ignore the fantasy and fairy tale-ness of this day when I am wearing Cinderella's dress and shoes and my husband looks like a real-life prince.

A monstrous prince. A ruined prince.

But a prince nonetheless.

He pulls me in one last time and holds me close as he rocks our bodies side-to-side. His gaze smolders and burns along my skin, so sensual I can't think.

"Where did you learn to dance?" he murmurs.

Little does he know, the only thing keeping me from taking out his toes is the dress. "I'm winging it," I say honestly.

The truth is that, in his arms, I don't need to know much of anything. Roman takes the lead. There is no room for failure when he's holding me like this.

There's nothing special about me. Any unfortunate loser with a pair of tits could play this role just as well as I have.

So why is he looking at me like there's no one else in the room?

The illusion shatters a moment later, obviously. Nothing sweet lasts in this world. He spins me again and scowls. "Smile. People are watching."

If I'm not smiling, it's probably because I am caught in the dream version of this moment—the one where a husband I love is telling me I look beautiful and truly meaning those words.

But that dream doesn't exist. He took it from me.

When the music ends, Roman holds me for a moment longer than necessary, then lets go.

"I need a drink," he murmurs.

Before he goes, he brings my hands to his lips and presses a kiss into my knuckles. I do a double-take—it's so weirdly chivalrous that for a moment I

wonder if I tripped over these stupid skirts and cracked my head open at some point.

Then, *POP*, the flash of a photographer's camera goes off.

And Roman drops my hands like hot coals before he turns to walk from the dancefloor to the bar.

Ah. Now, I get it. Hamming it up for the photo op.

He pauses right at the edge of the dancefloor to look at me over his shoulder. That's all it takes—one smoldering look—and I find myself walking after him like a trained dog.

I shiver. He's got his hooks in me already. I don't like that one bit.

But I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that, so I trot along after him with my chin held high.

"Whiskey," he orders.

The bartender nods. "And for the lady?"

I start to say, "I'll have—" but Roman cuts me off. "She's not thirsty."

I glare at him as the bartender scurries off to fetch the good stuff for Roman, but my husband doesn't seem to give a shit. He ignores me and surveys the crowd with a careful eye.

The bartender returns with the drink a moment later. "Here you are, sir," he says as he slides it across the bar top.

Then a new voice chimes in. "Wine," requests Floriano Verratti in a sickly sweet voice. "Something Tuscan."

"Right away, sir," the bartender says.

Floriano turns his gaze on me. He is close. Way too close. Close enough that I can smell the whiskey on his breath and the stench of his sweat and feel the bulk of his belly grazing my arm.

"We meet again, *principessa*." His voice has that too-many-unfiltered-cigarettes rasp, and his eyes remain fixed right above the plunging neckline

of my dress.

Roman takes a sip from his tumbler. “Why don’t you go check out the buffet, Floriano?” he suggests acidly. The implication is clear: *get the fuck away from us.*

But Floriano doesn’t seem to want to take the hint.

“What’s the matter, Roman?” he taunted. “Does the little pussycat have your tongue? I assume we have no hard feelings between us.”

Roman laughs darkly. “Why would I have hard feelings? I’m the one who walked away with the prize.”

Misha approaches from the left before Floriano can reply. “Roman, we need to talk.” He jerks his head toward a group of men standing near the bar. Then he looks at me and smiles blandly like I am too stupid to understand.

But I was born into this life. I know all about the clandestine meetings in back alleys, the kind that usually result in bloodshed. I know about the guns hidden under car seats and what it meant when my father rushed out of the house at three a.m., then came back in through the laundry room a few hours later, dripping in another man’s blood.

I’ve never lifted a finger to help my family do their dirty work. But I know where the money comes from.

Or at least, where it *used* to come from. The flow has been getting thinner and weaker for years. And it seems like that well finally dried up for good a few nights ago.

Lucky me.

Roman doesn’t even glance at me as he strides away with Misha. I wish he hadn’t left me alone, though. I have on enough fabric to clothe a small nation, and still, Floriano’s gaze makes me feel naked. Like he can see straight through the dress.

And now that my husband has walked away, Floriano sidles closer, pressing closer against me as he speaks. “You are enjoying your time with the Russian?” He thrust his hips suggestively, although it’s not exactly a subtle



joke.

I don't answer.

That doesn't put him off, either. "When you are ready for a real man to show you pleasure, you come see me." His look up and down my body makes my skin crawl.

"No thanks." Not even a question.

"You think your little Russian prince will be able to keep up with you? No. That is why all married women come to me." He points to his cock. "My soldier has stamina. Can make you scream long into the night."

I don't care if his little "soldier" can do cartwheels while it whistles the theme to *Star Wars*. No way am I going anywhere near it or the vulgar wart of a man it is attached to.

But I still don't speak. He looks like the kind of man who goes from leering to violent in the blink of an eye. I've had enough of that lately, thank you very much.

"You women can't resist real Italian cock."

I suppress a gag. "Watch me."

There's clearly nothing I can say or do to erase this asshole's confidence, and I'm not exactly inclined to spend time trying. I've already got one prick to deal with; the last thing I need is another.

So instead of wasting any more of my life bantering with the grossest man in Chicago, I whisk back over to the wedding party table and take my seat. I promptly down the inch or so of wine left in Roman's glass, if only to wash Floriano's odor out of my mouth.

The Verratti don stares at me from the bar for an uncomfortably long moment. I wonder if he's going to chase me down.

But then, with a shrug, he disappears into the crowd.

Thank God for small favors.

I look for my parents. I don't see them at first, but then—there. My mother stands at the edge of the dancefloor with some other women. She has a martini in hand and her fakest smile plastered on her lips.

My father, not one for socializing on a good day—and this isn't a good day for either of us—sits alone at a high-top near the bar, nursing a drink.

I don't run to him because I don't want to draw Roman's attention from whatever was so important he'd left me alone with Floriano.

But this is my chance—maybe my last one—to make Papa see how badly I need his help. Before I can lose my nerve, I get up and head in his direction. I smile at everyone I pass as I move toward him.

When I'm close enough, I whisper urgently, "Papa."

He glances up. His eyes are pinwheeling in their sockets. "My little girl," he slurs. "My Lily."

I don't have time for drunken ramblings. I need him to pay attention. "Papa, listen to me. Please get me out of this. Take me home with you. Hide me away."

Maybe they can send me to our cousins in Italy until I can figure a way out of my marriage. That's fine with me; hell, I'll stay there forever if I have to. I'll go to Italy or Siberia or Timbuk-fucking-tu if it means I am free to live my life as something other than an incubator for Roman's brood of future sociopaths.

"Lily, go be with your husband. He is the only one who can care for you now."

I shake his shoulder. "Papa!" This isn't my father. This isn't the voice of the man who used to parade me around the house on his shoulders, who took me to the father-daughter dance at St. Mary Magdalene's every year.

This is a stranger.

"I can't help you," he adds.

"Can't? Or won't?"

“What is the difference?”

“Papa,” I whimper. I kneel down and grab his hand. “Please...”

He needs to be convinced. I have to show him how much I need him. I have to find the right words. Then he will save me.

“Please. I’m begging you. Don’t leave me here. I don’t belong with him.”

“Lily, you belong to Roman now. Go.” He looks into his glass like there is some magical answer etched into the bottom and if he stares hard enough he’ll be able to see it.

“Papa, please!”

Mistake. Big mistake. I got too desperate, too loud.

And people notice.

Heads turn. Mouths drop. The crowd sees it before I do, but I feel it soon enough: a large hand tightening around my upper arm in a vise grip.

Roman’s breath is hot in my ear. “Did I not warn you about making a scene?” he growls as he drags me from the room.

I don’t even know what to say. I’m not going to apologize to him, that’s for certain. And now I am going to be “punished” for that. For wanting better for myself.

But just as that thought crosses my mind, something else does, too: a way to sell him on the idea.

A flash of hope survives.

I hope to God it works.



## ROMAN

I can't be truly angry. After all, I bet Misha ten grand that Lily wouldn't last until eight p.m. before she went to her father and begged him to rescue her.

I check my watch—7:08. Easiest money I ever made.

But I still need to show Lily that her little stunt is going to cost her dearly. So I pull her outside, through the pouring rain and over to the waiting limousine. A ruined dress I don't give a fuck about is the least of my concerns.

I pin her body between me and the still-closed car door. "Can't behave yourself, can you?" I snarl in her face.

I want the fear in her eyes as rain ruins her makeup.

I want to watch her come undone.

"Flirting with Floriano," I continue. "Running to Daddy for help."

Her nostrils flare. "I wouldn't flirt with that perverted piece of shit if he was the last man on Earth and the survival of all humanity depended on me saying a kind word to him."

I chuckle. "Do you always have to use eighty words when a 'Fuck you' would do?"

I don't mean to laugh. In fact, I don't mean to do anything but make her quake with the fear that I am going to spank her raw.

But I can't help it: the girl is amusing.

"And did you really think your dear old dad was going to lift a finger to save you? In case you forgot, he's the one who put you here in the first place."

"So you keep reminding me."

"Watch your tone, wife."

"Oh goodness, please find it in your heart to forgive me," she drawls sarcastically.

I grip her shoulder. Not gently, but not enough to leave a bruise. "Try again."

She winces but doesn't cry out. "I'm s-sorry," she stammers.

I nod, satisfied for now. "Better."

I step aside, wrench open the car door, and throw her in, then climb in after. As soon as the door is closed, the car starts moving. Danilo knows where to take us.

"Where are we going?" Lily asks. She's shivering in the air conditioning, with raindrops dappling her bare shoulders like diamonds. When I don't reply, she says, "The least you can do is answer me."

I cock my head to the side and look at her. "Where do a husband and wife traditionally go after the wedding?"

"In this case, I'm hoping '*our separate ways*' is the answer."

"Keep guessing."

Her eyes bulge. "You're taking me on a honeymoon? A fucking honeymoon?" She twists to face me fully, jaw wide open. "Are you kidding me right now?"

"The jet is fueled and waiting. The suitcases are already onboard. Paradise awaits, *moya zhena*."

"But not a real honeymoon, I assume. You're gonna, like, hide me away in a cellar for a week while you go to Aruba or something, right? A fake honeymoon to go with our fake wedding?"

I smile. The same dangerous smile many men see before they die.

Lily doesn't know that, of course. But she's not stupid. She senses something violent in it and shrinks deeper into her ocean of white gauzy fabric.

"I can assure you, sweetheart, that our wedding was one hundred percent authentic. As is our upcoming little adventure."

Like I'd timed it to perfection, the limousine pulls into the airfield just then and parks next to the jet.

Instead of waiting for me or the driver, Lily pushes her door open and steps out. She pokes her head back inside the car a millisecond later. "A private jet? Honestly, I thought you were kidding."

"I never kid."

Danilo comes around and opens my door. I step out and adjust my suit against the breeze rippling down the runway. It's not raining over here, though the dark clouds are amassing not far away. It'll be on us soon.

"This is yours?" she asks, looking at the plane with her own eyes but still not quite believing.

The wind from the idling engines kisses the edges of her skirt. I still think the dress my mother picked is fucking hideous, but there is something to be said about the allure of seeing my wife in white on the last day she'll ever be able to wear it.

"Yes."

"For the trip, you mean."

I laugh. She's intentionally trying to push my buttons. She'll have to try much harder than that. "I own the plane, I own the pilot, I own the airstrip."

She rolls her eyes. "A real '*Everything the light touches is mine*' moment. How endearing."

Her tone is biting, but I don't miss the note of longing in it, either. It's no secret that times have been tough in the Benedetti household. There've been repossessions. Dangerous men coming around in search of money that Arturo

couldn't repay.

So, no matter how much she hates me, she can't help but drink in the opulence, the decadence of having my family name and crest painted on the tail fin of a jet I own outright.

Something about watching her do that is fascinating to me. She looks at these insignificant things with an innocence I haven't had since I was five, when I saw my father slaughter my uncle bare-handed so he could take over the Bratva.

I hold out my hand to her. "Come with me. If you like the outside, the inside is really going to make your panties wet."

She frowns. "In your fucking dreams."

My princess wife has a spark, I have to give it to her. She goes from zero to fearless in an instant.

I'll put her back to terrified even faster.

I tug her hand hard enough to reel her back into my grasp. Enveloping her, I lean down and whisper in her ear, "I've seen a lot more than that happen in my dreams, *moya zhena*."

I don't say more, but I don't have to.

She whimpers and yanks her hand out of mine. Turning her back on me, she hikes up her skirts and starts the ascent up the stairs. Mari, the stewardess who usually sucks me off when I fly alone, is waiting at the top to help her inside.

After Lily walks past and I follow, Mari rests her hand on my bicep. "Are we three tonight?" she croons, eyes bright. She has on the crimson red lipstick I like seeing ringed around my cock.

Ordinarily, a threesome is an idea I can get behind. But I don't like the thought of anyone touching Lily but me. As a matter of fact, I can't bring myself to so much as picture anyone else near her without getting livid. Not even a curvy temptress who has tongue tricks that no other woman on the planet can match.



So I shake my head. “No, we won’t be needing inflight service tonight.”

Mari merely smiles. “Well, maybe another time, then, sir.”

She never calls me by my name. Not when she moans for me, not when she works for me. It’s always “sir,” nothing else. For years, that’s been fine by me. Not just for her, but for every woman who shares my bed.

But now, for some reason, I want to hear my name on the lips of one person in particular: Lily.

As a moan.

As a curse.

Any way I can fucking get it.

The thought pisses me off. I can’t become attached to her. She has a singular purpose—giving me an heir. I’m a little dismayed by how easy it’s been to forget that.

Her voice tugs me from my thoughts. “Can you help me with this? I can’t reach.”

Lily has her back turned, one hand grasping the corset back of her top. She wants me to undress her. I smirk. This is a ploy. She is bargaining and using her body to do it. Trying to outsmart me.

*Good luck with that, sweetheart.*

If she thinks a few inches of untouched skin is enough to rattle me, she’s—well, not completely fucking mistaken. Something about her gets in my head.

But I’ve had far too much training to blow a fucking load in my pants at something this simple. Besides, I’ll get what I want soon enough. I’m a patient man. I can wait.

I make quick work of the ties. The garment sags down, but she holds the front of her dress to her chest as she turns to face me. “Thank you, O Benevolent One. I want to change before we take off. Is that permissible to Your Highness?”

“I thought I told you to watch your tone.”

“Is that a yes or no?”

I wave a hand. “Go.”

She steps into the rear bedroom where her suitcase has been stowed and pulls the pocket door shut.

After a couple of seconds, it slides open again in its track. Lily sticks her head out, now wearing a lilac summer dress that makes her skin glow. “Have you seen this bed? It is like a cloud.”

Of course I’ve seen the bed. I’ve slept in it. Fucked in it. But her enthusiasm continues to amuse me.

“It’s Belgian,” I inform her. “The finest in the world.”

She emerges from the bedroom and takes a seat across from me. As she starts pulling dozens of hairpins from her intricate braids, she asks, “How many people did you have to kill to get this plane?”

“If you’re asking the cost of a human life, it depends on the life. If you’re asking if I’ve killed to get where I am, to get what I have... the answer is yes.” No point in lying to her. “But if you’re asking if I plan to kill you in particular, the answer is no.”

“How kind.”

“... Unless you become a problem.”

Her eyes flicker with fear, then strength. “And then?”

“I’ll try to make it quick and painless because you’re my wife. I will warn you, though, sometimes I get caught up in the moment and things... drag on.”

She shudders. “Why are you so cruel to me?”

“I am indifferent to you, not cruel. You have your purpose. And you’ll be rewarded if you follow through. You’re already halfway there. Is kindness a requirement for childbirth?”

She blinks at me, licks those luscious lips, and turns away. “I suppose not.”

“I didn’t think so. Buckle up. We’re going to take off soon.” I keep my voice gruff. As much to remind myself I need to keep her in line as to remind her.

She glances at me, then pulls her belt across her lap and turns to the window. She looks out and pointedly ignores me.

Fine by me. She’ll make plenty of noise when the time is right.

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## ROMAN

The flight is gloriously quiet. We fly, we land, and the plane rolls to a stop at the end of a runway strip near the villa.

“Where are we?” she asks when the engines die down.

“An island.”

“How specific,” she drawls. “Care to narrow it down?”

“It’s an island my family has owned for a long time.”

Her eyes go wide. “You own an *island*, too?”

I smirk. “If the plane lit your fire, you’re gonna love the villa.”

“Not to repeat myself too much, but you own a whole freaking island? With a villa?”

“Not much point to one without the other. It’s a little far for a day trip.” I stand and pull one of her bags from a compartment under my seat. “Come on.”

We walk to the forward part of the plane. One of the housemen holds his hand out to assist Lily through the open hatch. In and of itself, that’s no big deal—until the *mudak* lingers like he wants to breathe her in, touching her hand like it is made of diamonds.

I wait for a tense second to see if he is going to remember himself and let go. The servant is tall, young, probably appealing to women—and about to lose his job, if not his life.

“Step the fuck back,” I snarl. I move between them and he backs away in horror.

Lily shoots me a glare. I toss the bag to the son of a bitch who’d been making the move on my wife. He looks up at me with fear and confusion in his eyes.

I don’t blink or look away as I fix him with a blank stare and add in a low rumble, “Nobody touches my wife but me.”

He gulps and vanishes as quickly as he can.

*Good fucking riddance.* I turn to Mari and say, “Tell the housekeeper: if I ever see that motherfucker again, I’ll kill him.”

Then I take Lily’s hand in my own and we descend the jet’s stairs onto the tarmac. She’s not thrilled about the contact, but she goes along with it, wobbly as she is on her heels.

The limousine waits a few yards from the plane. By the time we’re inside, Lily’s glare is once again replaced by that wide-eyed look of wonder.

To say the limo is extravagant is an understatement. Polished oak interior and gold trim, five glistening screens, a beverage service container offering up top-shelf liquor, champagne, bottled water. The leather seat wraps around the passenger compartment of the car, buttery smooth and soft to the touch.

Lily promptly moves as far away as she can.

“I don’t bite, you know,” I remark with a chuckle.

She narrows her eyes. “I do.”

“I bet you do, little *kiska*. I bet you do.”

When we’re seated, the vehicle smoothly accelerates. Tarmac quickly gives way to beautiful wilderness. The estate road is lined with wild flowers that inch up to the beach on one side and a grassy meadow on the other. As we drive, the grass embankments thin out into a peninsula until we were

surrounded by white sand and rolling sapphire waves.

The road curves around the beach and up to the villa. More of a mansion, really. Remodeled with each generation, broadened and built higher.

One of the previous Sorokin dons craved a proper castle, so he added turrets to the north and south ends. Another wanted a wall to protect the house from wind and erosion. As with all Sorokin dons, he got exactly what he wanted.

But the inside is the real architectural marvel. Marble floors. Fluted columns. A billiards room, a ballroom, and a kitchen the size of a high school gymnasium. Fifteen bedrooms, nineteen bathrooms, ocean views from damn near every window.

It will do nicely for what I have in mind.

The limo pulls up and stops. The chauffeur opens the door. I get out and turn back in to face Lily.

“Come,” I order. She keeps her eyes downcast as I offer her my hand.

But instead of taking it, she reaches out and grips the chauffeur’s forearm to balance herself as she unfolds those long, elegant legs and steps out of the vehicle. She looks right at me as she does it, so that I’d understand it isn’t an accident. That she saw how I reacted to the house servant on the plane, how much I’d hated him laying a single finger on her.

She is taunting me.

One voice in my head wants to snap. To break her then and there. Tear that dress into useless fucking rags and show her firsthand just what her body is capable of doing for me.

But another, stronger voice urges me to wait. Lily will get what is coming to her soon enough.

So I just smile.

She lets go of the chauffeur and looks up to the sweeping marble staircase and two-story-tall double front doors.

“That way, I presume?” she says with heaps of snark.

I nod. “‘That way’ is correct.”

She snuffles and strides away.

We go up the stone steps, into the foyer. A Degas oil painting hangs on one side over an oak and marble table trimmed in gold, and a Monet on the other.

“Are those real?” Lily asks of the artwork, eyes widening.

“Do they look fake to you?”

She breathes out, “Holy shit.”

“You’re starting to understand. There’s more. Put that down,” I tell her, taking the bag out of her hand and dropping it on the table, “and come this way.”

Mallory, the housekeeper and caretaker of the property, has placed a few racks of swimwear and accessories I’d instructed her to buy in an adjacent room. Before I can even call for her, she appears in the black-and-white uniform she wears when we have guests, bearing a tray with two flutes of champagne.

Lily doesn’t look at me or admire the clothes. Doesn’t do more than sigh her exasperated and exasperating sigh.

I pluck a flute from the tray for each hand and hold one out for her. “Drink.”

She looks at it then at me, wrinkles her nose, and shakes her head firmly. “No thanks, I’ll pass.”

“Not a drinker?”

“Not with you. Hate to say it, but I didn’t quite think today was worth celebrating.”

“Drink it.”

“I said no thanks.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“And I said drink it.”

She glares again, defiant. “I’m not thirsty.”



I crowd her into the wall. “You will drink because I say so,” I growl in her face. “You will do everything I say because I say so.”

Fear turns her eyes darker, drains the color from her cheeks. “Fine. I’ll drink the fucking champagne.” But she doesn’t remove the bite from her voice.

“There now, that’s better.” I hold out the flute and wait until she takes it before I smile at her and ease back.

She drains it in one gulp, then shoves the empty glass in my chest. “Satisfied?”

I look her up and down, slow, undressing her with my eyes. “Getting there. But tonight, I will show you true satisfaction.”

Her lip quivers. “What?”

But I know damn well she heard what I said.

To my surprise, she presses the issue. “Roman, what do you mean? What’s tonight?” Her voice trembles.

“It’s our wedding night. What do you think I mean?”

“I’m not sleeping with you, if that’s what you’re suggesting,” she spits.

“Such brave words. Spoken with such fire.” I press my hips into hers again and let my stubbled chin slide along her soft cheek until my mouth is at her ear. “Don’t worry, *moya zhena*. We won’t do much sleeping.”

Then, satisfied with how things are progressing, I back off. “Go put on a swimming suit.”

Everything is an argument waiting to happen with this one. But she’s a little flustered at the moment. She just gawks, first at me then at the racks of bikinis. Then, gathering her wits, she snatches one at random off the rack and disappears into the dressing room.

I counted on her bending to my will sooner or later. I didn’t count on her looking so fucking incredible when she re-emerges a moment later.

The tiny white top pushes her breasts up deliciously. I want to slide my tongue between them, taste them, mark her with my kiss and my bite. And

the bottom triangle of fabric over her pussy rides low until it disappears between her legs. She has a uselessly transparent shawl draped over one hip and tied at the other.

Fuck. My cock twitches, and I shift to hide the evidence. I probably should've told her she looks good, but saying those words aloud would be counterproductive to getting this erection to go down.

“We need to talk about this sleeping situation,” Lily says with a sense of poise that tells me she practiced that exact phrase in the dressing room mirror before coming back out.

I grin. I expected nothing less. And I need to show her it won't work. Nothing she says will change my mind.

“Not now.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

“You know, I'm getting really sick of that answer,” she snaps.

“Get used to it, *kiska*. You're going to be hearing a lot of it.”

I put my hand at the small of her back and walk her out the back of the house toward the beach.

The sand is soft like sugar beneath our feet and the ocean in front of us is green and glowing. The sun decided to cooperate today, shining high over the jungle-covered mountains on the other side of the island.

A table is set on the beach—flowers and candles, a five-star-chef-prepared meal, glistening silverware, chilled wine in crystal glasses.

Lily's jaw drops at the sight of the spread. “Oh my God. Is this for us?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It's the first night of our honeymoon. Were you expecting McDonald's?”

She starts to laugh for the briefest of moments before she kills it.

I pull her chair out for her and she settles into it with grace. “It’s beautiful,” she murmurs, almost reluctantly, like she doesn’t want to admit it.

I nod as I take my seat across from my bride. “I bribed the sunset, too.”

She grins. “Whatever it cost, it is worth it.” Then her smile fades away, like she only just realized what she was doing. “You’re used to buying what you want.”

“Or taking it. Or winning it.” I clear my throat and lift the wine bottle. “May I?”

“Are you asking me, or telling me?”

I fill her glass to the brim. “Not much of a difference, I don’t think.” I set the bottle down and gesture to the food. “Let’s eat.”

We both fall quiet for a while as we dig in. The food tastes like angels themselves prepared the buttered lobster tails and fresh ahi tuna.

I have a moment, watching her eat—or more accurately, watching her enjoy eating—where I almost flip the table aside and draw her to me then and there. The sun catches a golden wave in her dark hair and it glistens. Wind brushes her locks like invisible fingers.

“Do you read all those books in your library?” she asks suddenly.

There are first editions as old as the island itself in one of the rooms we walked through on our way into the villa. Hell, it probably has God’s copy of the Bible.

“No.”

She scoffs. “That figures. Too busy breaking kneecaps or whatever.”

“You don’t like me very much, do you?”

“I don’t know you enough to dislike you. But yes, I dislike you.”

“We can fix that. Not that it matters, really. You’re here for a purpose.”

“And what happens once I serve my purpose?”

“Then we wait six weeks and start making a second child. And a third after that.”

Her jaw clenches. “And if I refuse?”

“Then we’ll do things a different way.” I let her think on it for a minute before I sigh. “I don’t force women into my bed. There’s not a need with so many willing. But you will have my child one way or the other. My way will just be more fun.”

“That’s not much of a negotiation.”

“Darling, who ever said we were going to negotiate?”

She grimaces and we go back to eating for a bit. The dessert arrives: chocolate mousse with fresh-picked raspberries. Lily takes one bite and then shoves it away.

“Not a fan?” I ask.

“Not a glutton,” she corrects.

“Ah. Keeping your figure trim for your husband, then.”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Why would I? I have you to do that for me.”

She rolls her eyes a second time, more dramatically than the first. “Are we done here? Or is this more of a dinner-and-a-show kind of thing?”

In response, I stand and walk around the table. We have an entire week to spend together. No need to do all my intimidating now.

I hold out my hand for her to take. When she reluctantly does, I lead her down the beach, toward the cove where chairs line the beach and crystal waters roll in from the ocean.

She undoes the shawl at her waist, tosses it aside carelessly, and lays down on one of the flat chaise loungers. Instantly, my mouth goes dry. She rubs one calf with her other foot. Her toes are painted dark red, so fucking sexy I can’t

stop looking.

Jesus, even her fucking toes make my dick hard. And the little moan when she stretches her muscles and yawns... It's all too goddamn much. The miles of leg. The acres of exposed skin. The flutter of her lashes as she slips into a nap like she's completely forgotten that I'm still standing right here.

I sink to the adjacent lounge. It's an effort to wrench my eyes off of Lily. But eventually, I do. I let them close. The sun turns my eyelids translucent, but I doze off for a while.

I don't dream. I rarely do. Men like me don't have to create fantasies in our sleep—we use our waking hours to take everything we could ever want.



I wake up sometime later and glance at Lily. At some point while I was sleeping, she turned over to lie on her belly. Her back is pink, redder still around the straps to her bikini top.

Without thinking, I reach into the pocket next to her chair and pull out a bottle of sunscreen, then move to stand over her.

“Wake up, princess.” She stretches again sleepily, her arms going over her head and her luscious ass flexing, pulling the white shiny suit bottoms in, showing the first hints of the incoming tan line.

“Time for the show?”

“You need sunscreen.”

She glances down at herself and shrugs. “Okay.” She holds her hand out for the bottle in my grasp.

“I'll take care of it.”

Lily frowns. “That's extremely not necess—”

Her words cut off when I undo the hook on her top. She gasps, stiffens, but says nothing.

Good girl. She is learning.

I tip the bottle and pour some of the smooth lotion into my palm. Then, before I can consider whether this is a bad idea, I'm rubbing it on her body, on her supple skin, letting my fingers caress and massage.

It doesn't lessen the urgency of my wanting her.

And it doesn't do a fucking thing to tame the rock-hard erection in my swimming trunks.

When I finish her upper back, I move lower, letting my fingers dip into the waistband of her bikini bottoms. She sucks in a breath and holds it. I feel that breath in my cock as I move to slide my hands down her thighs.

But instead of moving toward her knees, I push her thighs apart, press my hands inward toward her pussy, and wait for another gasp as I get closer and closer...

It doesn't come.

I don't look at her. That's what she wants—to feel like she can win some battles, push back in some moments. She's wrong. Very fucking wrong.

“Should I turn over so you can do the front?” she says. The threat of a taunt lingers on the edge of her voice.

*Fuck yes.* I want to squeeze a handful of her tits, feel her nipple pebble in my hand, then in my mouth. And—

“Roman?” Her voice doesn't waver. Doesn't crack or break. The little *kiska* knows exactly what she is doing. “Roman, dear?”

I growl. No one plays vixen to trap Roman Sorokin. Especially not someone I own.

I stand and drop the bottle of sunscreen next to her. Adjusting my cock in my shorts, I turn to walk away. “You can reach the front yourself.”

If I do it, I'll have her naked before her next inhale.

That will have to wait until tonight.

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## LILY

I've never had a man's hands on me.

Boys, yes. But a man? A *real* man?

Never.

I let Joey Gallo get to second base in tenth grade. It lasted all of thirty seconds while he tried and failed to divide his attention between kissing me and fondling my breast through my bra. He then promptly came in his own pants.

Another time, a friend of Leo's named Martin grabbed my ass when he was over with his girlfriend and mistook me for her. I'd been standing against the kitchen counter when Martin stumbled in reeking of booze. He groped my ass then ground his dick into it. He even reached around to grab my breast before yanking his hand back. He actually yelped like I burned him when he didn't find the D-cups he expected.

So yeah—that's pretty much the sum total of my sexual history.

What just happened was... not that.

It was not anything even remotely *close* to that.

Never has a man touched my bare skin with such power in his hands, such sensuality and passion in every stroke and brush and curl of his fingers.

No one has ever made me want to go farther just by massaging my back. It brought out something longing in me, something that wanted so much more.

Roman thought I was teasing him, I think. But he was wrong.

I was offering myself up on a silver platter.

But it was just a moment of stupid delusion. Without his fingers working their magic, all those blissful sensations wear off, and I am left alone. Just some pathetic woman lying mostly naked on a chaise in the sun while her husband strides away—unaffected, bored even, by touching me.

I try not to sigh. I've been doing a lot of that lately. Things could definitely be worse, right?

At least Roman gave me peace for a little while to laze in the tropical sun without worrying about him trying to fuck a baby into me.

Although, the closer the sun creeps towards the horizon, the more my stomach churns.

I have... obligations to fulfill once the sun sets. Spousal obligations that Roman has taken a twisted pleasure in reminding me about again and again and again.

I'm still not quite sure what he meant by "whatever it takes." I'm terrified to find out.



The sun is almost in the sea when his shadow darkens my chair again. "We should get back to the house."

"Oh yes, hello, hi, how's your afternoon going?" I drawl. "Me, I'm doing pretty good, tan is coming along nicely, the view is really quite spectacu—"

"We should get back to the house," he repeats.

I shade my eyes with my hand as I look up at him. "You are truly a man of many words."

“Would you prefer I point and grunt?”

I can't help laughing. “As if Caveman Roman is any different than the normal version.”

He just rolls his eyes. Well, actually, the sun is silhouetting his face so I can't tell for certain, but I'm pretty sure he does. His body is a little distracting, anyway. He's wearing a pale green bathing suit beneath a white linen button-down shirt with most of the buttons undone. It wafts in the ocean breeze, revealing the smattering of hair on his chest, a few inky tendrils of tattoo, the cuts and valleys of his abs.

Does the devil always have to look so fucking good?

“I won't ask you again,” he says. “Let's go.”

“You never asked me to begin with,” I grumble. But I get up and knot the shawl around my waist anyway, ignoring his offered hand.

Roman nods, satisfied, and sets off towards the villa at a fast pace. He doesn't even bother looking in my direction. Of course he is in a big hurry to get the show on the road now.

Sins don't look like sins if you do them in the dark.

I follow Roman into the house, up the curved staircase, down a hallway. We go through a first set of double doors, then a second.

Before I know it, we've arrived.

“I'll be back,” Roman says. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Then he's gone, disappearing down the hallway before I can think of something snarky to say.

And I'm left alone at what will soon become the scene of the crime.

The bedroom is as big as my entire childhood home. The only furniture in the room, a four-poster king-sized bed full of pillows, looms against the far wall. Built-in bookshelves house more of the books no one cares to read, but I would stake the Sorokin fortune their value could solve world hunger.

Floor-to-ceiling windows let the sun setting over the nearby ocean bathe the room in rich reds and golds. A door on one side leads to the largest and most ornate bathroom I've ever seen in my life.

The tub is roomy enough for ten and sits under a domed glass roof. The marble sink top runs the length of the wall, and one corner of the counter has every kind of lotion and soap, cream, emollient, gel, wash, scrub, and perfume that humankind has ever dreamed up, all waiting in row after row of glass jars.

The shower has multiple overhead sprayers and jets every six or eight inches that shoot out of the stone walls. There is a dressing table with makeup lights and a jewelry box I don't dare look inside.

Another door on the opposite side of the bathtub opens to a closet. *My* closet, I notice with a lurch. My clothes have been hung neatly from hangers and folded into careful piles on the shelves.

I have a drawer for my panties and bras, another for my pajamas. Nighty after nighty in silk and satin and lace, in deep reds and navy blues, in snow whites and deep blacks trimmed in gold. Garters and teddies, camisoles and stockings.

I choose the least skimpy negligee—maroon, since it isn't really my color and I don't want to look good for Roman—but it is still pretty freaking skimpy all things considered, with a white lace edging at the deep v-neckline and thin satin straps at the shoulders.

At least it isn't see-through, which is something. Not much, but something.

I debate back and forth on whether I want a shower or a bath. It seems like a waste to run water into the giant tub for just myself, but I sure as fuck don't plan on inviting my husband in for a scrub, and it isn't *my* money washing down the drain.

Besides—knowing what I am going to be put through, a bath is the least of the luxuries I deserve.

So, bath it is.

The control panel on the wall has knobs and dials and switches and digital read-out windows. I can select the water temperature, the number of jets and their intensity, the fragrance I want in the water—vanilla, rose, lavender, jasmine, coconut—along with additives for the water like body oils, bubbles, and music to listen to while I soak.

The only thing this tub doesn't do is drive itself around the house.

I feel like I'm defusing a bomb as I pick my settings, but eventually I get it all rigged up to my satisfaction. While the bath fills, I strip out of the bikini.

I turn to look at my naked body in the mirror. "What are you doing here, girl?" I whisper to myself.

This isn't the way I wanted to lose my virginity. I wanted to give it to a man I loved. A man who loved me back. One who would be gentle and care for me before, during, and afterward.

It isn't like I don't know what is going to happen. I'm dreading the blood and the pinching pain I've heard about from more than one of my friends who got rid of their V-cards already.

I was waiting for... something. I'm not sure what. I guess I had these grandiose ideas that I am worth more than a quickie in Joey Gallo's car.

But had I known I was going to end up with someone who treated me like a breeding cow to be used and discarded at his whim, I would've jumped into Joey's backseat and gotten it over with years ago.

When the tub is ready, I sink into the steaming water. It's easy to pretend nothing is real in here. That there is no monster lurking in the dark hallways of this house with my name on his lips.

I stay in the tub as long as I can without it looking like I am trying to go full mermaid. Then I spend another twenty minutes air-drying and slathering on lotion everywhere I can reach.

I brush my teeth, wash my face, blow my hair dry. When all that's done, I cast around for something else to do. But I come up empty.

I can't delay the inevitable anymore.

Without any way left to dawdle, I open the door and walk into the bedroom. The totally, weirdly, conspicuously empty bedroom.

My husband is nowhere to be seen... unless he'd decided to hide under the bed?

If so, I don't care. I certainly don't plan on going to look for him.

Instead, I climb up on the bed and start moving pillows to build my own shielding wall in the center.

I might be "obligated" to have sex with Roman—according to him, at least—but if he wants it, he is damned sure gonna have to work for it. That will start with destroying the mountain of decorative adornments I'm shoving between my side and his.

When I have a suitable barrier between us, I settle under the duvet and snuggle in. Roman still hasn't shown.

I want to be awake when he makes his entrance so he can see the fire in my eyes, the fight in my heart.

But God, I also just want to sleep. To close my eyes and lose myself in dreams that will take me far away from the shitty new reality of my shitty new life.

And yet no matter how many sheep I count, how many times I flip from one side to the other, my eyes won't stay closed.

I sigh and flop on my back. I'm not sure how long I lie there, listening to the crashing surf and watching the shadows dance on the ceiling from the trees waving between the house and the moon.

I try not to wonder where Roman has gone or why he hasn't come to bed already. It's not that I want him in here—obviously not. But Papa always talks about keeping your enemies close.

That's what I'm doing.

Or at least, that's what I tell myself I'm doing.

What kind of “enemy” slathers sunscreen on you the way Roman did today, though? I’ve been reliving that memory in my head again and again. He was so... gentle, I guess you’d have to call it. There’s no other word for it. Gentle... but powerful. Irresistible.

When he parted my legs, I turned liquid. In that moment, I would’ve rolled over if he asked me to. I would’ve spread wider. Would’ve let him—

Just then, the door opens and my husband walks in.

I freeze and close my eyes almost all the way. I leave just enough of a crack in my eyelids so I can watch him.

He strips off his clothes silently in the darkness. I can see the ridges in his stomach and the bulge of his cock in his boxer briefs like a concealed weapon.

He walks around the bed to my side. I flinch involuntarily.

But he isn’t coming for me. Not yet, at least.

He keeps moving past the bed, to the far wall. Stopping there, he stares out the window, almost naked, arm resting above his head on the window frame.

Maybe the same thing about the rolling waves that soothed me is soothing him. He sighs, then still. In that moment, he could be a statue. A portrait. He is all sharp angles and sleek lines. The body of an athlete.

And, God help me, so fucking sexy.

He sighs again and walks around the bed to his side. I close my eyes all the way and pretend to sleep. I feel the weight of the bed shift as he climbs in. If he notices the pillow wall, he doesn’t say or do anything about it.

A few silent minutes pass. I regulate my breath until I’m almost positive he believes I’m really asleep.

Then, out of nowhere, Roman’s voice comes rasping out of the darkness.

“Goodnight, my wife.”

His whisper is almost tender. I fall asleep before I can figure out what that might mean.

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## ROMAN

There is a direct correlation between youth and beauty. I've always known that. But now, I have it firsthand. Right up in my face.

Lily Benedetti—my wife—is the definition of exquisite.

At first, I thought it was the hair. Long, flowing, vibrant. The kind of locks I want to knot around my fist and wrench back.

But then, I thought—*No, maybe the lips*. So full I could spend hours thinking about how they'll feel wrapped around my cock. How they'll part to let out a tiny, timid moan when I lick between her thighs.

After a while, I changed my mind: *it's her eyes*. Fuck me, those eyes. Striking. Expressive. Her hate, anger, desire, passion all reflected in the depths of those little windows to her soul.

But none of these thoughts are going to get us where we need to be or get me the thing—our child—I need out of her.

Because at the end of the day, Lily is simply a prize. A possession. I don't have time for kid games or mind-fucking her into loving me. And I sure as fuck don't have time for the tantrums she likes to throw.

For one day, I told myself I would allow this insolence of hers, this rebellion. Call it a wedding gift.

But starting tomorrow, there will be a price to pay until she learns I am in charge.

Even the sound of the ocean rolling in beneath a full moon doesn't calm me. Nothing, not even a wall of pillows between my wife and me, has a chance of calming the beast inside. My whole body aches and burns.

Because of *her*.

The ocean rolls in. Back out. Always the same: steady, constant, soothing.

Well, almost always. But not tonight. Tonight, I saw the turmoil in the water that its grace can't hide.

The sheets and blankets rustle. Lily shifts in the bed to face away from me. I can see her reflection in the window. She's breathing too shallowly to be actually asleep.

A tempting little liar.

My cock hardens as Lily's smell fills my nostrils. The wall of pillows she's erected makes me laugh. A polyester fiber wall of chastity.

She thinks it'll protect her from her big, bad wolf of a husband?

Wrong. Very soon, Riding Hood is going to have to give up the picnic basket.

The thought is enough to relax me. To make sleep come easy. I close my eyes. Content. Peaceful. Drifting away, almost unconscious...

...when suddenly, Lily shifts again, and her foot slides along my calf.

Some of the pillows fall off the end of the bed. But she isn't done. Her breath is slow and even. I'm sure now that she's actually asleep, even if she was faking before.

And yet her hand is on the move. It inches through a crack in the wall of pillows, up over my chest to lay on top of my heart. Her fingertips curl into my chest hair.

I am disciplined. I've been trained to resist anything.

But this... *fuck*.

She scoots, presses closer, dislodges more pillows. Tits against my arm. Pussy nestled against my thigh. Her leg thrown over both of mine.

It occurs to me suddenly: I have a wife. I have a wife who is warm, who is fuckable, who is sleeping in my bed and dressed in a negligee that's just begging to be peeled off her.

I could act on it. One turn of my body and my cock would be flush against her wetness. It'd be that fucking easy.

But then she murmurs something I don't catch—and I find myself holding her instead. I slip my arm under her and guide her head to my chest.

How did we get to this point? Why am I here, doing this? I could have half a dozen women waiting in another room for me to come fuck them senseless. Marriage has never stopped Sorokin men from fucking whatever they please.

Not my father, at least.

I was eight when I first found him in bed with a woman who wasn't my mom. Ten minutes later, my mother was explaining to me that it was all okay. It was just the way things happened in our family.

I was ten the first time I realized what my father did for a living. It was only a minute later when I realized the reason he was hard on me as a boy, the reason my punishments were harder and more intense, was because I was being *taught*. Groomed, molded into someone my father could leave the family business to.

I was sixteen the first time I killed a man. Didn't even have my driver's license yet. I came home and found some son of a bitch holding a gun on my father in the home office. I backed out. So silent, already so well-trained. I went straight to my room, took out the gun Father had bought me the year before, circled back around to where the asshole had my father at the end of his weapon, and turned the tables.

I made that bastard kneel before my dad. Made him beg for his life. Made him piss himself with fear.

Then I shot him in the face and sent him back to his family in a body bag.

Father bought me a car the next day. I quit school the day after that.

He sat me down when we got home and he said, “Someday, Roman, you will be head of this Bratva. You’ll be the one in charge of the business and you’ll need a son to teach the ways of our family.” His accent was heavy. He’d come over from the motherland decades ago, but the sound of his words never adapted to life in America. “The decisions you make must protect this family. Starting now.”

He’d handed over part of the business for me to manage. When the right time came, I will do the same for my son. I will teach him what I was taught: how to kill, how to claim, and how to sleep peacefully afterward.

Lily burrows an inch closer. Between the irresistible smell, the fit of her curled against me, and the little sounds she makes—half gasp, half whimper—when she dreams, there’s no way can I lie here beside her and not be the man I am. Not take what I want, what I am entitled to.

Which means I have two choices: take her or leave her.

The decision is obvious.

I leave.

I lift her delicate hand from my chest, hold it a second longer than necessary, then set it on her side as I slide myself out from beneath her leg. The soft skin of her thigh brushes the length of my cock with only the thin fabric of my boxers between us.

She moans softly. I pull in a long, slow inhale as I step out of the bed and look down at her.

My whole life, I’ve never been forced to deny myself anything. If I want it, I can have it. But I learned long ago that willpower is a skill that must be practiced. So I’ve honed it like a fucking blade.

I can walk away from anything without hesitation.

Until her.

Until Lily.

But that desire is a fucking weakness. I won’t let it win.

So instead of giving into it, I storm out of the room and straight to the gym. Tonight, a ten-rep workout will be a twenty. A twenty-curl lift will be forty. Whatever it takes to beat these thoughts out of my head.

I'm not punishing myself for wanting my wife—but for second-guessing myself.

This is the life I have. The one I've chosen over and over again.

There isn't room in it for a single ounce of doubt.

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# LILY

I don't want to emerge from that moment between sleep and awake, the blissful one where I can still feel his chest under my ear and his arm around my shoulders.

*Wait.*

Hold on.

What?

I need a rewind. Because "chest under my ear and arm around my shoulders" makes no sense. I'd put about a thousand pillows between us, hadn't I?

I pop one eye open. My carefully constructed pillow fort is gone. It's scattered on the floor, across the carpet, in the bathroom.

Roman is nowhere to be seen. I tell myself that it must've been a dream, nothing more. After all, I have pride. Even asleep, I wouldn't surrender to him. I am stronger than that.

Dream Me can want him from midnight until dawn.

Daytime Me is gonna to stick to my guns and hate Roman Sorokin's guts.

I curl under the blanket. After all the shit I've been through, I deserve a few more minutes of beauty sleep. At the very least so I can keep denying reality for a little bit longer.



... Until the object of this love/hate relationship shoves the bedroom door open and waltzes in like he owns the place. His bare chest glistens with sweat and his smirk is firmly in place.

Bastard.

“Sleep well?”

“You moved my pillows.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining last night when you cuddled up to me and started rubbing your pussy on my leg like a bitch in heat.”

That renders me speechless. Stupid and fucking speechless. It meant the cuddling hadn’t been a dream. It was real.

Heat burns its way from my stomach to the top of my head. “I’m sorry,” I mumble. “Won’t ever happen again, Girl Scout’s Honor.”

The bastard simply grins. “Just know, my wife, that cuddling is the very least of what’s going to happen in this bed.” He walks to the bathroom door, turns, and looks at me. “I meant what I said: we’re going to fuck as soon as you beg me to make it happen.”

“Dream on, asshole.”

He smiles again. “Get dressed. We’re going on a hike.”

Then he saunters into the bathroom. I hear the shower kick on.

“A hike?” I call after him. “I don’t have clothes. Or shoes. I don’t even like hiking, actually. And I especially don’t like being told what to do.”

I plop back down on the bed and cross my arms. The very picture of bratty defiance. Childish, yes, but it feels good anyway.

When he emerges a couple of minutes later to see me right where he left me—and most certainly not dressed in the latest from the L.L. Bean Nightmare Honeymoon Hike collection—he cocks an eyebrow.

No doubt he’s loading up some smart-ass remark—but then a woman walks in with food on a rolling cart. I can smell pancakes and my mouth waters.

Roman nods at the woman. “Excellent timing. Thank you, Joan.”

She bows and walks out.

He turns to look at me. “You hungry?”

He sits on the end of the bed with his towel wrapped around his waist and nothing else. Droplets of water run down his chest. His hair curls up at the ends when it is wet, and I have a brief urge—very brief, very stupid, and very quickly extinguished—to run my hand through it.

He pulls the silver-domed cover off the plate and wafts his hand to direct the steam toward himself. “Smells delicious.”

“Have at it. Somehow, I’ve lost my appetite.” But my stomach growls, giving me away. I cough to cover it up, albeit not very convincingly. “I’m going to get dressed.”

He grins again and turns to face me. “By all means. I like breakfast and a show.”

I have two options: cower like a baby or face him with defiance. Not much of a choice, is it?

Men like him smell weakness a mile away. I won’t show him an ounce of it.

So I strip off the nightie and pull open a drawer in the dresser. “This is a tropical island?”

He nods and stuffs a bite of pancake in his mouth.

“Then why sweaters in the closet?”

“I wasn’t sure what you like to wear, so I had them bring everything.” He shrugs like the mind-boggling amount of money and manpower required to make that happen isn’t a big deal.

“Oh. Right.”

A silent minute passes while I keep rooting through clothes, keeping my bare back to him. I can sense his eyes burning holes in me.

But I just keep pretending I don't care. Even when that squirmy feeling between my thighs keeps growing hotter and wetter.

“Do you touch yourself, Lily?”

I freeze in place. Of all the things I thought he was maybe about to say, that wasn't even in the top one hundred. A blush rises in my cheeks and my thighs burn.

*Breathe, I tell myself. Count down from ten. Then turn around and tell this motherfucker to stick it where the sun don't shine.*

I do exactly that. *Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one...*

I spin slowly, arms crossed over my bare breasts. My jaw is clenched tight. Roman's eyes rake over my body, leaving a sizzling path of nerve endings behind.

“Do *you*?” I snap.

This man has a thousand smiles. This one is slow and lazy. “Do I touch you? Not yet. But I intend to.”

The smile shifts. This new one is knowing and smug.

“If you're asking if I touch *myself*,” he continues, “the answer is no. I have a number of women I can call for that.”

And now one more. This particularly arrogant grin is to let me know my place in his pecking order.

Fortunately, I don't give a fuck if he has the entire female population of Chicago taking care of his needs. Bless their hearts and good luck to 'em. I'm not jealous in the slightest.

“You should give one a call then. Or just go fuck yourself and save us all the trouble.”

I pull a plain white t-shirt out of the cabinet and slip it on, sans bra. If he wants to gawk at my nipples all day, he can be my fucking guest. Then he can call one of his bevvvy of broads to bang him tonight. Because no way in hell is that task going to fall to me.

“But I’m married now.” A final smile—pure evil. “I have you to take care of all my wants. All my needs. For as long as we both shall live. Remember those words?”

My body vibrates, practically purring.

I hate myself for it.

But if he stands and walks toward me now, I am history. The me that I am in this second—the one who has the courage and the desire to tell him no—will never be here again. So if he comes to me...

He doesn’t move, though.

Thank God for small mercies.

“You’re going to want to eat. Hiking takes it out of you. Here, sit.”

Grimacing, I walk to the bed and sit. Trained like a puppy and he hasn’t even rolled up a newspaper to bat me on the nose. Not yet, at least.

How pitiful.

He pulls a grape from the bunch and holds it up. “Do you bite, little princess?”

I let him feed me the grape and smile. “Do you want me to bite, master?” There is just enough sarcasm in my voice to keep Roman Sorokin on his toes.

With careful fingers, he presses another grape between my lips. I chew slowly and swallow, never looking away from him.

The back of his finger drags down my chin to my throat and over my collarbone. Fire flashes behind his eyes.

Either he doesn’t like me calling him “master...”

Or he likes it way, way too much.

“You don’t like to answer my questions, do you?”

He plucks another grape off the vine and holds it up for me. It might’ve been humiliating—like he’s feeding a pet—if it wasn’t so fucking hot I can’t

breathe.

“Let’s play a game,” he suggests. “I ask a question, you answer it. If you decline... well, I think you know how eager I am to spank your luscious little ass.”

Of course I know. He just doesn’t know that, each time I think about it, the idea gets hotter and hotter.

“Not much of a game. But I’m sure you weren’t actually asking what I want. So go ahead—whatever floats your boat, cowboy.”

“How old were you the first time you masturbated?”

Well, nothing like digging for gold on the first strike. I think about lying for a second, out of some weird self-protective instinct if nothing else.

But then I think again. What do I have to lose? There is nothing for me to be ashamed of anymore. All sense of right and wrong went out the window a long time ago.

“Twelve or thirteen, I think.”

“How long ago since the last time?”

“I don’t remember.”

Roman shakes his head. “Should I put you over my knee now, or shall we just keep tally until it’s worth my time?”

“You’re the one making up the rules as you go, wise guy.”

He chuckles at me. “I think we wait. The anticipation is half the fun.”

I wave a hand. “As you wish, your highness.”

“I’ll ask again: when was the last time you touched yourself?”

His eyes are burning coals. Searing into mine.

“I...”

But when I hesitate in answering, something changes. A shift in the air. And the weirdest word comes to mind when I try to decipher what happened; he’s

*disappointed* in me.

That's confusing, to say the least. But there's no denying that's what it is.

Roman turns back to his plate and deadens his tone. All sense of delicious tension that was humming between us has disappeared.

I kind of miss it when it's gone.

"Get dressed," he says. "We'll be leaving after we eat."

Unless he plans on wearing the towel on this mystery hike, we'll also be waiting for him to dress, but I don't mention that. I return to the closet, pull on a pair of shorts and socks, and go hunting for shoes.

By the time I step back out, he is dressed in a pair of athletic sweatpants and a t-shirt with sneakers. Doesn't really seem fair that he got a show and I didn't even get a sneak preview, but I digress.

"Come on."

We walk quickly through the house and soon arrive at a garage the size of an airplane hangar. Roman doesn't slow down when we get there. He climbs silently up onto one of the two ATVs waiting at the open mouth of the garage, fires up the engine, and rips out.

Which leaves me alone and shocked, looking back and forth between Roman's quickly vanishing cloud of dust and the lone remaining ATV.

"Son of a bitch," I mutter.

This bastard doesn't even know if I know how to start one of these behemoths, and there's not a soul in sight to help.

I'm not exactly an outdoorsy girl. The smug son of a bitch would get what he deserves if I said, "*Sayonara*," and let him go hike by his damn self.

But curiosity compels me. So I walk up nervously to the machine and hop up.

As it turns out, the ATV isn't hard to operate. I hit the start button, twist the throttle like I saw him do, and with a screech, I shoot off the way Roman went like a rocket ship.

Off into the jungle.

God help us all.

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## LILY

It doesn't take long to catch him. He'd either been taking his time or decided to wait for me. Whatever the case, when I turn a corner, I see him waiting in a small clearing on the side of the road.

He still doesn't look at me as he speaks. "Leave the ATV. Keep up."

Then he turns and plunges into the foliage. I follow behind at a jog as we pick up a faint trail between the trees.

His brusque manner is a little humiliating, but the view from back here isn't too shabby. The way this man fills out a pair of pants should be illegal. I shake the thought from my head and keep my eyes on my feet.

The path leads up the mountain. We quickly leave the open clearing behind and enter into lush, tropical jungle. Birds call overhead and the leaves are so green it makes my eyes hurt.

Roman keeps moving fast. "Don't fall behind," he barks.

The sounds of the wilderness are unnerving me a little bit. I haven't left Chicago in a long time—and we are very fucking far from Chicago right now.

"What happened to our game?" I call up to him. "Actually, you know what? I think it's my turn. Let's see... How old were you when you figured out you were the son of a crime boss?"

“Grigor Sorokin” is a curse in my house. When I was five, I thought his name was right up there with “shit” and “fuck.” When I asked Leo about it, he called me stupid, then told me who Grigor was and why our father hated him.

I don’t imagine Roman could’ve been much older when he learned the truth.

“Eight.”

“And when you first killed a man?”

I don’t ask “if” he’s killed a man. There is no doubt Roman has taken lives. Plural. If I hadn’t heard about it through the family grapevines, I would’ve known it by the way he stands, the way he gives commands, like he expects men and women alike to know what happens when they don’t comply.

This isn’t a man who waits for answers.

“I don’t remember.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“Should I turn you over my knee now or shall we keep a tally for later?” I sass.

He stops abruptly, looking at me over his shoulder with the faintest glimmer of a laugh in his eye. “Sixteen,” he says finally. “I was sixteen.”

I nod. That one has the ring of truth.

My turn to be honest. “Last week.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Huh?”

“You answered my question. I’m answering yours.”

*When was the last time you touched yourself?* he’d asked me. Well, now he has what he wants to know. And the mental image to match, I’m sure.

It clicks, and then he nods slowly and solemnly. It’s oddly tense, that moment that passes between us.

And when it ends, it’s clear that something very subtle has changed.

He walks on, but slower now, letting me walk beside him. We stay silent. But more than once, he shoots me a meaningful sideways glance.

Our childhoods weren't so different. He was pushed into his life just like I was pushed into mine. The difference is, he simply accepted it—embraced it, even—whereas I hid from it. I stuck my head in the sand and pretended like I didn't know.

But I knew.

I always knew.

I follow my husband through the jungle. He pushes exotic plants out of the way for us, ducks under low branches, steps confidently over rocks and roots.

He moves like he has no fear of anything poisonous or wild. It's honestly kind of awe-inspiring. I wish I felt the same.

We keep hiking fast and furious until my breath comes in short gasps and my thighs are burning from the effort of the constant uphill grind. My thin white t-shirt is so soaked with sweat that it is practically see-through.

Even though I desperately want to slow down for a breather, I don't say a word. I won't give him the satisfaction of leaving me in the dust.

But just when I'm starting to think I might collapse from a mix of heat exhaustion and my legs falling off, Roman pauses.

I almost collide with him because I am so focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

"Sorry," I mutter, stepping back.

I look up and see that we've stopped beside a steaming pool of water. It looks like a natural hot spring surrounded by flowers with triangular orange petals. They point up instead of out, like a flame licking the air.

"Oh, wow." My awe is genuine. "But I didn't bring a swimsuit."

He shrugs. "Me neither."

Before I can process what's happening, he's hooked his thumbs into his pants and dispensed with them and his shoes. He rips his shirt over his head and

tosses it at me.

I catch it and just barely resist burying my nose in the fabric to inhale the earthy, masculine scent of him.

But I watch him hungrily as he lowers his naked, muscular body into the water.

“Are you going to join me?” he asks.

This isn't the guy who owns me asking. Not this softly, this quietly, this tenderly.

The man in the hot spring is a different version of Roman Sorokin.

I slip out of my sweat-dampened clothes, hurry to the edge while shielding my nude body from his view, and plunge myself up to the neck in the scalding water.

I sit across from him on one of the slippery rock ledges just below the surface. The water is like a warm kiss against my skin. I close my eyes to savor it.

Peace.

Pure peace.

That's what I feel.

Jungle noises, wind in the trees, the soft slurp of water lapping against the edges of the rock. The knot of anxiety that has taken up residence in my chest since the night I was sold to Roman begins to loosen, just the tiniest bit. It is like I can finally take a deep breath for the first time in many days.

Then the bastard splashes me.

I yelp in surprise and open one eye, water dripping down my face. “Asshole!” Immediately, I shoot a return surge of water his way.

He laughs as he jumps out of the way. It's a rich, genuine sound that goes straight to my belly. No, lower than that. It makes me want to hear it again and again, as often as I can.

So I splash and move left and right when he retaliates.

It devolves into a war of hurling water back and forth, me squealing and him laughing again and again.

Then he plants his feet on the underwater ledge, lunges off, and swallows me up with his arms to drag us both beneath the surface.

“Ah!” I screech as we submerge.

It is even quieter down here. Just the sound of bubbling spring water. I open my eyes before I can consider whether that might let some gross jungle parasite invade my brain.

But to my surprise, it is crystal clear, perfect visibility.

Roman has his eyes open, too. They’re dark, so brown they’re almost black, but gazing at me with the strangest expression. Like his normal assholishness has receded just a little bit.

Something else is taking priority.

Something far less violent.

When we come up for air, he keeps me close to him, my breasts flush against his chest. So close our exhales mingle right between our faces.

We’re both still chuckling at first, but the laughter quickly fades. Tension builds. Roman stares at me and I stare back. He brings his hand out of the water and slides it over my cheek so he can thread his fingers in my hair.

Then he brings our mouths together.

And I melt into him.

This isn’t the kind of kiss I expected. This is raw and passionate and deep. This is the best kind of torture. Torture because we can’t stay in the hot spring forever, and so this kiss and all the touching that go with it will have to end.

But God, I don’t want it to end.

Based on how he’s kissing me, it seems like he doesn’t want it to end, either.

At least, until something shifts. Why does it feel like he's drifting away?

Why does it feel as if he is pulling back from this kiss?

Why is his hand leaving my waist, his warmth disappearing to the other side of the pool?

I open my eyes. It's not my imagination—he's really pushing away from me. And I'm left staring at him like a fool, with my lips parted and my heart pounding.

He climbs out, smooth and athletic. His body looks somehow even more beautiful when it is slick with spring water. I don't have long to appreciate it, though, because he dresses like he is getting paid for how fast he can do it.

"Let's go."

His voice is rough and gravelly. Like when we started, he doesn't wait for me to catch up before he takes off through the jungle back down the trail.

I wait one long, shame-filled moment before I struggle out. The jungle air feels chilly after the hot spring water.

My husband hadn't been able to get away from me fast enough. Maybe this marriage isn't going to go the distance after all.

But strangely enough, only part of me is thanking God for that.



## LILY

The vibration of the ATV does me absolutely no favors on the way back to the house. If anything, it only intensifies an already precarious situation. I am wired and achy and against all reason, I want my husband to—well, to act like a husband.

Because that is what he is, right?

He struck the deal. Made the bargain. Won the hand.

And now, he has me.

But what for? He says to make an heir, but just when I'm there and ready—finally ready—as in, really, really ready...

He walked.

Scratch that—he ran. As fast and as far away from me as he could go without leaving the island.

I pull the ATV into the garage next to his and for a moment to try and clear my head. It doesn't do much good.

I keep trying to summon up that old fantasy I used to have of my New York boyfriend, the sensitive artist who'd love me unconditionally. My Julliard man never would've left me aching and needy.

He would've... what?



Honestly, I am too inexperienced to know what a real man would've done. Whether he would've touched me while he kissed me. Finished me with his hands or his mouth. If it would've been fast or slow or rough or gentle...

He'd have done *something*, though. My imaginary Julliard man would've never left me to deal with this awful throbbing ache on my own.

Sighing, I clamber off the ATV. I walk through the house. It's startlingly empty. Roman isn't in the kitchen or the library or the billiards room or any other room I pass through on the way to the bedroom.

Part of me—a larger part than I want to admit to myself—is half-hoping I'll push open the door of the master bathroom to find Roman there waiting, steamy, wet, ready to finish what he started at the hot spring.

But no. The bedroom is quiet and steam-free. Roman-free, too.

I sigh again—I'm doing a lot of that lately—and strip quickly to step under the shower. I crank it to cold, hoping the shock of the frigid water will stun some of these thoughts out of my head.

That turns out to be a massive failure. Desire bubbles inside of me despite my skin prickling into goosebumps. Every thought is still of Roman. Every fucking image in my head is him, naked, kissing me in that hot spring.

His cock nestled against me.

His hand stroking down my body to my pussy.

*Fuck.*

I need to purge this shit. So what if my husband doesn't want me? And so what if he doesn't want to have sex with me, even after he explicitly stated that fucking me into pregnancy is his primary goal for our quote-unquote "relationship"?

I don't need Roman. I have hands. I've been pleasing myself for years.

I lean against the shower wall, close my eyes and picture Roman, strong and tall, virile and beautiful, his eyes dark with passion, his cock hard. Walking toward me...

I slide my hand down, imagining it's Roman touching me, circling my clit with his finger...

My lips part. A tiny gasp blossoms, then grows louder. I'm sticky with wetness and the tremors are building low in my belly. I'm getting hotter, higher, tenser, right up to the edge and I'm so close that I can almost fucking —

Suddenly, the door flies open.

I scream, fearing the worst.

But it isn't Roman. Roman wouldn't be looking at me with such stunned, wide-eyed surprise.

This poor housekeeper, on the other hand, probably isn't used to walking in on her boss's wife fingering herself like she'll never get to come again.

The pile of towels in her arms falls to the floor. She sprints out.

"Fuck," I mumble. "Motherfucking fuck."

I shut the water off and step out of the shower. I snatch a clean towel from the stack the housekeeper just dropped and dry off furiously like I can exfoliate the horniness away.

When the towel doesn't work for that purpose, I pick up a hairbrush and drag it through my hair over and over. And over and over, even when it hurts a little, until the desire finally starts to quiet, and I can pretend I am just an innocent girl brushing her hair before bed.

Finally able to breathe again, I change into pajamas, slink into bed, and wait. For the second night in a row, there's no sign of Roman.

An hour passes. I check the clock and wait another.

At long last, he walks in. Slow, shrouded in shadow, almost as if he is trying to sneak his way across the room to slip into bed before I notice.

Not much chance of that. I watch him strip to his boxer briefs. Then I sit up.

"Where were you?"

He sighs. “Working out.”

“The hike wasn’t athletic enough for you?”

Roman doesn’t answer the question for a while. “You should sleep,” he says finally. “It’s been a long day.”

He walks into the bathroom and showers without turning on the light. I sit in bed and gnaw at my bottom lip.

He’s in and out in two minutes. The shower cuts off and he pads back into the bedroom barefoot. I expect him to say something. Anything. *Sweet dreams* or *Don’t forget you belong to me* or *I’ll spare you one more night*.

But no, nothing.

He gets into bed, and in the space of a few breaths, the son of a bitch is asleep.

*Asleep*. Like his wife next to him all pheromone’d up isn’t his problem. Just another day in the life of Roman Sorokin.

Roman does what Roman wants. Tonight is merely another reminder of that sad little fact.

And if I have to finish myself off, oh well. Nothing new there. Although I can’t deny the whole ordeal makes me want to scream inside.

I sink back into the pillows, wondering what would have happened if he hadn’t run away at the hot spring.

Would he have done things the way I expected? Pulled me onto his lap, let me straddle his cock, lower my aching pussy onto him, let me ride it? It’s easy to imagine. Hell, it’s been easy to imagine him claiming me since the second we locked eyes at the poker game.

I can almost hear the spring water sloshing between us. My breath goes shallow and my body tightens. Every sensation I’m picturing tingles through me like it’s actually happening.

I close my eyes and let the fantasy intensify.

His hands would've explored my skin, my breasts, my ass, squeezed and showed me the extent of his desire so I knew it matched mine.

And more:

His lips sweeping over me...

His teeth clamping down on my collarbone as we ride out wave after wave together...

I wait until I hear his first soft snore. Then I slip the straps of tonight's nightie down so I can pull my arms out and shove the garment into a bunch around my belly. I tweak my nipples and pull, stifling a gasp.

Wetting my fingers with my spit, I circle the taut nubs. I imagine it's Roman sucking each one into a nibbling kiss. My back arches.

I imagine his lips gliding down my belly to the waistband of my panties. Slowly peeling them aside. My fingers are an almost adequate substitute for the tongue I desperately want circling my clit, using my own juices to make me wet.

When I dip my finger lower, I moan, imagining Roman touching me so intimately, so softly. I tease my nipples and my pussy relentlessly until my body starts to tighten with that telltale intensity.

The orgasm is building somewhere deep inside. My own wetness against my finger, and the fantasy of Roman doing what I want him to do so motherfucking badly that I might explode if he doesn't, and, and, and...

And just as I am about to come, a hand clamps down harshly over mine.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" His voice is like stone, flat and hard.

"Dying of embarrassment" probably isn't the answer he wants, but I don't have any other to give. It is all I can think of.

Not like it matters, because he continues before I can answer: "You do not touch your pussy unless I give you permission. Unless I *let* you do it." He crushes my fingers under his as he emphasizes the last word. "Do. You. Understand?"

I don't answer because, well, fuck him and his ridiculous orders. But he squeezes my fingers until I yelp.

"I asked you a question, *moya zhena*."

"Yes, Roman. I understand." My voice is breathy, whimpering.

At long last, he lets go. "I mean it," he repeats.

"I heard you," I spit. "But maybe you can explain why the hell you married me if you weren't going to fuck me. Kind of counterproductive to the 'let's make a baby' plan, don't you think?"

He sighs. "Go to sleep, little princess."

"Don't call me that. I'm your wife. I mean, if you need a little blue pill, if you need help getting it up, just say so. We can call a doctor or buy you one of those dick pump things."

"You're going too far, Lily."

"Touchy. Touchy," I scoff. "Can't prove it by me."

"Watch your mouth if you know what's good for you," he snaps. "I don't need to prove anything to you."

"Of course not. You're the fucking boss. The guy who says where and when and how. Although, now I'm thinking that maybe your equipment doesn't respond to your threats. And maybe it also doesn't respond to a naked woman in a hot spring? Or a half-naked one lying next to you? I'm no doctor, but it sounds to me like it must be broken."

All the extra dopamine must've made me brave, because I am writing checks with my mouth that my body most definitely cannot cash.

"I'm warning you one last time: watch your tone. I won't say it again." He flips the sheet over my naked torso. The slight contact of the fabric makes my nipples even harder. "And cover yourself."

"Why? This is my bed. Where I sleep. And it isn't like these skimpy nighties cover anything anyway."

I feel like I'm floating out of my body. This isn't me. This isn't the Lily Benedetti I've been my whole life. That Lily would never do what I'm doing—shimmying my nightie and panties down my hips and throwing them defiantly on the ground next to the bed.

"I'm more comfortable sleeping naked anyways," I add, a little unnecessarily.

"Me, too." He throws his boxers across the room.

"Good."

Oh, Lord. Not good. Not good at all. Midnight cuddles just took on a whole new meaning.

"Want your pillow wall back?" Roman taunts. Darkness doesn't hide the smirk in his tone.

I roll toward him and lay my hand low on his stomach. "Do you?"

He shoves my hand away. "Hardly. You're not the temptress you think you are."

"Funny, because you're absolutely the bastard I think you are."

Roman chuckles. "Tell me something I don't know."



**ROMAN**

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## THE NEXT MORNING

My fucking dick is so hard I can barely walk. Catching the little *kiska* with her own fingers deep in her pussy didn't help that situation.

But if she is willing to torture herself to think she can torture me, there is no goddamn way she is going to last the day.

By dusk, she'll be on her knees begging me to fuck her until one or both of us go cross-eyed.

Apparently, though, she has a plan of her own. When we wake up, she has seemingly decided clothes are off the menu.

After her morning shower, she dries off, walks past me, and drops the towel at my feet. I find her on the beach a little while later, wearing nothing but a pair of sunglasses.

She doesn't speak, just flips to her stomach and leaves that luscious ass up in the air. My hand yearns to spank her. My lips yearns to bite her. My dick yearns to fuck her.

I ignore it all as I walk up to her lounge chaise. Lifting the bottle of tanning lotion from the pouch on the chair, I pour a dollop onto my palm. I'm sure she expects me to go straight for her bare ass, so I do the opposite—start with her shoulders, move down her arms, then across her back.

I have self-control like a fucking monk. I can damned well smooth tan lotion on her legs without coming in my pants like a horny teenager.

The air between us crackles. Neither of us has said a word since dawn.

Lily shifts and lets one her leg dangle off the opposite side of the two-person chaise. Now, I have a bird's eye view of her pussy. Delicate. Luscious.

And, I notice, glistening.

Little princess isn't as unaffected as she wants to appear.

When I pour a second quarter-sized dollop into my hand, I let it warm in the sun for a moment, then run my hand from her calf to her thigh.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Her skin is velvet, satin, silk. So smooth. So perfect.

I let the fingers on the inside of her thigh move closer while my thumbs climb the curve of her ass. Lily sucks in a breath and holds it until my hands slide away, back towards her feet.

She holds another when I take the return trail north. Whimpers when I almost touch her pussy. Again when I pull away once more.

I chuckle under my breath. Yeah, no way is my submissive little wife making it until sunset.

"You okay there, princess?" I ask, keeping my voice casual as hell.

"I told you not to call me that."

I take a swing from the bottle of sangria I brought out from the kitchen. Then I offer it to her. She hesitates, then takes it from me and brings it to her lips.

Never breaking eye contact, she licks a droplet of wine from the edge of the bottle rim.

Goddammit. At this rate, my dick is never going to be back to normal.

She takes a sip, then hands the bottle back to me. "Thanks," she murmurs. "It's hot out here."

I take another long drink. "Yeah."

Lily pulls the back of the two-person chaise up into a sitting position and smiles, then pats the acreage of linen cushion next to her. "Take a load off,

Roman. You always look so stiff. So on-guard.”

“Stiff” is definitely accurate. But this is the first time in my life I’m not actually on-guard. I don’t know if I’m the type of man who can ever truly relax, but this might be as close as I’ll ever get to it.

Unless Lily keeps this shit up.

I stretch out next to her, crossing my ankles and folding one arm behind my head.

“You should take your shirt off,” she continues. “Get some sun on that chest.”

As soon as she says the word “chest,” my gaze flits to hers.

She catches me and chuckles. “Don’t make me take it off you...”

I pull the collar up. “I can do it myself.”

We need to set some ground rules. Get some fucking shit straight. But fuck if I can think of what those ought to be right now. All the blood in my body is occupied down south.

“You want me to put some sunscreen on you?” she says coyly. “We wouldn’t want you to burn.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yes, you are.” She chews one corner of her lip as she looks me up and down.

I turn my gaze away and finish the bottle of sangria in two long pulls. Before I can call the house for another, one of the house boys appears with a refill and two fresh glasses. To his credit, he doesn’t look at Lily even once. And so he lives to work another day.

“Are you getting drunk, Roman?” Lily asks when I immediately uncork the fresh bottle and take another drag.

Drunk on sangria? No.

Drunk on thoughts of fucking every last moan out of my wife's gorgeous, plump mouth? Hell fucking yes.

I smile thinly. "Maybe I am." I hand it over to her. "Here. You look flushed."

She grabs it and takes another tentative sip.

"If you get dressed," I say while she's drinking, "we can take out the jet ski." I nod down the beach to where it sits bobbing on the surf.

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "I've never ridden a jet ski before," she sighs like some breathy Hollywood starlet. "So many, many things I've never done before..."

She sits up, swings her legs to the side of the chaise, and stands. I watch her sweet ass all the way back to the house.

Then I finish the second bottle of sangria and wait for her. I set my breathing to the swell of the surf rolling in, rolling out, rolling in, rolling out. It calms me until I can stand again without my cock pointing straight north.

But when Lily returns a few minutes later, it's right back to full attention. The tiny blue bikini with sheer wrap she has covering—well, it's not covering much, actually. It's barely enough fabric to hide her nipples and slit from view.

She cocks her head, eyes shining. "Something you'd like to say?"

"Ready?" I grumble instead. I turn and march down the beach before she can answer. I'll be fucked if I am going to give her the reaction she's looking for.

"You sure you're okay to drive this thing?" she calls up to me. "You've been drinking like a fish."

Ah, now *there* is the voice I love out of her. Quiet. Unsure. Not so feisty.

"I'm rich. I'm powerful. I can do as I damned well please."

"Well, by all means then, Mr. Humble. Let's ride." She climbs on then pats the seat in front of her. "Do I need a helmet? Sign a waiver? Anything like that?"

I jump on in front of her. “You already signed on the only line that matters, Lily Sorokin.”

Then I fire up the engine and we go roaring out to sea.

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## ROMAN

“Roman, look!”

A few hundred meters off shore, as if I’d planned it just for her, a pod of dolphins leaps past, jumping and arcing through the air.

I slow so we can watch. Lily gasps and oohs in my ear. Her heart pounds against my back and her hands flutter around my waist.

After the pod swims out of sight, I put the jet ski through its paces. We max out the speed and carve huge turns in the water. Nothing like the sharp, gut-churning feeling of the engine to make Lily want to squeeze me tighter.

She squeals, laughs, begs for me to slow down without really meaning it. The sound goes straight to my cock.

When I straighten us out, throttle wide open so we’re skimming effortlessly over the top of the gentle turquoise waves, she lays her cheek against my shoulder blade.

We work our way around the perimeter of the island until we reach the cliffs and I cut the engine down to a slow idle.

The caves beckon. Coolness flows out from them, refreshing compared to the sunbaked air out above the open water.

As I’m piloting us through the open mouth of stone, Lily murmurs in wordless awe. The sound of waves on the slick rocks is serene.

“Look up,” I tell her.

Above us inside the cave, the rock formations attached to the ceiling sparkle like diamonds in the light reflecting off the water. Like a private light show for us and us alone.

Lily gasps. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Indescribably.”

But I’m not looking at the cave. I’m looking at her.

She notices a beat later that we’re talking about different things. Her cheeks redden in a maddeningly adorable blush.

I steer us deeper into the caves, a left here, a right there, a zig and a zag at the fork. She clings to me, until I make the last turn.

There, the top of the cave opens in a big circle like a skylight overhead and a waterfall cascades down the side. It falls twenty or thirty feet from the heart of the island, down here into this perfect oasis.

Glistening. Gorgeous. Starlight in liquid form.

“Oh my God.” Her voice trembles and she pulls her hand away from my stomach to put it to her mouth. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

I don’t know if she means to the island or to the cave, but it doesn’t really matter. The sentiment is the same.

We sit there in silence for a moment. It feels damn near vulnerable. Like this is the first time we’ve truly let our guards down, let the games come to a halt.

No power struggle. No testy back-and-forth.

Just being here... together.

It doesn’t last forever. After a while, she turns to me. “It’s got real Aladdin vibes, you know?” she says. “*You can show me the world*, et cetera.” Her smile is half-teasing, but half-serious, too. Her eyes sparkle. “What else you got?”



My gut pings. I don't say anything, just turn the jet ski around and drive us out of the caves back to open water.

"You want to drive?" I ask.

"Hell yes." She shimmies around me to climb in front, giggling.

I should've known she'd be good at it. But maybe I didn't appreciate quite how closely she's been watching what I do.

As such, I'm so unprepared for how confidently she seizes the handles and rips back on the throttle that the sudden motion throws me clear off the back of the jet ski.

I have just enough time to register my surprise before I crash into the water and below.

I swallow a huge mouthful of ocean on the way down. I bob back up to the surface, coughing and gasping, then spit the salty water out and smooth my hair back away from my face...

Right in time to see Lily bearing down on me at full speed.

In my life, I've faced down danger. I've had guns aimed at my temple, knives held to my throat. I've been in barehanded fights to the death.

This is a whole different kind of threat.

The woman driving it is another still.

Neither one looks very forgiving.

She accelerates more. Only a few dozen more yards to go. A second or less before the end. I don't have time to swim out of the way.

*Blyat'*. Of all the fucking things I've done, this is how I will die? My own wife will hit me, crack my skull open, and leave me out here to drown? Pathetic.

But I don't flinch.

I don't move.

I'll face down my death like a man.

Until at the last moment, she jerks the steering column and swerves. Her giggle floats to me on the air behind her, just a moment ahead of the huge wave of water that comes to splash me in the face.

When the stirred-up wake settles back down, there she is, waiting patiently with a wicked grin.

“Were you scared?” she asks. Those eyes flash again.

I laugh. “Shaking in my boots.”

I grab the lip of the jet ski and tow myself up behind her. As soon as I'm in position, we take off again.

This time, I hold tight.



We stay in the water until almost sunset. My wife's delighted squeals and peals of laughter are like a never-ending melody. Seeing this makes me realize that watching her mope and pout in silence is getting old.

It's nice to see she has other moods.

When the sun nears the horizon, we pull back onto the beach and park the jet ski. Someone who works at the house will take care of securing it, so I leave it with the keys in the ignition and walk beside Lily to the mansion.

She smells like sand and sea and fresh air. I want to inhale her. I settle for following her inside to the kitchen.

“Hungry?” she asks.

I'm not—not for food, at least—but I shrug and walk to stand behind her as she holds the door to the refrigerator open.

Lily glows in the light from the fridge. She looks every bit as innocent as she is. A helpless pawn in this grown-up game.

If I was the kind of guy who suffered guilt, I might've felt guilty at the sight.

Unfortunately for her, guilt is a foreign concept to a Sorokin don.

She holds up a plastic container. “We have cold cuts. I can make us sandwiches.”

I haven’t made my own food in... ever, as far as I can remember. It isn’t the kind of thing a man like me concerns himself with.

I shrug. “Sure.”

“Where would I find plates?”

“No idea. I can call someone to handle this, you know.”

She wrinkles her brow. “To make sandwiches? You would call someone to make you a sandwich rather than open a few cabinet doors to find plates?”

“I don’t have time to waste on shit like that.”

“I want you to know that I’m judging you right now.”

I scoff. “I have far more important things to do than make sandwiches. I hire people to make sandwiches.”

“Of course you do.”

Along with the judgement comes condescension. And with the condescension comes the old familiar contempt.

Just like that, we’re right back where we started.

I sigh. “I have things I have to take care of. Therefore, I hire people to take care of me. Or I buy them. So,” I continue, “when you’re finished with the sandwiches, bring them up to the bedroom.”

Then I turn and walk away, ignoring the open-mouthed gape I am leaving behind.



## ROMAN

It takes a while before she appears at the bedroom door. And when she does, there's no sandwich in sight.

I'm not especially hungry, but now there is a point to be made. And I have to make it clearly, because our lives and our safety depend on her listening to me.

"Where is my food?"

She doesn't answer.

The fact I am lying on the bed, ankles crossed, hands under my head, a football game I don't care about on the TV, doesn't speak to the tension roiling through me. I haven't been this wound up since... the last time she pissed me off, I suppose.

But I am playing the long game here. We're laying the foundation. Everything that happens between us on this island will shape the rest of our marriage.

"I asked you where my food is, Lily."

"I'm not your waitress or your chef."

She sticks her chin out—defiant.

Puts her hands on her hips—stubborn.

Grimaces like I am the devil—correct.

I sigh, stand, and walk over to the doorway where she's lingering. Leaning into her face, I rasp, "You'll make my food because I told you to do it. Because I own you. Because I say so."

Her eyes flash. "You can make your own fucking sandwich."

I tower over her. To her credit, she doesn't shy away. She stands with her back straight, head high.

"I'll give you one more chance to obey."

Her hard stare lingers for a moment longer. Then, to my surprise, she turns and strides back out of the bedroom.

I wait a few breaths, then follow her.

When I walk into the kitchen, she is standing at the counter. The loaf of bread sits open on one side of her, ham and cheese on the other. She's still wearing the swimsuit with the little wrap, so I focus on her hands rather than the curve of her tits. It's better that way.

She doesn't look up at me as I enter. But I see how she sets her jaw and spreads the condiments with a little extra ferocity.

I sigh. "Leave that. Come here."

I don't give a shit about a sandwich. It's only a symbol. I want the real meal. The real prize.

*Her.*

She pauses but keeps her gaze rooted on the counter. I step over, pluck the knife from her hand, set it down, and lead her into the living room.

New goal. New plan.

I push her to her knees on the carpet and sit down on the couch in front of her. She obeys, to my surprise. Good girl. But she hadn't said a word yet.

I reach a hand beneath the curtain of her hair and untie the bow in the bikini top.

“What are you doing?” she whispers finally.

I pull the top down, exposing those beautiful breasts. “Shh. You talk when I say you can talk.” I tweak a nipple. “You moan when I say you can moan.” I lean forward, take the nipple in my mouth, give it a suck, and chuckle at her gasp. “You beg when I say you can beg.”

Then I stand and look down at her.

“And right now, all I’m saying is, *stay right fucking there.*”

I don’t look back over my shoulder to make sure she’s obeying. I know she is.

And sure enough, when I return with a towel and a bottle of aloe gel, she’s still where I left her. Another point in the little *kiska*’s favor.

“Did you touch yourself while I was gone, Lily?”

She shakes her head but her skin pinks from her neck to her forehead. It’s a dead giveaway.

“Hidden cameras everywhere.” I pull out my phone and wave it in her face. “Shall we take a look?”

“Fine,” she grits. “A little bit.”

My dick strains against my pants. “Show me.”

She lifts her hands and squeezes her nipples, then gives them a twist and a pull.

Fuck. I can’t stop watching her. I want to push her hands away and do it myself, but there are lessons to be taught still.

“Turn around.” She starts to lower one hand to comply, but I shake my head. “No. You don’t stop until I say stop. Keep doing that, but turn around and kneel on the sofa.”

This time, she does exactly as I order. When she’s on all fours, I dance my hand over her left ass cheek then give it a light swat. Just enough to sting. Enough to elicit a cry, albeit one she manages to hold back.

“Good girl,” I croon in her ear. “Such a good girl.”

I want to touch her, and fuck her, and all the other shit I’ve been holding back from doing. But this isn’t about me.

Not yet, goddammit.

“Now, you know what will happen if you disobey me, don’t you?”

I spread the cool gel on her shoulders. She gasps and presses her forehead against the couch cushions.

“Yes, Roman.”

I move slow. Taking my time to spread the gel smoothly, to work it into her tender skin with gentle strokes.

“It’s cold,” she murmurs.

I give her another swat on the ass. “I didn’t say you can speak.”

My red handprint on her skin is one of the most exquisite things I’ve ever seen, and I am about to explode. I’m so hard I could use my dick to pound nails.

“Lie down on your back now.”

Once again, she does exactly as I say. Where this compliance is coming from, I don’t know—but I like that she’s starting to understand how this marriage will work.

She moves slow and keeps her eyes low. Her hands stay plastered to her breasts, teasing her nipples into painful peaks.

She lies back on the butter-soft leather and lets her eyelids flutter shut.

I match her speed. Standing over her, I hook my fingers into the sides of her bottoms and pull them down—slowly, slowly, slowly.

I could live to be a million years old and I’d still never get tired of looking at her. Her eyes, her hair, her ass, her pussy.

“Do you want me to touch you?” I ask.



I let my hand hover over her center. Warmth flows between us, desire flows between us, desperation flows between us—but I need her to ask for it. She has to learn.

She nods pitifully.

“Say it. Ask me to touch you.”

“Will you touch me, Roman?”

The way she says my name goes straight through my gut. But I wait. “You have to say please.”

“Will you touch me, please?” She trembles. “Please?”

“Please, *sir*.”

“Will you touch me, please, sir?” Her voice is different than normal. Huskier. Rippling with dark things she’s never encountered before.

“Are you begging me, little princess?”

“Yes.” Her whisper is as potent as if she’d screamed. Her breath comes in short puffs.

“Then say that.”

“Please, Roman. I’m begging you to touch me. Please.”

I let my hand rest on her thigh—close, but not quite there yet. “Where do you want me to touch you?”

“My pussy.”

“What did you say?” I’m not sure which of us is suffering more at this point.

She grits her teeth, eyes still closed, and says, “Roman, I’m begging you to please touch my pussy.”

“That’s a good little *kiska*,” I growl.

I tap dance a thumb over her clit, then spread her thighs apart. It requires no force at all. She parts so willingly, a flower ready to bloom.

Her breath catches in her throat as I go back to grazing her needy clit again and again. “Do you want to come, little princess?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

Her body tightens more. She looks like she would explode if I gave her just one soft breath between her legs.

So, of course, that’s when I pull away.

“Not yet.”

Her eyes jerk open in horror. I smile down at her. I don’t know if desire is making her more beautiful or if I just haven’t quite appreciated her enough yet, but I can’t look away from her in this moment. She’s a mirage. A fantasy come to life.

“But-but... But I begged you.”

I nod. “And you’ll beg again.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Fair?” I laugh. “Nothing in this world is fair, *moya zhená*. Now, sit up and turn around to face the back of the sofa.”

She’s still pouting, so she moves slow. Too slow.

Growling like a feral animal, I lunge forward, wrap an arm around her waist, and flip her quickly onto her stomach. I spank her twice, hard, once on each cheek. Lily cries out in shock and hurt.

“You like that?” I demand.

“Yes! Fuck, ow, God, yes.”

“Ask me for more.”

“Spank me, Roman. Please. I’m begging you.”

God, she is a fast learner. I swat her again, harder. My cock can’t take much more of this. “Turn around and undress me.”

A little voice inside my head says this is dangerous. I am playing with fire.

But today, right now, I have no more self-control to spare.

Lily turns and sinks to the floor between my legs as I take a seat on the couch. She rakes her fingers down my chest to the waistband of my bathing suit, pushes it down and stares at my throbbing cock.

“What do you want, little princess?” I rasp.

“I want to touch you.”

She wraps her fingers around my shaft. I should punish her for acting without permission, but then she starts stroking me and my brain short-circuits.

It damn near melts when she runs her tongue over the tip and laps up the drop of pre-cum leaking down the side.

Then her mouth slips over the head and just like that, I am lost.

She isn't skilled—that much is obvious. She doesn't have rhythm or experience. But her mouth is soft, her tongue a weapon. I tangle my fingers in her hair and show her how to move. She picks it up quickly.

“Oh, that's it,” I growl. “That's a good little *kiska*.”

She bobs up and down on my length, slurping and twisting at the base of me. I've been hovering on the edge for so long that my self-control is at its end. Just a few more licks and I might—

I shove her off of me and stand. “Come on, my little princess.”

She looks stunned, wondering if I'm teasing her again. But I just smile back at her.

“Your first time is not going to be on my sofa.”



# LILY

Is there a word for what's happening to me right now?

I've been saying for days—or weeks? months? honestly, I'm losing track of time—that I feel like I'm dreaming. I still feel like that.

But something in the substance of it has changed. It's not a nightmare anymore. Just a fever dream, where every sensation is heightened and all the rules have gone out the window.

The taste of Roman is hot on my mouth as he leads me to the bedroom. My lips still buzz with the memory of the words he coaxed out of me.

*I want to touch you.*

*Spank me, please, I'm begging you.*

*Yes. Sir. More.*

The craziest part of all... is that I meant every bit of it.

With every step we move closer to the bedroom—slow motion steps, like he knows what's going on inside me and wants to drag out the exquisite torture for as long as he can—my pussy gives another throb.

He pushes the door open and pulls me inside. Then he turns and kisses me like no one ever has.

Every kiss from Roman feels like it's the first one. New. Exhilarating. Hot.

Without taking his mouth off mine, he walks me to the edge of the bed. The mattress bumps into the back of my legs. He spins me around in place so his dick is against my ass and he has a handful of my breast while his lips burn a path along the side of my throat.

His free hand moves down to tease my clit, flicking back and forth over it until my knees go weak. When he dips a finger inside me, I throw my head back into his shoulder and let him hold me up.

He adds another finger. “You’re so tight, baby.”

He told me the rules downstairs: all I have to do is beg. To say those three magic words.

So I do.

“Fuck me, Roman.”

He smiles against my throat. Then he takes his hand off my breast and uses it to bend me over the bed. “You’ve been warned about speaking without permission. I’m starting to think you like being spanked.”

*God, yes.* I nod. “If that’s what you want.”

His hand slices through the air and makes stinging contact with my bare ass. I moan, but only because that will earn me another.

My pussy tightens and the world narrows as he smacks my ass again.

“Do you want to come now, baby?”

I like when he calls me “baby.” Like it so much I can’t speak, so I just nod and bit my lip.

“Then you know what you need to do.” His voice is deep, gravelly, but so fucking hot that there is no way I can refuse.

But I can barely form a word. If he wants me to talk, he is going to have to show my trembling body some mercy.

I squeeze my legs together to trap his fingers stroking inside me. “P-please, Roman. Let me come. I’m b-begging you.”

“You are a fucking fabulous wife.” His breath warms my ear as he pulls me upright again and uses his thumb to work my clit while his fingers push in and out of me.

The pressure builds until I can’t stop writhing, crying out, moaning. And then I’m coming on his hand so hard I drool.

When I finish, I can only pant. I need him to hold me up because I don’t know if I can support my own weight. Not with spasm after spasm rocking through me, each one as unforgiving as the man who gave them to me.

“Get on the bed,” he orders.

I’m running on pure autopilot now. Like his instructions are bypassing my standard *Fuck You* filter and acting directly on my muscles.

I scramble up onto the comforter and turn to lay on my back. I look up at him through half-lidded eyes.

He stands at the edge watching me, his eyes dark, lips parted.

“We’ll get back to the rules later.” He smiles and moves to lie beside me, to stroke his finger along my jaw. “Right now, I’m going to lick you... here.” He circles my nipple with his fingertip. “And here.” He traces the other nipple. “And here.”

I try not to whimper or move. Roman continues drawing his path, going down now to my belly button.

“And after I lick you here”—he brushes my clit—“and you come apart for me, I’m going to fuck you until you scream my name.”

“Please, Roman. I’m begging you.”

“Oh, my little princess...” He lowers his head and sucks one nipple then the other.

Oh God. I hear color. I see sound.

Then he presses his body over mine. He brushes his cock against my clit and dips just the head in once. Any farther and I would’ve come instantly.

Instead, I whimper as he kisses his way down my stomach. “You’re fucking sexy when you’re at my mercy like this.”

He whispers that in a deep voice with his lips against the crease in my hips, so that I feel it as much as I hear it.

Then he lowers his head and swipes his tongue over me once, twice, until I can’t possibly lie still. Until my fingers curl in the blanket and I tighten my thighs around his head and scream.

I’m floating to another high. Then, a second or an hour later, I’m not sure which, he is back, clambering on top of me, his body braced over mine.

Beautiful. Strong. Every muscle rippling. But tense, with something like second thoughts churning behind those stormy eyes.

His cock pushes into me where our hips meet. Just the tip again, before he pulls out. The gentleness I sense in him is never more than a glimmer, a mirage, a suggestion. He is rough edges and hard lines—always.

Until now.

Because when he leans down and presses a tender kiss into my lips, I realize that all that brutality is a façade. There is more beneath the surface.

This is the real Roman.

I wrap my legs around him, and he growls deep in his chest as I whisper, “Fuck me, Roman.” I murmur the words against his mouth, and he swallows them. His kiss is as potent now as his cock, pushing deeper, harder.

A pinch breaks out hard enough inside me that I flinch and cry out.

He pauses there and lets me work through it. The pain lingers for a second before he eases out and back in. Over and over, letting me adjust to his thickness. He never takes his lips off of mine.

When the pain passes, I tilt my hips upward again. I want the ecstasy back. I want to see him as out of his mind as I am.

“Please, Roman. Give me all of you.”



He starts to string together slow, deep thrusts. I feel myself widening to take all of him in. It's like nothing else I've ever experienced. I'm being torn apart—and loving it, craving it.

I cry out as the first wave washes over me.

Louder with the second wave.

I scream his name on the third. “Roman!”

His body goes rigid and he closes his eyes, breathing with his mouth wide.

Then he rolls off me and lays on his back for a second. “Come here.” He pulls me close and flips the corner of the blanket over us. “We can take our time.”

He kisses the top of my head and holds me. His touch is grounding, calming. I stroke my hand over his chest down to his stomach beneath the blanket. There is not enough skin on this man for me to get tired of touching him. Dear God. It is like satin covering steel.

“You’re going to be sore tomorrow,” he warns.

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

“No, *this* is a promise: when you are hurting, *moya zhen*a, I’ll take care of you.”

I shudder with a feeling I can’t describe. It’s sort of squirmy, sort of hot. “Butterflies in my stomach” comes closest, but that doesn’t quite capture it.

Maybe it’s simply the realization that it’s getting harder and harder to hate him. I’ve already given him my virginity. In for a penny, and all.

A quiet minute passes. Then I can’t wait any longer. I get on top of him, position him at my opening, and sink down on his cock—his hard, thick, massive cock.

It is all instinct after that. Grinding and bouncing.

Until he flips us so he is on top and thrusting like he can’t get enough. Like he desperately needs to fuck me.

Nothing in my life has ever been so hot.

He sits up, changes the angles, and digs his fingers into my hips, guiding me until we both cry out. Mine is high and hoarse, his more guttural.

I didn't think it would be possible to happen again so quickly, but every cell in my body fires and responds to his. He kisses me hard, thrusting his tongue with as much force as his hips.

Then, one blink of an eye later, we peak. It's like an out-of-body experiment. He fills me, again and again, and it's both the strangest and the hottest sensation I've ever experienced.

Before I know it, we're both coasting back down to earth. It takes me a long time to catch my breath and regain sensation in my extremities.

"Is it always so... intense?" I venture.

"For us, it will be."

He doesn't ask if I am okay or do anything more than kiss my head again and let me lie on his arm. I wasn't expecting a thank you or anything, but my emotions are pinging all over the place.

I want to be held and consoled. I just gave this man my virginity. The least he can do is make a minute of conversation, right?

But he doesn't, and I know better than to ask.

It makes me unreasonably sad. Like how a blizzard feels so much colder when you step into it from someplace warm.

A tear slips down my cheek and I turn on my side, facing away from Roman. I don't know if he would be offended by the tears or if he'd just be indifferent, but I don't want to chance it.

I don't want him to get angry. I just don't know how to deal with all the sudden feelings that are threatening to overwhelm me.

I stay there as his movement and breathing slow and soften. When I am sure he is asleep, I slip out of bed.

I ignore the pain between my legs as I walk into the bathroom. I run a bath and mix it with a generous supply of the scented bubbles from the counter, then climb in and soak away the sadness.

That was my plan, anyway. But the steam and the heat in the room only add to my sensitivity. And more tears fall. I close my eyes and let them.

After a while—I'm not sure how long—the door pushes open. I turn and look.

There Roman stands, naked as the day he was born and beautiful like a marble statue of a god, leaning in the doorway with a furrow in his brows.

“Are you alright?” he rumbles.

No, I most certainly am not. I am a train wreck of ridiculousness.

Out loud, though, I just sniffle, “I'm fine.”

“Nothing is different than it was before, you know.”

“Is *that* a threat?” I snap. This time, it's not a joke.

“You keep seeing monsters in the shadows where there are none, Lily,” Roman sighs. “Not everything in this world is meant to cause pain.”

“I thought that's *exactly* what your world is meant to cause.”

“It will be what you make it. If you want it to hurt, we can make it hurt. But there are other options.”

“Gee, how comforting. Aren't I a lucky girl?” I hiss through clenched teeth.

He nods solemnly. “Far more than you will ever realize.”

I roll my eyes and turn away from him. If this was supposed to be a reassuring post-coital chat, he missed the mark by a fucking mile. I feel worse than ever. Humiliated and angry at the same time.

And utterly powerless on top of that.

“Are you going to stand there and stare at me all night?” I snap.

Roman sighs again. “Come to bed when you can.” He turns and leaves me with just those few pitiful words.

*When I can?* What the fuck does that mean?

I linger in the tub until I am sure he has to be asleep again. Then I dry off, slink across the floor like a burglar, and slide into bed, certain to stay on my own side and far from him.

I fall asleep fast, like my body is so overwhelmed from everything that has happened today that it needs to shut down and recharge.

I don't dream.

Not even once.

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# LILY

When I awake, I'm alone.

I dress, ignoring the pain that lances through me whenever I move, and go downstairs. Mallory, one of the housekeepers who greeted us when we first arrived at the villa, is at the kitchen counter slicing fresh fruit.

“Have you seen Roman?” I ask.

She plunks a plate in front of me. “He’s working at the office on the estate. He says he will see you for dinner tonight.”

Mallory is a motherly type—not like my mother, but the good kind of mom. She has hair the color of honey that curls around her face and eyes that sparkle when she smiles.

“However,” she adds, “I made you a pitcher of my secret recipe pina colada.”

I blush. “That’s sweet of you.”

She pours it into a large insulated cup and twists on one of those fancy lids with the flip-up straw. “Here you go, dear.”

“Thank you.” I take a sip and cough.

Mallory grins as I splutter. “The secret ingredient is lots of alcohol,” she says with a wink. “Don’t worry—you get used to it after the first sip.”

Sure enough, the second sip goes down a lot smoother. A warm buzz spreads throughout my body, smudging the pain and the shame into something more bearable.

I'm obviously not drunk yet, so I can't blame the alcohol for the urge that comes over me next. But maybe I'm just desperate for a kind face.

"Mallory, have you ever..."

She tilts her head to look at me. "Ever what, dear?"

I purse my lips, frustrated by my inability to voice any part of the storm of emotions in my chest. "What I mean is, do you think... Or, I guess, what would you say if..."

But nothing is coming out right.

I think of my own mother again. What would she say if she knew what happened last night? Hell, maybe she does know—or she can guess, at least—and the fact that I'm still trapped in this marriage, in this nightmare, is proof that she doesn't care.

Maybe I'm just missing the days when I was young enough not to know just how fucked-up my family was. When a popsicle after dinner was proof of my mother's love. When a ride on my father's shoulders was proof that he cared. When Leo tickling me relentlessly was evidence that I wasn't all alone in this world.

I might've been wrong about all those things. I probably was.

But like they say, ignorance is bliss.

"Never mind," I mumble. "Thank you for the drink."

I turn and leave before I can embarrass myself any further.

Without Roman, I'm not sure what I am allowed to do here. He didn't leave a list of rules or a map of where I am and am not allowed to venture on the island. I change into a new bikini, take my cup of special recipe pina colada, and go back to the beach.

I lay on the chaise as I sip on the drink and try not to think about yesterday. It's warm and pleasant and picturesque. Most people could be happy here.

Too bad I'm not most people.

After a while, my eye wanders to the jet ski pulled up on shore. I bet I can find those caves from yesterday.

By the time I have the machine figured out and I've taken off from the shore, the alcohol is strong in my bloodstream. I am over-confident, relaxed, and carefree. I half-expect an army to come chasing after me the second I blast off, but there's no one in sight.

So now, I have an entire day to watch dolphins if I want. To swim with that giant sea turtle Roman showed me yesterday, to bathe under the waterfall and smell those exotic flowers climbing up the sheer sides of the cliff.

This is *my* day. Was it only a week ago I took such a thing for granted? It seems like years since my old life. Since Leo, my parents, Juilliard.

None of those things feel real anymore.

I sit at the mouth of the cove for a few minutes and watch the open water swell in front of me. A few days ago, I would've almost certainly been on this jet ski riding as far as I could go to get away from Roman. Hell, I'd have been swimming if that was my only option.

Funny how things change. And how quickly, too.

Now, in place of the all-consuming hate I used to feel whenever the name "Roman Sorokin" flew across my mind, it's warmth I sense spreading throughout me.

Maybe being his wife isn't so bad. It will keep me away from the real world.

Here, Juilliard doesn't matter.

Here, it is never even a consideration.

I've gotten away from the Benedetti curse, probably forever, just like I always dreamed of. Even if it is sort of an "out of the frying pan and into the fire" kind of situation.



I shake my head to clear it. I've spent so much time trapped in my own thoughts lately.

I'm here, alone and free for the first time in weeks. I need to rediscover how it feels to be alive.

Sure enough, the caves aren't hard to find. I aim for the cliffs, and when I round the bend and see the opening, I cruise up to it.

Like yesterday, the sun reflects off the surface and illuminates the crystal ceiling.

"This is so beautiful."

I say the words aloud. To my surprise, the echo of my voice bouncing off the cave walls is the most beautiful acoustic effect I've ever heard.

I glance over my shoulder one more time to make sure no one has followed me. Coast is clear, so I sing a quick scale like I'm back in my elementary school choir class. "*Do, re, mi...*"

And after each note, I pause to listen to the reverb. It makes the hair on my arms stand straight up.

I haven't sang so much as a single note since... before the night of the poker game, I guess. I forgot how much I need music to sustain me.

I kill the engine of the jet ski so it's just the lapping of the waves and the fading echoes of my voice in here. Then, with a breath, I start singing again.

I give it my all, closing my eyes and letting the sound of my voice meld with the nature all around me. It feels good to sing. Freeing and light and wonderful.

It's only when the final note glimmers away that I realize I'm not alone after all.

I turn—and nearly scream. Roman is sitting on his jet ski, calm and composed. He doesn't say anything.

"Go on," I challenge bitterly before he can do it himself. "Tell me how stupid it is. Tell me how I'm wasting my time on a career that doesn't have a chance

in hell of being anything more than a hobby in the shower.”

It is what my father has always said. The family party line. Mom repeated it even though she helped me make the recording for Julliard and drove me to the post office to ship it off. A rare moment of sweetness in a lifetime of acrimony.

Roman is still staring at me. He is wearing a red bathing suit without a shirt, showing off his shredded abs and lean, tan legs. His chest hair and short beard glisten with the ocean spray.

But it is his eyes I am focused on. Dark and unreadable as ever.

“You have a beautiful voice,” he says.

“But...?” I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop with him. For the insult, the pain, to follow anything remotely nice.

It doesn’t come, though.

He just shrugs. “No but.”

“So it’s just a genuine compliment.”

“Is that so strange, *moya zhena*?”

It’s my turn to shrug. “I just didn’t realize you were capable of that.”

I expected him to laugh. He usually laughs when I bite back at him. Not right now, though.

“I’m capable of many things you haven’t yet realized, Lily Sorokin.”

His eyes hold mine captive for a long moment. He looks unbearably sad, of all things. That’s another thing I didn’t realize he was capable of. It feels like I’m seeing something, some part of him, that he’s never shown before.

*The real Roman.* If such a thing exists.

Then he blinks and the moment ends.

“Now, come,” he says. “We have to go.” He starts his jet ski and turns around to lead us back to the house.

I follow numbly. The whole ride back, my brow is furrowed. There was something damn near haunted about his expression. What could've been so bad on a tropical island that he came back looking like someone kicked his dog?

He doesn't wait for me at the beach. Once he parks, he steps off his jet ski and strides up the beach. I have to run to catch up.

When I walk into the kitchen, I see him seated at the dining table behind an open laptop. He jerks his head toward the staircase without looking up.

"Go change," he orders. "We have to get back."

My stomach drops. "Back... to Chicago? Already? I thought we had a week here."

"Things change. Now go."

The last place I want to go is back to reality. Back to life. Back to the place where everyone knows my marriage is a sham and I am nothing but cheap Sorokin property.

But the look in Roman's eyes says some things must be obeyed.

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## ROMAN

We leave the island in a hurry. Mallory has packed everything that needs packing. I give Lily just enough time to shower and dress, then the car whisks us back to the waiting jet.

No one says a word.

We taxi and takeoff while I brood. Hours pass. Still—nothing but silence. Soon enough, Chicago is unfurling itself outside of the plane's windows. When we land, we disembark straight into another car that takes us to my mansion on the outskirts of the city.

The whole time, I'm thinking about catching her in that cave. She has a gift, a voice that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Beautiful. Pure.

But so fucking naïve.

I'd stood and watched for several long minutes while she sang before she ever realized I was even there. If I'd been a man with bad intentions...

Fuck, I should've never let her go out there alone.

But then again, she hadn't tried to flee, or gone looking for secrets or bodies or any of the other sordid Sorokin family shit hidden all over that island. She'd gone *singing*, for fuck's sake.

What the hell am I supposed to make of that?

I wait for her at the front doors to the mansion. Lily halts at the bottom of the stairs and gnaws at her lip in that way she always does when there is something on her mind.

I frown. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she murmurs.

“I’ve warned you about lying, Lily.”

She nods, trembles, nods again. She looks like she is close to breaking down in tears. Finally, she speaks. “I’m just... I feel...”

“If you’re going to complain, think twice. You will have everything you can possibly want here.”

Truth be told, I don’t care if she is unhappy. Or at least, that’s what I want to think. For the most part, it’s true.

But not the whole part.

Part of me—a tiny, tiny piece, like an invisible splinter of glass stuck in my finger—*does* care. It is like her unhappiness has a physical manifestation inside of me. It throbs, it aches.

She shakes her head, though she won’t quite look me in the eye. “No, it’s not that.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s just, I’m not a—I mean... I left something back there. You said nothing is different, but... I *feel* different. People will look at me different.”

“We’re married. You’re not supposed to be a virgin anymore.”

“I know,” she sighs. But she isn’t truly agreeing. *Acknowledging* is the better word. She isn’t saying what she really wants to say.

I see the underlying sentiment, though. It isn’t that she cares if other people know she’s no longer a virgin.

It is that *she* cares. *She* feels different.

I retreat down the steps to stand next to her. “You are my wife now,” I tell her, staring fiercely into her eyes. I need her to hear this—not just with her ears, but with her whole body. “And that means you are the queen of this Bratva. Nothing can be taken from you unless you are willing to give it.”

She blinks and trembles. She’s right about one thing: the Roman and Lily who went to that island are not the same as the people who are coming back. Something shifted out there, like tectonic plates beneath our feet.

But it has nothing to do with her virginity.

It’s that I don’t look at her and see property anymore.

And I can’t say for certain—but when I look in her eyes, I sense that she no longer sees a monster gazing down at her.

Baby steps.

“Come on.” This time, I guide her with my hand at the small of her back. Truthfully, I just want to touch her.

I lead her upstairs, into the house. The foyer greets us with huge ceilings and massive chandelier dripping diamonds. We keep walking, up the inside staircase, past the room where I locked her when she first arrived, and down the hall to my bedroom.

I push the mahogany doors open. “This is where you live now,” I say simply.

She steps inside timidly. But I can see on her face that she is awed.

The ceiling is high and painted a deep green so it feels like walking underneath a forest canopy. The four-poster, California-king-sized bed is draped with white silk sheets and supported on a bedframe of dark steel.

Lily wanders through, touching everything hesitantly like she is afraid she might break it if she isn’t gentle enough.

The far side of the room holds two doors. One leads to the white marble bathroom. The other opens into a closet big enough that she could live in it with room to spare.

So I am surprised when her frown grows more serious, along with the ever deepening color of red in her cheeks.

“What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not—I can’t—I don’t... look like I fit here, in a place like this. You’re saying I’m a *queen*, but I don’t think I am. I don’t belong here.”

I clench my jaw tight. I see what’s happening here. Grabbing her hand, I start to lead her back out of the bedroom.

“Where are we going?” she asks. “Roman?”

“We’re going shopping.”

“I don’t think—”

I stop, whirl around, and hush her with a hot, open-mouthed kiss. When I break away, I say, “You’re wrong about what you’re saying. You don’t think you look like you belong here yet? Fine. Then we’re going to buy you everything in the world until you do.”

I call Danilo to drive us. Two minutes later, he’s out front in a blacked-out Mercedes sedan. He opens the doors as we approach. Lily and I slip into the backseat.

I wonder for a moment if the shock of the transition is going to be too much. If I was wrong about seeing a wife in her. If she is too broken, too fragile to be molded into the queen she will become.

But then, without ever looking over at me, she reaches across the seat and laces her fingers through mine.

Funny how things change. And how quickly.





## ROMAN

Danilo lets us off on Michigan Avenue. We walk into the first shop. “Whatever she wants,” I order the moment we’re inside.

The team of saleswomen know the drill. They nod in unison and show Lily a hundred different items.

We buy one bag.

The second store goes the same way. We enter, I tell them to bring their finest, they scurry to do my bidding.

We leave with a scarf.

By the fifth store, I am seeing a trend. Lily is uncomfortable. Before we walk into another boutique, I stop her, turn her to face me, and kiss her softly.

She is a refreshing change compared to all the other women I’ve known. There is no greed in there. She isn’t trying to suck me dry.

Lily is different than the rest.

“You have to pick out some clothes. Some shoes. *Something*, for fuck’s sake.”

Her cheeks flush. With a firm hand, I steer her through the door into the next boutique.

“Can I help you?” asks one of the attendants.

I point at Lily. “She’d like to spend an obscene amount of money. Help her do that.”

Lily’s cheeks redden again. She starts to say, “Well, not exact—”

But the saleswoman, spying the kind of commission that could pay off her mortgage, loops her arm through Lily’s and winks at me. “You’ve come to the right place, my love.”

Smirking I sit in an armchair in the corner of the store and observe. Lily and the saleswoman meander through the store. Another staff member follows along, and with every passing minute, the stack of items in her arms grows taller and taller until it looks like a mountain of clothes with legs.

On one circuit, Lily stops near me to examine a minidress hanging from a rack. “We just got this one in,” the saleswoman informs her. “The neckline is gorgeous. Half-off-the-shoulder with these cutouts? Ugh, so fabulous.”

Lily frowns and glances at me. “It’s a little... much,” she sighs. “I can’t just walk around with half my boobs hanging out.”

I clear my throat. “I beg to differ.”

Lily blushes—fuck, that is starting to have an effect on me—and keeps going. But I notice the saleswoman wink again and add the dress to the collection.

While the salesgirl ventures off to find another pair of blue slingbacks, Lily comes to stand in front of me. She looks a little nervous.

“Everything here costs so much money,” she says. “Are you sure about this?”

“Do I look like I can’t afford it?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” she protests.

“Listen to me: if you won’t do this for you, then do it for me.”

What she doesn’t understand is that I *want* her to have nice things.

I *want* her to hold her head up and be proud.

I *want* her happy.

I'm as surprised about that as she is. Nothing about this marriage has gone the way I envisioned.

Lily is about to reply when the salesgirl returns. "Here you go!" the woman says brightly. She has arms full of boxes.

"Go. And hurry, little princess. I'm a little hungry."

*Not for food, though.*

"I probably have enough things already," Lily suggests, though she is uncertain.

But the salesgirl knows a whale when she sees one, and she's not about to let me and my credit card walk out the door. She gasps like Lily just spat on the floor and says, "But shoes aren't enough! You have to have handbags and accessories."

I chuckle and relax in my seat. My dick is aching hard, but since there doesn't seem to be a visible end in sight, I lean back and enjoy the view of Lily's bare feet beneath the drapes of the changing stalls.

She comes out in a floor-length gown the color of blood that makes her hair look like it's glowing from within. One change later and she's in skin-tight black leather jeans and a cream-colored crop top that shows off her toned abs. Back into the stall, back out, and now it's a flowing summer dress with a slit up to her hips.

My cock gets harder and harder.

When the salesgirl walks away again in search of a bag to match a pair of gray suede stilettos, I snare Lily's hand and pull her to me.

"This is all so much," she murmurs, looking wistfully around the store. "I mean, I've been shopping before obviously, my mom loves it, but this is—"

She yelps and squirms when my fingers slip under the hem of her skirt and tease along the seam of her panties. Her writhing motion on my cock isn't exactly unwelcome.

"Roman, we're in a store!" she hisses. "People are watching."

“Let them fucking watch,” I snarl. “It’ll be the last thing they ever see.”

This time, her face goes bright red like a stoplight.

This waiting game is even fucking hotter than what I’d been fantasizing about. If she doesn’t finish this up soon, we’re certainly going to be christening one of those fitting rooms.

“I really like those red ones,” she says by way of changing the subject. “Do you?”

I look where she’s pointing. The Louboutin stilettos in question have a sharp toe and a sharper heel. My first thought is that they’d look good—so long as I’ve got Lily’s legs over my shoulders.

I imagine sitting her on the desk in my office, hiking up her pencil skirt and pounding into her with those shoes wrapped around my waist, nudging my ass into more, more, more.

I lean in, lower my lips to my ear, and add, “I want you to put them on and dance for me. Then I want to bend you over, lift up your—”

“Mrs. Sorokin?”

We both glance up. It is the salesgirl again. “Go away,” I order at once.

Without a word, the salesgirl does a quick about face and vanishes. Smart lady.

Lily grins through yet another blush. “You were saying?”

“I forget. Care to remind me?”

She laughs. “I don’t know a lot about fantasies and how we should go about acting them out. But those shoes are in a few of mine.”

I shook my head. “No, no, no. I seem to remember that I was in the middle of you bending over for me. Let’s go back to that. Better yet: let’s go back home and try it out ourselves.”

She laughs again, leaps off my lap, and hurries through bag selection. When everything is boxed and bagged, I hand over the card at the register and arrange for delivery.

Then we are off, out the door and onto the sidewalk. It's time to bury myself into this woman and bring all those fantasies to life.

We are halfway to the car when a new and unwelcome voice interrupts. "Lily? Is that you?"

She gulps loudly, turns... and her jaw drops. "Joey?"

I turn to see who has the balls to approach us in public like this. The target in question is a tall guy—though he still has a few inches to go before he catches up to me—with blonde surfer boy highlights and just enough muscle to show he tried picking up a weight once upon a time.

"I heard you were... married now," Surfer Boy says. From the tone, he'd also heard who it is to and probably why it happened in the first place. He doesn't even glance at me until I hold out my hand.

"Roman Sorokin. And you are...?" I squeeze until he flinches in pain, then I let go. Point made.

"Joey Gallo." He flexes his fingers a couple times then ogles my wife for another minute. "You look great, Lils. Considering..." As if I'm not standing right fucking there, he tilts his big surfer boy head in my direction.

Lily loops her arm through mine and smiles up at me. "Considering I have a man who won't cheat on me with Larah Lowery? With Rhonda Morris? With that weird chick with the stupid name I found you on top of?"

The asshole's mouth is hanging wide open now. He shakes his head to regain his composure, then looks at me and scoffs, "Can you blame me, dude? She wasn't giving it to me. A guy has needs. Am I right?"

If he is looking for some sort of male bonding agreement moment, this is not it.

"Must've not been man enough to get her motor running," I suggest acidly. I lean in for a bonding moment of my own. "Your loss, too. Because, *dude*"—the word comes out dripping with sarcasm—"you don't know what you're missing."

I straighten up and run a hand through my hair.

“And if you ever call me ‘dude’ again, I’ll cut off your fucking balls and shove them in your gaping mouth. Now, get the fuck out of my sight.”

He’s not quite as smart as the saleslady was—he doesn’t turn tail and flee immediately when I tell him to.

But I guess he’s not quite as dumb as he looks, either, because after a few seconds of gawking back and forth between Lily and me, he stumbles around the corner and disappears.

Lily is looking at me as Danilo pulls up just then. “I’m really sorry about that, Roman.” Embarrassment colors her cheeks.

There’s no reason for it, though. She has nothing to be sorry for. He’s the one who needs to be begging for my mercy. The little fucker is lucky I didn’t break him in half right here on Madison Avenue.

“I can kill him if you want,” I say without blinking.

“He’s a made man,” she whispers.

I laugh. “As if I give a fuck.” For her, I’ll kill him with my bare hands.

She looks up at me. “Why?”

“Because fucks like him deserve a quick knife across the throat—and that’s only if I’m feeling merciful. Anyone who hurts you, anyone who has ever hurt you... they all go on a list, Lily. No one on that list survives.”

She shudders. “Somehow, I don’t think you’re joking.”

I tilt her chin up to force her to look at me. “I’m not. You’re my wife. And what you want, you get.”

She smiles softly. Leaning up on her tip-toes, she presses her lips into mine with a feather-light touch.

“I want this.”





**LILY**

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SIX WEEKS LATER

Another party.

As if the wedding wasn't gaudy enough, we now have the "Welcome Lily to the Family" party—and apparently, "The Family" includes every crime boss and henchman from five states and their wives.

I sit, satin robe belted, in the chair in what Roman now calls my "ready room," which is one of the guest bedrooms remodeled and retrofitted with better lighting, a basin, a chair, and several cabinets brimming with every product and makeup supply a girl could ever need.

My outfit for the evening hangs on a hook across the room—a drop waist sheath dress in a muted champagne color that seems to absorb the light and refract it like a diamond.

"Your hair is amazing." The makeup artist, Ellis, smiles at me as she smooths foundation on my forehead. "I can't believe how long it is now. Just since we met, it seems like it's grown a foot. And it's so pretty."

"Thanks," I murmur with a blush. The flattery is nice, though it's taken some getting used to.

"I heard the caterers talking while they were setting up." She tilts my chin upward and continues working as she speaks. "Said they love coming here for the parties you throw."

"They've been good to work with," I say.

That's taken some getting used to, too: being the boss. The queen of the house.

My whole life has been spent being told what to do. By my father, my brother, the world at large. And just when I thought I'd ended up in a world even more restrictive—the harsh, brutal world of the Sorokin Bratva—I'm finding myself issuing orders of my own.

I keep expecting to click my heels together and wake up back in Kansas any day now. So far, it hasn't happened.

Ellis moves from smoothing the foundation to applying color and definition and tone and shadow to every other part of my face before she finishes the look off with lipstick.

“Marriage really agrees with you.”

She spins me toward the mirror to admire her handiwork. I can see what she means. I have a—well, I'm not quite sure what to call it. *Cosmopolitan* would've called it a “euphoric glow” or something like that. Seems close enough.

My eyes are bright, my hair soft and luminous. I look good—no way around it.

Before Ellis can butter me up anymore, the door opens and one of the women who staffs the mansion, Lucy, walks in with a jewelry box. She looks like she is carrying a bomb—arms outstretched, eyes wide.

“Another one?” I sigh.

She nods cautiously. “This feels different, madam.”

So far, Roman has given me my wedding ring, whose center stone makes the iceberg that took out the Titanic seem small, a tennis bracelet with more diamonds than Liberace, a ruby pendant he says reminds him of the Louboutin heels from our first day shopping on Madison Avenue, an anklet so delicate I am still afraid to wear it, and a diamond belly button ring to match the diamond earrings he'd given me when we got back from the honeymoon.

Today's box is a blue velvet square. Lucy sets it carefully on the bureau.

I open the front hinge. When I see what's inside, my breath catches in my throat.

"Holy shit."

Diamonds and emeralds. Specifically, a choker with diamond and emeralds. Roman might enjoy calling me his little princess, but he dresses me like a queen with jewels to fit the title.

I hear a throat clear and look up to see the man himself standing in the doorway.

Tuxedoed. Gorgeous. Relaxed and smiling.

"I've been to every jeweler in town looking for something as beautiful as you, but this is as close as I can get."

All the women who've been scurrying to get me ready vanish from the room at once.

It is just him and me then.

He's been saying a lot of things like that lately. Sweet things that still make my core heat and my toes curl. Things that make me want him, like him, crave him.

A dangerous combination, since he already has all the power in our relationship.

I don't say anything. Watching him walk toward me is a religious experience that demands silent reverence.

Roman growls low in his chest when he reaches me. Then he takes the choker from its box and clasps it around my neck while I hold up my hair.

"How does it look?" I ask.

He pulls me from the chair and palms my hips. "Like a fucking dream, *moya zhena*."

He snakes his hand inside my robe, then works my breast free and bends down to suck a nipple into his mouth.

The power of speech always goes first when he does that. “R-Ro-Roman...” is all I can stutter. The power of standing upright is going to go next if he keeps it up. “Our g-guests...”

But right then, he let his free hand roam south. He finds my panties, pushes them aside, and strokes me through my wetness.

“Fuck them,” Roman growls. “Fuck the guests.”

“No,” I say with a sly smile, “fuck *me*.”

“With pleasure.”

Keeping his hand on my hips, he walks us over to the full-length, gilt-edged mirror that consumes one whole wall of the ready room.

“Look at yourself, *kiska*. Look at us.”

He has one arm wrapped around the front of my waist, the other laid on my hip. As I drink in our reflections, he slowly strokes my hair away from the nape of my neck and presses a line of kisses from my earlobe down to my collarbone.

“You’re a fucking vision,” he croons between each kiss. “A queen fit for a king.”

His muscular arms strain against the tuxedo sleeves. His dark hair is effortlessly perfect, just tousled enough to be casual. I’m longing to run my hands through it.

I can’t reach that far up and back, though, so instead I rest a hand on his thigh. Then I sigh and tilt my head backward, letting my eyes flutter closed.

“No,” he corrects at once. “Eyes open. Watch me.”

Like always, my body reacts before my conscious mind even processes the word. My eyes fly open.

“Help me touch you,” he orders in that low, husky rasp that sets my heart on fire.

*Oh God.* Not only do I love when he tells me what to do with such authority in his voice, I love that it makes him hot to watch me touch myself.

He takes my hand in his. Together, we slide slowly down my torso. We work open the knot of my robe and it falls to either side.

It takes us a long minute to cross the distance from my hip to my center. But eventually, we make it there. He coaxes one of my manicured fingers to dip into myself—“Slowly,” he commands—while he works slow, tender circles on my clit.

His name comes out of me again like a breath: “Roman...”

“I have a surprise for you later,” he whispers in my ear. “If you’re a good girl.”

“The choker wasn’t enough?”

“I plan to give you the whole world, *kiska*. One gift at a time.”

I feel the evidence of his arousal poking in the back of my thigh. With my free hand, I graze over it. “Want me to take care of that for you?” My mouth waters for a taste of him. “Please?”

He grins. “You don’t have to.”

“I don’t beg for things I *have* to do, Roman. I beg for things I want.”

He chuckles. “You’re starting to sound like me.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

He tilts his head to the side, considering it. “In this case, no.”

“I want you in my mouth, Roman. Please.”

He laughs again and holds up his hands in defeat. “What the princess wants, she gets.”

Grinning, I turn and sink to my knees. I tug the zipper of his pants down and free his cock from within.

As soon as it's out, I devour it instantly. I am going to have to touch up my makeup, but every swirl of my tongue and every suck earns a moan or a thrust or a huffed breath until Roman's balls tighten and his head falls back, and my God, that's so worth it.

"Lily, you're going to—"

I redouble my effort. He starts to pull away, but I hold him in place. I pop him out of my mouth, using both my hands to stroke him as I murmur, "Then do it, Roman. I want this. I want the taste of you on my tongue. And I'm not stopping until I get what I want."

"*O moy grebanyy bog*—" he snarls in Russian.

Three more strokes and he comes in my throat with a muffled roar. I milk every drop out of him.

When there's nothing left, he sighs and helps me stand. "Where did you come from?" he growls in amazement.

"Your worst nightmare."

He laughs, but before he can reply, a knock on the door interrupts. While he goes to answer, I re-tie my robe and survey the damage in the mirror. I'll have to do the touch-ups myself—I can't call the makeup artist back, not unless I want to die from shame when she realizes I ruined the work she's already done because I just sucked her boss off in the makeup room.

It is one of the house staff at the door. "Your guests have started arriving, sir."

"We'll be right down." But instead of leaving, he shuts the door and looks at me. "Wasn't quite fair of me to not let you come, was it?"

I shrug like it doesn't matter. Like I'm not currently trembling with need. "It's fine."

"I know that tone. You're waiting for me to go downstairs so you can handle it yourself."

I smile shyly. "I would never do such a thing."

He smirks. “If you wait until tonight, I’ll make sure your surprise is well worth it.”

“Easy for you to say. What kind of surprise are we talking?”

He crosses back over and kisses me languidly, like we have all the time in the world. “Let’s just say the jeweler isn’t the only store I visited today.”

“Rather vague, Mr. Sorokin,” I tease. “Some might even say cryptic.”

His dark eyes flash. “You don’t make it as far as I do in this world without preserving a little secrecy.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever you say, Mr. International Man of Mystery.” Rolling my eyes, I walk to pluck my dress off its hook. “Holy hell,” I say as I pick it up. “Does this thing have enough rhinestones? I’m gonna be walking around in a diamond weight vest all night.”

“You’ll survive.”

“I might be a little too tired for this surprise,” I joke.

He barks out a laugh. “Yeah fucking right. You’re insatiable.”

Blushing, I shimmy out of my robe and start to step into my dress. “You might know me a little too well.”

“I know what makes my little princess wet.”

The blush reddens. “Save that kind of language for later.”

“Get dressed and come downstairs,” he says with a smirk. He checks his watch. “No lingering. I’m timing you to make sure you earn your surprise.”

With that, he walks out.

It wouldn’t take more than a couple quick rubs for me to explode, but I don’t. Instead, I do as my husband commanded and wait. Even though I am burning up and throbbing between my legs as I dress, fix my face, and walk out of the ready room.

Time to be the lady of the house.



Roman Sorokin's queen.

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# LILY

When I walk into the room where people are waiting to be called to dinner, I see ten or twenty guests already mingling. Some I know by sight, others only by reputation.

I don't have to know anything to know they're all filthy rich and corrupt as fuck.

But no one in the whole place is as spectacular in their gowns and tuxes as Roman. He stands taller, straighter, stronger, certainly more gorgeous. There's something to be said for tailored suits and the handsome men who wear them. Several somethings, actually.

His eyes lock on me at once. Warmth spreads through me like a physical touch as he beckons me over.

When I approach, he smiles and slips an arm around me. "There she is," he murmurs.

"I hope I'm not intruding on anything private," I say politely.

The capos and underbosses he's talking to can't hide the lust in their eyes; nor can their women hide their jealousy.

But then they all see the way Roman touches me, the way he looks at me, and they know it would cost them their balls if they let their gazes linger for even a moment too long.

"Nonsense," Roman says. "My wife is welcome anywhere. Isn't that right?"

Everyone in the circle nods fervently, as if Roman is working their heads with marionette strings.

“That’s what I thought. Now, if you’ll excuse us,” he adds to the group, “we ought to go play at being capable hosts for a little while.”

It’s an effortless, graceful exit. Not that I expected anything less. He turns us and we meander to the edge of the room.

“That bad of a conversation?” I tease.

He grimaces. “Was it obvious I can’t stand those fucking Italians?”

“Only to me, I think.”

“Well, you saved me from having to pretend for any longer. Your timing was exquisite.”

“I do my best.”

He spins me away to arms’ length so he can look me up and down appreciatively. “Yes,” he murmurs, “you certainly do.”

The crowd in the room circulates and babbles. I can sense that everyone is keeping at least one eye on us at all times. But when Roman looks at me like that and says things like that, it’s as if the whole world drops away and it’s just the two of us all alone.

“You’re blushing,” Roman notes with a smirk.

“I keep wondering if that’s going to stop one of these days,” I sigh, cupping a hand over my cheek.

“Not if I can help it.”

I swat him on the arm. “Don’t you have underlings to go lord over?”

He chuckles and loops an arm around my waist again. “This is all bullshit anyway. Everyone just comes to pander for my attention.”

“And do they get it?”

“No,” he says solemnly. “Only you do.”

We do the rounds for a while. I laugh and smile when I'm supposed. Roman is the consummate host, which is sort of surprising and sort of not.

In some ways, it's bizarre to see him gladhand and pontificate with the crème de la crème of Chicago mob royalty.

In other ways, it's the most natural thing in the world. He was born for this.

After half an hour or so has passed, the lead caterer steps into the room and rings a tiny bell. "Dinner is ready, if you all would care to follow me," she announces.

We file into the dining room. A large table awaits. Roman takes his place at one end and I walk all the way down to the other. I feel his absence immediately, missing his warmth at my side.

The women follow to my end of the table. The men go towards Roman. The seating arrangement isn't exactly progressive, but that's life in the criminal underworld, I guess. Twenty-first century gender politics haven't exactly penetrated here just yet.

Most of the other wives are older than I am. Some of them are bold enough to smirk, to look down their noses at me, like I'm just a silly little girl playing dress-up.

But I know who I am. I know what my new last name means for me now.

*Smirk away, ladies. You can't touch me.*

We dine on a seafood coquillage, suckling pork belly, roast pheasant—one of Roman's favorites—and crispy Brussels sprouts. Dessert is a chocolate-almond cake with banana-rum caramel drizzle.

It's all phenomenal, of course. The caterers have their reputation for a reason, and they know to bring their A-game when they work at the Sorokin household.

But just once, just for fun, I want to serve these uptight, snooty mob wives something like sloppy cheeseburgers so I can laugh at the grease dripping on their rhinestones and tulle.

I chatter politely with everyone. I sneak glances at Roman throughout the meal, too. He reigns at the far side of the table like a medieval emperor. I don't know if it's fear or awe that keeps people's gazes rooted on him so steadfastly. Both, probably.

After dinner, we adjourn to the ballroom so the music can start and, more importantly, the drinking can begin.

"I need to get a drink," I say politely, excusing myself from one of the older women who's kept me pinned in a conversation about drapery for the last fifteen minutes. Without waiting for an answer, I knife through the crowd towards the bar.

"Can I get you something, madam?" the bartender asks when I approach.

"I'll have a glass of the cabernet sauvignon," I decide.

"Coming right up."

While he pours the drink, I look around the room again. My gaze focuses on my husband. He stands in the center of a cluster of men who admire him as much as they fear him.

I like seeing that. I understand the feeling well.

I used to be terrified of my husband, not so long ago. Now, I don't know what I think about him—or at least, I don't know how to put it into words.

I just let our bodies do the talking for us.

"Here you are, madam."

I take my drink and walk to the bathroom hallway. It is dark—a bulb has gone out, I note. But as I turn to go inform one of the staff so it can be replaced immediately, someone steps in my path.

Floriano Verratti.

The fat old Italian don catches my elbow when I stumble into him. He doesn't let go right away, either. Instead, he leans in and sniffs me. He doesn't hide what he's doing, either. Doesn't even try.

"I love the smell of a woman who needs to get laid," he purrs disgustingly.

I want to vomit. He is sweating from the crown of his bald head all the way down to where the collar of his shirt has a stranglehold on his thick neck.

“That’s a repulsive way to say hello,” I snap.

I wrench myself free of his grip and try to move past him, but he holds up a hand. That doesn’t dissuade me, so he uses it to palm my boob and push me back against the wall, hard.

We recede backward into the shadows where no one can see us.

“What the hell are you doing, Floriano?” I hiss.

“Don’t say my name like that, little Benedetti; it sounds so wrong in your mouth. You call me ‘Daddy’ instead.” He continues to squeeze my tit like it is an udder. Then he presses his hips against mine and lunges in a for a kiss.

I turn my head to gag. God, I want Roman to come find me right now so he can save me from this.

Scratch that—I have to save myself.

Just as Floriano’s hand goes for the gold and jerks the hem of my dress up so he can get farther, I throw my glass of wine in his face, wriggle free of his hold, and race out of the hallway.

I walk back to Roman as calmly as I can, but it is more of a half-jog than a leisurely stroll. He’s in the center of another knot of men.

Not caring this time if I’m interrupting, I plaster myself against him as close as I can get. He smiles down at me, oblivious to my racing heart, my stilted breaths, and my urge to crawl inside his coat and hide.

I want to tell him what happened, but I can’t find my voice and I can’t stop trembling. So I just stay stuck to him the rest of the night. When Roman moves to the bar, I go along. When he sits, I sit next to him.

I don’t even try the bathroom again until he does. By then, the bulb has been changed and there is no more darkness.

But the light doesn’t erase what has already happened.

*I can kill him if you want.* He'd said that to me about Joey Gallo not so long ago, in broad daylight no less. I was horrified then. I don't want someone to die just for touching me.

But now, I stand beside Roman considering whether or not I would feel the same shame over asking him to end Floriano Verratti.

The Italian is a pig. A creep. A criminal. It would be a public service to the greater Chicago area to snuff him out.

But I still can't do it. I can't ask my husband to kill for me.

Not even a bastard who deserves it.

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**ROMAN**

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### THREE DAYS LATER

I'm bored out of my fucking mind. Unfortunately, I'm stuck in a meeting with my father and brothers. None of whom are nearly as pleasant to look at as my wife.

My father has been yammering about maintaining a stronghold on the port for the last fifteen minutes straight. "... Losing that area would hurt us!" he's saying. "We need the—"

"Yes, we get it," I cut in acidly. My head is starting to hurt from listening to him drone on and on. "You said that already. Losing that area would hurt us. We need the revenue we get from taxing all the imports and exports. For fuck's sake, we get it, Father."

He's not wrong. Because we charge the city's various criminal organizations based on the value of the product they're carrying in and out of the port, it's a lucrative line of business to say the least.

I'm just tired of listening to him tell me shit I already know.

My father opens his mouth to bicker, but one look from me silences him. He knows who wields the power in this house now.

Misha clears his throat in the tense silence. "If we're changing topics, I've got something."

"Go ahead," I tell him.

“We have a possible issue looming,” he says grimly. “Arturo has dropped off the map. My intel says he’s planning to rescue his daughter.”

That does the trick. Suddenly, I’m very invested in the meeting.

“What intel? When did this come up?”

“We found one of his guys trying to break into the warehouse at the pier. Asked him who sent him, persuaded him to ‘fess up, you know the drill. He says Arturo is going to start hitting our interests to draw your attention away from your—and I quote—‘prisoner.’” He pauses, then adds slyly, “If you ask me, though, she didn’t look like much of a prisoner the other night.”

“Of course she didn’t. Because she isn’t a prisoner. She is my fucking wife.”

“Yeah, or your necklace, judging by the way she was draped around your neck the whole damn party,” Kaz chimes in with a laugh.

“Tell me then, brother,” I snarl, “how should a good wife act?”

“A *bought* wife, you mean?”

I tighten my fist. Brother or not, Kaz is one smirk away from meeting his maker.

“He didn’t buy her,” Misha points out with a mischievous grin. “He won her fair and square in a poker game. Big difference, no?”

“Enough!”

Now, I’m glad for my father. Glad on Kaz and Misha’s behalf, at least. He saved his other sons’ lives from my wrath by interrupting.

“We need to decide what to do if Arturo makes a play for the girl,” he adds. “This is a business matter.”

The idea of that old Benedetti bastard coming to get Lily makes me chuckle. “Let the old fucker try,” I say. “I’ll sever his leg and beat him to death with it.”

My brothers nod, on the same page as me.

But my father frowns. “Arturo was once to be a family friend. It’s a shame weakness has taken him out of the game.”

“Family friend or not, there are lines that cannot be crossed.”

Father nods in understanding. He knows how this game is played. “As long as you understand what must be done to protect the reputation of the Bratva.”

If Arturo does make a move, then it will fall to me to take him all the way out of the game, so to speak—for good. I’ve never hesitated to get my hands dirty when it’s called for. I won’t start now.

“Speaking of Italian bastards, did you hear Floriano the other night?” Kaz asks. “He is still burning alive that he lost the girl to you.”

That amuses me. “Is he? What a shame.”

He nods. “Yeah. That girl is worth—”

“Her name is Lily,” I interrupt coldly.

Misha cocks a brow. I shoot him a glare. Wisely, he decides to stay silent.

“Lily. Right. Anyway.” Kaz shakes his head. “Verratti’s going around boasting how he’ll end you. Says he’ll take your girl. Bump us off the top of the food chain and—you know, shit like that.”

I frown. Arturo threatening me is a laughing matter.

Floriano is more dangerous.

Though that doesn’t mean I’m any more concerned about it. From where I stand, both men are cockroaches. If they venture too close, I’ll crush them underneath my heel.

“Floriano Verratti is a pompous blowhard,” I say dismissively. “I’m not worried in the slightest.”

My father says, “Roman, we would be wise to consider—”

“No,” I interrupt. “We will not be considering anything. Don’t say that motherfucker’s name again. As far as I’m concerned, the threat he made alone just signed his death warrant. When it’s convenient for me, I’ll execute

him. Next topic.”

Father nods. “Very well. We should—” But before he can finish his thought, he dissolves into a fit of violent coughing.

Kaz pounds him on the back while Misha brings over a glass of water.

He waves them both away when the attack subsides and croaks, “We should be focused on Kane Ito.”

I frown. “Why Ito?”

Ito is the boss of the Japanese Yakuza gang. A notoriously violent and spiteful son of a bitch.

“One of the Albanians mentioned something about it at the party the other night. He seems to believe that Ito is on the periphery, shaking things up. Forcing his way into areas that belong to others. He’s dissatisfied with the way things lie right now.”

I can’t be bothered to give a significant fuck about Ito, though—just like I can’t be bothered to give a fuck about Arturo Benedetti or Floriano Verratti.

My thoughts are upstairs, with my wife. Below the surface of the meeting room table, my hand is tingling with the desire to touch her. To hear her moans, kiss between her legs, bury myself inside of her.

It makes it very fucking difficult to concentrate on business.

“Fuck Ito,” I say dismissively. “He isn’t a concern.”

Misha chimes in, “I say we go Karate Kid on the son of a bitch and put him in the ground.”

I shake my head and repeat myself. “Not worth the effort. Ito isn’t a threat.”

“Anybody can be a threat, Roman.” Misha considers me through narrow eyes. I wonder if he can see how my attention is divided.

“I wasn’t opening the topic for further discussion, *sobrat*,” I tell him coldly. “I’m done talking about Ito. As a matter of fact, I’m done with this whole meeting. Get the fuck out of my house.”

They're used to my gruffness, but I think even thick-headed Kaz notes that there's an extra layer of irritation in my tone right now. They don't protest as they gather their things and slip out the door that leads to the garage.

I wait until the sounds of their engines firing up and fading away is completely gone. I need a drink and a fuck—not necessarily in that order.

Sighing, I rise and make my way to the bedroom. But when I open the door, Lily jumps like I've caught her red-headed.

I frown instantly. This isn't the first time she's gotten so startled by nothing at all. She's been all over the place these last couple days.

“What's wrong?”

I expect something flip. A denial, sarcasm—something. Instead, she bursts into tears and throws her body against mine.

*What the fuck?*

I hold her, letting her cling to me as I walk us inside and sit us on the sofa. She is sobbing hysterically. “Talk to me, *kiska*.”

She sniffs, lets out a last sob, and then lifts her chin to look at me. “I haven't told you, because...”

My pulse quickens. “Haven't told me what?”

“I don't want you to be mad...”

“Tell me what happened, Lily.”

“The other night... at the party...” It takes her a long time to bridge the gap between words. Her voice is hoarse and broken. “I went to... get a drink, and then to the bathroom. But the, the... light was out. The light in the hallway. So I didn't see him coming.”

“Him?” My stomach churned. “Who?”

“F... F...”

I know it before she says it.

“Floriano.”

It feels like the air in the room is chilling rapidly. “What did he do?”

“He grabbed me,” she whispers in a voice so small I can barely hear it.

Rage boils under my skin, the kind that results in death. “He touched you? In my house? In my fucking house?”

I can taste the fury and it tastes like blood.

The blood of Floriano fucking Verratti.

Lily shrinks more in my arms. “Roman, please... Just don’t hurt him. It is no big deal. I didn’t even want to tell you, I just freaked out. And I’m... sorry I even mentioned it now.”

*Sorry she mentioned it?* “I will kill him. No one touches what is mine.”

It’s hard to focus on my wife in my arms when I’m seeing red and dreaming of crushing Floriano’s face with my bare hands. I’m distantly aware of her nodding timidly.

“Yours,” she says. “Right.”

I wrench my attention back to Lily. “Something wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Just promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“Don’t go after him personally. I feel... safe, finally. Here. With you.” She puts her face on my chest. “I wouldn’t be able to stand it if anything happened to you.”

She wants me to let someone else have the pleasure of making a stain of Floriano? I can’t. I won’t. It would make me look weak, and I’ve never been weak for one second in my whole goddamn life.

Not an option.

So instead of answering, I do what I’ve been daydreaming of doing since the second the meeting with my brothers began and pull her onto my lap. She fits



like she was born to be there.

And when her lips meet mine, I taste ferocity in her kiss.

“Maybe I’m not the only one who’s been fantasizing the last few hours,” I murmur with a low chuckle between kisses.

She whimpers almost mournfully. “I need you, Roman.”

Her hands are frantic, scrabbling over me. She shoves my jacket from my shoulders, then yanks my shirt open so the buttons scatter and bounce off the hardwood floor. Her fingers rake from my chest to my stomach.

The shy little *kiska* I won in a card game is gone.

The woman in my arms knows what she wants.

Her hands make their way down to my zipper and free my cock. She undoes my belt and tosses it aside, then rips my pants halfway down my thighs.

Straddling me, she flips up the hem of her dress, pulls her panties aside, and lines me up with her opening.

Then she lowers her hips onto me—and I see fucking stars.

She rides slow at first as she adjusts to me. But it doesn’t take long before she’s grinding hard on my length and I’m fucking up into her. The orgasm is building in my balls. More impatient than ever.

“Roman...” she whimpers. She’s clinging to my shoulders like she’ll melt away if she lets go. And when I try to take a hand off her hips to keep myself from sliding off the sofa, she cries out, “No!” and clamps her hand on top of mine to pin it in place.

There’s a desperation here I’m not sure I fully understand. She won’t look at me. But she’s fucking me like it’s the only thing that matters.

A few thrusts later, she pushes her tits against my chest, arches her back, and lets loose the loudest moan yet. Her hips are a blur, crashing on top of mine.

“*Moya kiska*,” I growl.

She keeps going, up and down, over and over, until I can't take more, until the world narrows and there is only her, her whimpers and moans, her gasps and groans. The second she comes, I do, too.

We coast down together, collapsed in a puddle of sweaty flesh on the sofa. There are things that we each want to say to each other. I can feel them as a vapor in the air.

But not yet. Not now. I don't even know if I know the fucking words for what I want to express.

How violent I'll get to protect her.

How she's running rampant through my thoughts at all hours, even when business demands my attention.

I ought to just chill the fuck out and enjoy this moment. But one thought keeps rearing its ugly head no matter how hard I try to ignore it: Floriano Verratti touched my wife.

That greasy Italian motherfucker put his hands on her when he was a guest in my house.

I've already sworn I'll kill him when the time comes. Well, this is the goddamn time. But his won't be an easy death. It will be long and slow and messy.

And I will handle it all myself.

"Roman?" Lily looks up at me. "I'm asking you again: promise me you won't go after him. Not you. Send someone if you have to, but... not you."

Her voice is soft and sweet. But there is honest fear in her tone.

"You know I can't do that, Lily."

She sits upright. "Please. I'm asking you as a personal favor to me."

I shake my head. "He has to know he cannot put his hands on my wife."

I don't tell her that her father will suffer the same fate if he tries the same thing. She doesn't need that burden added right now.

“Roman...” Her voice cracks. “I’m begging you. Just... let someone else handle it. Anyone but you. If you get hurt, I’ll... I’ll...”

A single tear of hers splashes down on my chest.

Fuck me.

Growling, I concede the point. “Fine. I will not touch Floriano myself. But I will be there to make sure it happens.”

It is the best I can do for her. The best I can give in this situation.

For her.

“But the motherfucker is going to die for what he did to you. Slow and painful.”

She nods and lays her ear over my heart. I carry her to bed after she falls asleep, and it is as sweet and peaceful as my life has ever been.

But when the dreams come, they are bloody.

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## LILY

It's dawn when I wake cuddled into his side. For the first time in my life, I'm not worried about what the day will bring. I'm not sad, or depressed, or desperate. I don't even miss Julliard now, or the life I'd imagined I would have there.

I am happy. I'm safe.

And it's because of him.

I don't know how to describe what I'm feeling for Roman these days. Even calling it a "feeling" seems overwhelming. I just know that the thought of him getting hurt terrifies me—and the thought of him getting close thrills me.

Speaking of the devil, he stirs and cracks one eye open. "You woke me up," he mumbles. "Thinking too loud."

"Sorry."

"Don't just apologize," he growls. "Make it up to me."

As usual, Roman takes matters into his own hands. He grabs me by the hips and flips me on top of him. I shriek and laugh, though it turns into a sharp gasp when I feel his hardening cock through the bunched-up sheets between us.

"Someone woke up *very* quickly," I tease, pointing down at him.

"Never went to sleep, honestly," Roman chuckles.

“Oo, I like the sound of that. Did you dream of me?”

Something passes over his eyes briefly like an eclipse. It’s gone as soon as it came and I’m left wondering if I made the whole thing up. And when he swipes his thumb over my clit, I forget about it entirely.

“Of course,” he says. “But you don’t want to hear about that nonsense.”

“On the contrary, I think I really, really do.”

“Well,” he muses, “it started very similar to this, actually...”

He slips a finger inside of me and curls it toward him. I plant my hands on his chest and groan softly.

“What happened next?” I pant.

“This.” He pulls me down into a hot, open-mouthed kiss. His breath is warm and his dick continues to press up between my thighs. We’ve been sleeping naked lately, so the thin barrier of the sheet is the only thing stopping him from sliding inside me.

“Keep going,” I whisper.

“I don’t know, *kiska*,” he taunts. “I’m going to be late for my meeting.”

He strokes my clit again and I sputter, already on the verge of coming on his hand. It’s so easy for him to make me explode. I’m almost embarrassed by how fast and how often it happens.

“Not if—oh God, don’t stop—not if I have anything to say about it.”

Fighting back the trembling sensations coursing through me, I free his dick from beneath the sheets and start stroking with two hands. The tips of my fingers don’t touch around his thick shaft.

Now, it’s my turn to coax moans from deep in his chest. I love seeing him like this—writhing and bucking at my touch. It makes me feel so sexy, so powerful.

“Lily...”

“You were saying something about a meeting...?”

I keep stroking him until at long last he grins the grin I love more than all the others. It's the one that means I am getting my way.

“Argh, fine. Fuck them. They can't start without me anyway.”

“That's what I thought,” I laugh—though the laugh dies on my lips as soon as he enters me.

It goes fast from there. It isn't long until we're both crying out and panting and holding onto each other as we ride out the shockwaves of our orgasms.

Afterwards, we lie in a tangle of limbs catching our breath.

“It just always gets better.” I hadn't meant to speak the thought aloud, but like always happens in the wake of sex with Roman, I'm not quite in control of myself or my thoughts or my mouth or my hands that can't stop touching him.

“And it always will.”

I laugh. “Even when we're old?”

He chuckles and holds me tighter. “Especially when we're old. Think of all the experience we will have racked up. Plus...” He kisses the top of my head. “If it's bad, we won't remember it.”

I laugh. “I'm not sure if that's quite the happy ending I had in mind, but I'll take it.”

“I really do have to go to this meeting, you know,” he sighs.

“What am I supposed to do all alone?” I moan seductively, biting at my lower lip.

Roman chuckles. “That depends. What would you like to do?”

I'm taken aback for a moment. No one ever asks me that. Usually, they just tell me what to do. *Go to school. Go to choir practice. Wash this, fold that.* The choices have never—not in my entire life—been mine to make.

Honestly, I'm not even sure I know *how* to make them for myself.

Something occurs to me. It's small and stupid and inconsequential, but maybe that's the best place to start with something like this.

"Can I be honest with you?"

Roman frowns. That dark cloud passes over his face again.

I wait a breath before I say, "I hate your sofa."

"My sofa?"

"It's lumpy and itchy and there isn't enough room for two people."

He laughs and shrugs. "So buy a new one, my princess."

With that, he stands, walks to the bureau, and opens his wallet to retrieve a shiny black credit card.

All it takes is the sight of his bare, muscular ass to make me want him again. I'm so lust-drunk that I don't even process that he's holding the card out for me to take until he says my name.

"Lily? Did I lose you for a second there?"

I blink and smile up at him. "I'm here."

He nods. "I'll have you added to the account as soon as I can, but for now, just use mine."

Something else occurs to me: I am the lady of his house now. That is no small realization.

Once upon a time, he lived here alone. Or, if he didn't, I don't want to know. Whatever the case, now he has me. And I have him. And we have a place that is ours together because he is including me, letting me make decisions about what it looks like.

It seems small. But it matters. It matters so much.

"Are you sure?"

He nods. "I trust you."





By the time I am dressed in a black Gucci minidress and a pair of Louboutins, Danilo has the car waiting, with Igor standing at attention by the door.

I still don't like riding in the back, but he insists. "Don Roman would accept nothing less," he always says.

He drives Igor and me downtown to the boutique furniture store on Madison Avenue. "I'll wait at the door," Igor informs me as we step out of the car. He says it like it's a courtesy, but we both know he's going to be scrutinizing every passing pedestrian for any signs of danger. It must be exhausting to always be on guard like he is.

The store is overwhelming at first sight. Plaids and solids, linen and leather, every color under the sun and every design configuration mankind has ever dreamed up.

I walk around and peruse my options. Leather would fit nicely into Roman's design scheme, but I want white and light, maybe a couple of beachy blue pillows on a sofa we can sink into. Some matching chairs, an ottoman.

I can see the whole thing in my head. Even the pictures on the wall—something a little abstract in pastels with flourishing brush strokes and whooshes of color.

And as I finish the thought, I find exactly what I'm looking for: a cream-colored linen sofa with lilac throw pillows and overstuffed cushions and armrests.

The saleswoman walks over. "That is a fabulous choice and we have so many pieces to complement the homey feel it creates." She taps her finger against her chin. "Let me guess: you're redoing your bedroom and Mom gave you carte blanche."

I purse my lips. "No, actually," I say with over-the-top sugary sweetness, "I'm picking out furniture for me and my husband."

Her eyebrows disappear into highlighted bangs. “Husband.” She nods. “Of course. My apologies.”

Just then, I feel my phone vibrating in my purse. “Speak of the devil,” I say to her. Turning, I answer. “Hello?”

“Well, hello, *moya zhena*.” His voice, smooth and deep, warms me like an invisible fire.

“I just left you like half an hour ago. Missing me that bad already?”

“You have no idea.”

I shiver at the sensation of his voice. “Anyway,” I say shakily, “I found a sofa. But—”

“But what?”

“It’s kinda expensive.”

My eyes flit to the saleswoman, who’s retreated a few steps away. Far enough to seem like she’s giving me my space and close enough to still eavesdrop.

Which is why I’m almost glad that Roman barks out a laugh that I’m sure she can hear and says, “Do you think I can’t afford it?”

I giggle nervously. The woman’s face sours further and she goes from beautiful to ugly in the blink of an eye. Jealousy is really unbecoming on some people.

That thought makes me laugh. Not so long ago, I would’ve been jealous of her. Her freedom, her innocence. Her naivete about how this city and this world actually operate—and who exactly is in charge.

“No, of course not,” I say into the phone.

He chuckles. “I gave you the card, *kiska*. It might as well be unlimited. You can redecorate the whole fucking house if it makes you happy. Or buy a new house, I don’t give a shit.”

I picture him behind his desk—a giant mahogany monstrosity because the man loves nothing else the way he loves dark, over-polished wood—tapping

his pen against a leatherbound notebook. Tie askew. Hair finger-combed into little spiky points of inky black.

The thought makes me squirm. “Maybe when I’m done here, I can swing by your office?” I suggest.

“Any other day, I would love to give you the full tour,” he sighs. “But I have meetings all day. I won’t even be here.”

My excitement dampens a few notches. “Bummer.”

“So, pick out whatever you like, and I’ll see you tonight.”

“For dinner?”

“Would you like that?”

I grin. “Yes, please.”

He chuckles again. It’s easy to give him what he wants—submissiveness, mostly—when he gives me little pleasures like his laugh in return. “Then I’ll be there.”

“So will I.”

“Good. Being in the same place at the same time will make eating together significantly easier.”

“Hm, what makes you say that?” I tease.

“Seven o’clock. Clothing optional. I’ll see you tonight, Lily.”

Then he hangs up.

I realize as I put my phone away in my purse that I’m trembling. Even from a distance, Roman Sorokin is enough to throw my systems into flux.

I pull out the glistening black credit card and hold it out to the saleswoman. “I’ll take the couch,” I announce. “I’m also going to want to see some matching pieces.”

She nods and sweeps off to the back without a word.

I stand there waiting, looking around at the other items to confirm I'm getting what I want. The store is pretty empty, given the hour, with only one or two other patrons wandering around the far side of the space. Probably because the sight of Igor's massive bulk at the door is dissuading anyone else from browsing.

Before the saleswoman returns, someone sidles up behind me.

"Meet me in the back," a man growls in my ear.

*What the...?*

I turn.

My father stands inches from me, dressed in a black suit three sizes too big and stuffed with some pillows to add girth to his midsection. He's wearing a short black wig and mustache, but there is no hiding the vibrance of his blue eyes.

I cannot roll my eyes hard enough. He's taken "cloak and dagger" to an idiotic extreme. Especially since he is actually holding a literal dagger down at his side and glancing left and right as if he expects he will soon have to use it.

With one final look behind him, he waddles toward the back of the store and ducks into a room marked "*Employees Only.*"

I'm not quite sure how to feel. Given the fact he'd shown up at a place where I hadn't mentioned to anyone I was going and he disguised himself as a fat Burt Reynolds for the occasion, he's clearly been watching me. Waiting for me to go out alone.

That's disturbing in its own right. But, creepy or not, he is still my father. And if he says to meet him in the back of the shop, I have to at least see what he wants.

Plus, I want to let him know it is okay now. I am fine. Somehow, I fell ass backwards into the life I always wanted.

I pretend to browse on my way through. Igor is at the door, but he isn't watching me. Too busy scanning the traffic for anyone suspicious. Papa

must've come in through a back route.

When I slip through the Employees Only door, Papa is there waiting. He takes both my shoulders in his. "Let me look at you." He turns my chin left and right. "Has he hurt you?"

"No." I shrug away from his touch. His fatherly concern is less heartwarming when the faux mustache is pointing north and south like this. "Papa, what are you doing here?"

I'm checking the door over my shoulder every few seconds. It won't take long for Igor to notice I'm missing and track me down.

"Come with me." He tugs me toward the street exit door in the back of the room. "Maximilian Kostokos"—a Greek gangster I'd heard about a thousand times over the years—"has a son who would make a fine husband for you. You will marry him, then Max and I have plans for business."

I dig my heels in. "I'm already married to Roman, in case you forgot." My tone is icy.

Roman, at least, seems to care about me. Maybe he cares about me like he'd care about a prized horse or something, but that's better than this.

Papa only cares about what he can get in return for me.

"Pah! Irrelevant. We'll get the whole thing annulled. And you can come home. Get to know Max's son."

"Am I supposed to drop to my knees and thank you?"

"Lily Benedetti—" he starts to say.

"The answer is no. If you want someone to marry Max's son, you can damned well do it yourself."

Face purpling in anger, Papa charges forward to where I'm standing my ground and shakes me like a ragdoll.

"I'm trying to help you! Be fucking grateful."

"Oh, *now* you want to help me?" I blurt in anger. "Where the hell was that instinct at the wedding? When I was fucking *begging* you to get me out of

there?”

I shake my head. My voice is louder than is probably smart, but I can't control the rage bubbling out.

“I'm happy now, Papa. And you don't want me to come home because you give a single shit about me—you want me to come home because you *need* me.”

“Such disrespect,” he snarls. “I raised you better than this.”

He cocks back his hand. I close my eyes and wait for the pain of my father's slap.

But it never comes.

Instead, there's a blur of sound and wind and motion. I open my eyes just in time to see a huge hand clamp around Papa's wrist and yank him away from me.

Igor throws my father against the wall hard enough that the whole room shakes. The stuffing falls from beneath the suit jacket as Igor pummels him with fists and elbows.

It's pitiful and ridiculous at the same time. I don't know whether to laugh or cry and my heart is thumping so hard against my ribs that I wonder if they're going to crack under the pressure.

He's a monster. He hasn't changed.

But for God's sake, he's still my father.

“Igor!” I cry out. “Stop!” My voice is enough to stall his fist, if only for a moment. In that brief window, I yell, “Get out of here, Papa!”

Future Lily is going to have a very hard time explaining this to Roman. But for now, all I can feel is pity in my heart.

“Lily...” My father gasps. He slides down the floor and crumples in a puddle at Igor's feet. “*Mia preziosa...*”

It's the pet name he used to call me. But it isn't the voice I used to love.

And I'm not the same girl who once worshipped the ground he walked on.

I am stronger.

For a moment, in the middle of all this drama and chaos, I stop for a second to stare at my father. He hasn't changed. Maybe he never will. Maybe the luster of my adoration has just worn off and shown the garbage human being that's always lurked underneath.

"Just go," I say tiredly. And Papa"—I wait until he looks at me because I need him to know I mean it—"it's probably better if you forget you knew me."

Silence. Stunned, frigid silence.

Then, with a groan, my father clammers to his feet and runs out the door. Pillow stuffing marks his path like breadcrumbs.

He doesn't look back at me. Not even once.

When we're alone again, Igor crosses his arms and stares at me. He doesn't speak, but he doesn't have to. The scowl says it all.

"Please don't tell Roman about this," I whisper. He doesn't so much as blink. My stomach churns. "You heard me tell him to leave us alone."

I think about everything Roman has ever said about loyalty. About what happens to traitors in his world.

Spoiler: it isn't pretty.

And it's not hard to see how he could take a dim view of everything that just happened.

I'm the one who insisted on going to get furniture, of all things. On coming to this store, of all places. Without him accompanying me, of all requests.

It looks bad. It looks really bad.

Igor still doesn't speak.

"Please," I say in the tiniest voice imaginable. "I'm begging you."

Maybe I'm wasting my breath and this is all going to blow up in my face as soon as Roman gets home. But I have to try.

Because if Roman thinks I've betrayed him...

There's no telling what he might do.

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## ROMAN

I watch Floriano via the security camera app on my phone. That fat fuck has no idea he is minutes from meeting his maker. Just a few breaths away from drowning in his own blood.

It's the least he deserves for laying a finger on my wife.

I send the go-ahead text to Pyotr and Viktor. It's a small crew, but this job shouldn't take more than two men. Hell, I don't need more than my own bare hands to wring the life from Floriano's neck, but I'd promised Lily I would stay uninvolved.

That being said, I'm going to be as close as fucking possible.

Which is why I'm currently sitting outside a nightclub Floriano opened six months ago to wash his dirty money through. My men are already posted inside the parking garage where the hit will take place whenever Floriano waddles out to his hideous Rolls-Royce.

This is the best place to strike Floriano down. The garage is secluded, since the businesses in the building attached have already closed for the day. The concrete should dampen the sound of the bullets that will end his life. From there, it'll be a simple matter to load his corpse into a trunk and stick him somewhere where anyone who's ever thought of crossing me will see it and reconsider.

I'm parked down the street, surveying the scene via the hacked garage camera footage on my phone. Igor is seated next to me, having just arrived

from escorting Lily on her shopping errands. We're both watching the shadows warily with guns on our laps.

This will all be over soon.

I clench the phone tightly as Floriano comes into view. For an old guy who's survived probably thousands of attempts on his life, this idiot still saunters out of his club and into the garage unaccompanied by a single bodyguard.

"Stupid old fool," I mutter.

I switch feeds. Two silhouettes separate from the shadows. Pyotr moves in from the front, Vik from behind.

I stay rooted in my driver's seat. I keep watching. I keep waiting.

That turns out to be a massive fucking mistake.

Because it means I am powerless when Floriano suddenly spins around with surprising speed for a man of his age, pulls a Ruger from each of his shoulder holsters, and opens fire on the pair of Bratva soldiers creeping up to end his life.

I have to watch from afar as my men drop in stunned silence.

Trusted men.

Sorokin men.

And now, they are dead men.

"Fuck! Fucking motherfucker!"

One second, I had Floriano Verratti's life in my hands. The next, everything has gone to shit.

I watch the grainy footage as puddles of blood begin to spill from Pyotr and Viktor. Floriano strolls over to the dead bodies and puts one final bullet in each of their heads. I can't hear anything—no sound on the cameras—but I've seen enough to know there is no hope for their survival.

When he is sure they're dead, Floriano re-holsters his guns, gets into his car, and drives away.

Fucking slippery bastard.

I let the phone drop onto my lap and pound the steering wheel with a fist. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I bellow.

Igor says nothing.

I know what must happen next. The immediate steps, at least. I will make sure their families are cared for. That they won’t feel a financial burden of the men’s losses. It is the least I can do.

As for Floriano... I need time to think about that.

Igor and I sit silent for a long time while I brood. Finally, I put the car in gear and pull away from the site of this disaster. I’ll have Misha send men to clean up Pyotr and Vik’s bodies.

“I need a fucking drink,” I grimace.

“There’s a bar two blocks east,” Igor says. It’s the first words he’s spoken since we watched our comrades get gunned down.

I gun the car, screech to a halt out front, and step out.

“You can’t park there!” whines an old lady, jabbing a wrinkled finger at the fire hydrant I’m blocking.

“Suck my dick and go to hell,” I snap at her.

She recoils in horror and runs away. Wise choice. I’m in a foul mood, and even little old ladies might catch my wrath if they stray too far.

Everyone looks at us as we step inside.

That’s normal.

Everyone looks away again immediately when they realize we’re not the kind of men to gawk at.

That’s normal, too.

I find a booth while Igor goes to the bar. When he sets a pair of glasses down a minute later, I throw mine back in one fiery gulp, then look up at Igor.

“What’s eating you?” I snap. He plays his cards close to the chest, but I’ve known him for long enough to see when something is amiss.

“I took Lily shopping today,” he says carefully.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

There’s a note in his voice, a tiny, subtle catch, that I don’t like at all. “Something I should know?”

“Well...”

I like that even less. Igor is nothing if not blunt, direct. He doesn’t beat around the bush or hide things.

“Tell me,” I order.

He sighs and starts to talk like the special forces soldier he once was. “I stationed myself at the primary entry point with a view of the lobby. Twenty-six minutes passed and no other customers entered the location. Lily was with a member of the store’s sales staff. And then...”

“And then *what*, Igor?”

“And then she wasn’t.”

My fist tightens around the glass. “Where the fuck was she?”

He sighs one more time. “She was in a back room. With an exit to the street.”

At that, my blood runs cold. “She tried to run?”

“Not exactly. She was with...”

“For fuck’s sake, man, spit it out!” People around us are murmuring nervously, but I don’t give a damn. I need to know what the hell she tried to do—and with whom.

“Arturo,” Igor says finally. “She was with her father.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Igor shakes his head. “Near as I can tell, he was trying to rescue her. I came in in the middle of an argument. He was about to slap her. I... intervened.”

“I hope you broke every bone in his goddamn body,” I seethe.

I’m vibrating with anger at this point. First Floriano, now Arturo? Nobody touches my wife. Not one man. Not if he values living to see the next sunrise.

“I would have. But she stopped me.”

“Did she fucking shoot you?” I demand. “You holding back a bullet wound?”

“No.”

“Did my hundred-pound wife kick your balls into next week?”

“No.”

“Then tell me,” I snarl icily, “how the fuck did she stop you from showing that old son of a bitch that no one gets to even think about laying hands on my woman?”

It’s obvious this is destroying Igor from the inside out. He prides himself on loyalty and efficiency. It’s why I value him as highly as I do. But he knows damn well this is a failure. A colossal fucking failure.

Igor sighs for a third time in as many minutes. “She asked me to stop, Roman.”

“*Excuse me?*” I slam my glass back on the table. It shatters into a million pieces, which I ignore.

“She was hysterical. Threw herself between us.”

If that doesn’t sound so much like Lily, I would’ve kicked his ass right here and now. “*Blyat*,” I mutter to myself.

“Sir, there’s more.”

*Well, fuck. Of course there is more.* “Go on.”

He hesitates, then says, “She begged me not to tell you.”

“What exactly did she say?”

“She says that since she didn’t want to go back home with Arturo, there was no reason to say anything to you about it.”

He nods like he sees her point. But if he really saw it, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. He would have kept her secret.

So his doubt becomes mine.

Perhaps my innocent little wife isn’t so innocent after all.

Between Lily and my dead soldiers, I’m boiling over with rage. I’m going to explode if I sit here any longer.

I threw a few hundred dollars on the table to cover our drinks and the broken glass, then storm out. I don’t say anything as we climb back into the car and drive home as fast as the car will go.

My wife asked my most trusted employee to lie to me. My traitorous fucking wife.

Lying. Hiding. Sneaking around with her shitbag of a father.

My blood is hot.

“She’s torn between her father and her husband,” Igor says softly. “She is not like us, Roman.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I say at once. “When I want you to explain my wife’s behavior to me, I’ll ask you.”

He shrugs. Friend or not, it isn’t the first time I’ve had to put him back where he belongs.

I can trust a thief. Thieves steal; that is expected. I can trust a killer. Killers kill.

But a liar—and it is looking more and more like my wife fits that description—is unpredictable.

You can never know which way a liar will twist the knife.





## LILY

I've been on edge all day, waiting in the front room like a puppy ready to see their master again. Every time I hear motion at the front door, I spring up from the armchair and sprint there.

But so far, it's been just the maid, or the chef, or a delivery driver doing something or other. Not Roman. And every time, I slink back to my chair with my tail between my legs.

Until finally, the door creaks open, and I do the same routine.

But this time, it's him.

"Hi!" I say as brightly as I can through my nerves. "I've been—"

The door slams shut viciously. And when his eyes find mine, they take my breath away like a blast of Arctic air.

My smile withers on the vine. "Everything okay?"

"You tell me."

There's a tingle of unease in my belly, but I ignore it. Surely Igor didn't snitch *that* fast. He said he had meetings all day, so maybe he's just tired. That must be it. Tired.

Not wanting to nag him, I take his hands in mine and say, "Come on. You aren't going to believe the difference one sofa makes."

He pulls his hand out of mine. “I can walk just fine on my own, thanks.”

I blink. Then, as the unease grows, I turn and slip into the living room.

The old settee has been replaced by my uber comfy linen sofa. Roman looks at it and says... nothing. Then raises his eyes to mine. They’re still so cold that I audibly suck in a breath and recoil ever so slightly.

“Do you... like it?” I venture.

“It’s a couch.”

I’m on the verge of tears. We’ve come so far since the wedding. For weeks now, he’s been coming home like he’s happy to see me. Greeting me with a kiss, a nibble on the neck, or more—sometimes we don’t even make it upstairs before our clothes come off. He’ll ask me to sit with him in the study to share a drink or to tell him about my day.

But this? This man is a stranger.

No—this is the man I originally thought I married. He didn’t go away. He’s been here all along.

He turns and stomps up the stairs. I follow him as anger and fear heat up in equal measure.

Once he sees the bed, he’ll perk up. He’ll see how happy it makes me to feel like I finally have a place I can call my own, where my input is valued, and that’ll make him happy in turn.

I hope.

The hope lasts about point two seconds before it gets ruthlessly stomped out.

He pushes open the bedroom door and keeps walking into the bathroom without so much as glancing up. I stop in the threshold, dumbstruck. The new bed taking pride of place in the middle of the room has a canopy and gauzy curtains and bleached wood to go with the frosty blue sheets and stark white comforter made of the softest Sherpa.

“Did you see the bed?” I say. He’s left the door of the bathroom open, so I know he can hear me.

“No.”

“Are you going to look?”

“I don’t give a fuck about the bed, Lily.” His voice is molten steel. And not in the good way.

Storming to the door of the bathroom, I stop and snap, “What the hell is your problem?”

He looks up at me again—and again, his gaze is like a slap in the face.

I hate this more than I did when we first met—because now, it’s not just my stupid innocence he’s skewering to death with his coal-black eyes. It’s hope. Hope that maybe this time, things wouldn’t turn out the way they always do for me.

Hope that life wasn’t meant to be miserable.

He splashes water on his face, then dries it off with a towel. Tossing it on the floor, he turns to leave. But I stay rooted in his path.

“Get out of my way, Lily,” he snarls.

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong with you.” I press my fists into my hips and try to look braver than I feel.

“You are a real piece of work,” he rasps. “Tell me, are these accommodations not satisfactory for you, princess? Because I can assure you, there is always a way I can make them worse.”

I don’t doubt that; I just doesn’t know what the hell he is talking about or why he is talking about it in such a devastating and hateful tone. “The accommodations are fine,” I say. “Everything is fine.”

“Have I treated you badly? Because if you think anything I’ve done is so horrible, just know this has been like a trip to fucking Disney Land. It can always get more difficult.”

The words are like an ice pick in the chest. “Well, you’re not exactly Prince Charming right now,” I retort.

He scoffs and smiles, but there is no happiness in it. Just the old bastard version of Roman staring at me with all the distrust and condescension he had from the very start.

“Not even Prince fucking Charming would put up with your bullshit.”

I shake my head and blink back the tears. “I don’t have to listen to this.” I turn to leave, but Roman snags my wrist in his grasp.

“Going so soon?” he drawls viciously.

“Let me go.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re losing all your charm, Prince Roman.”

He narrows his eyes into tiny slits. “At least I don’t fucking lie to you.”

“I don’t lie to you!”

“No.” He drops my hand like a hot coal. “You ask my fucking men to do it.”

My face goes pale white. Fuck me. I was right—worst fears confirmed.

Igor told.

“Roman, listen, I can explain.”

“Explain why you begged my most trusted employee to lie to me? Go on then. This, I want to hear.” He crosses his arms, ready to mock whatever explanation I give him.

I don’t even know where to start. I had so much hope that Igor would keep my secret. That it would get washed away and forgotten and the life I thought I could have with Roman would continue.

But I was wrong.

And now, it’s going to cost me dearly.

“I saw my father today,” I whisper. “He was trying to bring me home.”

“How did he know where you’d be?”

Mortified as I am, I can't help still feeling some lashes of anger. "Maybe your security isn't as top notch as you thought."

"Certainly not if an old fool like your father can sneak past it." He stalks to his bedside table and jabs a button on the phone. When the line picks up, he barks, "Tell Jakob to get in here."

"What are you doing?" I ask nervously. The last thing I want is for someone to lose his job because of me.

"Handling my security issues, as you so adeptly pointed out."

He's not done yet, either. As we wait for his lieutenant Jakob to come, he pulls out his phone, swipes open an app, and shoves it in my face.

"Who the fuck is that?" he demands.

I see high-definition footage of a gray car parked on the street outside the gates. I peer closer until my nose is almost flush with the grainy image on the screen, hoping to be proven wrong, but there is no mistaking.

It is my Uncle Paolo.

Before I can answer, Jakob knocks on the door and strolls in without invitation. "What's up, boss?" He takes a bite out of the apple in his hand.

*Oh shit.* My heart plummets. He is acting way too casual. Roman is going to devour him without remorse.

Roman fixes Jakob with a withering glare. "Why has no one told me about the Italian *mudak* taking a fucking nap in his car outside my gate?"

Jakob shrugs. He still has no idea of the peril all around him.

"Didn't think it was an issue. He hasn't moved since around four when he showed up. I dunno who the hell he is, so whatever." Another bite of the apple. He's an open-mouth chewer, too.

The nonchalance is what pushes Roman over the edge, I think. Moving fast as a tiger, he springs on Jakob. He takes a fistful of the man's shirt, pins his other forearm against his throat, and shoves him hard into the wall.

“He’s a goddamn Benedetti, you stupid motherfucker. And every minute he’s outside that gate, it puts my wife in danger.” Roman jerks Jakob forward then slams him back again. The lamps and the windowpanes shutter. “Lily, did you tell your father where you were? And don’t you dare fucking lie to me or I’ll kill this son of a bitch.”

The apple falls from Jakob’s trembling hand and rolls over to me. I stare down at it because I can’t look at him.

This is all my fault. Maybe logically that doesn’t quite check out, but it feels right. The guilt is undeniable.

“No, Roman,” I say numbly, “I didn’t call my father. Please believe me. I don’t want to go back there. Why would I? My father used me. He might as well have stuck a price tag on my forehead.”

It takes every effort to meet Roman’s eyes. I’ve never seen such rage in another person, but I can’t shrink away in fear. Who knows what he’ll do to this poor idiot if I run crying from the room? My tears bring out the worst in Roman. Jakob might not ever walk out of here again.

So I don’t look away. I stare my monster of a husband in the face and urge myself to be strong—strong enough for this, if nothing else.

And by some miracle, it works.

It takes a minute before Roman calms and lets Jakob go.

“Roman, if I thought this guy was a threat...” Jakob shakes his head in horror at the mere suggestion.

Roman waves a hand at the door. “Get out my sight. And get rid of the son of a bitch at the gate.”

Jakob scampers out and leaves us alone without another word.

When he’s gone, Roman looks at me. His expression is already softer than it was only a moment ago. “You didn’t call your father?”

“No. I swear I didn’t.”

Swallowing past the knot in my throat, I close the distance between us and put my trembling hand on his cheek.

“My father is a gambling addict and he sold me for a hand of poker. It’s embarrassing. I want to be *here*, Roman. With you. This is my home now. You are my family.”

He takes all that in stony silence for another few breaths. I wonder if he’s going to laugh in my face. If the cruelty will continue.

Then he sighs. “Good.” He brushes his thumb over my lips and kisses me softly. “This is where you belong, *moya zhena*.”

He’s right: this is where I belong now. With my husband, in our house...

Until death do us part.

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# LILY

Things are better in the morning. We made love last night under cover of darkness and fell asleep, and when the sun comes up, I feel like I can finally breathe again.

Roman wakes up before me. By the time I come to, he's standing in the doorway of our room, pajama pants slung low beneath the V-cut of his abs, coffee mug steaming in his hand.

“Good morning, *kiska*.”

“Good morning,” I mumble sleepily.

He doesn't move into the room. Just stands a full acre away, watching me. “We should be getting ready,” he remarks.

“Ready for what? Round Two?” I pet his spot on the bed next to me, bite my lower lip, and tease at pushing down the strap of my nightie to reveal a slice of bare shoulder.

“You're a vixen,” he chuckles. “Relentless.”

“Does that mean you're coming or not?”

He grins and sets the coffee cup down.

Twenty minutes later, I'm sweaty, sore, and fully awake.

“If I didn’t know it myself, I would never believe you were a virgin less than a month ago,” Roman says. He leans his forehead against mine, his dick still buried inside of me.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“Absolutely.” He rolls off me. “We really do need to get ready now, though. Get in the shower.”

“Ready for what?”

“Do you want to reek of sex while we’re on a date?” he asks.

“A date?” I exclaim. “This is the first I’m hearing of it.”

“You’re hearing of it now.”

“Hmph.” I purse my lips and pretend to pout. “Better late than never, I guess.”

He hustles me through the shower—although he does take time to finger me to a quick and greedy orgasm, so I guess we weren’t in *that* much of a hurry—and when I emerge, he’s got an outfit laid out on the bed for me. An ankle-length navy summer sun dress with a slit up to the hip, a gold necklace, and matching diamond studs.

The man knows what he likes. And he’s always, always right.

Danilo is waiting out front, as per usual. “Morning, boss. Morning, madam,” he says as we approach. He helps me into the car, and then he whisks us off to Roman’s private airplane hangar.

“A jet? Where are we going?” I ask as the stewardess pours coffee for us.

Roman just smiles. “You’ll see.”

I *hmf* again, but I don’t really mind that much. This is so much better than the cold, furious stare I got from him yesterday. These subtle smiles, the inner joke? That stuff, I like. I like it quite a lot, actually.

He pores over a file folder while I read a romance novel. Puffy cotton clouds pass us by. I can’t see much except the patchwork of middle America below us.

It's not until I see a green torch poking through the cloud cover that I realize with a gasp where we are.

I grab Roman's forearm. "You didn't!"

"Welcome to New York," he says with a laugh.

We taxi down the runway of the private airfield. When we come to a stop and walk down the unfolding staircase, I see a uniformed chauffeur waiting at the bottom to escort us to a blacked-out town car.

It's a short ride from there to our hotel, the Surrey, with marble floors polished so bright I can see the reflection of the skyline in them. Upstairs, our suite has a grand piano, a Jacuzzi big enough for an elephant, and a sprawling balcony with a view overlooking Central Park

I stand against the railing and breathe in my life.

Roman walks out behind me and traps me between his body and the balcony rail. He presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Good surprise," I tell him. "'Good' might be an understatement, actually."

"You think so?"

I turn in his arms and drape my hands over his shoulders. "Absolutely."

"Well, there's more."

I grin. "Do tell."

"I thought maybe we can get some dinner, shop, see a show."

Then he pulls the Broadway tickets from his back pocket and my jaw drops.

"You're joking. You're actually joking. This show has been sold out for months. You have to be, like, the president to get last-minute tickets to this thing."

"Then I guess that makes you the First Lady."

I laugh and bury my face in his chest. "Who are you?" I whisper over and over again. "Where did you come from?"

When he laughs, I feel it as much as hear it. “I’m glad you approve.”

“Approve?” I lean back and pull him down for a kiss. “I love it. This is the best surprise ever.”

“Good. Let’s have lunch, because I’m fucking starving. Then we can shop for something to wear tonight.”

He pulls me inside the room, and I freshen up while he calls for a driver. When I’m ready, we ride hand-in-hand in the private elevator down to the lobby.

“You ready to see New York?” he asks just before the doors open.

I squeeze his fingers between mine. “Ready,” I whisper. “Lead the way.”

And lead he does. He holds the door for me to get into the limo, which is stocked with drinks. Roman pours a scotch for himself and hands me a bottle of water I am too excited to drink. If I could stick my head out the window to gawk at everything without looking like a fool, I would have. But Roman probably wouldn’t be too keen on that, so I rein my excitement in.

Fifth Avenue is like something out of a dream. Endless rows of the finest the world has to offer. Gucci and Louis and Prada and Versace and Dolce. Everything gilded and gleaming.

Roman has to reel me in more than once to stop from getting run over by overzealous pedestrians. At least until one man in a trench coat buzzes too close past me. Roman gives him a vicious glare and we get a wide berth from then on.

I duck into a gorgeous little boutique with a shimmering auburn tulle dress in the window that catches my eye. Roman relaxes into a seat while I go to try it on.

Halfway through wriggling the thing into place in the dressing room, I can’t help myself—I stop and peek out at him.

It doesn’t matter where Roman is; he always looks supremely comfortable and confident. He’s a king, a sun, the center of gravity that the whole universe orbits around.

And sitting in that snowy white wingback chair with mirrors all around him, he is more *everything*. More beautiful. More virile. More imposing.

He sees me looking and winks. “I don’t know if I’m going to be able to sit out here knowing you’re in there naked,” he calls over.

“People can hear you!” I hiss at him.

He laughs and shrugs like he doesn’t give a shit—mostly because I’m sure he doesn’t.

I pause, blush, and then add, “So you’d better come say that again somewhere a little quieter.”

Roman arches an eyebrow, then smoothly unfolds himself and meanders over to me. When he gets close enough, I reach out to snare his hand and walk him backward into the dressing room.

Sometimes, I catch myself wondering about his past. I never ask about his life before me, probably because I don’t want to know if there were a thousand women or even only one out there who knows how his skin tastes and how he sounds when he comes.

But this is all so new for me. He’s my everything. My first and my last. I wonder if he knows how much of me he holds in his powerful hands.

Not just my body or my freedom...

But also my heart.

For now, though, it’s easy to set all that aside and kiss him. And when he pulls the door closed behind him, it’s easy to do far more than that.

I sit him on the bench and straddle him. With both hands fiddling in our laps, I free his cock from his zipper and pull my panties aside so I can sink onto him.

“Oh...” I sigh as he fills me. It’s perfect, just like it always is.

He holds me close and whispers, “*Kiska...*”

It’s enough to make me come almost instantly, just like it always is.

I bounce on him until he's about to explode. Then, when I see the telltale signs, I climb off, sink to my knees, and swallow him whole so he can finish in my mouth. His hips buck against my lips and his hands wind through my hair.

"You're a fucking dream," he says as he comes down from his orgasm.

"Then let's not wake up," I tease.

"Never," he says solemnly. "Never."



By the time I get freshened up and changed back into my clothes, Roman has already paid for the dress and stands waiting for me at the counter. I feel dowdy changing back into my normal street clothes after wearing something that gorgeous.

But the way he watches me, half-smiling, eyes bright, sends warmth skittering from my stomach to my everywhere else.

"I wish you would've told me I need to bring shoes," I sigh. "I have a pair that would look so great with the dress."

"Should I send the plane back to get them?"

"I don't think Mother Earth would appreciate the emissions. Let's save that for Plan B. Maybe we can find something here. You think they sell shoes in New York?"

He nods. "As a matter of fact, I know just the place."

For some reason, that innocuous little remark sticks in my head. Has he done this before with someone else? I don't want to know. I don't want to know at all.

But also... I fear being made the fool.

When we climbed back into the car, he gives some directions to the driver and we pull away from the boutique. Roman relaxes against the seat.

“What would you be doing today if you still lived at home?” he asks.

I don’t know what day of the week it is anymore, much less what month. But the answer would be the same no matter what. “I would be singing. Practicing.”

“Do you love it?”

Coming from someone else, it might seem like a silly question. But coming from Roman, it’s so serious and authentic and honest that I give him the kind of answer it deserves.

“It’s the only thing that’s ever mattered to me,” I say softly. “Until you.”

Before he can reply or ask another question, the car stops in front of what looks like an old industrial building. It has push-out windows, a brick front, and smudged double glass doors.

“Um, where are we?” I ask nervously.

Thanks to my father, I still have a few trust issues when it comes to buildings that look like they might house dead bodies or sketchy, middle-of-the-night poker games.

“Do you know Martin Herrera?”

“Holy shit. Martin Herrera is only the next Christian Louboutin.”

I don’t want to squeal with glee or give myself away with some other ridiculous fangirl showing, but...having my own Martin Herrera shoes is beyond a fantasy.

“Wait,” I say suddenly. “You know who Martin is?”

He shrugs. “Should I not?”

“I mean, women from fourteen to four hundred know him. But you’re not exactly his core demographic. The man makes the most beautiful women’s shoes in the world.”

Roman laughs. “Oh man. Martin is going to love you. Come on, they’re waiting.”

I wait for him to say he's kidding. But when he sticks his head back in the car and asks if I'd rather not join him, I squeal and hurry out.

Roman holds my hand as we step through the unmarked doors and into the minimally decorated lobby. I see only the signature *Martin* watermark stamped subtly into one concrete wall. Otherwise, I'd have no idea where we were.

I realize with a jolt that I have no idea what Martin looks like. I'm picturing an old Italian guy, stooped and fussy, with nimble fingers and sharp eyes.

Which is why I'm surprised when a door bursts open and an Amazonian blond woman sweeps out. She embraces Roman, kisses each cheek, then loops her arm through his as she turns to survey me.

"Martina, this is my wife, Lily. Lily, this is Martina Herrera."

"Martina?" I squeak. "Not... Martin?"

"Men's names sell better," she explains gruffly. Then she says to Roman, "You said 'wife'? Did my invitation get lost in the mail?"

Roman chuckles. "We kept it small."

The woman laughs. "My mother told me you had a shotgun wedding, but I say, no way. Roman Sorokin does nothing halfway." She laughs at her own joke then slips her arm through mine. "Come, little wifey." She glances down at my feet as I walk. "A size seven?"

"Yeah." I add a nod in case the high-pitched squeak of my voice made her deaf. "Seven."

When we step through the door she came through, the building comes to life. I see machines and work tables and easels in all directions. Dozens of people bustle to and fro. No one pays us any attention.

"It's magical," I whisper to myself. "Like Santa's workshop."

Martina hears me, much to my dismay, and laughs. "Does that make me Santa Claus, dear? Am I really so fat and hairy?"

I blanche. "No! No. You're, uh, just, you're—"



She laughs again and pats my cheek. “I see why you chose this one, Roman. She looks so innocent when she blushes.”

Martina leads us to a design table with a work lamp on a bending arm beaming down at a sketch pad. Other sketches hang on the wall in front of the table—shoes so beautiful and so richly detailed I can almost feel them on my feet.

“Oh my God,” I blurt. “I mean, these are so lovely.”

I’m oscillating between fangirl stupid and sounding like I have a stick up my ass. *Get it together, Lily. Just act like a normal person.*

Roman chuckles. “We’re going to a show tonight. Lily needs a pair of shoes to match this.” He pulls out his phone, taps the screen a couple times, then faces it toward Martina.

“Delicious.” She nudges Roman. “You’re a lucky girl, you know. If I didn’t hate men, I would make you fight me for this one.”

“Careful,” Roman warns her with a smirk. “Lily is a fighter.”

“Is she now?” Martina looks up and surveys me over the top of her glasses with a discerning eye. “Yes, now that you mention it, I do see some fire in there.”

I blush more, which just makes the two of them laugh harder.

“Anyway,” Roman says, “the show is tonight. We’ll need something by then.”

Martina *tsks* and flaps her hands at him. “*Do this, do that*, he says. Have you no patience?”

“None,” Roman replies with a straight face. “Never have.”

“I’d despise you if I wasn’t just like you, Roman. Marriage hasn’t softened you a bit. Or,” she adds, giving him a closer look, “perhaps it has. I don’t recall ever seeing a smile quite like that on your face before.”

Roman smirks. “Is this a friendly visit or a therapy session, Martina?”

“Listen,” the woman retorts, “you come in my building and ask me for miracles. It’s lucky for you that I am a miracle worker. By the time I’m done, you’ll want to eat dinner off her feet.”

She turns to me. “He’s such a man. How do you manage?”

Then back to Roman: “Go. Take her to see some sights or feed her. When you get back to your room to dress for the evening, the shoes will be there.”

Roman narrow his eyes. “No one gets to talk to me like that and live, Martina.” But he is half-smiling.

“Such a big, scary mob boss. I bet she can get away with anything she likes. As will I.” She winks at me, then adds sternly, “Now get out of my shop. I don’t want to see you again today. Your bride needs to be fed.”

She stoops and cups my cheek. “You are a treasure, darling. Never forget it.”

Then she turns and focuses her attention on her work table, and just like that, it’s as if we don’t exist to her anymore.

I’m dizzy. Martina Herrera in person is like standing in the open while a hurricane blazes through. I’m not quite sure which way the exit even is, my head is spinning so much.

And to be honest, I don’t want to leave. I want to watch the magic happen, but we’re already at the door by the time I remember I can speak.

Maybe that’s for the best. Some things are too much for words.



We have a light lunch at Le Grande Boucherie, where Roman orders for both of us like he can read my mind. I devour every delicious morsel and crumb.

From there, we helicopter to the Statue of Liberty and back and take a carriage ride through Central Park.

Back at the hotel, my dress is waiting on a hangar with Martina’s shoes in a box on the floor. I open the lid and squeal in sheer joy when I see what she’s created.

They're beautiful. The stitching is flawless, a swooping black leather with bronze metallic accents that encircle the lower curve of my calf. I put them on bare naked because I just can't wait, then step into my dress and squeal again.

"Do they fit?" jokes Roman from the doorway. "The store is picky about returns, I'm afraid."

I turn and squeal a third time. This time, it's not the shoes—it's Roman.

What this man does to a tux should be illegal. Even in an absurdly expensive dress and heels that are literally priceless, I am nothing by comparison.

You wouldn't know that by looking at Roman, though. His eyes rake over me and darken with desire as he moves from the door over toward where I stand near the full-length mirror.

"You are stunning," he murmurs in a voice that makes goosebumps prickle on the backs of my arms.

"You don't clean up so bad yourself," I joke back.

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me against him. "Sure you don't want to stay in tonight? Seems a shame not to test the bed before we go out on the town."

"I could be convinced. Is that what you want?"

"What I want is to peel this dress down your body and follow it with my tongue."

My nipples are probably already hard enough to poke through the fabric and he's barely even touched me yet. Honestly, though, we're long past the point of either of us having to touch me for my body to respond to him. It happens the second he enters my line of sight.

"That's almost as good as a Broadway show."

"Almost?" he growls playfully. "You'd better reconsider your word choice there, *moya zhena*."

"Make me."

Laughing, he nips at my neck with his teeth, then growls again and pulls himself away. “Come on. We have to get out of this room before we never get out of this room.”



Dinner at Le Bernardin over candlelight with Roman as company is perfection, from the meal to the service to the decor to the company.

“What do you want to do with your life, Lily?” he asks again in that solemn voice he saves for these kinds of questions.

I dab at my lips with a napkin. “Well, before...”—*Before my father lost me in a game of poker* is what I was going to say, but that seems a little crass while we are in such a lovely place—“... before everything happened and we got married, I wanted to go to a musical conservatory program at Julliard. I got accepted already, actually.”

He smiles. “I heard you in the caves. They would’ve been fools to turn you down.”

It seems like so long ago. Years, not weeks. I’m a different person than I was when I first held that letter in my hands. “I wanted to be a professional singer.”

“And being a Bratva don’s wife now is a poor substitute?”

He isn’t begging for compliments. Roman Sorokin isn’t that kind of guy. He is a man who knows what he wants every minute of every day and doesn’t need validation.

Fortunately for me, I am what he wants.

Or so he says. Little by little, I’m starting to believe him.

“It’s not about one being better than the other. I like being your wife. It’s about passion. About wanting to do something I love for no one but myself.”

“Passion cuts in every way, *moya zhena*.” He smiles almost sadly.

It's a cryptic thing to say. I want to hear the story behind it, but he wipes the look away and tucks it back behind the icy Sorokin façade I've already come to know so well.

He clears his throat. "Anyway, it's almost time for the show."

We make our way to the car, which is waiting right out front. "Thank you for today, Roman," I say, holding his elbow. "It was... everything."

I feel sad suddenly. This day has been so perfect that there's no reason for it, but the feeling is there anyway. A deep-seated melancholy I can't shake no matter how hard I try. My only choice is to pack those feelings away.

He smiles. "Thank *you*."

Beyond the car window, the town is alive. People milling on sidewalks, taking photos, enjoying the greatest city in the world. Inside the car, we fall into a comfortable silence. Roman holds my hand. When he gives it a squeeze, I feel the edges of the melancholy start to blur and fade. He does that to me. Does that for me.

Somehow, Roman Sorokin has become my comfort. And he did it without me noticing.



## LILY

I can't stop blabbering after the show. "It was amazing. Incredible. I don't even—I can't even..." Finally, I run out of adjectives and just sigh. "Thank you, Roman. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Just to be clear: you liked it?"

I laugh and swat him. He swats me right back, smack dab on the ass, which of course is enough to make my thighs tingle with that familiar need he calls forth effortlessly any time of day.

I giggle again and walk beside him into the hotel and across the lobby to our private elevator. "There's one more thing..." he says as the elevator starts to convey us upward.

Something in his voice makes me frown. "A bad thing?"

He shrugs. "I don't know what you'll make of it."

"Roman, you're scaring me." My stomach is suddenly churning with nerves.

But I don't have time to ask any more questions before the elevator dings to signal our arrival. The doors whoosh open. Roman takes my hand and leads me into the suite...

And my jaw drops.

"I thought I'd take a liberty."

I don't know where to look first. Every part of the room is dazzling. There's champagne chilling in silver buckets, rose petals spread on the floor, candles lit on every surface. It's like something out of a magazine spread or a fever dream.

"You did all of this?" I whisper in disbelief.

"There's more."

I raise an eyebrow. "More? What more could there possibly be?"

He guides me into the bedroom. It's more of the same in here—candles as far as the eye can see, rose petals on the bedspread, red satin sheets to replace the white Egyptian cotton that was there when we arrived. It's luxury incarnate. It's love incarnate.

It's perfect.

I notice a discrete box on the bed with a red bow tied around it. "What's that?"

Roman grins wolfishly. It makes my skin prickle up in the best possible way. "That's more."

"What's in it?"

"Open it and find out."

Frowning, I step up and undo the bow. When I remove the lid, my jaw drops again and my cheeks set themselves on fire.

Nestled in the box amongst black tissue paper, I find a black silk, blindfold, two pairs of black leather handcuffs, a high-tech remote controlled vibrator, and canisters of flavored body gel and lube.

I look up at him. That grin of his ticks a notch wider and I shudder at how hot and desperate it makes me. Those eyes are already undressing me.

"You did all this?" I know I already asked that, but I still can't quite find it in me to believe this is real. I pinch myself and it hurts, so I can't be dreaming.

But real life is never this beautiful.



Roman stalks towards me. Slow and dangerous, like a predator in a tux. I back up instinctively, but the bed hits my knees and there's nowhere else to go.

"I did it all for *you, moya zhená*. For you, *kiska*. For you, my beautiful bride."

His words are kisses. Each one of them pressing hot and seductive into me.

He's almost on top of me now. His voice dips into a low, rumbling growl. "Tonight, I want you to surrender to me." He leans closer and kisses right where my neck meets my ear. "Wholly..." Another kiss, this one on the other side. "And unholy."

I'm a shuddering puddle of need. So I say the only thing I could possibly say in a situation like this: "I'm yours."

He nods like I've done my part of this dance to perfection. "Stand up," he orders.

I rise like a marionette on strings. He owns my body and he hasn't even lifted a finger yet.

"Turn."

I pirouette in place slowly. Roman's eyes rake over me hungrily. I feel his hands go to the zipper at the back of my dress. He undoes it slowly, letting the *tck* of each metal tooth resonate in the quiet room. My heavy breathing is the only other sound.

Then he peels the halves of the dress down until it pools at my feet. Every sensation is heightened right now. I can smell the roses and the champagne and my husband's scent like a bouquet meant for me and me alone. The delicious slide of smooth satin over my skin makes me nearly come on its own. I'm naked beneath the dress, so when air swirls in the room and cools me, my nipples pebble hard.

The whole time, Roman just stares as he licks his lips and glides his hand over the curve of my hip.

He spins me back to face him again, just as slowly as he's done everything so far. The waiting game is driving me insane.

“I want you,” I whisper desperately.

He laughs, a sound that goes straight to my low belly like a lightning bolt. “So impatient,” he muses. “The little *kiska* doesn’t want to wait.”

“Please...”

I reach out for him, but he snares my wrist in his hand. “I didn’t say you could touch yet, darling.”

Keeping hold of me, he leads me around the bed. “Up.” I climb on and turn around to face him.

His eyes never leave mine as he takes off his jacket. I watch the bulge of his biceps in his pressed white shirt. He undoes the buttons one at a time, then slides the shirt off carefully and lays it on top of the nearby armchair with his coat. He steps out of his shoes.

And it’s all slow, painfully slow. I know without looking that I’m dripping wet and every inch of my body is on fire with need.

Roman knows all that too, of course.

Which, of course, just means he’s going to make me wait even longer.

He steps out of his shoes. Undoes his buckle, takes off his belt, shimmies out of his pants and boxers.

Then he’s in front of me in all his beautiful glory. His cock is hard enough to cut glass, his body a rippling tapestry of perfect muscle.

It’s the eyes that get me most of all, though. There are so many parts of Roman Sorokin worth obsessing over, but the eyes? Those are what truly keep me prisoner to him.

“Come here,” he says. I crawl forward obediently and he fastens the blindfold around me.

I moan pitifully. I want to see him, but I know better than to balk. Anyway, I trust him. My husband knows exactly what he’s doing.

“Lay down.”

When I'm on my back, I feel motion. He cuffs my wrists and my ankles to the four posts of the bed. I'm spread wide open for him and I've never felt so exposed—or so turned on. The vulnerability is like a shot of pure adrenaline. I'm trembling from head to toe.

More motion, this time at the foot of the bed.

Then it begins.

He kisses the soles of my feet, up to my ankles, to my calves, the backs of my knees. Every tender, delicate spot gets a moment of his attention. And with the ticking past of each minute, he gets closer and closer to the wet center of my need.

Past my knee. To my thigh. The crease in my hip.

He breathes hot and heavy on my slit and I shiver uncontrollably. I wonder for one horrifying moment if he's going to leave me here, desperate for release. Surely even Roman Sorokin isn't that cruel.

Then, at long last, he licks me from top to bottom.

And a second time. A third.

The fourth is what does it, and when he slides two fingers into me at the same time, I explode in a sputtering mess. I'm gasping wordlessly and yanking at the handcuffs. They keep me pinned firmly in place.

"Roman...!" I cry out, but he's merciless. He doesn't stop even as I fall over the edge. Just keeps licking and curling those fingers inside of me.

The second orgasm comes right on the heels of the first. I'm still panting and trying to regain feeling in my fingertips when I feel Roman slide up my body, peppering me with kisses on my belly, my neck, each breast.

Then his cock starts to tease at my opening. I hear the crack of a lid and the sharp scent of mint. He must be using one of the lubes in the box.

Not that we really need it, because I've never been wetter. And when he lines up and pushes into me one agonizing, blissful inch at a time, I realize just how right I am about that.

I'm soaked with need for him. Every part of me wants every part of him.

"Deeper," I beg. "Give me all of you."

As always, my husband delivers.

I'm not really sure what happens after that. He fucks me slow and gentle for a long time, and then he frees my legs so I can wrap my heels behind his lower back and urge him deeper and deeper into me.

I come again and again. Finally, what seems like hours later, Roman does, too. Filling me with him. Marking me as his.

Then he frees my wrists and cuddles me for a long time. When I'm almost asleep, he carries me to the Jacuzzi and bathes me slowly. He rubs soap up and down my arms and my legs, taking his time. Neither of us says a word the whole time.

When my skin begins to go pruney, he steps out and wraps me up in a soft, fluffy towel, then conveys me back to bed.

I can feel Roman starting to drift off behind me. "Roman?" I whisper into the darkness.

"Mm?"

"Will you tell me something?"

"What kind of something?"

"Tell me..." I'm not sure how to phrase exactly what I want. I just know that there's one tiny piece missing to make this night absolutely perfect in every way.

Then I find the words: "Tell me something you've never told anyone else. Something about you that I only will know."

He's silent for a long time and I start to wonder if he's gone back to sleep. Maybe I've gone too far. Maybe it's a stupid, childish request and he's giving it the treatment it deserves.

But after a while, he speaks. "I want to be a better man for you, *moya zhena*," he murmurs. "I want to deserve your purity. I'll do anything to keep you, I'll

kill anyone who tries to take you from me. My world was a mausoleum before you arrived. A fucking graveyard. But now... Not anymore. Now, it's something beautiful."

He pulls me closer into his grasp. I don't say anything back because, really, what can I say that would top that?

It was perfect.

He is perfect.

This is perfect.

That's how sleep finally overtakes me. With me curled up in my husband's arms and the scent of roses in the air.

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## LILY

We leave New York the next day. Roman goes into his downtown office as soon as we land, leaving me to ride back to the house with Igor.

I don't want to part from him since I'm still riding the bliss cloud after our getaway, but I do have work to do.

A house to make into our *home*.

I change into jeans and a t-shirt before the next furniture delivery arrives so I can be useful as needed, although I highly doubt any of the burly masculine types who work for Roman or the shipping company will let me lift a finger. Fine by me; I can supervise.

The morning passes in a blur of activity. By the time they're done, though, I'm cheesing from ear to ear.

The newly minted family room is a blend of my personality and all the high-tech gaming and fun equipment I can come up with. We have multiple gaming systems and games, a big screen that takes up an entire wall, a sprawling sectional couch with plush cushions, a dual chaise, and matching recliners. This is a homey comfort room all done in gray and white, but with splashes of red—pillows, curtain tie backs, candles. I worked hard on this one and I am proud of how it came out.

When it's all done and the movers have left, I stand on the patio to take a break and catch the breeze. It's peaceful out here, gazing out at the grounds. Thousands of square feet of untouched grass flow in every direction.

Beautiful, yes, but I can't help feeling it's a little bare. No flowers. No landscaping. Just unbroken green.

Maybe I'm asking for too much, but I want one of those backyards where our friends come over and the kids swim in the pool while Roman barbecues with his friends and I sit at a table in the sun with the ladies, drinking margaritas and chatting about the latest fundraiser or school outing or other pleasant nothings like that.

I want the rich family sitcom life. I already have the husband everyone wants. I have the perfect house.

Just a few more pieces to finish the puzzle.

With my mind racing for ideas, I find a sketchpad in one of the downstairs offices and go back outside to doodle some ideas for my backyard haven. I sing while I work, and the birds chirp back to me like they're joining in on the melody.

I'm putting the finishing touches on an idea for a poolside cabana...

When a hand digs into my shoulder.

Another snatches away my book, then plasters a piece of tape over my mouth and tugs some sort of cloth bag over my head.

I scream, but the tape muffles the sound. Just when it occurs to me to start fighting back, whoever or whomever are attacking me wrench my hands behind me and zip tie them together.

"Let's fucking go," a deep male voice snarls in my ear.

*Not on my watch.* I dig my heels in, but then a second pair of hands scoops me up and hoists me on the men's shoulders like a roast pig at a luau.

Igor has gone through scenarios with me and taught me what to do if someone came at me, but none of those included being snatched from my own patio without warning.

I frantically search my memory to see if he'd given me any advice I can draw on.



*If all else fails, play dead.* I remember those exact words.

So as they jog through the grounds towards God-knows-where, I stop fighting. Just let my body limp, my legs drag, my knees bend, my arms become flimsy little noodles.

The kidnappers grunt in surprise and irritation, but they don't slow down.

I hear the creak of a gate, followed by the metallic whine of car doors opening. Then I'm dropped roughly into the back of a van. I land hard on my face and feel the trickle of blood coming out of my nose.

Then the doors slam shut.

Panic roils through me. How long will it be before anyone noticed I am missing? Roman isn't home. How long before—

We take off. Almost immediately, the van swerves and I roll to the left.

“Watch it! They're coming.” It's a little muffled because of the burlap bag over my head, but I could swear I recognize that voice.

And when the second man says, “That bastard is right behind us,” there is no doubt.

My father and brother have kidnapped me.

Papa is driving like shit, throwing me from side to side. My hands are bound so I can't protect myself from smashing into the wheel wells repeatedly. The normal bump of the highway turns into harsh jerks like we're running over potholes.

Then the van screeches to a halt. Two doors creak open and slam closed. I hear footsteps circling the car towards the back.

When they open the back doors, I'm going to have just one chance to get away. I prepare myself to do whatever I have to do: fight, kick, claw. I wriggle off the bag over my head and turn to face the rear.

The handle clanks—and then the doors burst open and I make my move. I lash out hard with one heel and catch Leo right in his stupid fucking face. Cartilage gives and blood spurts.

“You fucking bitch!” He catches my ankle, drags me to him, and backhands me so hard I taste my own blood while his spurts from his nose.

Stars dance in my vision as I turn to look at my father. Unlike Leo, he’s calm as he points a gun at me.

“Don’t be difficult, Lily,” he says. “We’re rescuing you.”

The man who’d used me as the chip in a poker game is rescuing me from the happiest days of my life?

Fuck. That.

But before I can formulate an appropriately venomous *Go fuck yourself* to the man who birthed me, I see something behind him. Motion.

A second car squeals into the alleys. Men shout as they leap out.

“Let her go and we won’t kill you!”

My brother twists his hand into my hair and drags me in front of him as a human shield. At the end of the alley, a Mercedes neither of them can afford sits idling. I try to stomp Leo’s foot but I have no shoes on and it does pretty much nothing.

But when I throw my head back into his face, making perfect contact with his already-ruined nose, he lets go of me and cries out again. In fact, his bellow in my ear is so loud that I almost don’t hear Roman shout, “Get down, Lily!” as he steps out of the driver’s seat of the Mercedes.

But I do hear it. I hear it just in time.

I drop to my knees as two bullets cross paths over my head. One from Roman aimed at my father. One from my father aimed at Roman.

*BANG.*

*BANG.*

Then everything is silent. Just before I open my eyes, I offer up a silent prayer: *Please let him be safe.*

I don’t think God needs clarification on which “him” I’m referring to.

Then it's time. I can't put it off any longer. I open my eyes, and I see it: the body of a man.

The body of my father.

I am lying on the ground of some dingy alley, mere inches from my father's corpse. He is sprawled flat on his back, eyes open to the sky overhead, a trickle of blood flowing from the corner of his mouth, and his shirt—maybe it was white once, but not anymore—soaked in dark crimson.

I don't even take a second to grieve. I stand and run to Roman—where I belong.

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## ROMAN

Lily collides into me hard and I wrap her up in my arms. There's commotion beyond me—her bastard brother must be running.

Fuck him. My men will catch him, and if they don't, we'll find him soon enough and make him pay for what he's done. Her father has paid already.

There will be questions later. Questions like, how the fuck did two worthless pieces of shit manage to get past my security measures to snatch Lily from the yard?

But for now, I just hold her. Let her sob against me as I soothe her as best as I can.

"There's nowhere on earth they could've taken you that I wouldn't have searched, Lily," I snarl in her ear. "No lengths I wouldn't have gone to in order to find you."

She cries harder and presses her face into my chest. I wonder if she's mourning her father. Not too long ago, I would've thought she was in on it. But I can see now that she's not.

She's mine. She's utterly and completely mine.

Which means she falls under my protection.

Anyone who fucks with her or makes her unsafe or frightened will die, simple as that. Today, it was her father. Tomorrow, it will be Floriano. The day after that, someone else, perhaps.

But it doesn't matter. They'll all meet the same ending.

I look down at her and wipe the tears from her face. "It's okay," I tell her. "I'm here. Everything is okay."

He bound her hands, for fuck's sake. And her asshole brother gave her a shiner she'll definitely feel tomorrow. I despise that, mostly because I know it will remind her of the alley and what happened here.

Best to put all this behind us as quickly as we can. My wife is pure and innocent and doesn't deserve to be mired in the blood that runs through my world.

It's my job to keep her safe from that.

"I'm here," I tell her again. "I'll always be here."



Igor pulls the car in front of the house. I'm in the back with Lily, who has fallen asleep against me. Without waking her, I carry her into the house and up to our room. She needs sleep, to be held and soothed, cared for and lov—well, cared for.

I'm about to nestle her in the bed when she finally speaks. "Roman..." Her fingers curl around the edges of my shirt.

"Yes?"

"Don't leave me."

I look down at myself. I'm covered in sweat and blood spatter. "I'm unclean," I say.

She nods without opening her eyes. "So am I. Can you fix it?"

Her voice is so tiny and broken that my chest throbs. Instead of setting her down on the bed, I turn and walk her into the bathroom. I run the bath as hot as it can go and sit her down on the edge of it while I undress her with careful, tender hands.

She breathes softly, eyes vacant, and says nothing.

When the water is ready and steaming, we both slide into it. She nuzzles against me, her back to my front, and we stay like that for a long, long time.

After a while, I find a comb and coax the knots from her hair. She sighs and lets out the tiniest moan.

“Stay here with me,” I whisper in her ear. “In this moment. Don’t go in your head. Don’t go to your memories. I’m right here. Be here, too.”

“Okay,” she murmurs. “I want that.”

Her breathing slows and slips into the rhythm of sleep. When I’m sure she’s out, I pick her up, swaddle her in a bathrobe, and convey her back to our bed.

*Our* bed. Funny how easy and natural that sounds in my head now.

It’s *our* bed. In *our* house. Lily has made it that way. Her touch is all over the house in every little detail, from trays of potpourri in the entryway to the snowy white blanket draped over the armchair.

That means more to me than it should.

I lay her down, then I lie down beside her. She’s fast asleep in no time, but sleep is a laughable thought for me.

She needed tenderness, so I was tender. But the rage brought on by what happened today needs some release.

So I slide carefully out of bed. She doesn’t stir, so I move to the door and walk out.

“What a fucking night,” I say under my breath when I’m in the hallway.

Words don’t do it justice. I need a drink, a couple hours in the gym, a way to make my head stop working while my body sorts through the emotions.

First things first: the drink.

I go to the kitchen for the forty-year-old whiskey I nip into only on the best and worst days of my life.

Today, though, one won't do it. One pour becomes two and two turns into seven before my father walks in through the back door.

"What are you doing here?" I snap.

"Heard you had some trouble."

*Some trouble.* Those words don't do it justice, either. I roll my eyes and pour another glass.

"You can say that."

"The girl okay?"

"The girl' is my wife. And she's fine."

"That's good."

"Yeah. It is."

I'm tired enough to let my guard down for one brief moment. And in that moment, I find myself saying, "She's so young."

Father nods. "Yes." He takes the bottle, finds a tumbler in the cabinet, and pours himself a few fingers.

"I think..." I falter before I finish the thought.

I think what? That the thought of losing her shook me to the core? That I'd burn the whole city to the fucking ground if that ever happened?

I can't say that shit out loud, least of all to my father.

So I do what I've always done with thoughts like that: bury them.

"I could've lost her," I say instead.

Father nods again. "But you didn't."

"No. I just killed her dad instead."

"Better him than her, no?"

"Yeah," I grimace. "Can't argue with that."



“We worry about you, you know,” my father remarks. “Your mother and I.”

“I bet you do.”

“Parents worry, Roman. Mothers especially so. All we can do is try to keep our women calm.” He speaks like he knows full well the trouble burning in my gut.

“Good to know.”

What I need to know is how to stop worrying about her. How to not imagine the nightmares she is probably having.

But even more than that, how to protect her so this never happens again.

My father starts to say, “Roman, I—”

Before he can finish the thought, though, he coughs again. It’s worse than I’ve ever heard it before. He’s spluttering and wheezing for a long minute afterward. I try to offer him a glass of water, but he waves me away.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” he gasps as he gets his breath back. He looks like death warmed over, but I don’t say that.

When he’s finally calm again, I fix him with a grim look. “What did the doc say, Father?”

He shakes his head. “Pah! The doctors don’t know shit. They just come to me with pills, pills, pills. Always more pills. One to piss, one to stop pissing. One to sleep, one to wake up. And the heart pills—don’t even get me start on the heart pills. I’m a fucking pharmacist’s dream. But you don’t need to worry, son. I will outlive you all.”

I snort. “Not a bad bet, honestly.”

They make them tough in the Old Country. Grigor Sorokin is no exception.

“Who worries about you, though, Roman?” he ponders.

I know it’s not a question I’m meant to answer, but I bristle at it anyway. “I don’t need anyone to fucking worry about me. I’m fine.”

He sighs. “Trust me, son: you don’t want to make her worry.”

He doesn't have to specify which "her" he's talking about.

"Any more fatherly advice?" I growl bitterly.

Father shrugs. "She is in a fragile place, son. Her father wagered her virginity like a chip at Caesar's. And then she watched him swallow a bullet right in front of her."

"I'm aware of what happened."

He nods again, unsurprised by my answer. "What about the brother?"

"Motherfucker ran like a bitch. Kaz is out looking."

"You make an example of that boy when you catch him."

I tighten my fist. "You know I will."

Leo Benedetti is on the list now. As soon as he turns up, he will be brought to me. He will be dealt with.

And no one will ever find the body.



## LILY

My morning bath isn't as pleasant as the one from last night. I felt safe when Roman was in there with me.

Now, when I slip below the water and open my eyes like I always do, I blink—and see my father's face, pale and bloody in death.

It's just a vision. A hallucination. And it's gone as quick as it came.

But when I sit up, hacking and choking on inhaled water, the image stays seared onto my retinas.

Sadness surges through me. It's not easy plucking moments worth saving out of my relationship with my father. But there are some, spread throughout my flaming dumpster fire of a life like tiny little treasures.

Him brushing the sweaty bangs out of my face when I was home sick with the flu.

Him kissing me on the cheek to wish me luck before I took the stage for a choir performance.

I'll never feel my father's touch again.

And it's not just him that I've lost. When my mother learns what happens, she'll blame me. She always does. So really, by losing him, I'm losing her, too—though she was already almost all the way gone, anyhow.

She won't be there to see her baby girl grow up into a proud, capable woman. She won't be in the hospital with me when I deliver her first grandchild into the world.

Of course, that is a long way off. Kids are—

I still for a second, quiet and counting. The weekend before the poker game that changed my life, I was at Jenny Figueroa's party on the roof at her mom's penthouse apartment when I started my last period. That was about... shit, how long ago?

I think harder. It was Jenny's birthday, and she is nine months to the day younger than me. I was born on the sixteenth. The party was on a Saturday and we blew out candles at the stroke of midnight.

Seven weeks.

Seven weeks since I got my period.

“Oh God.”

Stress can stop a period. I've definitely been a little stressed due to, shall we be nice and call them “life events” over the last few weeks.

Of course, sex with a man whose body is built specifically with said purpose in mind also leads to the thing—I can't bring myself to say the word—that makes periods late by about—oh, I dunno... nine or ten months?

This can't be happening.

I climb out of the tub in a rush, sloshing water over the side. My left foot slides, my right foot catches, and I would've gone down hard if not for the towel rack I manage to grab hold of.

When I have two solid feet under me, I wrap a towel around me and hurry into the closet. What does one wear to head to a drug store to buy a pregnancy test?

Jeans and a t-shirt feels weirdly inadequate, but anything Prada is too much. I settle on cargo capris and a white tee. By the time I walk into the hall, I've almost convinced myself I'm overreacting.

I'm not pregnant. Stress, stress, stress—that's all this is. The last few weeks—all the weeks since the poker game, really—have been stressful! Period postponing levels of stressful.

I hear noise at the end of the corridor and I duck back into the bedroom before I even realize what I'm doing.

I don't want Roman to know yet. Besides, there's nothing for him to know. Right? Right.

So I wait until the sound of his footsteps fade in the other direction. Thank God for small favors. When I peek back into the hall, though, I hear him finishing up a conversation with one of the house staff and then tromping back this way.

"Shit, shit, shit," I curse under my breath. Of all days, he has to pick this one to stay home to work.

No way am I getting past him without him asking question. I only have one choice.

Igor.

I pick up my cell phone and start typing out a text.

***Can you please go to the store and pick something up for me? I need a pregnancy test.***

I almost hit send, but then the obvious truth smacks me across the face: he will run straight to Roman. He certainly didn't keep the faith about my father's little rendezvous at the furniture store. And this is equally if not much more pertinent to Roman's interests than that.

Shit. What to do...?

I delete "pregnancy test" and type out a bunch of random items I don't actually need. ***Organic orange juice, aspirin, Chewy caramels, pregnancy test, a bag of mini donuts, and a pair of reading glasses.***

Just a random grab bag. Nothing to see here, keep it moving.

I hope.

I hit send. A nanosecond later, his reply pings to my phone. ***Back in ten.***

***You're the best. Bring it to my room when you get here?***

He sends a thumbs up. A man of few words, that one.

I sit on the bed cradling my phone in my lap like I can influence Igor's blabbing-or-not-blabbing by squeezing it hard enough. Is he going to forward the exchange to Roman?

I feel a weird pang and realize that this is what my mother should be doing—calming me down, bringing me a test, talking me through this life-changing moment. This is a moment where I want a mom more than I ever have before.

And I don't have that. I never will.



Ten minutes pass. Ten long, agonizing minutes of wavering between being sure I am pregnant and screwed, and sure I'm making a mountain out of molehill.

But when ten minutes are up, Igor knocks on my door. "Here." He is both prompt and concise.

"Thanks, Igor," I say as pleasantly as I can.

He nods, sets the bag on the floor, and backs out of the room with only a muted grunt in response. Par for the course, really, but it doesn't help calm my nerves in the slightest.

As soon as the door closes behind him, I leap up, snatch the plastic drugstore bag, and dump all the contents out on the bedspread. The pregnancy test sticks up from the bottom like the sword in the stone.

I read the instructions even though it's a pretty straightforward maneuver. You pee on the stick, you wait, and then you crumble to pieces.

I do exactly that. Hurrying into the bathroom, I do my business.

And then I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

If that ten minutes felt like a lifetime, this thirty seconds feels like eternity spent in purgatory. I convince myself a dozen times over that I'm starting to see—wait, nope, *now* I'm starting to see—no, okay, fine, *there* it is. For real this time.

It is...

A plus.

I'm pregnant.

I have a jaw dropping moment. Literally, my mouth falls open. For all I know, my heart stops, too. I feel sick to my stomach—and the first thought that runs through my head is, *Is that bad for the baby?*

Holy shit. I have to tell Roman.

I can't tell Roman.

I have to test the water with Roman. Yeah, that's better.

As if I summoned him with the power and intensity of my thoughts, he walks into the bedroom just then. I slid the test stick under my thigh and look up, fake smile in place.

"Hey," he says. "You're awake."

"Yes. Yeah. Yep. Wide awake."

He cocks his head. "I can see that."

Then, like he knows I am about to explode from the effort of lying-slash-concealing this too-big-to-be-true truth, he settles against the doorframe. It's so quiet in this bathroom that he can probably hear the sound of the screaming in my head.

"What's up?" I squeak.

"Wanted to check on you before I leave for work."



“You’re going into the office?” *Oh thank God.* I need some time to wrap my head around this. It’s too much at once.

“I can stay if you’d like.”

“No!” *Too loud. Too quick. Dial it back.* “I mean, I don’t want to come between you and your work.”

“I’ll only be gone for a few hours.”

“Sounds great.”

He turns to leave, then pauses. “Or maybe I’ll just call in and tell the boss I’m sick.”

*Is that a barbed threat? Does he know? No, impossible. He doesn’t. He’s just making a joke. Make one back, like a normal human being.*

“Aren’t you the boss?”

He smirks. “Oh, right. How convenient.”

I stand up and cross over to him on trembling Bambi legs. “Well, who’s gonna steer the ship if you’re playing hooky, hm?”

When I’m close enough for him to reach, his fingers dance over my stomach under the hem of my shirt. I have a sudden, inexplicable urge to wrench away from him. To protect my baby even from something so innocent as my husband’s touch.

I stiffen my whole body so I don’t move and give myself away.

Roman stops and pulls back. “You sure you’re okay?” Before I can answer, he takes my cheek in his hand and strokes my face with his thumb. “I know you probably think you have to hold it all in because...” He pauses like he isn’t sure I’m ready to hear the words, *Because I killed your father.* “But you can cry if you need to.”

I shake my head. “I’m fine, thank you. I think I just need some time to process. To... grieve.”

Both true. But those things have taken a back seat right now.

“Okay.”

He turns to leave once more, but this time it’s me stopping him. “Roman?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for... for saving me.”

His dark eyes shimmer. “Always.”

I manage to hold it together until he leaves. But as soon as the door shuts behind him, I sink to my knees on the porcelain floor and sob.

They’re not sad tears. They’re not really happy tears, either.

Truth be told, I don’t know what I’m feeling. Do I love my husband? Do I hate him? Can I raise a child with him, or should I take this baby and run, run while I can, run like our lives depend on it—because maybe they do?

Roman Sorokin is a killer, after all. He may kiss me tenderly and fuck me like he loves me, but we both know he isn’t capable of that feeling.

Right?

I say that like I know it to be true. But deep in my chest, I wonder if it’s possible for someone to change that. For *me* to change that.

I have to make a choice sooner or later. But I’ll be damned if I know what choice that will be.

Hours pass like this, rife with indecision. By the time I give up and go to bed—no sign of Roman—it is after midnight, and I am exhausted. Too exhausted to even look at the clock when he finally slides into bed beside me and pulls me close.

Too exhausted to do much more than snuggle into his side and let him hold me while I sleep.

But not so exhausted that my demons leave me alone.



# ROMAN

Sleep doesn't come with its usual ease.

Because I fucked up. My enemies got close enough to touch the most precious thing in my world.

I've taken care of the gaps in my security. Matthias will carry a scar and wear an eye patch for the rest of his life as a reminder that he'd failed to keep watch over the single most important person in my life.

Igor was spared a similar punishment, but only because I know that he'll torture himself for his failures far worse than anything I could ever do to him.

But the anger lingers anyway.

Eventually, though, sleep claims me. With it comes a dream—unusual for me.

My head aches from the chaos of the crowd around us. The lights overhead don't help—fluorescent and colored, strobing and blinking.

Lily is with me. I keep a tight grip on her hand because everywhere I look, I can see danger.

Clowns with guns. Men with animal masks. Women with talons for hands.

We're exposed out here. Too many variables, too many threats. I tow Lily through the crowd, smacking away reaching hand after reaching hand, shielding her with my body.

I'm not even sure where we are. A circus? A shopping mall? Some kind of masquerade?

Suddenly, I realize something: her hand isn't in mine anymore. I'm holding only empty air.

"Lily? Lily?" I get louder and louder until I'm roaring her name. "Lily! Lily!"

But she is gone. The crowd swallows her up. Faceless and ruthless and endless.

Then: "Roman!"

Her scream echoes through the night air. The space is completely empty now in the blink of an eye, but it's so dark I can't see her, can only hear her.

I chase after the sound. There are woods suddenly. Tall, dark trees crowding together. "Roman!" comes out from between the trunks once again.

I run through the trees, dodging roots and suffering branches whipping me across the face. I'm bleeding, but I don't give a fuck.

I just need her.

I see light ahead. We're nearing the edge of the forest. But just when I'm about to burst through the perimeter and back out into the open space where I can still hear Lily calling me, I realize that I'm not moving forward anymore.

I'm running as fast as I can, but my long strides gain no ground, the floor is a treadmill belt, and I can call out for her as loud as I want but it does nothing and I get no closer.

I startle awake. My heart is pounding, every other muscle throbbing and aching and tense.

But she is lying beside me, breathing even and soft, hair still fragrant, a sleepy smile tugging at her lips.

"Thank God." I whisper the words into the darkness of our room. The dream has its claws in me.

I shake my head angrily. No one is taking her from me. Not ever fucking again.

It's easier to fall asleep this time. I close my eyes and feel myself slipping away. I'm passing through that sweet spot between awake and asleep where the world is weightless and nothing matters...

When everything explodes.

The window erupts inwards in a hail of broken glass. Flames and smoke pour through the jagged openings. The fire alarm and security systems are screaming bloody murder.

"Lily! Get up!" I shake her shoulders even as I stand and yank on my pants with my other hand. I don't have time for a shirt because the accelerant has splashed onto the walls and floors and the corner of the bed. The fire consumes it greedily. Smoke fills my lungs and makes me cough like my father.

I hear a second crash down the hall and four more in rapid succession before I can rouse her enough to dress.

"Wha... what's happening?" she asks blearily. "Roman, what—"

"We don't have time. Get up. We have to move."

When she still doesn't respond fast enough, I scoop her up and run into the hallway. Down the stairs, the front door is wide open, and through it, I can see the estate gates have been blasted to smithereens. Two of my men—Fakir and Andrei—are lying bleeding from head wounds on the driveway.

And the smell of smoke contaminates everything.

I can't see, I can't breathe, I can't think. What the fuck is happening?

It doesn't matter. First, we have to move. When Lily is safe—then I can figure out my plan.

Still, I can't help forming a list of suspects in my mind as we run down the concrete drive. A long list. Everyone from Lily's brother, to Gianpaolo and Floriano, to the Irish, the Yakuza, or that new Greek bastard who is running drugs out of his restaurant on the edge of my territory.

One thing is certain: whichever one dared do this will suffer terribly.

I set Lily down only when we're far away from the burning house. She whimpers, still clouded by sleep, and huddles against me.

All I can think of is protecting her. Finding a way to keep her safe. There are no houses nearby, no cover to shield her while I watch my house burn. And if someone is waiting in the tree line, they'll be able to ambush us without any resistance. I have no weapon, no phone, not even a fucking shirt.

Lily, still wrapped in the blanket, has fat tears rolling down her cheeks. "What's happening, Roman? Who's doing this? Where are all your men?"

Before I can answer her rapid-fire questions, the first bullet rips through my side.

There is no sound of gunfire, not even the quiet ping of a silenced weapon. Just pain.

Warm wetness—blood—seeps from the wound down to soak my waistband as I twist around trying to figure out where the shot came from and who the fuck I need to kill.

But the world spins as I try to focus. Bile rises into my mouth.

"Roman!" Lily screams as my legs buckle and the cold ground rushes up to meet me.

She cushions my blow and presses the blanket into my wound.

"Roman!" she cries again.

The edges of my world are blurring and my mouth won't work right. So I can't warn her about the man approaching behind her.

I try anyway, but all that comes out is "Li..." before my voice gives up.

I cling to her hand, but I don't have enough strength to keep her with me as the man leans down and yanks her away.

"Lil..."

"Roman!"

"Lily..."

Then—just like in the dream—her hand slips from mine, and she disappears into the woods, still screaming my name.

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# LILY

I scream again and again until no sound comes out. My kidnappers ignore me as they drag me through a hole blasted in the fence. Shrapnel litters the ground and the hedges are burning.

Once we're clear of the grounds, the pair of them tie my hands together behind my back, then hoist me up over their shoulders and continue to run into the shadows.

Between the darkness and my tears, I can't see where we're going. I can't see Roman, either. God only knows what they're doing to him. I can't imagine it's good.

One thought runs through my head again and again: even if I somehow survive this, my baby will never know its father.

I want to cry, to scream, to lash out and show these motherfuckers my wrath. But I have no shoes, no weapon and only a pair of pajamas between me and the air.

No. No. Roman will be fine. I refuse to go back to living without him, to being without him. He can't die. He won't.

But the fear that he might bubbles up in my chest, in my throat, until it's all I can taste and all I can breathe and all I can think.

"Shut up, you stupid bitch." The goons set me down roughly on the asphalt. "Walk."

“Go fuck your—”

He pistol-whips me across the face. I see stars and feel my lip split open. The copper tang of blood fills my mouth.

He points the weapon in my face. “There will be more where that came from if you do not cooperate. *Capisci?*”

I say nothing. I won’t show him my fear or my pain. I’ll do as Roman would do: stand tall and spit in the faces of our enemies.

His mouth, the only thing I can see besides his dark eyes because of his ski mask, twists into a feral grimace.

“When I ask you a question, you’d better fucking—”

“Easy, *amico*,” the other man interrupts. “No time for this. We need to move.”

The first man growls. “Lucky little bitch,” he mumbles. But he tucks the gun away nonetheless.

I steal a glance behind me. Where are Roman’s men? Where are his brothers? Where is Igor? I’ll take anyone right now, anyone at all. Just someone who will pull out a gun and shoot these Italian bastards.

They must be wondering the same thing, because they redouble their efforts, pushing me in the back to urge me forward.

If these fuckers get me into a car, it is over. Chances are I will disappear and never be seen again. Sold to the highest bidder or dismembered and discarded—who the hell knows what they have in mind?

I can’t let that happen. Roman needs me to survive. My baby needs me to survive.

When I stumble, the rope-holding goon yanks on the leash attached to my cuffs. “Let’s go!” he snarls.

But instead of letting him tow me back upright, I collapse to my knees. They might hurt me for this, but it’ll buy time. Time for Roman, for his men, for someone to figure out what’s happening and stop this.

The more patient thug grabs my upper arm and reels me to standing, but I go limp in his grasp and hit the ground again. The asphalt tears my knees open, not that that's high on my list of concerns right now. He grunts in frustration.

"We ought to just kill the *puttana* right here and now," grumbles the angrier of the two.

"You know we cannot do that," replies his comrade. "Boss's orders."

That's a small relief, I guess. God only knows which fucking boss they're talking about, though. This city has more corrupt Italian dons than it has cockroaches.

Of course, just because they can't kill me doesn't mean they can't manhandle me like a ragdoll. The angry man grabs my hair by the roots and wrenches my head back so I have no choice but to look in his face.

"I will tell you this one more time: Get up. Walk. If you don't..." His breath is foul. "If you don't, we will hurt you very, very badly."

"Fuck you," I rasp as best as I can. I fix him with a fiery stare, even though my head is still swimming from him striking me with the gun.

He clucks his tongue like I'm a stupid child. "I would advise you not to say that to Floriano," he sighs.

Oh fuck. *Oh fuck.*

So *that's* the cockroach responsible for this nightmare.

The henchmen see my shock and surprise. Both of them chuckle, and I feel a lash of anger at their condescension.

"Now," the first one croons, "are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?"

Old Lily would've cried and screamed and gone along with whatever they said. Isn't that what I did with Leo the night of the poker game? I just gave in. I gave up.

New Lily won't do that.

Roman has taught me better. Roman has showed me pride, strength, bravery. Roman has made me see that the world is what you make of it.

Roman would want me to fight. So fight is exactly what I'll do.

With the aggressive henchman leering in my face, I cock my neck back—and headbutt him in the nose as hard as I can.

Contact. Blood spurts, bone breaks, and my forehead hurts a little more than it already did. Worth it, though, to see him stumble back. “Argh!” he cries. “Stupid motherfucking—”

The first punch comes from behind me. It lands right in my back, low near my kidneys, and sends pain spiderwebbing through my torso. When I go to collapse forward on my face, the second goon snags me up and holds me up, just in time for the second punch to strike right in my stomach.

I fall down and cry out again in anguish. *My baby, my baby, my baby...*

They descend on me with kicks and punches. If I live through today, tomorrow is going to hurt like a son of a bitch. But that doesn't matter right now. All that matters right now is my baby. So I curl up in a ball and do everything I can to keep him or her safe.

“Please!” I uncurl enough to hold up a hand. “Please, stop!”

Two sets of hands haul me up. “Will you cooperate now?” one of them seethes.

“Yes,” I sob. “Yes.”

One of the goons ties another rope around my neck and leads me down the street like a beaten dog. I've lost track of who is who and my eyes are swelling shut from a particularly brutal kick to my face.

It doesn't matter. I don't want to see anything anyway.

If darkness is coming for me...

Let it come.



## ROMAN

*Fuck!* I bellow in my head. I can't do anything more than exhale out loud. With a bullet hole—more like a fucking crater—in the side of my torso, I can't stop them from taking her.

Can't stop them from hauling her through the woods.

Can't do a fucking thing but bleed and watch.

When all I want to do is chain them up, cut off a piece at a time, and feed it to them. Eventually, I will do exactly that. Eventually, I will kill those bastards slowly.

But right now, I can hardly move without roaring in pain. Staying still is not an option, though. God only knows how many other bastards are moving around in the shadows of my property.

So, setting aside the white-hot agony of the wound, I get to my feet. I keep the blanket pressed to my side, even though it's already soaked through with my blood. More blood trails behind me as I take one slow, lumbering step after another, headed in the direction they took my wife.

I make it through the stand of trees and see they've blown a hole in my fence. In the distance, I can make out a trio of silhouettes. I hear a scream—Lily's.

Redoubling my effort, I keep moving. Keep grinding forward. I might bleed out in the effort, but I'll do that a million times over if it gives me even a sliver of a chance at saving her.

But I can't close the distance fast enough. As I watch, Lily stumbles and falls. The bastards descend on her with fists and feet. She cries out again and again. Then they drag her back upright and toss her into the back of a nearby van.

Fuck. If they get away before I can steal a car to pursue, I'm fucked. Lily is fucked. I'm running out of time.

I scan the darkness with my swimming, blurry vision. There's a line of cars parked along the side of the road. Limping toward them, I try the handle of the first.

Locked.

The second—locked.

"Come on, *mudak*," I growl under my breath. "Open the fuck up!"

On the third one, I strike paydirt. Door is unlocked.

I glance over my shoulder and see the sons of bitches firing up their car. Headlights slice through the darkness. I have to hurry.

Cracking open the dashboard panel, I tug out a mess of wires. I strip the coating off one with my teeth, touch them together, and boom—the engine rumbles to life.

It sounds like shit, as if it might die at any moment, but it'll have to do. Fact of the matter is that I might die at any moment, too.

My head is throbbing, my side is ablaze, and I'm seeing double and triple of everything on the road ahead of me.

Three versions of the car holding my wife take off down the road.

I floor the gas and follow.

They're driving fast—fifty, eighty, a hundred before we've even left the residential part of the city. Some higher power must be helping me steer, because I manage to stay on their trail even as we swerve around traffic and pedestrians.

People scream and honk, but I don't give a shit. They don't know what's at stake.



A voice penetrates my stupor. “If you don’t drive faster, you’ll never save me.”

“The fuck...?” I look at the passenger seat. Holy shit—I can’t believe what I’m seeing. “Lily?”

“You heard me, Roman. You promised you would save me, always.” Fat tears roll down her cheeks. She’s wearing her wedding dress, I notice. She hated that thing the day we got married. It looks wrong on her now. “Please, Roman. Save me.”

I blink. When I look again, she is gone.

Then I glance up and see the oncoming headlights of a blaring eighteen-wheeler.

At the last possible second, I wrench the wheel to the right. This stolen truck tips over on two wheels and I wonder if I’ve gone too far, if I’m about to flip, if I’m going to lose Lily forever.

Then I slam back down on all four wheels and keep the pursuit alive.

“Who the hell taught you to drive?”

Kaz sits in Lily’s spot now. Not Kaz as he is now, but Kaz as he was as a twelve-year-old boy. The little hellion who worshipped me, who’d go anywhere I went and do anything I did.

“You suck,” he says, sticking his tongue out.

“Fuck off, *mudak*. I’m trying to save my wife here.”

“Save her? How did you manage to lose her in the first place?” He clucks his tongue and shakes his head. “You don’t deserve all the good shit you have.”

I go up on a sidewalk to avoid a gaggle of drunken college kids lingering in the crosswalk. They scream as I hurtle past them, narrowly avoiding clipping one with the side mirrors.

We’re aiming toward the wharf now. Toward the warehouses and storage buildings, the container yard.

“You’ll never find her if you don’t get your head out of your ass and think, Roman.”

Now it’s my father occupying the passenger seat. He’s much younger, hair darker, wrinkles smoother, voice just as gruff and cruel as it’s always been.

“I’m a little busy, Pop.”

“Too busy to think it through? You need to think, boy! Think!”

“I *am* thinking!” I snarl. Or I am trying, at least. But my mind is shrouded in a bloody red haze.

“You can’t bust in there and save her with no weapon and no backup. What are you going to do?”

“They’re taking her to a warehouse.”

I feel more and more confident about this now as we zig-zag through the industrial district. It’s barren and concrete out here, everything suffused in darkness.

“So I’ll follow like I’ve been doing. Take out whatever man they have posted outside. Get his weapon and shoot my way in.”

Sounds simple enough to my pain-addled brain. Nothing now but to do it.

“How do you plan to do that when you’re about three minutes from death by blood loss, idiot boy? Focus, Roman. What can you use?”

I reach across his lap and open the glove compartment. Shit falls out—car registration, a handful of pens, packs of tissues, a flashlight.

The flashlight is going to have to suffice. It is small, black, thin. The handle, if the kidnappers are as stupid as I hope they will be, might be able to pass as a gun barrel if no one gets too close. I can sell it.

We race past row after row of warehouses. The car takes a quick left into acres of storage containers. Maybe the second row? I can’t tell. I guess but it’s the wrong choice. Nothing but concrete and squat, silent storage units as far as the eye can see.

I accelerate down the labyrinth of crisscrossing aisles. Hoping, praying for a glimpse of my wife.

Finally, as I near the end of one row, I catch a glimpse of something black crossing the parallel aisle. That has to be them. I whip the car left toward it, right, left, chasing after shadows that may not even exist.

Then we burst out of the storage area and onto the other side of the wharfs. And there, I see the black car screech to a halt in front of one of the huge warehouses lining the water.

I know immediately who owns that motherfucker.

Floriano Verratti.

I park as close as I can to the side of the crumbling brick and rusted metal building. I expected resistance, but there's no one out here. My breath comes in painful hitches as I search along the side of the structure for some way in.

I'm halfway down when I see a window at eye level. I peer through. The glass is covered in cloudy grime, but I can see well enough.

Enough to see Lily.

She's still in her pajamas, with bare, bleeding feet and a rope chafing nasty red rings around her wrists. Floriano Verratti stands in front of her.

I growl low in my throat at the sight of that motherfucker.

I should have killed him myself. This would never have happened if I hadn't let Lily talk me into doing something I've never done before: letting someone else get their hands dirty on my behalf.

As I watch, Floriano circles her like he's eyeing a prized cow. When he's back in front, he stops, squares up, and reaches out for her with one grubby hand.

Lily promptly smacks his fingers away. Floriano throws his head back and laughs.

My plan is flimsy at best. I have a flashlight and a hole in my ribs. But if I have to sacrifice my own body to save her, to give her a chance to get away, I

will. No matter what it costs me.

Saving Lily is all that matters.

Another six or seven yards down the wall is a rusted door. I hurry to it, grab the doorknob, and pray to fucking God that it's not locked.

I've had a lot of lucky breaks in the last few minutes. The car being open, the eighteen-wheeler not flattening me. Even being alive is fortunate, all things considered.

But I need a little more good luck. Just a little bit more.

And like an answer to my prayers, the door opens without so much as a squeak.

I slide through, but I don't speak yet. I hide in the shadow of a stack of pallets and listen, blood boiling, as Verratti taunts my wife.

"... Tell me what you know about Sorokin, little whore."

"You'll have to kill me before I tell you a single goddamn word, you fat fucking pig."

I can't help but grin. Feisty, my wife. Floriano doesn't even know the half of it.

"Maybe after I let my men have some time alone with you, you will remember."

He nods to one of his gorillas, who steps forward with a leer I am going to wipe off his face.

"Roman will kill any man who touches me!" She speaks like she has an army of me behind her.

"Roman Sorokin died in his front yard thirty minutes ago, *puttana*."

"You're a liar." She spits at him. It lands dead center on his smug, ugly face.

There's a long pause. Tension rife in the air. Then, without wiping her saliva from his face, Floriano's hand shoots out and cold-cocks her hard enough that her head whips to the side.

“I have tolerated so much of your disrespect, Benedetti whore,” he sighs. He takes a handkerchief out of his back pocket and mops the saliva off his nose, then tucks it away again. “For days and weeks and months now, you have said no to me. No one says no to Floriano Verratti. Not you. Not your cowardly excuse for a father. Not your dead dog of a husband.”

“Well, here’s one more,” she says with blood trickling down her chin. “No.”

He nods mournfully. “I thought you might say that.”

Then, moving faster I thought possible, he pulls a pistol from his waistband and shoots Lily in the thigh. She collapses with a scream that tears my heart in two.

“Not so tough now, little bitch, are you?” he hisses down at her.

I explode into the light. Taking the nearest Verratti thug in a headlock, I wrench until the satisfying snap of his neck washes away the cloudiness in my mind.

Suddenly, I can see it all. The pain recedes. I am what I’ve always been: the angel of fucking death.

I reach down and snare the dead man’s weapon. The .44 feels familiar against my palm.

Pivoting, I drop to one knee and fire a shot through the throat of the man closest to Floriano.

Another of his henchmen has his hands on Lily and is trying to drag her to her feet while Floriano turns and charges at me. I shoot the *mudak* holding Lily. All those thousands of hours I’ve spent at the range pay off in blood spatter as the bullet dives between his eyes and erupts out of the back of his head.

Then I turn the gun on Floriano. He freezes, caught in no man’s land. There’s nothing for him to hide behind.

He’s fucked.

But he grins like a shark. “Roman. I must admit, I’m a little surprised.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

I don’t have much time left before blood loss overpowers the adrenaline. Certainly not enough to trade witty banter with this fucking *durak*.

But neither does he deserve a quick and merciful death.

So I blow a hole in his knee.

He goes down hard. His scream echoes throughout the building. I limp that way to stand over him and look him in the eye.

With dignity I wouldn’t have expected from him, Floriano lifts his head and says, “Go ahead. Do what you must.”

And with a grimace, I lean down so I can be sure he understands the last words he’ll ever hear: “Die slow, motherfucker.”

Then I empty the clip into his stomach.

I don’t stick around to watch the light leave his eyes, as satisfying as that would be. I have to get my wife to the hospital. She is near the door, bleeding and whimpering.

I look around. The thug lying dead closest to her has a belt. I can use it as a tourniquet to stop the blood flow and hopefully give us a few extra minutes to get her medical attention.

But as soon as I try to move toward her, my thoughts go fuzzy and the warehouse starts to revolve like a merry-go-round.

“No!” I roar. Not yet. I need more time.

I reach to hold onto a metal pillar so I don’t collapse. Then, steeling myself, I stagger toward her. I bend down to get the belt of the Verratti man’s corpse, but halfway there, my strength fades and I fall to the floor.

I have nothing left in the tank.

I’ve come so far. I’ve almost won.

So this can’t be it. This can’t be the end.

“Roman?” Her voice is small and weak, but it’s the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.

“I’m here,” I rasp. “It’s going to be okay. I’m going to get you to the hospital.”

Rolling over, I push myself onto my knees. I slide my arms underneath her and scoop her up. Pain lances through me, searing hot, but I ignore it. I grit my teeth so hard I feel a molar crack. I ignore that, too.

Nothing is going to keep me from saving her. From being the man I promised her I’d be, the one she deserves.

I can do it.

I’m going to do it.

I must.

But when I try to stand, the world blackens. I can’t see more than vague shapes. I sink back to my knees in agony.

“Roman?” Her voice is fading. I’m losing it. I’m losing her. I’m losing myself.

“We’re going to... hospital...”

I try to stand again, but I can’t find the floor. I don’t know what’s up and what’s down, what’s real and what’s fake. I taste blood and bile.

Lily reaches up and touches my cheek with one bloodstained fingertip. “Roman...”

“Yes, *kiska*?” I manage to spit.

“We have to... We have to save our baby.”

That’s the last thing that penetrates my consciousness before it all fades to nothing.

What does she mean, *our baby*?



**Roman and Lily's story will continue in Book 2 of the Sorokin Bratva  
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