



THE *Bratovai's*
TWIN BABIES

A SURPRISE PREGNANCY MAFIA ROMANCE

BELLA KING

THE BRATVA'S TWIN BABIES

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AFTER MIDNIGHT

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BLURB

Blue eyes,
Powerful thighs,
And more danger than I realize...

I'm just a small-town girl in a big city,
Tempted by a wicked bratva beast who spoils me rotten.
He wants to have me, to claim me, to own every piece of me.

By the time I realize the kind of man he really is, it's too late.
I'm trapped in his perilous game with no way out.
Teetering between depraved cruelty and sticky-sweet bliss.

The stakes are so high that I fear even love can't save us.
But maybe two little heartbeats can...

Eliza

Mistakes don't happen, only happy accidents.

I press my paintbrush against the canvas, elongating the bright white streak until it's stretched to the edge. There, now it looks like it's supposed to be that way, a blur of light against the bleak New York sky.

It's a happy accident, not a mistake.

There are no mistakes.

I breathe a judgmental laugh out of my nose as I watch a woman come out of the luxury boutique with so many bags she can hardly carry them. Her expression is one of pure annoyance, as though the world has cursed her with so much money.

How can someone have so much, yet be so ungrateful?

Is that also a happy accident?

There must be something I'm missing. They say money can't buy happiness, but being broke hasn't bought me anything at all.

Except some half-used tubes of oil paint, a simple canvas, and a shoebox apartment that I'm about to miss my rent on if I can't sell any of my artwork. It's hard to feel grateful for any of that, but not being grateful would only

prove to my toxic ex-boyfriend Noah that he's right.

He wanted me to stay in the small town we were both born in.

I said, "Fuck it, I'm moving to New York City!"

And... that was about the time we broke up.

I can't say I miss him.

I *won't* say it.

But it does get lonely in a place like this. I've been running around, trying to get my paintings hung up in galleries and sold, so I haven't had time to meet anyone. I'm just a lonely girl in a big city, and I doubt that's going to change until I get some money rolling in.

And that better happen soon. I've been living off ramen noodles and tap water for the past two weeks to make sure I have enough money to cover rent, and even that isn't going to be enough. I need to sell a painting. Even one would cover the difference, but it feels like no matter how many people I show my work to, nobody is interested in putting them in their gallery, restaurant, or bar.

I carefully trace the side of the boutique building on the canvas, and the color of the building nearly disappears into the darkening grey sky. The gold window frames provide a glowing, luxurious contrast to the otherwise brutalist exterior. I do those next, taking great care to capture the warm feeling of wealth they effortlessly exude.

It's coming along quite well, even with the mistakes I've made. The four years I spent getting a degree in Fine Arts weren't wasted on a girl with no talent. Everyone from my hometown was forced to admit that I knew how to paint when I graduated top in my class, and even Noah was impressed when I made my first sale.

But in the six months following graduation, that was the only sale I made. Nobody wanted to dish out the hundreds of dollars it cost to produce an oil painting from scratch, and my student loans were clambering over the horizon, their green dollar-sign eyes lit up with the expectation of large monthly payments.

My attention is torn from my canvas as a man walks out of the boutique carrying a black leather suitcase with silver buckles. He walks like he has somewhere to be but has all the time in the world to get there.

I'm stunned for longer than I'm willing to admit, taking in his sharp, almost jarring, features. His overgrown coffee-colored hair is slicked back to reveal thick furrowed eyebrows and eyes so blue that they send an electric shock through me from across the street.

He's dressed in a deep navy suit, but it's unlike the ones I see other businessmen wearing as they buzz to and from work on the busy streets of New York. This suit has a sheen to it, a certain level of fineness to the fibers that couldn't be achieved at anything but the highest price point.

I bet he could pay my student loans. It would be a drop in the bucket for a man that rich.

Alternatively, he could beat the ever-loving shit out of anyone who tried to collect said money from me. His muscles are so big they threaten to tear the fabric of his suit, ruining it and probably giving every woman in the vicinity a heart attack as his perfect physique is laid bare for the world to see.

I try not to stare, but my eyes follow him anyway, gliding along with his handsome yet ominous figure as he ditches the crosswalk and makes several cars stop for him so that he can cross the street where he pleases.

He doesn't pick up his pace. He continues on at the exact same speed.

Somewhere to go, all the time in the world to get there.

And not a single horn is punched in response to his antics. Not a raised fist or a middle finger comes as a result, as though he has the God-given right to cross the street in the middle of traffic.

Men like him aren't just confident and attractive.

They're dangerous.

My heart leaps into my throat, choking me with the pounding adrenaline of getting caught when his blue eyes flicker over to where I'm standing. I duck behind my canvas, letting out a squeak that's washed away by the sound of

resuming traffic.

He saw me! He saw me!

Fuck, he saw me!

It's not like I know him or something. He's just a stranger, someone who will forget me in a few seconds. I know he'll be burned into my memory for days, if not months, but he'll be gone eventually, too.

"Hey." His voice is so low and penetrating that it feels like it's coming from inside me.

I look up from my canvas to see the handsome stranger standing right in front of me.

How did he get here so fast?

"Hi," I say, but that's all I manage to get out before my throat closes up and refuses to let me explain myself.

I'm just a painter. A painter who paints things, and he happens to have walked right in front of what I was painting.

"I noticed you were painting," he says, leaning over my easel to see the painted side of the canvas.

Everyone who has walked past me this evening has seen it already, but I feel especially nervous about allowing *him* to see it. It's just art, but every stroke has a little piece of my soul in it. I feel like he's the type of man who could pry those pieces out and use them against me.

Silly, but the feeling remains, regardless.

"Very nice," he purrs, his Russian accent becoming obvious. He moves closer to see more. "You're quite the artist."

"T-thanks," I reply, trying my best not to be awkward but failing horribly. I don't know what to do with my hands. They're hovering over the canvas, my paintbrush wet with a steely blue-grey paint that matches the building behind my handsome visitor.

I pull my hands behind my back, pursing my lips and praying that's the last

of his comments. I just want him to go away. I don't need this kind of pressure right now.

"Really beautiful," he continues, his eyes leaving the canvas and wandering over to me. "A true artist. That's hard to find, these days. Everyone is using computers, and here you are, putting brush to canvas the way God intended. And outdoors, too. Risky behavior in a city where crime makes money hand over foot."

I wasn't under the impression that I was the one taking risks, here, but perhaps he knows more about New York City than I do.

"You're not going to steal it, are you?" I ask, breaking the one-sided tension with humor. It's always been my defense mechanism, even when it wasn't appropriate. I've still not learned when to dial it back.

"Quite the opposite, actually," he replies, his eyebrows rising like a wave across his forehead. "Once you're finished, I'd love to buy it from you. It would fit perfectly in my cigar lounge."

My heart rate doubles at the prospect of making a sale. If I got enough for it, just a hundred dollars or so, I'd be able to pay my rent and give myself another month to try my hand at becoming a professional artist here.

A hundred doesn't seem like a lot to ask from a man who is probably worth a million times that, but I still struggle to put a price on my work. I know he expects me to, but I'm terrible at sales. I'm an artist, not a businesswoman.

I look at my canvas, and suddenly every stroke looks wrong. The building isn't quite right, the lighting is wrong, the shadow is crooked, the sky is –

"How does a thousand sound?" the man says, interrupting my spiraling thoughts.

"A... thousand?" I ask, looking up at him. I'm instantly lost in his eyes, leaning closer to him until I'm almost touching the canvas. Between the unbelievable sum of money and the way his eyes put me in a trance, I'm having the damndest time keeping my head on straight.

"Is that too little?" he asks, pulling back a bit. "Perhaps two thousand, then. I know your time is precious."

I brace myself against the easel to keep from falling over. My legs are shaking so badly that my knees are hitting each other, so I widen my stance, planting myself into the sidewalk so that I can concentrate on responding to this man without sounding like I've lost my mind.

"That's more than enough," I say, "but it's going to be a little while until I finish it. Maybe a few days to get it perfect."

He shrugs his impossibly wide shoulders, and it feels like the entire world moves with them. "No problem. I'll give you my card and you can call me when it's ready."

His hand glides into his suit jacket and comes back out with a black card between his fingers. He hands it to me, and I put down my brush to hold it with both hands like it's as precious as he claims my time is. I've never had someone say that. Most people are eager to waste as much of it as they can before leaving me with nothing in return.

Noah, for example, but I can hardly get a clear mental picture of him in the presence of this new man.

I look down at his card.

Lev Andreev.

"And this is half upfront," Lev says, reaching again into his jacket and pulling out a neatly folded stack of crisp blue hundred-dollar bills. They're so new that they almost feel fake as he tucks them between my fingers. "Don't let anyone see you carry that around. This city is full of wolves."

He winks, and I swear I see the moon in his eyes for the briefest of moments.

"Thank you," I say, blinking a few times like I'm dreaming. Someone could've slipped me something, but who would waste a drug this good on a girl with no money?

I put the money and his card into the front pocket of my black corduroy dress and grab my paintbrush from the easel. I'll probably get two strokes done before I run to the bank before it closes to put the money into my account.

Lev tilts his head to the side, his powerful jaw moving as he studies me. "I

didn't get a name."

"Oh, um, Eliza. Eliza Wilson," I say putting the brush down again and finally stepping away from my easel.

There's nothing between us now, no illusion of safety as he steps forward and wraps his enormous hand around mine. His skin is pleasantly warm, but there's a roughness there as well. He's not soft and fragile like some of the men I know.

Noah! My brain screams it like I'm not even supposed to be looking at another man. Should I feel guilty for enjoying Lev's company? Noah and I broke up almost a full month ago, and he hasn't talked to me since.

"Nice to meet you, Eliza," Lev says, his voice awakening demons in me that have been lying dormant my whole life.

Now that he's closer, I can smell him. His cologne is dark and rich, like leather soaked in smoke and whiskey. There are notes of licorice and peppermint floating on top, but only enough to tease me, like I need to lean in closer... and closer...

Lev lets go of my hand, and the connection is broken. It feels like I've been doused in ice water, brutally awakened from the dream of being so close to a man who probably doesn't care about me in the slightest.

I'm just another woman, and he's, well, something like a God. Or maybe the Devil. I'm not sure which.

To make it all the worse, he must be at least fifteen years older than me. It would be laughable to think he'd want anything to do with me.

Rich guys and younger women, though, right?

I'm probably getting my hopes up. I need to chill out, like, yesterday.

Lev gives me a small nod and drifts away, his long legs taking him from me faster than my lonely heart can follow him. I'm sure I'll see him again, but his absence leaves a void in the middle of the sidewalk that repels me.

The moment he's out of sight, I pack up my easel and canvas, taking them with me to the bank so that I can deposit this outrageous sum of money.

Then, I'll have to finish the painting.

I put my hand into my pocket, my thumb running over the edge of his card. Once the painting is finished, I'll have to see Lev again. I'm not sure why, but it feels horribly important that I wear nice underwear.

Lev

“Mid-twenties?”

“Something like that, with ginger hair just above her shoulders and lips like a red candy apple,” I reply, tapping the ash off the end of my cigar.

“Not on the floor, fucking dickhead. I told you about that,” my uncle Valentin says, coughing as he shakes his head. He’s had that cough since I was born. I swear I remember it from the day my mother first brought me home.

“It’s marble. It’ll come off with a quick mop,” I reply, waving my cigar over the gallery floor. A few extra ash flakes flutter down.

Valentin curses under his breath, glaring at the ash like it’s a cockroach. “I can never have anything nice with you around. I’m sure you scared that girl off the moment you opened your mouth. No twenty-something artist wants anything to do with an old man like you. Those days are over.”

“Maybe for you,” I mutter, puffing smoke into the spacious room. Valentin has been hounding me to stop smoking in here, talking about the smoke yellowing the paintings, but nobody comes here to buy real art. They’re laundering money. That’s all this garbage is good for.

“For both of us,” he says, waving my smoke away from his face as though he

doesn't smoke two packs of cheap menthol cigarettes a day.

"I'm not trying to hit," I reply, my mood soured by his inability to listen to a story without reprimanding me for something. Reminds me of my mother, God rest her soul.

"Yeah, yeah, you think she's the next Van Gogh or something. Sounds like you're trying to make excuses why you should scuttle down to her apartment and screw her brains out. Again, she's way too young for you."

I laugh. "Oh, come on. You think that's what this is all about? I'm not that shallow. I can appreciate art."

He cackles, which turns into another fit of coughing. "Jesus, boy, you're going to give me a heart attack. Yes, I think you're that shallow. Always have been. You remind me of myself when I was younger, and you don't appreciate art in the slightest. You're smoking around all these multi-million-dollar paintings."

"I'll ash my cigar on one of them if I feel like it," I reply, stepping up to a painting of a couple of crooked blue squares and putting my cigar close enough to singe the paint. "These aren't real art."

"Would you stop that!" Valentin charges toward me, waving his hands like he's trying to scare away a bear.

I step away from the painting before he can knock the cigar out of my hand. I'd like to finish this one. It's a Cuban.

"Are you here to help, or are you just here to gush about your new crush?" he asks, stepping back and planting his meaty fists on his hips. He really does remind me of my mother.

I sigh, looking around at the two dozen paintings still waiting to be hung on the empty white walls. None of them are as good as what Eliza is painting for me, but most of them will fetch a hefty price at auction tonight. The amount of money people wash through this crap doubles every year.

"Hang them yourself," I mutter, turning away from him and walking toward the door.

“I know you ain’t leaving me. Come one, boy! I’m Family,” he whines, but I already have one foot out the door.

Family doesn’t seem to mean much anymore. I was taught that the bonds of blood were the strongest a man could have in the Bratva, that Family were the only people I could trust.

Then came Vanya, my greedy bastard cousin who fucked it all up.

Now, I don’t trust anyone, and even Valentin doesn’t act the same. Everyone wants something from me, but nobody wants to give a goddamn thing. If it weren’t for the money, I’d have left this cruel game a long time ago and started over somewhere else.

Maybe that’s what I need, a fresh start, a reason to feel that hunger and drive again. Or maybe I am just getting old, like Valentin said. That version of the story is more depressing, but I don’t linger on it for long.

My mind wanders back to Eliza, the painter across the street from the boutique. Her hazel eyes are burned into my mind, and those lips... I was never good at keeping my demons contained. I’d do just about anything, pay any price, kill any man, just to taste those lips.

Or perhaps give her a taste of me, a little extra glaze on her puffy red lips.

I shouldn’t even be thinking about doing something like that to such a sweet young woman. She’d be appalled to know how deep my thoughts have sunk in regard to her, completely ignoring her talents in favor of her body.

I try to tear my thoughts out of the gutter as I cross the street toward the skyscraper that houses my penthouse apartment, but my demons have claws. They don’t let go so easily, especially something as soft and grippable as Eliza’s perfect body.

The greying receptionist nods at me as I enter the building, silent permission for me to brush past him to the elevator without showing my keycard. Everyone here already knows who I am, but security is tight when it’s anyone but me. I witnessed them questioning a guy for half an hour for trying to sneak a girl in one time.

It would be excessive if my lifestyle wasn’t so dangerous, but as it stands,

security like that is necessary. There are about a dozen people who want me dead at any given time, and at least four of them live in New York.

My cousin Vanya is a great example. That little slimeball knows where I live, so I wouldn't be surprised if he took a shot at avenging his brother Feliks' death at some point.

Talk about a broken Family. Mine wants to murder me.

The elevator takes a minute and a half to reach the top floor, something only accessible with a red key, a typed code, and a scan from my keycard.

More security measures that would be excessive if I wasn't a Bratva boss. Sometimes I wish I wasn't, but as I step out into my living room, my shoes sinking into the antique Persian rug I inherited from my father, I can't imagine living any other way.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly as I walk to the floor-to-ceiling window that stretches from one side of the room to the other. It's a single pane of bulletproof glass, but nobody would be able to get a shot at me from all the way up here. I can barely see the city below me, just the tops of the buildings and a few yellow taxis like the reflection of fireflies in still black lake.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket.

Probably Valentin.

I pull it out, turning from the window and walking to the bar to make myself a scotch as I check the message. It's not from Valentin. The number isn't immediately recognizable, either, but once I open the message, I know instantly that it's Eliza.

Hey, thanks again for buying my painting! You're very generous. I'd like to bring it to you in a couple of days, but I don't have an address.

I want to trust her, but I can't. Not yet.

I'll meet you at your place.

I leave it at that as I pour myself a drink. I need a double after what I've been

through today. Between dealing with some of the biggest snobs in the art world, pacifying a couple of our clients who *need* their money washed, dried, and folded by *yesterday*, and getting talked over when I'm trying to be the slightest bit vulnerable with Valentin, I feel like the grey hair on my head has doubled in the last twenty-four hours.

And then there's Eliza.

Sweet, soft Eliza. Just a girl trying to make it in New York. I've known several of them, and every single one of them turned to stripping and thinly veiled prostitution to pay the bills.

I'd hate for Eliza to fall into that bullshit. She seems like she could be a genuinely good person, a rarity these days.

Perhaps I'm pessimistic.

Or maybe I'm an optimist for thinking Eliza is any different.

I take a quick swig of my scotch, the buttery oak flavor washing over my tongue and biting it soon after, like a kiss followed by a slap in the face. That's how my last relationship ended, but there wasn't a tear shed on either side.

Love is just hate by a different name.

The only thing that's real to me is obsession.

But I try not to fall into that as I receive another text from Eliza, giving me her full address like she actually trusts me not to break down her door and carry her back to my cave.

If I were a lesser man, I'd do just that, but perhaps she realizes I have control of the evil that dwells within me. There are layers, safeguards of a sort, and one must peel them back to release the beast inside.

The beast that squeezes when he should let go.

Who keeps going even when he has nothing left to pump inside of her.

The walls I put up around my soul are to protect people like Eliza just as much as they are to protect myself. The consequences of tearing them down

are severe, but so is the pleasure derived from the experience.

The trouble comes when the walls are brittle, and the chains holding back the beast are dissolved by such a beauty that they can be broken with something as simple as a feathery touch.

Or a kiss from a set of candy apple lips.

Eliza

I'm shaking so hard that I can barely hold my phone. I can't believe this is happening. The money is real and it's in the bank, my rent is paid, and he's coming back with more once I finish his painting!

I almost want to run out to the boutique and work on it under the light of the moon, just to get it finished sooner. My excitement comes not only from my ability to make more money, but also from seeing Lev again.

Oh my god, he's so handsome. I don't think I've ever met a man with a jaw so powerful and pronounced. And those eyes... Fuck, he could electrocute me with them and I'd probably have an orgasm from the pain.

Nothing like Noah. Oh, good God, no. I don't even want to compare the two.

My mind is racing. I can't think straight.

I sit down on my bed, looking out the window and wondering how many people are out there tonight, falling in love, breaking up, getting drunk, sobering up. In my little hometown, once the clock struck midnight, nobody was out but the sheriff. If you were out, you'd be doing something you weren't supposed to, and you could be equally sure that you'd be getting caught.

Those memories feel so quaint when I look outside and see dozens of people passing by my little apartment every minute. This city never sleeps. It keeps

its eyes wide open, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

It's no wonder I can't sleep either.

I get up from the bed, forcing myself to leave my phone behind as I make myself a cup of tea. One of the first things I did after I deposited the money Lev gave me was buy some groceries. It's been weeks since I've had my favorite tea, but now I finally have a container of it calling to me from the cabinet above the stove.

Earl grey. My brother Jake used to make himself a London Fog with it every morning and drink it on the porch with my grandfather. We lost both of them in the same year and it was the hardest thing I ever had to endure.

I think that's why my breakup with Noah ended without a single tear. It was a bittersweet realization that he wasn't going to be coming with me to New York, compared to losing a brother and a grandfather the year prior.

I just packed my bags and took Noah up on his unsavory ultimatum – stay here or we're done. I was so numb that nothing held any weight.

Things haven't felt real since, but I think it's helped me push past my doubts. I just... don't care what anyone thinks anymore.

I start the kettle I stole from Jake's room after he died. My parents wanted to keep things exactly as they were, like he'd still be coming home from the army once his deployment was finished, but I knew I had to keep something to remember him by. The only thing that came back home was a flag and a letter, and that wasn't enough to keep me around.

They can wait. I know he's not coming back. I've made peace with it.

When the kettle starts whistling, I take it off the heat and pour the water into my mug. Jake used to pour it from such a height that it would splatter all over the counter.

Cheap laminated particle board. The boiling water would make little spots all over it, and our parents would throw a fit, acting like he was destroying expensive granite.

They've always been a bit uptight. That's why we haven't talked much since

Jake died. The only real relationship we had was through him, and once he left, there wasn't anything to say.

I feel bad for them, but I have a life. Jake would understand. He left to follow his dreams, and he'd want me to do the same.

That's why I smile when I put the tea to my lips and take a sip. It tastes like orange peels and success. It tastes like doing what I love and proving everyone wrong who said I couldn't.

Maybe it's too soon to celebrate, but if not now, then when?

Gotta appreciate the little things. That's how my grandfather was. Even in the wake of Jake's death, he was blowing out candles and singing happy birthday with everyone at the table.

Two days later, he had a heart attack and died, but for me, that's just more motivation to keep moving and do things the way I want to do them. Tomorrow isn't a guarantee, so I'm taking today and having fun with it.

And by fun, I mean drinking tea in my pajamas while I fantasize about what a man like Lev could do to a woman like me.

Would he take his time?

Or would he want all of me, all at once?

I thought I had outgrown such fantasies, but the simple act of meeting eyes with Lev has reignited the flame that went out after I lost two people back-to-back. Noah couldn't do this. He could barely get me wet, but Lev has me dripping and he's not even here.

Dangerous. Yeah, he's definitely not someone I should be fantasizing about, but I do it anyway. It's not like he'll ever know. His eyes cut right through me, but he can't read minds.

I take another sip of my tea and close my eyes, crossing my legs and using the seam down the middle of my pants to give myself pleasure. The feeling is explosive even without my hand.

I haven't masturbated in six months, and my body is begging me for release.

But I don't succumb to my cravings. It feels wrong to derive pleasure from a stranger, a man who doesn't even know me. Had he come on to me, revealing his attraction and allowing me to indulge in a mutual fantasy, I'd allow myself to slip.

But as it stands, it feels wrong. He's trying to help me, and all I can think about is what it would feel like to have his hands on my throat.

My cheeks burn hot with shame, and I uncross my legs.

A cold shower, more tea, and I'm finally able to sleep.

Get out of my head, Lev Andreev. Please, get out before I do something I shouldn't.

Eliza

I push my hair behind my ear as I put the finishing touches on the painting outside the boutique. I've been anticipating Lev, but he hasn't made an appearance. Of course, he wouldn't just show up here again for no reason, but I feel like I need to be prepared in case he does.

Maybe he forgot something, one last luxury item to grab from the store on a rare sunny autumn afternoon. I wonder what he does for a living to afford such expensive things. I've been in that store once, more out of curiosity than anything, and I couldn't believe the prices.

Of course, everything is quite beautiful, but in what universe is it normal for jeans to cost a thousand dollars? In my hometown, you'd get them from the little shop down between the pancake place and the postal service, and they'd always be priced the same – \$19.99. That never changed in the ten years I was shopping there.

I'd be lucky to get a pair for ten times that here, but I'm probably not going to be doing any shopping for a long time. I brought enough clothes with me to get me through the winter and subsequent summer, and I'll wear them until they're falling apart.

More out of necessity than thriftiness, though I like to say I'm just being environmentally friendly.

I think my clothes are cute, though. I usually wear mid-length dresses, almost always black and paired with leather boots. It's simple enough not to be a hassle in the morning, but nice enough to wear I don't feel like a bum the moment I step outside.

I've added a pair of black sheer black pantyhose with little cats printed on them. I got them before I left home, but I haven't worn them because I was afraid of ruining them. Today, I've worked up the courage to wear them. It's amazing what a little money can do for your confidence.

Painting today feels like freedom. I have a whole month to worry about making sales and paying rent, and it takes the weight off my shoulders and just allows me to paint. The brush runs across my canvas like it's dancing to the music of the city, and I barely register anyone around me.

People pass, they gawk, and occasionally, someone hurls an insult from their car or catcalls me, but I'm blissfully unbothered by it. I'm painting two-thousand dollars onto a canvas. My subconscious makes the money and my conscious mind is at ease.

My phone buzzes, breaking my focus so hard that I drop my brush. It clatters lightly on the gum-caked sidewalk and I leave it there, pulling out my phone.

I just know it's Lev. God, he's texting me already.

My heart jumps up into my throat, but sinks all the way down into my stomach just as quickly when I see who sent me the message.

Noah.

Fuck, it's like he knows I'm having a good time and he wants to spoil it for me.

I open his message because it'd be eating at the back of my mind for the rest of the day if I didn't.

Still in New York?

Um, duh. Where else would I be? I hope he's not planning on paying me a visit. The only person who knows my address is Lev, and I plan on keeping it that way.

I text Noah back quickly, even though I know I should wait. Everyone in the world will tell you to wait at least a few minutes, if not an hour or more before texting your ex if they're bugging you, but we haven't talked in almost a month. Having him text me first feels like winning.

My thumbs fly over the keyboard.

Yep.

That's all he gets. Just one word, and I'm back to painting. I pick up my brush and resume where I left off.

The sky is different today, but I'm trying to picture how it was yesterday when I met Lev. The only thing I can remember was how blue his eyes were.

I mix a few colors together to get the perfect hue, and I put it down on the canvas. Perfect. It's just like the color of his eyes, only it doesn't have the same wicked intentions baked into it. It's a bit friendlier.

My phone buzzes again.

I let out a sigh, checking it again.

I thought you'd be coming back by now. Don't let your pride get in the way of your safety. It's okay to admit you were wrong.

I'm tempted to take a screenshot of my bank account and send it to him, but that wouldn't prove a whole lot. A thousand dollars isn't much proof that I'm not living on the street, especially when my rent is nearly twice that.

I have more in savings, of course, but it's barely enough to get me through the next month. Noah doesn't have to know that, though. I'd like him to think I'm selling my paintings like hotcakes, earning a comfortable living in the big city and leaving my simple past far behind me for something more glamorous.

Instead of sending him my bank account, I snap a picture of the boutique and tell him I'm busy shopping. He probably won't believe it, but if it puts doubt in his mind, maybe he'll leave me alone.

He texts me back almost immediately, but I ignore him this time. There's nothing he could say right now that would convince me he's right about

anything. I've already proved him wrong. What he chooses to believe now is up to him.

My painting continues to develop effortlessly, as though I'm not even the one doing it. My hand drifts across the canvas, and every dot, dash, and stroke comes out perfectly. Not only does it look great, but it's finished much sooner than I had anticipated.

Of course, there are consequences to my speediness. I have to let Lev know that it's ready for him, and that means I need to prepare myself and my apartment for his arrival.

Will he come today? It's already quite late. I didn't realize it because I was so focused on my painting, but the sun is already setting, and it gets dark early here in autumn. The buildings block the sun the moment it starts to dip from the middle of the sky.

Ignoring the two new texts on my phone from Noah, I send Lev a picture of the finished painting, inviting him to come pick it up.

A message comes back faster than even Noah was able to text me.

I'll be there in twenty minutes.

Not, *can I come in twenty minutes?*

Not, *is that alright?*

Lev gets straight down to it, and he does so in a manner that can't be negotiated. It's both refreshing and concerning the way that he appears to command me, like I have no choice.

Like I don't even *want* to have a choice.

I pack up my easel, taking great care not to touch the drying paint as I put a cover over my freshly finished painting. I'm not all that far from home, just a ten-minute walk, but I don't have time to straighten up both the apartment and myself before Lev arrives.

And to be quite honest, I'm more worried about myself than the apartment.

I send Lev a quick reply, confirming that I will be ready for him.

Not the painting. Me. I probably sound crazy, maybe a bit too eager. I hope he doesn't take that as an invitation. I'm not ready for something like that to happen. I don't even know him, and I'm not that type of woman.

But why am I even considering it in the first place? He's never given any indication that his intentions are any more than to buy a painting off me.

That's it. That's all. This isn't an opportunity for him to take advantage of my innocence, slamming me against the window and pressing my naked body against the glass while he fucks me senseless in front of everyone passing by...

No, nothing like that. He's a gentleman, and I need to get my mind out of the gutter before it gets me in trouble.

But that doesn't stop me from running home, bursting into my apartment with a huge grin on my face, and slamming the door shut so hard behind me that I hear the neighbor come out to check on the commotion.

I plaster myself against the door for support, panting as I collect myself. My emotions are bubbling up so fast that it's nearly impossible to keep them under control. I'm going to make a complete fool of myself but I've lost control.

I should know better. I've been hurt before.

But no, I'm running into Lev like he's already professed his undying love to me.

And we haven't even kissed. I'm just some crazy girl who's obsessed with a man who is much older than her. So much older. Probably too old, but why should I care? I'm in New York City, away from the judgmental eyes that tore into every little detail about my life in my hometown.

I get to start over, and I'm going to have it all, every last fantasy without compromise.

But first, I need to convince Lev that I'm even worth having. It should be the other way around, but I'm too star struck to behave any differently. I immediately change clothes, put on fresh lipstick, and examine every inch of myself in front of the mirror.

Then, I clean like I'm preparing for a drill sergeant to visit my room for inspection.

Lev

It's a cute place, warm and small like Eliza. I think it fits her well, but I have to duck to get through the doorway, and the slanted walls make it even more difficult for me to move with ease.

"It's not much, but I'm working with what I got," Eliza says with a nervous laugh, making her way to the stove. "Would you like some tea?"

That's an invitation to stay longer, and I'd die before saying no to her. I don't know why, but I feel the need to be close to her, to learn everything about her, inside and out. Maybe it's the innocent way she pouts her lips, or the inviting swing of her slender hips.

She has a body like a dancer. I bet she knows how to move when she's on top.

"I'd love some tea," I say, snapping out of my perversion for the briefest of moments before my eyes begin following her body again.

Perfect waist, perfect breasts, perfect everything. It almost makes me angry that a woman can look so good and not even realize it. Valentin would laugh at me, but I legitimately believe I've found the most beautiful woman in New York.

Probably the most beautiful woman in the *world*.

“I just have earl grey. Is that fine?” she asks.

“Darling, you could spit in that cup, and I’d drink it,” I say, the words coming out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

Her cheeks instantly turn as red as her lips, and she looks down at the mug in her hand like she’s trying to find a way out of this apartment through it.

“Yes, earl grey is fine,” I say, laughing a bit to ease the tension.

She laughs with me, nodding vigorously and turning away to put the kettle on. She’s so innocent. Jesus, she’d probably lose her mind if I told her what I really wanted to do to her.

The painting is just a bonus at this point. I’ve already decided that I’m going to have her legs in the air and her panties hanging off her foot if I have to turn the entire world upside down to do it.

I sit down on the edge of her bed, the only place available in her small studio apartment. The mattress reminds me of what I slept on during my years obtaining a degree in economics from a university back home in Moscow. I swear they used to make those damn things out of cement.

“Oh, yeah, you can sit there,” Eliza says, looking over her shoulder at me. “I’m sorry I don’t have any chairs. There’s not much room for them.”

“The bed is fine,” I reply with a thin smile, watching her as she tries to distract herself with the kettle.

She’s just standing there, watching it and waiting for it to whistle. All the while, I get to watch *her*, staring at the hem of her little black dress and wondering what color her panties are underneath.

Maybe they’re sheer white, and I would even be able to see how she keeps her garden. I’d hate for it to be mowed down to nothing. That’s just no fun, especially when the hair on her head is such a vibrant shade of red.

After a few moments, the kettle begins to whistle, and she pours us both a cup of tea. I try to keep from staring at her as she comes to me, but my eyes are fixated on her perfect figure. It’s difficult to hide my attraction to her.

“I hope you like it,” she says, handing me a green ceramic mug. Her voice is

so soft and needy, like she's terrified of me but wants my approval, anyway.

I take a sip of the tea, allowing it to burn my tongue. It's a needed distraction from Eliza. She doesn't realize what she does to me, how insane and out of control she makes me feel. Having her this close, smelling her sweet floral scent, is making my cock so hard it aches.

"Very good," I say, my throat tight as I lower my mug.

"Would you like to see the painting?" she asks, her eyes widening with eagerness to show me her work. Her knees are drawn together, both hands on her lap holding her tea like it's trying to jump off.

My eyes meet hers again, and I'm able to see much more now that she's sitting so close. There are little flecks of green in her hazel irises, sparks of color that increase in intensity as they move toward her pupils.

I'm captivated, but I must remain collected. I can't reveal my obsession. She would run like a little scared rabbit, and I'd never get to sink my teeth into her delicate flesh.

"I would love to see it," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

She doesn't move at all, almost as though she hasn't heard me. The words came out, but she's not focused on them, not aware of anything but the meeting of our eyes and the connection of our souls.

A chill moves through me suddenly, like a ghost gliding into my body and out just as quickly. I'm certain she feels it too, because she breaks from my gaze with a shudder, pulling her shoulders together and looking down at her tea. "Yes," she says, frowning like she's bothered by the way she feels. "I'll get the painting. It's... It's in the closet."

She springs up from the bed, putting her tea on the counter and rushing to the closet next to the front door. She pulls it open like she's trying to leave the apartment through it, or as though she's going to lock herself inside until I go away.

But after a moment of shuffling through things in the darkness, she returns with a canvas. She keeps the painted side facing herself, smiling nervously as she walks toward me with it. "I finished it not more than half an hour ago, so

the paint is going to take a little while to dry. It's oil, you know. That stuff takes months to dry fully, but it should be fine to hang tomorrow if you're careful with it. Just don't touch it too much."

I nod. I'm used to dealing with new paintings, but most of the ones that come in are acrylic. Like everything in the new world, faster is better, and quality takes a back seat over quantity.

That's clearly not the case with Eliza's work. As she turns it around to reveal it, I'm blown away by how much thought was put into it, how many fine details there are, but how everything feels like it comes together so effortlessly.

"Wow," I say, losing my breath for a moment.

She laughs, pushing her hair from her face and tucking it behind her ear. "You really like it?"

"I love it," I say, standing up and leaning forward. "It's just... Fuck, you're so good at this. Do you have anything in any galleries around here?"

She shakes her head, her hair coming loose from behind her ear and sticking to her lips. She tucks it back again, but it drops down again without mercy. She gives up this time.

"You should have your stuff everywhere in this city. You could be big. Very big," I say, meaning every word. "I could get you into some places, if you're interested."

"Oh, I could never ask that of you," she says, her cheeks turning a violent shade of red again. Even her freckles turn darker.

"You don't have to ask," I reply, stepping toward the painting and shaking my head in admiration. "I want to get you in. I work as a curator of sorts. A middleman. I would get your work in front of some very wealthy people, and I'm certain they would be interested."

"And you would get a cut, of course," she says, practically begging for a way to repay me for what I'm doing. She doesn't feel like she deserves it. She's so used to giving that she can't stand to get without immediately finding a way to pay back the favor.

Clearly, the world hasn't been so kind to her, but that's also a good thing. She isn't spoiled.

But I'm going to change that.

I'm going to spoil her rotten and make her into my princess.

My queen.

"You will find a way to repay me, I'm sure," I finally say, purposefully leaving out the details of how that will happen. I'm sure she will discover ways she can thank me eventually, but I'm not going to coerce her to do anything lewd.

I'm classier than that. Or, at least, the man containing the beast is.

When the time is right, she'll surrender so fully that she'll beg me to ruin her, and only then will beast be unleashed.

"Do you have any more paintings?" I ask, looking up at her again with a smile.

"Oh, um, yes. I have a few more in the closet. I was trying to get those in at a few restaurants nearby because the galleries wouldn't accept them, but that wasn't working out either."

"Believe me, darling, once those places realize your stuff is hanging in the best galleries in the city, they'll be begging you for even the worst of your work, the stuff you would throw away. You'll find those motherfuckers digging through your trash at night. Might have to buy some bug spray to get rid of them."

She laughs, and the entire room grows lighter from her joy. "I don't think I'm *that* good."

I wave my hand dismissively. "That's not for you to decide. I think you're amazing, and I know many people with deep pockets who would agree."

"Well," she says, finally accepting the compliment. "Thank you. I would love to meet them, and I really appreciate your help. I just don't know how to thank you."

I wink at her, putting my hand on the canvas and leaning in further. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Eliza

Alright, now I *know* he's coming on to me, but what the hell am I supposed to do? I don't want to be too easy, or be treated like a whore who's willing to perform sexual favors in exchange for his help. I'd be passed around to all his rich friends, and they'd line my pockets with cash while using me like a toy.

I cross my legs behind the canvas, trying to squeeze out my impure thoughts. I hate that I'm so turned on by the idea of him sharing me. I don't want to be that kind of woman. I came here to do art. I'm a painter!

I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly and trying to make my face turn a lighter shade. I know I'm red. I have a pale complexion, and I'm sensitive. All someone has to do is look at me wrong and I blush.

But he hasn't suggested that I do anything sexual for him. That's all my doing. Those are my thoughts, and there's no way for me to know what's going through his head right now. For all I know, he's just a nice man who appreciates art and wants to help my career.

I'm sure he'd make money from it. He's not going to do this for free.

"So, you'd like to take this now?" I ask, trying to steer the conversation to a close so that I can get him out the door. I wanted him here so badly before, but now I'd love for him to leave so that I can be alone with my racing

thoughts.

“I’d like to take that,” he says, putting his hand on the painting and pulling it toward him. “And I’d like to take something else.”

“Your tea?” I ask, my voice dying in my throat as his eyes light up with every sinful intention imaginable.

“I don’t think so,” he says, picking up the painting and leaning it against the wall.

Now, there’s nothing between us but the air, and even that’s quickly disappearing as he closes the distance with his massive frame. His shoulders fill my peripheral vision, and his cologne takes over my senses, clouding my thoughts with warm exotic spices.

There’s barely an inch between us now. The heat of his body is soaking through my clothing and seeping into the vulnerable parts of my body like hot candle wax. I take a breath, but there’s no air left to breathe.

“What is it that you want from me?” I whisper, my bottom lip trembling.

His piercing blue eyes narrow. “Everything.”

I find the courage for one more question. “And what if I can’t give that to you?”

“Then the painting will suffice,” he replies, maintaining his scorching, unwavering gaze.

“I don’t want this to be about the painting,” I say, attempting to frame my desire to him as more than just paying back a favor. I’m not sure he cares, but I’d like to maintain some level of dignity.

“Let me tell you something, Eliza,” he says, lifting his hand and brushing the back of it against my cheek. It’s cool compared to my burning hot skin, and I find relief in it. “What I feel for you is far from transactional.”

My knees threaten to give way at his words, but I steady myself with another deep breath.

“I feel like I should tell you...” I begin, already trying to find a way to push

him away while my body begs me to give in. I crave his bare skin against mine, but my fear is putting up a greater fight.

“Tell me what?” Lev asks, raising an eyebrow as he continues to stroke my cheek.

“I... I don’t know. Maybe this sounds stupid, but I’m not really emotionally ready for something like this,” I say, my entire body shaking like a leaf in the rain. “I’ve only been single for a few weeks. Barely a month.”

“Not over your ex?” he asks, his mouth curling up in a smile of amusement.

I’m so far over Noah that it isn’t even funny, but this is all so new. I’ve never been with anyone else. Noah and I dated for years. I feel like Lev would consider me too naive, too inexperienced, if I admitted that to him.

“I’m over him,” I say, my mind desperately trying to find the right way to say this without ruining the moment. “I’m just... overwhelmed, a bit.”

“We’ll take it slow,” he says leaning in a little closer. His movement is so slow that I almost don’t catch it. “Very slow. I’d like that, Eliza. I want to take my time with you, to really explore you. The outside... the *inside*.”

I close my eyes, knowing exactly what he’s about to do and accepting it fully as I realize it’s happening. I can’t let my fears hold me back. I can’t let the memories of Noah hold me back. I need to live for me, and even if Lev is an impossible option, I just want to taste him. Just this once. I need to know what his mouth feels like against mine.

But it’s not just his lips that come crashing down onto mine, it’s his entire body. He presses himself into me, wrapping his arms around me and taking me in fully. Suddenly, I’m enveloped in his masculine energy, completely weightless and at the mercy of his movements, like I’m floating in a warm ocean of bliss.

His tongue dances past my lips, exploring my mouth, rolling over my teeth and gums. He tastes sweet and smoky, with a hint of peppermint. He was ready for this. He came just as prepared as I did when I put on more perfume and changed panties.

Lev’s large hands travel over my body as we kiss, touching me, pushing and

squeezing, finding my ass under my dress and taking full liberty with it. He squeezes my cheeks, spreading them as he presses his erection into my belly.

I gasp when I realize the size of it. I almost don't believe it, but then again, the rest of Lev is enormous, why shouldn't his cock be as well?

Our mouths pull apart, but only for as long as it takes his to pull down my dress and grab my breasts. Then, he kisses me again, running his thumbs over my nipples and making them hard and tight.

I'm soaking wet. Everything he's doing to me is driving me into a more desperate passion. I need him right now, and I don't care what happens as a result.

The painting is leaning against the wall beside us as we tumble onto the bed, long forgotten amidst our lustful frenzy. Is that what he came here for, or was it just for me? I know the answer, but I'd like to pretend otherwise.

I lean back on my bed as he mounts me, his powerful thighs pressing my hips into the mattress. He tears off his jacket, throwing it onto the floor and unbuttoning his shirt so fast that his hands become a blur.

Underneath, a slew of tattoos are revealed, some fresh but most quite old and faded. There is writing in what I assume to be Russian, and some odd symbols that I've never seen before. On his chest, an eagle has its wings spread, black pigment spanning from shoulder to shoulder.

I knew Lev was fit by the way his body filled out his suit, but only now do I realize how perfect his physique is. It seems impossible that he could look this good, that his abs could be so well defined and his chest could be so broad, yet I'm staring right at him.

My mouth drops open, and I'm unaware of the way I'm gawking at him until he smirks and sticks his fingers into my open mouth. My lips close around them instinctually, and I roll my tongue over his knuckles, tasting the last cigar he smoked.

"Good girl." His voice rumbles deep in his chest. "Suck me just like that."

I close my eyes, breathing heavily as I taste him. He pushes his fingers deeper into my mouth as he gropes my breasts with his other hand, becoming

rougher with me as I succumb to his power.

“Deeper,” he growls, thrusting his fingers into my throat.

I gag, and he pulls them out, grabbing my throat as I open my eyes. “I’m going to destroy you, Eliza. Your body belongs to me now.”

I can hardly take this anymore. I push my hips up to press my pussy into him, but his weight doesn’t allow me to move at all. I need relief. I can’t stand to be tormented with such heavy anticipation any longer.

“Please,” I say, my voice barely more than a raspy whisper.

“Please what?” he asks, his eyes catching the light from the window.

“I need it,” I say, unable to form a sentence that makes any sense. “I need... I need it.”

“You need me to fuck you so hard you forget where you are. You forget *who* you are. Is that right?” he asks, the cruel power in his voice undeniable.

“Yes.”

“Then I’m going to do just that,” he says, squeezing my throat just a little harder. The pressure makes the blood pound in my ears, but it feels good, like hanging upside down.

I can’t move my head much, but my eyes wander down to Lev’s belt as he pulls it out of the loops of his slacks. It jingles as he flings it across the room, the metal buckle leaving a dent in the wall beside the door.

Next, he thumbs open the single button that holds his pants closed, the zipper undoing itself from the pressure the moment he shifts his weight. His cock bulges out, covered only by thin black underwear. There’s a little spot of dampness where to tip is, precum from his arousal.

My eyes widen at the sight of something so subtle, yet so telling. His arousal makes me even wetter, but I’m helpless to do anything about it. He has me firmly positioned beneath him, unable to even touch myself and relieve my insatiable need for pleasure.

He catches me staring at his cock, and a wide grin stretches across his face.

“Want a taste?”

I nod, biting my lip as he moves his underwear out of the way. His cock falls out onto my stomach – large, vascular, and pumping up even bigger with arousal. His balls rest below like warm gold weights wrapped in loose leather. Their heat seeps down from my belly to my pussy, the dull swollen ache of hunger rising by the second.

He moves closer to me, his cock throbbing against my neck, hot and eager. I know what he wants and I’m dying to taste him. I’d even be willing to let him cum in my mouth because I’m so horny, but I suspect he wants more than that from me.

And I’m dying to go all the way.

There’s a little drop of clear precum on the tip of his cock as he presses it to my lips. It smears across my mouth, sweet and sticky when I lick it off. Surprisingly inoffensive.

I open my mouth, accepting his cock as he pushes it in. I can tell he wants to fuck my face like a madman, but he’s holding back. He doesn’t want to push me too far, and I appreciate that.

However, once he claims me fully, I don’t want him holding back. I need to be fucked like a whore in private and treated like a princess in public. I’ll have it no other way.

“Fuck, Eliza, your mouth feels like heaven,” Lev groans, thrusting a bit faster in my mouth.

I’m barely doing anything, but if he’s crazy about that then what I’m about to do next is going to blow his fucking mind. I wrap my tongue around his cock, lifting my head a bit and taking him deeper. I’ve done this before, so I have some confidence in myself, but he’s also a lot bigger than Noah.

I gag, but I take him deeper, trying to reach his balls with my tongue. No luck, but I can tell he’s still happy with it. He lets out a deep sigh, tilting his head so far back that the room turns upside down for him.

I love the way his cock taste, but I love the pleasure I’m able to give him even more. He feels so important, so confident and self-sufficient that having

him surrender to me like this is extremely empowering.

But it doesn't last for long. He takes control again, pulling out of my mouth and moving back down to my legs. He pulls them apart, spreading them wide and placing his cock on my mound. "Once I'm in, there's no guarantee I'm pulling out," he warns.

"I don't care. Just fuck me as hard as you can," I reply.

He doesn't need to be told twice. He spreads my labia with one hand, using the other to guide his cock between my swollen lips. He glides through my ample wetness, but it's a tight fit I almost feel like I'm not going to be able to take him, but he slides in anyway.

"Fuck!" I exclaim, grabbing his muscular thigh and digging my nails into his flesh. "God, you're so fucking big."

Eliza

I'm struggling so hard with the size of Lev's cock that it feels like I'm going to ruin everything before we've even begun. Maybe I should've just let him cum in my mouth, but I had to have him inside me. I wanted him all the way, and I'm paying the price for it.

"You're just tight, darling. Relax," he says, pausing for a moment as my body adjusts to his girth.

It's no easy task, and it takes almost a full minute before he's able to start moving again. But once he slides in all the way, all the overwhelming tension inside me dissolves into pure bodily bliss.

Waves of euphoric pleasure move through me as he begins to make love to me, blossoming into electric pulses in my brain that cause me to lose what little control I had left. I'm consumed by Lev, and yet I'm the one consuming him, taking him inside of me deeper with every thrust.

Lev's huge hand encircles my neck, applying pressure and testing my limits. I wouldn't stop him even if I couldn't breathe anymore, but he appears to know where the threshold is for maximum thrill and minimum risk.

He's in control. He knows exactly what he's doing and I can trust him because I know he doesn't want to hurt me. That makes it so much easier to surrender to him fully, to allow myself to enjoy the ride and let loose.

I grab his hand, pressing it into my neck even harder as his gentle movement inside of me quickens into hard thrusts. “I want to be your bitch,” I say with what little air I have in my lungs.

He spits on my face, the devil appearing in his eyes for just the briefest of moments, that little loss of control that tells me he’s capable of terrible things. It almost snaps me out of my blissful daze, but it retains control, letting go of my neck and grabbing my breasts. He squeezes them much harder, pinching and pulling my nipples.

“So, you want to be my bitch, huh? Be careful what you ask for,” Lev growls his accent becoming twice as thick in the murky haze of lust.

“Teach me a lesson, then,” I dare him.

“I would break you like you couldn’t imagine,” he says, but his eyes light up like he’s already accepted my challenge.

“Do it.”

“Don’t make me ruin you. You’re so innocent and pure,” he says, even as he’s fucking me so deep that I can feel it in my ribcage.

I smirk. “Not anymore.”

He slaps me lightly across the face, grabbing my mouth and squeezing my cheeks together. “You want to be fucked like a whore, huh? You really want it like that?”

I nod, and he lets go of me, flipping me over so quickly that I lose track of where we are. Everything’s a blur, and he’s suddenly much deeper inside of me, grabbing my hair and using it to pull my head back as he rides me hard.

My mouth goes dry as he hits my cervix, pushing so deep that the overwhelming sensation causes me to scream.

He slows down, reluctant to push me too far, but I reach behind myself and claw at him. “Don’t stop. Fucking destroy me.”

He thrusts hard again, pushing me forward until I collapse on the bed. From there, he grabs both ass cheeks, holding me down to the bed as he rams himself inside.

My face is buried in the mattress, and the air is warm and sour as I struggle to breathe. I don't even want to come up for air, but my body forces me to, and I gulp in the fresh oxygen as pleasure ripples through me.

My fingers and toes are tingling now, fizzy gray pleasure that's mixed with a concerning amount of numbness. I've forgotten about the world and everyone I've ever known. I can barely remember who is fucking me anymore, only that I want him to cum inside me, to fill me with his seed.

The risk of pregnancy makes me climax. I feel dirty and stupid for doing this, but it's the best release I've ever had. Pure, unbridled pleasure courses through me, rewarding my recklessness.

The bed is soaked from my release, but Lev doesn't seem to mind. He continues to fuck me from behind, his body stiffening as he grows close to finishing.

"Fuck, you feel so good," he growls into my ear, causing goosebumps to run down my neck and arms. "I'm going to pump you full. You hear me? I'm going to cum inside your little pussy."

I push my ass out to him, taking him deeper as his filthy words turn to reality, and he climaxes inside me. His cock throbs, stretching me as he buries himself deep inside me.

I feel complete for the first time in ages.

And as our breathing slows and the world returns to normal, I realize that I can never go back. This is one step too far, and I've officially left the regular world of small-town people for good.

I could never go back there.

I could never go back to Noah.

Lev

I almost feel guilty for what I did to Eliza yesterday. She's never going to be able to be with another man without craving that kind of treatment, and the number of men who know how to do what I did to her are few and far between.

I own her pussy now, and nobody else is going to touch her unless they want every bone in their body shattered. Eliza doesn't know that I would kill for her, and I pray she doesn't find out the hard way. If this ex she's been talking about attempts to find and reclaim her...

Then I'm going to prison for murder.

My demented thoughts are only proving Valentin more correct, but I've lost control. The beast is loose, and all it took was a kiss.

But even amidst my newfound sexual obsession, I haven't forgotten the promises I made Eliza. She's more than an object for my amusement, and I don't want her believing that I only want her for sex. I recognize her talent, and I'm willing to give her the leg up she needs to make it in the art world.

It's a cutthroat industry, but I'm the one doing the cutting.

I pick up the phone in my home office, dialing the number of an art dealer a few blocks from the gallery Valentin manages. I still use a landline for important calls because they're more difficult to hack. Cellphones are much

more vulnerable.

Asher, the owner, picks up the phone. “Ah, Lev, I was wondering when you’d call me.”

“Why?” I ask, not wanting to give him the impression that I need him in the slightest. Everything in this godforsaken industry is about power, even a simple conversation with a colleague. A man can never let his mask of ultimate control slip, even for the briefest of seconds.

Asher quickly regains his footing in the conversation, though. I’m not dealing with an amateur. “You need buyers, and I have them. One can’t sell paintings without buyers.”

“I have enough buyers,” I grumble. “Let’s cut to the chase. I have a painter, a very talented young woman, and I’d like to get her stuff in front of the right people. People who will pay.”

“Don’t you already own a gallery?”

“Yes, Asher, I do. I want her stuff in every gallery in the city.”

“Either she’s exceptionally talented or you owe someone a huge favor,” he replies with a chuckle.

“Both,” I admit.

“Well, I can only put her stuff up if it’s good, and I’d like to meet her as well, if that’s okay.”

“Why?” I blurt, red-hot jealousy causing a sudden surge of adrenaline. I’m holding the phone so hard that it creaks like it’s about to shatter in my hand.

There’s a short pause from Asher’s end. “Um, because I like to know who I’m working with. The art industry is full of unreliable types. I need people who will be pleasant to work with.”

“If you can stand me, you’ll be fine with her. She’s easier on the eyes, and not so gruff, but if you give her a hard time, I’m going to break your neck.”

“Lev, have I ever given you a reason to talk that way?” he replies calmly.

“You can never be too careful. The world is full of idiots these days,” I

grumble, thinking specifically of Vanya. He and his brother Feliks threw their futures away over money. There wasn't an ounce of loyalty in their blood. Not a single fucking drop.

"I'll keep an eye out for idiots, but you won't find any at my gallery. If you bring the young lady and her portfolio, I'd be happy to take a look. Won't come cheap though, I have to warn you. I just raised my rates."

Of course, he did. Right when I called him and told him I was doing someone a favor. Fucking rat. He's lucky he has connections or I would've killed him already.

"What are the new rates?" I ask.

"Forty percent," he replies. "I know it sounds like a lot, but rent has gotten so high in New York. You know how it is."

"No, I don't, actually," I reply with a generous helping of smugness. "I own every building I use. Don't have to deal with anything but property tax and maintenance."

"Sounds nice, but the rest of us live in the real world," he replies dryly.

"I'll bring her by this evening," I say, twirling the phone cable around my finger.

"That might not be a good time for me. I'll see what I can do."

"Make it a good time," I reply, hanging up immediately after. Asher thinks he has the entire world at his disposal, but the fact of the matter is that he's a small fish in a big ocean.

And I'm a shark.

Eliza will want to know about tonight ahead of time, but I'm not going to send her a text. I'd rather pay her a visit in person. I want to see how she's doing after how rough I was with her last night.

I throw a coat on and take the elevator down to the ground floor. From there, my driver is already waiting. I have several on call, but there's one who always waits just outside my building. Rain, shine, four in the morning... It doesn't matter. He's always there.

By the gallery, but two streets down. I want to pick something up.

“Shall I wait for you?” the driver asks.

“No need,” I reply, checking my teeth in my front phone camera.

Ten minutes later, we’re outside the florist’s shop. It’s the best one on this side of the city. I think a woman who’s about to have her paintings in every notable gallery in New York City deserves a bouquet at the very least.

The air is cool and crisp when I enter. It smells like leaves and that weird chemical fertilizer they sell in those big green and yellow bags at the garden section of every hardware store. I don’t do much gardening, but I’d like to have a house one day outside of the city and plant some roses bushes.

Maybe make a couple of kids.

And get a wife. One like Eliza. I feel like the clock is ticking on that and I’ve been far too distracted with work to even try to meet anyone stable. Everyone in this industry is too crazy for such a long-term commitment.

Well, perhaps short-term is better than nothing. It gives me an excuse to buy flowers. I love the way they smell, but I can’t justify buying them for myself all the time. I have an image to uphold.

That’s life in the Bratva.

The shop owner, Arina, recognizes me immediately, despite it having been a substantial amount of time since I’ve been in. “Lev, my dear,” she exclaims, rushing out from behind the counter to give me a hug.

Arina’s a stout old woman who thinks she’s my mother because we’re both from Russia. She’s probably the only person who isn’t out to stab me in the back, so I humor her. I know she’s lonely. Her husband passed away ten years ago, and her son committed suicide when he was only fifteen.

Tragic, but if you dig deep enough into anyone’s life, you’ll find tragedy and heartbreak. It’s the human condition.

I accept her embrace, feeling the years of pain layered over her body. They’re subtle, but they’re there if you know what to feel for. Part of me wishes I was ignorant to them, but I see through people in ways they don’t realize. I can’t

stop myself from knowing.

I saw through Eliza as well. It was easier when I was inside her. I saw the pain. The tragedy. I know things happened to her, but I can't say what they are. I'm sure I'll find out, eventually. People tend to pour their hearts out to me once they understand I won't judge them.

I smile at Arina as she lets me go. "I know you're busy, so I won't be too long."

"Too long? Dear, you could never be long enough," she replies, shaking her head. "Always so quick. In and out. You need to take life slower. It'll be gone before you know it. God knows it was only yesterday when I was clutching my books, running down the checkered hall to History class. All bullshit, you know? All the history they taught us turned out to be wrong."

I smile, remembering my mother complaining about the same thing. It was a different world back then. Nobody knew anything outside of what the government allowed you to know. The internet didn't exist for you to fact check anything.

A simpler time, but not a better one.

"I think we both still have plenty of time," I assure Arina. "And I am taking life slower. I'm here getting flowers. If I were in such a hurry, I wouldn't be doing that."

"Flowers for who?" she asks, her grey-green eyes lighting up.

"I already know what you're thinking, and this is just business," I lie.

"What kind of business has you bringing someone flowers?" she asks, raising a thin silver eyebrow.

I look around the place for some inspiration, but instead my eyes lock onto a large bouquet of red roses. Classic, and they match Eliza's lips. I love how red they are, but the way they taste is even better.

"Just a business deal. Female client."

"Oh, she must be pretty," Arina says with a grin, quickly catching on. I can't hide anything from her. She has those witchy powers that all Slavic women

seem to have. I'm just glad Eliza doesn't have those powers or she'd turn my brain inside out in her little studio apartment.

Hard pass. I've seen more than enough brain matter in my life already.

"These roses are pretty," I say, redirecting Arina's attention to the flowers I came for. "A dozen is a nice, neat amount."

"Oh, aren't they just gorgeous?" she says, hurrying over to them as fast as her bad left knee will allow. "You want to know how I get them so red?"

"Dye?" I ask.

She clicks her tongue at me. "No, not dye, silly man. I use my special soil, which I'd never sell or share the secret ingredient with anyone. Nope, not a single person, so don't ask. Maybe have, but I wouldn't share. Some even offered big bucks, but my lips are sealed."

"Maybe once I get a house and I want to grow some," I say with a laugh. I'm only half-joking. Her roses *are* better than anyone else's and she grows them herself. If she says her soil is the trick, I believe her.

"You're really going to impress your special woman with these," she says, picking them out of the bunch one by one. "Maybe you want to make it two dozen. That way, it'll be extra special. I'm sure nobody has done that for her before."

"Or three, or four."

"Or five," she says, turning to me with wide eyes. "Oh, she might agree to marry you on the spot."

I sigh. "I'm only joking. I think a dozen is enough for now."

She wags a finger at me and winks. "Right. For now."

Twenty minutes later and a few recipes for soup later, I'm out the door with a dozen of the reddest roses I've ever seen. And yet, they still aren't as red as Eliza's perfect lips.

Eliza

I answer the door with drool on the side of my face and crust in my eyes, praying that it's the mailman and not Lev. He fucked me so good last night that I slept for a solid twelve hours. Even the sun in my eyes and the sound of the city couldn't wake me.

I want to shoot myself when I open the door to find Lev standing there looking like a goddamn Rock 'n' Roll magazine model, a dozen red roses in his hands and a smile on his handsome face.

Of all the days I picked to sleep in, it had to be the one where the man of my dreams showed up on my doorstep with flowers. I didn't even think to expect something like this because I've never had a man bring my flowers.

Not once!

Lev smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling like he doesn't even realize how much of a mess I am. He holds the roses out to me. "I have some good news. But first, flowers for you."

"Thank you," I manage to say, taking the flowers and backing away so that he can come in.

As he slides through the door, I hurry the roses to the kitchen area, finding a large vase that I had been using as a decorative piece. It came with the apartment, and I almost got rid of it. I'm glad I didn't.

I take longer than I should to fill the vase with water. I'm embarrassed to be seen like this, even if Lev doesn't seem to mind. I like him too much to reveal this side of me so early.

"These roses are beautiful," I say, fiddling with them in the vase to buy myself more time. "They're so red!"

"I have a good florist, Arina. You'll want to meet her, eventually. She knows everything about flowers."

"Cute," I reply, finally turning around. "Thank you again. I know I'm a mess, but I just woke up."

"You're beautiful," he insists, and I almost believe him before I catch my reflection in the window.

"Oh god," I mutter, turning away. "You can just make yourself comfortable. I'm going to take a second to freshen up if that's alright."

"Quite alright," he says with a pleasant smile.

Such a gentleman. I'd almost forget how hard he fucked me last night. It's like a switch turned on and he transformed into a savage, fucking me like he hadn't had sex in years. I quite liked it, but I'm not sure why. Maybe it's flattering to be desired so strongly by someone so powerful.

I don't dwell on the reason as I lock myself in the bathroom. I have a more pressing issue at hand, which is how the hell to make myself look like a human being without leaving Lev waiting for an hour while I do my full routine.

Noah used to hate it when I took so long, even though I never thought I was that slow, but Lev seems like he could be a bit more patient. Still, I won't press my luck. A quick rinse in the shower and some lipstick will suffice.

I'm in and out of the shower in a heartbeat. My hair is too short for a bun, but it looks fine when it's wet. No problem.

The rest is just a quick, a little bit of red lipstick and a fresh shirt and pair of jean shorts. I tear the slit in them a little higher for Lev.

Steam and perfume floods out of the bathroom as I open the door to see Lev

sitting patiently on my bed, looking out the window thoughtfully. Anyone else would be on their phone, but he's a peculiar man. He doesn't take an interest in the same things as everyone else does.

"Sorry for the wait," I say, taking a deep breath of the cool air and cleansing my lungs of the humidity I've been soaking in for the past fifteen minutes.

"It's not a problem. Arina insisted that I take life slower, so you're only helping me."

"Arina? The florist?"

"She's older. More like a mother to me," he says, sensing my not-so-subtle jealousy. I hate being that type of woman, but I've had bad experiences before. Wandering eyes and flirting. Noah was terrible about that, but I don't think he actually ever cheated.

"She sounds nice," I say, relieved she's not my new competition. God knows Lev could have anyone he wanted. I'm not exactly sure why he picked me, but I'm determined to prove that it was the right choice.

I can't sound jealous. I have to be more confident.

Lev stands up from the bed, clasping his large hands together. His eyes run over me, and I shiver. It's always like that. One moment his brilliant blue eyes are giving me goosebumps, and the next moment they're setting me on fire.

"So," he begins, looking toward the window again. "I've been talking with an art dealer by the name of Asher Wesley, and he's agreed to take a look at your work. I'd like you to come with me to his gallery and bring your portfolio."

Wow, that was scary fast. I didn't think he'd hook me up with an opportunity so quickly. I appreciate that he's a man of his word, but the quickness is what took me off-guard.

"Thank you, that's really great," I say, a bit stupefied by his offer. "Do you want me to bring the paintings, or just some pictures of them?"

"Pictures will do just fine. He just wants to meet you, more than anything."

“Oh, okay,” I say, my cheeks glowing red in a way that makeup couldn’t even hide. I feel like I don’t deserve this level of attention, but it’s coming on with full force anyway. I have to accept it or I’m going to lose grip on the biggest prospect of my life.

“Asher listens to what I say,” Lev assures me. “You won’t have a problem with him.”

He stands up from the bed and comes toward me. My breath catches in my throat as he takes my hand. There’s so much warmth to his skin. It’s such a stark contrast to the cool blue of his eyes.

“And after that, I’d like to take you to dinner,” he says. “Private entry. You have to know someone to get in, and I happen to know quite a lot of people.”

The pinnacle of fine dining in the little town I’m from is the red and white diner that was built in the fifties. I can’t imagine what type of restaurant he’s talking about. I’d be so out of place.

As though he can read my mind, he cocks his head to the side. “If you’re worried about the dress code, I have you covered. I’ll have Asher give you a cash advance on your first sale, and we can take some of that money down to the boutique, the one you painted for me.”

I still can’t imagine someone would actually want my paintings hanging in their gallery, much less pay me in advance for them, but I go along with what Lev is saying. If it all proves to be true, I’m the luckiest girl in the world.

If not, at least the sex was good.

“You seem awfully confident that Asher will be able to sell my paintings,” I say with a nervous laugh.

He squeezes my hand, his eyes never leaving mine. “You have no idea how much your work will go for, but I understand. You and I live in a different world. I’d like to show you mine, if that’s alright.”

“Only if I get to show you where I come from,” I reply. As nice as it is that he’s filthy rich and twice as charming, he should know what he’s getting into. I’m sure a small-town girl isn’t what he’s used to.

“I’d love to get to know you. Everything about you, every inch and every detail,” he says, his voice smoother than a hot knife through butter.

“Even my fucked up hometown?” I ask with another nervous chuckle.

“I can assure you, my dear, that I came from a much, *much* worse place. I’m not in the position to pass judgement.”

“Oh?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “That’s something I’d be interested in hearing about.”

“Perhaps over dinner,” he says, squeezing my hand again before letting go. He turns toward the door. “You ready?”

I’m far from ready, but I don’t think I’ll ever be, so I just follow him, almost forgetting to lock my apartment door on the way out. Soon, the paintings in there might actually be worth enough to steal, and then I’ll really have to be careful.

The air is buzzing with energy the moment my feet hit the pavement outside. It’s coming from everywhere, peeking around the sides of the towering buildings, screaming along with the horns in traffic, and practically glowing from Lev’s intimidating figure as he walks close beside me like Dobermann on high alert.

“Asher is a bit of a cockroach, but he’s useful,” Lev says, digging into his jacket for something. “If he says, does, or even hints at doing anything that makes you uncomfortable, tell me and I’ll deal with him. Not that he would, but there’s always a chance.” He pulls out a cigar and slides it under his nose, drawing in a deep breath. “Mm, I hope you don’t mind if I smoke this.”

“Not at all,” I reply, my mind stuck on his statements about Asher. Smoking is the least of my worries.

In fact, as he lights up his cigar, I find myself enjoying the smell. It’s nothing like the cigarettes people in my hometown smoke. This is refined and expensive. Just watching the blue smoke curl up across Lev’s handsome face makes me feel like he should be captured, studied, and reproduced.

I should paint him. I wonder if he’d let me.

“It’s about fifteen minutes from here,” Lev says, smoke leaking out of his mouth as he speaks. “But I like the air, even if it’s not the freshest.” He chuckles. “New York, you know.”

“It’s not all that bad,” I reply, even as a gust of wind blows the exhaust from the heavy traffic into my face. I cough. “Okay, it’s... different.”

He laughs, tapping the ash of his cigar and shaking his head. “Oh, different is certainly a good word for it. I’m sure where you’re from, the air is much nicer. Out in the countryside. Is that what it’s like?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I guess that’s one good thing about it. Probably the only thing.”

“I’m sure there are more,” he replies. “Good air, more grounded people, and probably a better sense of community.”

I laugh louder than I should. “Fuck no, they’re horrid. The people I’ve met here are much better. Where I’m from, people will smile in your face and poison the water you drink from. I left that place and I’m never going back.”

He looks puzzled for a moment, then nods. “I see. Back in Russia, we had this image of the West. It was the land of opportunity, no matter where you went. The countryside had these hug crops with cotton and corn, and the cows would be out grazing all day. The farmer would always be resting under a tree, chewing a long piece of wheat. I guess we thought everyone was so rich they didn’t have to work.”

“That’s wild,” I mumble, trying to figure out what preconceptions I have of Russia that are outrageously wrong. Probably most of them.

Lev takes a few short puffs from his cigar. “I learned the hard way that not everything is as glamorous as the movies, but the notion that anyone can get rich if they put in the effort stuck. I still believe that.”

Is this Lev’s first real flaw? I can’t agree with him that anyone can be rich in America. There are so many people who are so hopelessly poor with no way out. They kill each other just to get a chance at having anything at all.

And Lev is walking around in a suit that probably cost more than double my rent, casually talking about how simple it is to make money. Maybe for him,

with how clever and charming he is, but the rest of us are struggling.

“You don’t think that other people have a more difficult time making money?” I ask, trying not to sound like I’m interested in starting an argument. It’s not in my best interest to anger the man who’s helping me.

“Difficult, yes. Impossible, no. That’s the mistake you Americans are always making. You’re not dreamers anymore.” He gestures around us with his cigar clenched between his large knuckles. “Most of these people have no clue what they’re doing, and more importantly, why they’re doing it. If you have a dream, make a plan, and stick to it, that’ll take you a lot further than simply following orders.”

“I suppose so,” I reply cautiously. “But some people don’t have the resources to do that. They’d starve if they weren’t working all the time. Hell, some of them *are* starving even though they’re working all the time.”

“Beg, borrow, and steal,” he replies, tossing his half-smoked cigar into a black wastebin and slowing his stroll. “The point is, there’s always a way. You either make it, or you don’t, but that’s your decision.”

His eyes meet mine, and I know immediately that he’s talking about me. This isn’t about the American dream. It’s about my dream, and what I’m willing to do to achieve it.

We come to a stop in front of a tall white building. Out front, an impossible number of marble stairs lead to two towering wooden doors. They have brass handles so big that I’d need two hands to grip them, but Lev is able to wing the door open with one.

It feels like I’m seconds away from selling my soul to the devil.

Eliza

Asher's hand is warm, but something about his eyes makes me reluctant to trust him. I know he works with Lev, who, despite his intimidating appearances, has been good to me, but Asher isn't the same.

His image is softer, a lot of browns and tans hanging over a skinny frame. He should be less threatening, but there's an opportunistic edge to his gaze, like he'd be willing to take advantage of you if you were especially weak.

He reminds me of a coyote – lean, weak, but growing desperate. I can almost see his fangs when he smiles. “It's lovely to make your acquaintance,” he says, his voice soft and slow.

I smile, but it's only my mouth moving. My eyes are watching him closely as he lets go of my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Lev, perhaps sensing my discomfort, interjects. “How many openings do you have for her work? I'd like to get things in as soon as possible.”

Asher leans back, rubbing his short auburn beard and frowning. “I'd like to see the work beforehand, but I could give you probably two or three spots for this weekend.”

Lev nods again, then looks at me and gives me a reassuring smile. “You can show him your work now.”

I pull my phone out so fast it nearly flies out of my hand. The sweat from my palm is the only thing that saves it. I guess my nerves are good for something after all.

“Here,” I say, opening up a picture of two of my paintings side by side. I hand the phone to Asher, my cheeks burning from the pressure of having to show my amateur artwork to someone who runs an upscale gallery.

I will admit, however, that the art here isn't all that good. It's contemporary, but that's not the only reason I don't particularly like it. It's just... uninspired. Some of the pieces seem unoriginal too, like they were copied from somewhere else in a hurry.

Despite my distaste for the art around me, I still feel an unbelievable pressure on my heart as Asher uses his fingers to flick through, zoom, and examine what I've spent my whole life trying to perfect.

He hums for a moment, then he looks up at me, a sparkle in his brown eyes. "These are really good. Lev, where'd you find this girl?"

"Painting out in front of the luxury boutique. I thought I told you that," he replies cheerfully.

"Well, she certainly has an eye for art. I wouldn't mind having a few of these in my gallery this weekend. I'm sure they'd sell to the right customer."

I get the biggest rush I've ever had, much greater than when Lev was choking me with his cock up in my ribs. Everything I've ever dreamed of is coming true, and it really feels like just that – a dream.

But it's real. I bite my lip hard just to check, but I don't wake up.

"We'll need an advance, by the way," Lev says, transitioning into a topic of conversation I'd be woefully unprepared to have on my own. I'm glad he's here to help.

Asher hands my phone back to me, pretending not to hear Lev. "Very nice. Yes, we can do something with those," he mumbles.

"Probably around twenty grand each. I'm sure you'll get much more," Lev says.

Surely, he's joking.

Asher shrugs. "I can do fifteen on the big ones. Ten on the smaller one, and that's only because we're friends."

He's not joking? What the hell am I going to do with that much money? It seems unreal. This has to be a joke, but then again, I thought Lev's initial offer of two-thousand dollars was also a joke.

The best thing to do right now is to keep my mouth shut and let these two talk it out.

Lev places a heavy hand on my shoulder. "I think you're selling Eliza short. I

should be asking for thirty or more, but I'm only asking for twenty because she's new."

"You planning on bringing your guys in and busting up the place if I don't?"

"Who?" Lev asks, squeezing my shoulder hard. "My Uncle Valentin?" He laughs. "He'd pull a muscle trying to lift a bat to hit you with."

Asher scoffs, shaking his head. His eyes meet mine for a brief second, and then he looks back to lev. "You know what I mean," he says in the most serious tone I've heard from him.

"And you know what *I* mean. Twenty each, and it had better be cash."

"I don't have that kind of money lying around," Asher replies, throwing his hands up like Lev has a gun pointed at him. He seems a lot more stressed than he should about all this, like the joke about Lev sending his guys to bust the place up wasn't a joke at all.

Lev removes his hand from my shoulder and steps up to Asher, casting a shadow over his frantic face. "You and I both know what you here, so don't play those games with me. Go and get it. We'll be counting it before we leave."

Asher's expression melts into one of pure contempt, and for a moment, I think Lev has ruined the deal. All this, just to be turned down for pissing off the owner of the gallery. But, to my surprise, Asher doesn't tell Lev to scram. He grits his teeth and shakes his head, but replies, "Very well."

I watch as he hurries off down the hall, biting my lip again to check if I'm really not dreaming.

"Sorry about him," Lev grumbles as he turns back to me.

"I honestly thought he was going to tell us to leave," I say, my nervousness revealing itself in the form of a laugh.

"I don't think that would work out very well for him," Lev replies with a smirk.

"Why not?" I ask, wondering if they have some kind of contract going.

“Well, Valentin might not come in, but someone else would. Nobody wants that,” he replies, his smirk widening.

I frown, an itchy sort of suspicion growing in my chest. I have to dig deeper. The last thing I want to do is unknowingly get involved with a bunch of criminals. I just want to sell art. That’s it.

Okay, and get my brains fucked out by the most attractive man on the planet, but that’s already happening. I have everything I want already. I don’t need to start rubbing shoulders with criminals.

But before I can voice my concerns to Lev, Asher comes back with a brown monogrammed duffle bag and drops it on the cold marble floor in front of us. It lands with a loud boom that echoes across the high ceilings and shakes every concern straight out of my head.

“Unzip it,” Lev says to Asher.

He leans over, pulling the gold zipper hard and opening up the bag like a gutted fish. Instead of slippery gray organs, stacks of cash spill out. They’re all hundred-dollar bills, bound in paper like they were stolen from the bank this morning.

I’m stunned, but everyone else seems deathly calm.

“Count it,” Lev says, nudging me with his elbow. “Make sure it’s all there, and we’ll go.”

Asher steps back, and I study the duffel bag like each stack of bills inside is secretly a bomb with a timer counting down to zero. “Y-you want me to do that now?”

“Yes, please,” he says, waving his hand over the money. “And quickly.”

I drop to my knees, feeling the urgency of Lev’s voice more than the reverberating pain in my knees. I start separating the money, feeling more like a starving peasant grabbing crumbs than a woman who’s about to make it big in the art industry.

I can barely concentrate on counting the thick stacks of money with how fast my mind is racing. Each thought punches out the next, creating a bloody

mess inside my head that has me restarting my count nine times before I finally am able to get an estimate on how much money is on the floor in front of me.

“Sixty-thousand,” I say as I stand up just a bit too quickly. Stars dance in front of my eyes, and I steady myself against Lev.

He places his hand on my waist, his fingers curling around like I’m small enough for him to pick up with one hand. It feels like he’s making a statement, declaring that I’m his property as he stares Asher down.

The tension between them is thick, but as usual, Asher backs down quickly. “Well, it’s all there, like she said.” He steps back from the bag. “So, you can be on your way. I expect the paintings in by tomorrow, though. I need to get things prepared for the weekend.”

“Right,” Lev grunts. He grabs the duffle bag, carrying it in one hand even though Asher had to use two. Everything is so easy for him.

“Let’s go, darling,” he whispers in my ear.

Gladly. I walk with him out the door and down the dizzying set of stairs to the sidewalk. The bag in his hand feels like it’s glowing, but nobody else can see it. We’d be a target if that were the case, but I doubt anyone would want to mess with Lev.

“We’ll take my car,” he says, coming to a stop suddenly at the edge of the road. He takes his hand off my waist, pulling out a phone and pressing a few keys. It’s the old type of phone, the one with physical buttons and a tiny square display at the top.

“I hope we didn’t just pull a heist,” I say as Lev tucks the phone into his pocket.

“There’d be more sirens,” he replies matter-of-factly.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any experience with that, would you?” I ask, my doubts on his moral character increasing.

He looks at me, raising an eyebrow. “Not in the least. What makes you think that I would?”

I point to the duffle bag. “That doesn’t seem like something a bank robber would be carrying? And you do it so naturally.”

He chuckles, lifting the bag and shaking it a few times. “Not much in here, honestly. Come to my place sometime and I’ll show you what a real bank robbery looks like.”

“Just please don’t tell me you’re a criminal or something. I like you too much to be let down like that,” I say, hoping he’ll at least lie to me long enough for me to get my footing in the art world.

Or maybe he’ll tell the truth, and it’ll be something I actually want to hear, like he inherited all his wealth from his parents, or he’s a lawyer for six different billionaires. A girl can dream, and I’ve been doing a lot of that lately.

But Lev declines to say anything at all. A large black sedan rolls up, and the back door opens automatically. He gestures for me to get in, and then he slides in beside me, the door closing like there’s an invisible chauffeur outside closing it for us.

“Alright, darling, let’s get you dolled up,” he says as the car pulls away from the curb.

Lev

I thought I'd be satisfied from last night, but seeing Eliza spin around in flattering designer clothing for an hour has lit a fire in me that can only be put out by her pouty red lips and the swirl of her tongue.

She seems to know it, too, taking every opportunity to flash her panties when she's bending over to look at something, or let a nipple slip when she's showing me a dress she likes.

She's trying to act coy, but I know it's in her blood to show off. She's an artist, a performer, and she loves attention more than she probably realizes.

But she doesn't have to seek it out from me. I can't keep my hands off her, and I make that obvious when we slip back into my car and head to dinner.

"Very soft," I say, slipping my hand under her sparkly black dress and squeezing her thigh.

She sucks in a breath, trying to look like she's shocked by my behavior. "Right before dinner, Lev?"

"You're my dinner," I growl, pushing her legs open so wide that the driver would be able to see her panties had I not pulled the curtain closed when we got in. He knows not to bother me when I'm back here. Whatever happens – groans, moans, screams – he just keeps driving.

"Spread those pretty legs," I say, slapping the insides of her thighs. "That's right."

She obeys me so readily that I'm almost stunned. If it's this easy to get her to follow my lead, how far can I take this?

For now, the only thing I want is her pussy in my mouth. We didn't get around to it last night, but I'm going to change that. I'm going to get those legs over my shoulders and change her life forever.

I bet her ex never ate her pussy. Losers never do, but it's funny because they're actually missing out on one of life's greatest pleasures.

More for me, I suppose.

“How much were these?” I ask, my fingers wrapping around the impossibly thin waistband of her crimson panties.

“Five-hundred-something,” she replies, his voice high and thin in her chest.

A ridiculous amount for such a small speck of fabric, but I’ve bought bottles at the club for ten times that price. I tear them off her hips, flinging them onto the floor. “No panties, tonight, darling.”

I undo her seatbelt and slide her to the far end of the seat. Her back rests against the edge of the door, and she wiggles her hips until her dress rides up enough to reveal her pussy. It’s already swollen with need, her pink flower rising up as I lean in to taste it.

The way she gasps as my lips cover her mound gives me the biggest jolt of excitement I’ve ever had. She grabs my hair in her fist, pushing my head down harder on her pussy and rubbing it across my tongue.

She’s always so shy before we start, but once she’s going, there’s no stopping her.

But I’m the same way. I match the intensity of her needs with the movement of my tongue, tasting her sweet nectar as she spreads her legs further.

The way she moves beneath me is incredible, pushing her hips up and giving me everything without reserve. Her soft moaning, the sounds she struggles to control, adds a new layer of satisfaction to this already beautiful experience.

I look up, and the only thing I can see is her dress. I wish I could see her pretty face, but it’s up to my imagination to create the image of her flushed cheeks, open mouth, and dilated pupils.

“Oh my god,” she gasps, holding my head in place as I flick my tongue over her clit. “Lev, I’m going to cum. I’m going to... Oh fuck!”

Her body writhes as she climaxes in my mouth, and I taste more of her sweetness, deriving acute bliss from the flavor of her orgasm. It turns me on so much to know how good she feels. It’s my duty to always keep her satisfied.

But I also have needs, and just because she's finished doesn't mean we're ready for dinner.

Sometimes, it's better to have your dessert first.

I come up from her pussy for air, smirking as I see the look on her face – shock, ecstasy, and another wave of arousal. She's a woman in heat, and I'm about to make it so much hotter in here.

“Your turn, sunshine,” I say with a smirk, replacing her on the seat and pushing her down onto the floor. She looks better at my feet, anyway.

Submissive.

“No hands,” I say, pushing them away as she reaches for my zipper. “Unless you're tugging on my balls, I want your mouth doing all the work.”

She scoffs. “Do you expect me to suck it through your pants?”

I respond by grabbing her head and pushing it down into my lap, smearing her pretty red lipstick all over the fabric. I clutch her hair, pushing my hips up as my cock throbs, using my power to control her movements.

God, even through my pants she feels like heaven. I can't imagine what her mouth is going to do to me.

I let go of her when she starts to struggle, and she looks at me like she wants to stand up and slap me. I distract her by unzipping my pants, my cock popping up and wiping every thought from her mind except for sex.

“Suck it, now,” I demand, leaning back and offering myself to her.

Her eyes are so wide she could swallow me whole with them, but she uses her mouth instead.

My daydreams turn to an almost unbelievable reality as I watch her red lips slide down the sides of my cock. She moves slowly but confidently down, pausing only for a moment on her way to the base.

I'm surprised how deep she can go. It almost makes me jealous to know that she's probably done this before, but I don't want the past to ruin this precious moment. The pleasure is too great to allow myself to get distracted.

“Oh, fuck, that’s good,” I sigh as her lips touch the base of my cock.

She looks up at me, her dark eyes shimmering in the low light, and she winks.

Almost cum right then and there. My fingers curls into the leather seats to either side of me, and I thrust my hips up so that my cock plunges the rest of the way into her throat.

She comes up for air, coughing and shaking her head. “Take it easy.”

I laugh. “Jesus, I’m not sure I can. You shouldn’t have winked at me like that.”

She grabs my balls, squeezing them hard and winking again. “I think I’ll do what I want, thank you very much.”

And just like that, Eliza literally and figuratively has me by the balls. I can do nothing but suffer under the cruel pleasure her mouth and tongue provide as they slip down my cock again.

She keeps me on the edge the whole time, slowing down and squeezing my balls when I get too close to cumming, but quickly bobbing her head when she feels me relaxing again. It’s torture at its most pleasurable. I’m a victim of Eliza’s delectable punishment.

She tugs on my balls hard when I’m about to cum, my stomach clenching as I’m pushed over the edge. I erupt in her mouth, pumping every drop that I have down her throat. Milky white cum dribbles out from the sides of her mouth as the seal of her lips against my cock breaks.

The view is incredible. Nothing is better than watching the most beautiful woman on the planet drink the most intimate part of me.

She wipes her mouth as she swallows and climbs back up to the seat beside me. She tugs the hem of her dress down, looking over at me like nothing happened. “How long until we get there?” She asks. “I’m starving.”

Eliza

I can still taste Lev on the back of my tongue as I take a sip of my water. The ice jingles in the glass, but it's not loud enough to drown out the hammering of my heart. It hasn't slowed down since I felt him release in my mouth and I realized I liked it.

I've done stuff like that before with Noah, but he wasn't clean like Lev is. He didn't taste good. It was bitter and unappealing, but Lev was totally different. It turned me on when I tasted him, and the groans that rumbled out of his chest gave me goosebumps.

If he asked me to do it again, I'd crawl right up to his seat and blow him in front of everyone here. It's so unlike me, but things are changing so fast that I don't know who I am anymore. This is my opportunity to remake myself, and I'm quickly moving in a dangerous direction.

Do I want to be a classy artist living big in New York?

Or do I want to be some Russian millionaire's arm candy?

I hate that both of them seem equally appealing.

"The wine here is excellent," Lev mutters as he scans a narrow paper menu. I can't understand a damn word on it, but I trust he knows how to order here. He seemed to know the person who seated us.

"You can choose for me," I say, tracing my finger along the edge of the lace tablecloth.

"Maybe a Chateau," he says, running his finger down the menu. "Yes, that's good."

I really shouldn't be drinking. I need to keep my wits about me, but it feels like I've already stepped into such a dazzling existence that staying sober seems almost as dangerous as drinking myself silly.

Just a glass. I'll have one, and then I'll eat something interesting. I'm sure they have all sorts of things I've never tasted here.

“So,” Lev says, putting down the menu. “I think it’s time we get to know each other on more of an intellectual level. Carnal sins are delightful, but that’s a shallow way to know someone, isn’t it?”

“I would like to know more about you,” I admit.

He smiles, but I’ve noticed that there are times his smiles are genuine, and other times when they’re calculated, like he’s making sure to pull up his mouth high enough to be polite.

His eyes don’t follow, like this time. He’s not really smiling, he’s just pretending like he is.

But why?

Is he just being polite, or is he hiding something? There must be more to him that he doesn’t want me to know. Someone as powerful as him must have secrets, and I’m too curious not to try to uncover them.

I tuck my hair behind my ear, taking another sip of water to hide my curious gaze. I don’t want him asking why I’m staring at him. It’s hard enough to hold a conversation without getting flustered. Answering direct accusations would shatter what’s left of my sex-addled brain.

Thankfully, Lev led the conversation, opening up about his past like I wanted him to. He’s an honest man as far as I can tell, but there’s always this hint of mystery to what he says, like he’s leaving out details that really shouldn’t be left out.

“Moscow was freezing, let me tell you,” he says with a chuckle. He leans back in his seat and crosses his thick arms, shaking his head. “I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy. Okay, maybe I would for my worst, but not for anyone else.”

“You have enemies?” I ask, curious what kind of person would dare to get on his bad side.

“More than I can count,” he replies, “But let’s focus on the good things. I had a nice upbringing, despite the disturbances at home. Most of the time, things were calm, and we had more than enough to get by.”

“Disturbances?” I ask, leaning forward even though I’m trying my best not to seem too curious.

“My father was a businessman. People came in and out all the time, and not all of them were decent people. He had to have someone thrown out on more than one occasion.”

“What sort of business?” I ask, propping myself up on the table with my elbows.

“Financial matters,” he replies.

More mysterious responses, but I’m not going to press him further. The truth will come out eventually. It always does.

The waiter comes with a narrow bottle of wine. I’m not sure I even heard Lev ask for it, yet here it is.

I stare into the deep scarlet wine as it flows into my glass. I’m so used to drinking cheap canned mixes from the grocery store that I’m not sure if my tastebuds are ready for something this expensive. It’s not electric blue or lemon-lime flavored. It’s real wine, and I feel richer just looking at it.

“And your parents?” Lev asks as the waiter leaves.

“They own a bookstore,” I reply, grateful for the easy question. “They’ve been running it since before I was born. It’s a small place, but it’s pretty much the only place in town that sells the types of books people really want to read.”

“I take it they’re not peddling textbooks,” he replies with a grin.

“A lot of Romance. Holy shit, so much Romance. That, and Murder Mysteries, but people need some excitement. God knows they don’t get any in that little town otherwise.”

Lev rubs his chin, the stubble making a loud scratching sound in the otherwise quiet restaurant. Our table is all the way in the back, far removed from anyone else, like Lev is allergic to other people.

I’ve noticed that about him. He’s social, but he doesn’t hang out with people for too long. He seems especially uncomfortable in crowds.

Nervous. His eyes shift a lot.

Lev lifts his wine glass, swirling it around a few times before taking a sip. I always thought that people didn't actually do that, but he makes it look like the most natural thing in the world, like he's done it a million times.

I forego trying to imitate him, instead taking a rather large sip to calm my nerves. The wine washes over my tongue like mercury, heavy and smooth, and I'm stunned by the complexity of the flavors.

"You like it?" Lev asks, a smile creeping onto his face.

That's a real smile. I'm sure he's delighted to introduce me to such a high level of luxury. Everyone else around him probably takes it for granted.

Not me. I'm soaking it up like one of those big yellow sponges they use to wash cars with.

"I love it," I say, taking another big sip. "I've never had better."

"Good, good," he says, leaning back again and folding his fingers together. "Tell me more about your family. Any siblings?"

The enchantment inside me dies like a match in a rainstorm. I put my glass down, my voice dropping as I speak. "Yes, I had a brother, but he passed away."

"I'm sorry," Lev replies, reaching over the table and squeezing my hand. "But you know what? I knew you had experienced loss. It changes a person, and you wouldn't be who you are without it."

My defenses come up so fast that it feels like an electric shock. My body stiffens and my spine digs into the back of my chair, which is more like an art piece than something built for comfort.

"How can you tell?" I ask, immediately splashing more wine into my dry throat.

He tilts his head down and gives me a look. It's a *this is something we can't talk about in public* look.

I immediately know what he's suggesting, and the familiar fire of

embarrassment creeps up my neck to my cheeks. That wild sex we had. Yes, of course. Part of me wanted him to choke me until I didn't wake up.

"Well, it was a while ago," I say, trying to shrug it off. "My parents never got over it, but I've made peace with it. Jake was a great brother, and God took him too soon, but I know it was for a reason. Everything happens for a reason."

"That's an optimistic take, but I admire that about you. Positive people always win in the end. That's my little dose of optimism for you."

"I've never thought of myself as an optimist. I just try not to be bitter."

"And that makes you better than ninety percent of the population. Cheers to that." He raises his glass.

I smile, raising mine and finishing off the rest of what's in it. With wine this good, you don't even realize you're drinking so much until you look down and there's just that little drop that always clings to the bottom of the glass.

Talking about Jake always makes me want to drink. I always say I'm over it and I've let it go, but just because I'm doing better than my parents doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. Every time I think of him, I think of how little people appreciate what they have.

Even I do it. I take things for granted when I should just be grateful to be alive.

"Do you believe in God?" Lev asks, catching me off-guard once again. He has a knack for that.

"Oh, um, I guess so. Why?"

"Well, you mentioned it, but sometimes people talk about God because it's part of the language. Like how we say, 'God bless you,' or, 'God forbid.'"

I nod. "Yes, people do that a lot. I don't take offense. I never really even went to church because the ones in my hometown are awful, but God probably avoids those places too."

He smiles, and it's another genuine one. "You're goddamn right. Oh, you see, just there I did it."

He's so cute when he's like this. It's like I can see the boy that lives inside of him, the innocent one he keeps shut away most of the time. That boy is too sensitive for this cruel world, but Lev is letting him out now. I feel honored to witness this side of him.

"And what about you? Any higher powers, are or you more of a materialist?"

"Agnostic," he replies. "My grandmother was a devout Catholic, but I'm terrible at following rules. I'd like to think someone created all this, but I can't be sure. I like to leave things open."

"A diplomat," I reply.

"You look like you need more wine."

I shrug. "Is that what a diplomat would say?"

"If he was trying to close a deal, perhaps."

"And what kind of deal are you trying to close with me?" I ask, pretending to look bothered.

"We're doing business. I have to butter you up," he says with a sly grin. He snaps his fingers, and a waiter appears like he came up from the floor. "More wine, please."

Our glasses are refilled, this time much higher, and we're alone again.

"You don't have to butter me up. You already have what you want. I'm in no position to give you a hard time about anything."

"I like to, anyway," he replies.

"Is it safe to do that, though?" I ask. "Mixing business with pleasure?"

"You're right, it could be dangerous," he teases with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm serious, Lev. What if things get... I don't know... What if they get complicated?"

"Life is complicated. I'm used to it," he replies, much calmer than I am about all this. Maybe I just need more wine, but I've had more than he has and I'm starting to feel warm and fuzzy.

Too much of that warm and fuzziness and I start to get hot and horny.

I've never had sex in a restaurant bathroom, but I'd be willing to try.

"Just take it easy, darling," he says, taking a sip of his wine. "You're in good hands."

Lev

The rain is coming down so hard today that I can barely see an inch in front of me. Even the short walk from the car to the entrance to my building is hazardous because of it, but I manage to make it to the door without tripping over any curbs or running into any pedestrians.

I shake the rain off my coat. It's been soaked so many times this month that it's starting to smell. I'll have to take it to the dry cleaners. Wool isn't supposed to get wet so often like this.

I can't say the same for Eliza. She's been soaked every time I see her, and the sex only gets better as we understand each other's bodies more. We've been taking things slower in the bedroom while going so fast it's making both of our heads spin.

I don't even want to know what Valentin would have to say if he discovered I was spending every single evening with Eliza. She has absolutely nothing to do with the Bratva and I love it. I'm so obsessed with how simple everything is when I'm with her.

It's natural. Easy.

I've managed to spend the night at her place again. It's not the safest place for me to be, considering how many people would like to see me in a casket, but I've not noticed any unwanted followers lately. My driver drops me off and picks me up, and nobody is any the wiser.

The same goes for me, in fact. My head has been in the clouds ever since I met Eliza, and it's only going higher. Running out of oxygen is both a delightful and terrifying experience. It's so good and yet I know it'll kill me eventually.

Probably sooner rather than later.

The receptionist at the front desk doesn't nod to me as I move toward the elevator. He stands up. "Mr. Andreev," he says with a deep and official voice. "Letter for you."

“Better check for anthrax,” I mumble, but it’s not a joke. I’ve been poisoned before. You learn not to handle your own mail after a few nights in the hospital not knowing if you’re going to live or die.

“The mail has been examined. We opened it, but we declined to read it,” he says dutifully.

I take the white envelope from his hand and fold it open with my thumb. Inside, there’s a single sheet of white paper folded in half. There’s absolutely no reason why anyone would be sending mail to this address, unless it’s someone in the Family. Nobody else knows my address.

“Alright, let’s get this over with.”

I open the letter, and I immediately know who it’s from. Nobody else would write to me in Russian with such sloppy handwriting. I can barely read it.

*Lev,
I'm going to kill you.
And I'm also going to kill your new girlfriend.
That way, we'll be even.
- Vanya*

My blood pressure rises so quickly that I see stars. I can’t hear a damn thing with the blood pumping in my ears, but I don’t have time to listen to what the receptionist is saying anyway.

Vanya, the bastard who tried to tear apart our Family, is back and he wants revenge for what I did to his snake of a brother. I wouldn’t be worried about it if it was just about me, but when he brought Eliza into it, he changed the game.

I will tear him to pieces, and I’ll revel in his suffering. I’ll carve his eyes out with a spoon and make him eat them. I’ll tear his balls off and shove them up his goddamn ass!

Nobody messes with Eliza, but if he’s already had time to leave the note, then he could potentially already be at her apartment.

And she could already be dead.

I turn around so fast that I almost slip on the smooth tile floor. Thankfully, my shoes have enough grip to get me back out the door without faceplanting, and my driver is still right where I left him. He always knows to wait a little longer than he has to. I have a habit of leaving things in the car.

I throw open the door, barking commands through the gray sound of pouring rain. “Eliza’s apartment! Now!”

He doesn’t ask questions. His foot is pressing the pedal into the floor before I’ve even closed the door. That’s how it is in the Bratva. You can have weeks of calmness – months, even – but when shit hits the fan, everyone is ready for action.

“Go, go, go!” I shout, leaning forward in my seat like I’m the one trying to see what’s ahead of us in traffic. Nobody can see a goddamn thing out here, and we’re already going faster than we should.

But it’s not fast enough. It can never be fast enough when Eliza’s life is in danger.

“Shit,” I growl as we hit a red light.

There’s too much traffic to run it.

“Meet me at the apartment,” I say as I open the door. “I’ll get there faster on foot.”

I don’t wait for a reply as I dash back out into the rain. We’re only halfway to the apartment, but with the rain coming down this hard, traffic is moving at a snail’s pace. I can’t wait for it to clear up.

My vision is blurred but raw instinct is able to guide me to her apartment building in mere minutes. I use my shoulder to open the door downstairs, scrambling up the stairs as I draw my gun.

There’s this weight in my stomach, the guilt of having put Eliza in danger in the first place, and it’s so heavy that it feels like it’s tearing my guts out and leaving them in the hallway as I charge toward the final door.

Adrenaline slows time down, but I’m moving faster than I ever have. I’m

numb as I ram into Eliza's apartment, breaking the door off the hinges and continuing into the studio like an angry bull.

Inside, I hear a shriek, and I see Eliza jump back onto her bed, her eyes wide with fear.

"Where is he?" I growl, my eyes darting around the room in search of Vanya. I'll kill him on the spot if he's here already.

"What the fuck is happening?!" Eliza squeaks, shrinking against the wall. "Is that a gun? Why do you have a gun?"

I look at her, realizing that the only thing here she's scared of is me. Vanya hasn't found her yet, and that means she's safe. It's better for me not to be waving a gun around.

I tuck it into the back of my soaking wet trousers, my skin still burning from the icy rain. "Sorry," I grumble. "I thought someone had broken in."

The look in her eyes tells me she isn't buying it. She thinks I'm crazy, but if she knew the truth, she would leave me in a heartbeat.

And I can't have that.

She's the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I'll die before I let her go.

"Tell me what's going on," she says, stepping down from the bed cautiously. She looks behind me at the broken door. "Lev, you've destroyed my apartment."

"It can be fixed," I mumble, my eyes scanning the room a bit slower to double check that we're alone. "What can't be fixed is the fact that someone who doesn't like me also decided they don't like you. That means you're in danger. That also means you need to come stay with me for the foreseeable future."

"Lev, what are you talking about?" she asks, her eyes searching mine for an acceptable answer.

"Everyone has enemies. Mine just tend to cause trouble, and I don't want you to be in danger," I reply, trying to be vague enough not to reveal that I'm a

Bratva boss with enemies who kill without remorse. It wouldn't be pretty if Vanya got his grimy hands on Eliza. He would make her demise especially brutal because of what I did to his brother.

"You're scaring me," she says, taking a step back when I move toward her.

"There's no need to be scared when I'm around. I will protect you," I reply, holding out my hand. "But we need to go. We can't stay here."

"Yeah, someone has probably already called the police after you broke down the door," she says with a nervous laugh.

"I was worried about you. I'll have someone fix it. Let's go."

Reluctantly, she takes my hand and allows me to lead her out of the apartment building. She's shaking, and her fear makes me furious. I blame Vanya. Even scaring her is enough to make me want to kill him.

"What about my stuff?" she asks as we walk briskly toward the back exit.

"I'll have someone bring it to my place. Don't worry."

Her eyes are wide with terror, but at least she's listening to me. I'd have much more trouble if she decided that I was the real threat and decided to flee. It's not a good look for a man like me to be chasing a young woman down on the streets of New York. The police would have a field day with me.

"My driver should be here already," I say, pushing the door open. The red glow of the exit sign bounces off the rain. It's coming down so hard that I feel like I'm we're walking into a wall as we head toward the car. The only thing I can see are the headlights.

I lean over Eliza, covering her delicate body with mine until we reach the car. I push her inside quickly, running to the other side to let myself in.

"My place," I grunt to the driver, and he takes off immediately. The tires lose traction with the pavement for a moment, but then we're on our way.

Eliza

I knew there was a catch. Lev couldn't just be a normal guy. He's too perfect, too rich, and the sharpness in his eyes tells me he has experience with danger. But what kind of danger, he seems reluctant to tell me.

I'm going to find out, though. Breaking down my door and rushing me to his home in the middle of a rainstorm has spurred my suspicion of him to a critical point. Either I find out what he's up to, or it's over between us.

And I don't want to end things like this, not when everything has been going so well. The money, the sex, the passion... I'm not ready to give all that up and move back to my hometown as a failure.

I can already picture Noah's smirk, like he knew all along that I wouldn't amount to anything, like I *had* to end up with him again.

Fuck, no. I'm not doing that, but I still need to figure out what the hell is going on with Lev.

I sit with my arms crossed, partially because I'm cold and wet, but mostly because I'm angry. "You going to tell me what's going on?" I ask, looking down at him like he's some kind of mold growing on the seat.

He rakes his hair back with his fingers, flashing me a pearlescent grin. "This isn't really something you need to be concerned about."

I scoff. "Yeah, buddy, that line isn't going to work on me. You broke down my fucking door, Lev. You owe me an explanation."

"A little testy," he muses, rubbing his chin.

I glare at him. "Answers. Now."

"Oh, you're cute when you're angry. I haven't seen this side of you yet. I bet you fuck better when you're angry too."

"Shut up," I snarl.

"I thought you wanted me to explain things to you. I can shut up instead.

That's fine."

I ball my fists, tempted to throw one at him. I'm certain he'd catch it. Futile, really. He's too quick and too powerful.

I sigh. "Just explain yourself. It can't be that complicated."

"Just a guy by the name of Vanya who is angry at me because he believes I screwed him over. Not really sure what he's capable of, but he threatened you over it, and I lost my mind over it. I want to protect you, Eliza. I'm not trying to cause issues."

"You could've called the police or something."

A dry laugh escapes his mouth. It's almost inaudible against the sound of rain hitting the roof of the car and the frantic rhythm of the windshield wipers. "Oh, they're not very useful. Maybe the ones in your city were, but this is a much bigger place. The only thing they have time for is writing parking tickets and the occasional drug bust."

"Is that something that concerns you?"

He furrows his eyebrows. "What exactly?"

"Drug busts. Or just police in general."

He shakes his head. "I have no business with the police. I'm a businessman, plain and simple. You haven't met my uncle Valentin yet, but he'll tell you."

I'm not sure I want to meet any of his family members. I'm not even sure I want to be in this car with him right now. I feel like I've been tricked, and it makes me sick to my stomach.

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt you," he says, lowering his voice as he senses my fear. "I'm sorry this happened, but it's only temporary. Look, if it makes you feel any better, I'll file a report with the police. We'll get this straightened out."

That does make me feel better, but he should've done that instead of breaking down my door. The look on his face when he came storming in shook me to the core, and I still haven't recovered from it.

Either my life really is in danger, or he's crazy.

I'd hate for it to be both.

He doesn't really seem crazy when I look at him. He's calmed down considerably, almost completely back to his usual stoic self, but there's concern in his eyes. I don't know if that's concern about my wellbeing or concern over the possibility that I'll run to the police and report him.

I don't plan on it, though. I'd like to get this worked out and continue selling paintings. If Asher can get money from them... well, I'm happy. I might not even need Lev's help after that, and we can go back to being whatever we were before money got involved.

Friends with benefits? He hasn't called me his girlfriend, so I guess we're not on that level yet, but there are emotions involved. It's not just about sex.

The car stops around the same time the rain does, and Lev rushes around the car to open the door for me. Always a gentleman, even if he's kidnapping me and keeping me prisoner at the top of his skyscraper.

We ride the elevator up all the way to the top floor, which is long enough for me to start doubting whether I should be going up with him. I left my phone at home, and nobody knows where I am.

If this is a trap, then I've already sealed my fate.

But when we step into Lev's penthouse and I'm able to see how he lives, I feel the cool wash of relieve over my hot and bothered skin. I take a deep breath, inhaling the crisp scent of freshly washed clothes and expensive cotton, and I exhale slowly.

"This is it," he says, nodding his head slowly as he stands by the entrance. "I wasn't expecting guests, but it's not too dirty. I'm a neat person."

Neat person, filthy mind. Isn't that how it goes?

I'm quickly distracted by how impressive Lev's penthouse is.

I feel small here, the towering ceilings reaching upwards, touching heaven or at least the clouds. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, its icy light casting colorful prisms on the white walls. Everything hints at power, from

the dark glossy wood to the metal accents that glint like the edge of a golden blade.

I knew Lev was rich, but I didn't realize that he was *this* rich. I can't even imagine what something like this would cost, and it would be tactless to ask.

"Wow, this is... this is incredible," I say as I look around.

"I'm glad you like it. You should be comfortable here until we get things sorted out with Vanya. He's not terribly smart, but then that's the danger, isn't it? Smart people don't run around doing dumb things, and pissing off a man like me by threatening his woman is exceptionally stupid."

Goosebumps erupt on my skin when he calls me his woman. Not friend. Not girlfriend.

His woman. It's very possessive, and even though I've always considered myself an independent woman, especially after my breakup, I find the way Lev talks about me enthralling.

But I can't let all that distract me from what Lev is telling me about Vanya. This man is threatening me, and I don't even know who he is.

"What's up with this Vanya guy?" I ask, meandering over to the kitchen and running my finger along the black granite countertop. "And why does he know who I am? That's weird, isn't it?"

Lev shrugs. "If he's been stalking me, then he would know."

"It really sounds like you should go to the police," I say, wrinkling my nose. "This guy is a major creep, and it's more likely he knows where your place is than mine."

"He certainly does know where I live, but getting up here would pose a challenge. This building has a lot more security than you might realize. Here, let me show you," he says, a thin smile appearing on his face.

My chest tightens as he walks across the room to a closet with a large lock on the front. There's no code or keyhole on the lock, only a square with a thin blue light wrapped around it. He presses his finger into the square and it unlatches.

“All legal stuff, by the way. I’m no dummy when it comes to weapons,” he says, pulling open the closet with both hands.

A light comes on inside the closet, and I lean forward, frowning until I realize what’s inside. I lean back, utterly shocked by what I’m seeing. There has to be at least a hundred guns inside, some in frames, while others stacked up on wooden crates. There are a few on the floor, like he dropped them there in a hurry.

“My collection,” he says, puffing out his chest proudly. “Come, take a look.”

I inch toward the closet carefully, unsure what to make of all this. He says they’re legal, but there’s something distinctly criminal about having so many guns in one place. No man needs this much firepower. He wouldn’t even be able to use all of it. He’d need a whole army to utilize what he has, and an enemy big enough to use them against.

“This is crazy,” I say as Lev grabs a rifle off the wall and holds it out. “I mean, what’s all this for?”

“Protection,” he answers like it’s totally normal. “And I’m a bit of a collector.”

“A bit?”

“Yeah, it’s not that much, but it’s a start.”

“A start? Lev, I was joking. This is crazy. You don’t need all this stuff,” I say, throwing my hands up. “You could really get in trouble.”

He shakes his head, putting the rifle back. “No, it’s all legal, like I said. It’s the grenades that are the problem. Now, those are definitely not legal.”

“God, tell me you’re joking.”

“If it makes you more comfortable,” he replies, closing the closet. “I just want you to know that you’re safe here, but Vanya wouldn’t even make it up the elevator. I have men around outside. If he walked into the lobby his head would be split open like a watermelon.”

I jerk my head back. “That’s horrifying.”

“He deserves it for threatening you.”

“How did he threaten me? You still haven’t explained that,” I say, my chest tightening again.

Lev purses his lips and rolls back his eyes as he thinks of what to say in response. I know he’s choosing his words carefully so as not to freak me out further, but that only makes me feel like this is a lot more dangerous of a situation than he wants me to believe.

“Vanya told me he would hurt you. That’s about it,” he finally says.

“Hurt me? Why?”

“Not a nice guy.”

“Please, Lev, this isn’t funny.”

He sighs, walking toward the couch and leaning on it. He looks out the window at the bleak gray sky for several seconds before speaking again.

“Vanya used to be part of my Family. He was disowned because of some shady business he was conducting, and we like to keep things clean around here. Obviously, he’s pissed off, but I didn’t think he would come back around and start stirring shit up so soon. He is dangerous, but I’m going to keep you safe.”

I smash the palm of my hand into my forehead and groan. “Jesus, I don’t want to die. I just came here to make art and get away from Noah.”

Lev’s head snaps in my direction. “Who’s Noah?”

“Relax, he’s just my ex. I hate him, so there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I always worry about you,” he says, his eyes dancing over me with newfound concern. “First Vanya, now this Noah guy. I can’t keep them away from you.”

“Well, Noah isn’t trying to kill me or anything,” I reply.

“He’d better not be doing anything other than keeping his mouth shut and his greedy little hands to himself,” Lev growls.

“Are you jealous?” I ask with a slight laugh. It’s wild to see a man so rich powerful act like this over a guy who pales in comparison to him. I guess he hasn’t seen Noah, otherwise he wouldn’t be so worried about him.

“I’m not jealous,” Lev snaps. “I just don’t like sharing.”

I walk over to him, placing my hand on his arm. I can feel his biceps flexing under his shirt. He’s gripping the side of the couch so hard that the wood beams inside are groaning.

“Babe, you don’t have to share,” I say softly. “I’m all yours.”

His eyes are absolutely frosty when he looks at me, and they send a chill down my spine. “You’re right about that, princess. That perfect body of yours belongs to me, and I’ll be damned if I let anyone so much as look your way when we’re together.”

“I think a ring would be easier,” I joke, holding out my hand and wiggling my ring finger.

Lev’s eyebrows come together, and it’s like he’s fighting for the polite way to tell me it’s too soon to consider something like that. He’s taking this so seriously that it’s hard for me not to laugh again.

“I’m joking,” I say, pulling my hand back. “You can beat up my ex if you want to, but he’s not really much of a threat. Last time I checked, he was only about a hundred and sixty pounds.”

Lev gives me a bewildered look. “Did his mother forget to feed him?”

“Probably forgot to do a lot of things that would’ve benefited him, but that’s not really my business anymore. I told you that things were over with him, and I meant it. I don’t think I could ever go back to someone like that after experiencing all this with you.”

His grip on the couch loosens, and I guide him to sit down with me. His shoulders are so tense when I run my hands over them, like they’re carved from the same granite his countertops are.

“Please, try to relax a little,” I say, pushing my thumbs into his shoulders.

“Those little hands won’t do much,” he says with a chuckle.

He's right. I'm going to have to use all the weight I have if I'm going to get anything done with his oversized muscles. He's built like a tank, but even machines need to take breaks on occasion.

I kick my shoes off onto the plush copper-toned rug and stand up on the couch. From there, I'm able to lean in and plant both of my elbows on his shoulders, using them to knead his stiff muscles.

"Oh, that's right. Jesus, you're good at this," he groans.

"Good, but still confused and a little scared of what's going on," I remind him. "You should tell me more about Vanya. Maybe more about your business, too, if you want me to keep going."

He tilts his head back and looks up at me. "I'll tell you what I can, darling, but you're going to have to trust me after that."

Lev

Eliza isn't going to let me off the hook so easily. She might come from a small town, but she has a big mind and an even bigger suspicion of me.

I'm going to have to break things down for her in a way that doesn't terrify her, and that means avoiding the topic of the Bratva and money laundering entirely.

That should be simple enough. I just have to give Valentin and everyone else a heads-up that Eliza isn't tuned in to the real nature of our business, but they're used to keeping secrets.

I let out a long sigh as she works her elbows into my shoulders again. With her entire weight on me, I can feel her working out the knots I should've taken care of months ago. I've just been too busy between the Family and art galleries to allow myself any time to relax.

But with Eliza, things are different. She reminds me that there's more to this life than money, power, and sex. There's something else going on, something simmering deep within me that I never knew existed until I met her.

Emotions I didn't think I could have.

And now, I find myself wanting to tell her everything but having to hold back for fear of being rejected because of it. She's not from the Bratva, and I doubt she'd ever understand it enough to accept the man I truly am.

So, for now, she'll only know my shadow, the convenient actor who has taken my place so that I don't lose the only stranger who has even become more than a passing acquaintance to me.

And even this shadow seems to fuck up sometimes. Too often, if you ask me. I feel like tearing it away from my body and finding a new one, but Eliza seems to like this one too much to do that.

"I trust you already, you know," Eliza reminds me as she works her elbows higher up my shoulders toward my neck. "It's just that I want to know more. I feel like we're at that point that we should know a lot about each other, especially if we're going to be living together."

“That’s true,” I say. I’m just happy she’s down with the idea of staying at my place. It’s not safe for her anywhere else, and I wouldn’t let her leave here without me, even if she didn’t want to stay. It’s not a choice.

“So, tell me about the business, first,” she says.

I hum under my breath, thinking how to begin. “Well, it’s a Family business, so we’re all in on it.”

Fuck, no that doesn’t sound right. Sounds like a scheme, something illegal. Try to make it sound more legitimate.

I clear my throat. “We work together to help the business grow. It’s always been like that, and I want to keep the money in the Family.”

“Reasonable enough,” she muses. “Is Asher part of your family?”

“Friend of a friend,” I reply. I don’t want her to know anything about him, so I breeze past the subject as quickly as possible. The truth is that Asher is useful because he’s crooked enough to get us people who want to launder money, and reliable enough not to be a pain in the ass. Valentin likes him, too, so that helps, but I think he’s a bit of a rat.

We have a lot of those in New York.

“So, we manage a few galleries in the city, and we attract very wealthy clients,” I continue, rolling my head to the side as she moves to massage my neck. “That’s how I was able to get your paintings up for such a high advance, but believe me, once they start selling, you’re going to be making a lot more than that.”

“I’m pretty happy where they’re at now, to be honest. What I got from Asher was about triple what I could’ve made where I’m from.”

“Yes, but it’s more expensive to live here, so consider that. Either way, you’re going to do well.”

“So, what was the deal with Vanya? You said something went poorly and he freaked out?” she asks, digging back into her line of questioning and hoping to catch me off-guard.

Not a chance. I’m quick with my wits and even quicker with my tongue. She

should've learned that when my head was between her pretty thighs, but I'm a patient man. I'll show her again.

"Vanya got greedy and wanted to go his own way, taking our business with him. Feliks, his brother, went with him. I kicked their asses to the curb when I found out their plans, and Vanya's just bitter about it. He can't make it out there on his own. He needs to leech off someone else," I explain.

"And Feliks? Isn't he going to be a threat too?"

Should I tell her that Feliks is dead? She wouldn't have to know that I was the one who took his life, only that he's not going to pose a problem.

No, that's too much for her. She'd jump to all kinds of conclusions, and some of them might end up being right.

"Feliks wanted to get out, anyway," I reply after a moment. "He's not interested in what we have going on over here. It's only Vanya who wants to fuck around."

"Does stuff like this happen often?"

I shake my head as Eliza moves her elbows back down to my shoulders. "No, this is the first time. It's not like I've never dealt with people causing issues at the galleries or anything, but our Family sticks together. Vanya is the exception."

"Well, that's good to hear. I wish my family knew how to stick together, but things fell apart after my brother died. We stopped talking, and then I just left..."

I can hear the strain in her voice.

The regret.

She feels guilty for leaving her family and coming out here to try to make it as an artist, but I find it particularly brave. It's the kind of fighting spirit that my Family needs more of.

I turn to face her, moving her elbows off my shoulders. Her eyes are already filled to the brim with tears, and it breaks something inside me. I shouldn't have this much empathy for someone, especially not a woman I've only

recently met, but...

She does something to me. She moves something inside of me, and I feel compelled to do everything in my power to make sure she's safe and happy.

"Hey, come here," I say, holding my arms open.

She slides down the couch and accepts my embrace immediately, pressing her face into my chest as she begins to sob. This whole situation has wound her up, and she's finally able to release her emotions.

"It's okay, I got you," I whisper, rubbing her back as she begins to sob. "You're okay. Everything is okay."

She cries for several minutes, and I let her. I don't know what else to do. I've never dealt with someone crying like this before, nor have I ever felt compelled to comfort another person on such an intimate level.

I'm learning just as much from Eliza as she is from me.

After a bit, her tears turn into sniffles, and she finally raises her head, laughing a little at the mess she's made on my shirt. "Sorry about that."

"You're fine," I say, surprised that she would even apologize. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I've put her through hell and now she's stuck with me. I know from experience that I'm a hard motherfucker to deal with.

"You know, you're a lot sweeter than you look," Eliza says, her eyes meeting mine with such intensity that I almost flinch.

"Oh, um, yeah, I'm not that sweet though."

"Come on," she says, clearly not buying my response. "You might look scary, but you're a teddy bear. And don't say that you aren't. I'm expecting snuggles tonight."

I swallow hard, every cell in my body vibrating with the kind of wicked buzz you get when you do just a little too much cocaine. I don't know why she has this effect on me, but it's strong and I'm not even sure if I like it.

I'm supposed to be tough. I'm the guy nobody messes with, and I'm folding for a woman asking me for snuggles.

I don't even use that word. Snuggles. It's too cutesy, and I'm not that kind of guy.

And yet, like she has cast a spell on my tongue, I reply to her, "I'll give you as many snuggles as you want."

She beams, and it's like the sunshine coming out after a wicked storm. Everything else around us melts away, and I'm caught in the warmth of her happiness. I'd die for her to always be like this. I'd do anything. I'd kill anyone.

But unfortunately, she requires a different kind of action to please her. I can't go around bashing people's head in to get her approval. She makes me play a different game, one that I'm entirely unfamiliar with but determined to learn.

The game of love.

Eliza

“That’s cute,” Lev says as I walk out of the bathroom in one of his oversized white t-shirts.

“I look like a ghost,” I say, hurrying toward the bed.

He grins. “Very spooky.”

“Boo!” I exclaim as I jump into the bed.

I land on his chest, and he grabs me, rolling me over and pinning me down. “I caught a ghost. Now what?”

“If you catch a ghost, you’re supposed to snuggle it. Those are the rules,” I say, hoping he won’t kick me out of his bed for being too goofy. He seems to like it, though, even if he’s a little unsure of how to respond.

I figure he needs a break from being so serious all the time. The stress I rubbed out of his shoulders this evening was very telling.

“If I snuggle you, I might squish you,” Lev says, even as he pulls me close.

I melt into the warmth and power of his chest. I can hear his heart beating faster than it usually does, reminding me that he’s just as nervous to be intimate with me as I am with him.

It’s cruel how our bodies work like that. We want something so badly, something mutually beneficial, and yet we’re still reluctant to act on it. Intimacy makes our skin clammy and our stomach drop, and yet we need it. We *crave* it.

Or at least I do. My entire body is buzzing with excitement as Lev holds me against him. Even with a blanket in between us, I can feel that warmth, that compassion through the cotton and feathers.

“God, you have no idea how much I want you right now,” I say, looking into his crisp blue eyes and imagining his cock between my legs.

“I could make that happen. I just need to –”

He's cut off by the sound of a phone ringing outside the bedroom, and he nearly throws me onto the floor as he jumps out of bed. "Sorry, I have to answer that," he blurts as he runs out of the room without a shred of clothing on.

I hate to see him go, but that ass has me enjoying the way he leaves.

I crawl off the bed and creep toward the door as I hear him answering the phone, speaking quickly in Russian before hanging up. His heavy footsteps back to the room has me doing a little run and jump back into the bed.

He opens the door as I'm throwing the blanket over myself. "No time for rest, sweetheart. We have a guest coming up shortly."

"What? Who?" I ask as he hurries to the dresser to grab fresh clothes.

"Valentin, my uncle. He got word that something was going on and he's coming over. Just a quick chat, but you should probably get dressed. I'd have to break his neck if he saw you looking so cute."

"I'm not cute," I reply, obviously fishing for compliments, but he's too busy in his drawer to pay much attention. I guess Valentin coming up is a big deal, and I'm severely underdressed for it.

I climb out of bed as Lev throws a jacket over his loosely tucked shirt and shoots me a lopsided grin. "I'm going down to get him. It'll just be a second."

"Oh, okay. I guess I'll just get my clothes out of the dryer."

Lev nods, and I jump out of bed, rushing to get changed back into regular clothing as Lev goes to pick up Valentin from the lobby downstairs. I hate that our little snuggle session has ended so soon, but it was early in the night, anyway, and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to sleep.

We would've figured something out, probably involving some strategically placed hands and mouths, but meeting Valentin is an acceptable alternative. Having one of Lev's family members around will give me more insight to which aspects of his personality are inherited and which were created for the purpose of surviving the business world.

I get to learn more about Lev, and I also get to pick at Valentin and see if I can get any more information about what they do. It's not that I don't believe Lev's story, but it'd be nice to hear more than just his side of it.

I dig around in the dryer for my dress, hoping that it's already dry. We only put it in twenty minutes ago, and it was soaked from the rain, but there wasn't anything else in there to dry with it, aside from my panties. It might be a bit damp still, but it should pass for dry.

The elevator chimes as I tuck my hair behind one ear and adjust my glasses in front of the mirror. I wish I had more time to prepare, but I consider myself lucky that I even have a dress to wear, or else I would be hiding in the room the entire time Valentin was over.

I can smell them both before they come into the living room. Lev's scent is deep and smokey, but Valentin's is louder and more stringent. He smells his age, if that makes sense, like one of those old guys who has burned out his sense of smell and wears far too much cologne.

Green bottle, gold cap. I've smelled it a million times.

"Oh Jesus, Lev, just look at this girl," Valentin exclaims as they come into the room. "She can't be older than twenty."

"Twenty-five," I say, pursing my lips.

"Don't listen to him," Lev says, shaking his head. "Valentin can barely even see, he's so goddamn old. Like a fucking sewer rat, scuttling around New York all night."

Valentin laughs, which turns into a fit of coughing. He pounds his chest with a meaty fist, wheezing for almost a minute before he's able to speak. "This kid, always embarrassing me in front of new people. Be careful around him," he says, jabbing a thumb in Lev's direction.

"We've already passed the point of caution," Lev replies, considerably more serious than his uncle. "This is a serious situation, which is why you're here, right? I mean, I'm assuming you didn't just show up to make comments about Eliza's age."

"Relax," Valentin says, putting a heavy hand on Lev's shoulder. "You're

stressing me out more than I already am. Your bastard cousin is about to give me a fucking heart attack as is.”

This is my opportunity to interject and hopefully get more clues as to what went wrong between Lev and Vanya. “What’s the deal with this guy?” I ask.

“I need a drink first,” Valentine replies, sinking into the couch next to me. “Lev, get us drinks. No ice. Don’t water that shit down. I need it strong today.”

Lev grumbles something about Everclear as he goes to the bar, and I join Valentin on the couch. I scoot toward him, our hips almost touching. He looks more than a tad bit uncomfortable, but I enjoy putting pressure on him. He’s not as calm and collected as Lev is, and something tells me he might be willing to reveal more about Vanya.

“Vanya is just... running around, causing all kinds of trouble,” I say, steering the conversation quicky while Lev is out of earshot.

Valentin frowns, pulling his head back a bit. “Trouble? That jerk-off wants you and Lev dead. Probably wants to kill me too, but bullets bounce off this gut.” He pats his stomach.

My breath catches in my throat. Lev didn’t say anything about Vanya wanting to *kill* anyone. This is considerably worse than I thought it was, unless Valentin is exaggerating things to scare me.

“You look spooked. Maybe you shouldn’t be messing around with this guy if you can’t handle the heat,” Valentin says, speaking in a low voice as he points a lazy finger at Lev. “He’s my nephew so I have to love him, but he’s a bit of a psychopath.”

“He’s been a gentleman to me,” I say, feeling the strong need to defend Lev. Maybe my feelings are getting in the way, but I don’t see how Lev is a psychopath at all.

Valentin sighs. “Lev’s always been a charmer, but you know what, he’s been real strange with you. Obsessive. I think it’s creepy, but if you think he’s a gentleman, who am I to judge.”

Obsessive. That sounds more accurate, though I can’t say I feel any

differently about Lev. I've had him on my mind twenty-four-seven since we first met, and it almost feels like I'm unable to think about anything else.

It has to be Lev. All the fucking time.

"I like him, but this isn't really about Lev. It's about Vanya," I say, hoping to get more out of him before Lev comes back with the drinks. He looks as though he's almost finished over there.

"Well, you won't like Vanya. The motherfucker has always been a rat, and not like how Lev calls me a fucking sewer rat. This guy is a real rat, the kind that'll backstab you and then come back to stab your granny too. Lev's brought you here for a reason. It's for your own good now that you're too deep to turn back."

I probably could turn back, but I don't want to bring that up and have Lev worried that I'm going to run away. I don't intend to, but I know it's an option. Vanya isn't going to come looking for me in a small town in the middle of nowhere.

Or at least I don't *think* he would.

Lev comes back to the couch before I can ask any further questions. He sets a full crystal glass of whiskey in front of Valentin, then hands me a water. "I didn't think you'd want whiskey."

I wrinkle my nose. "You're right about that. Water is fine."

He motions for me to give him room on the couch, and I'm forced to scoot away from Valentin. Lev takes the spot I had, and I'm separated from his uncle and effectively cut off from the conversation.

I exhale angrily through my nose, but Lev either doesn't hear me or ignores it. I'm leaning toward the latter.

"I hope you haven't been telling lies to Eliza. She doesn't need that kind of stress right now," Lev says to Valentin.

He scoffs. "I never lie."

"You're lying right now, you fat bastard."

“Watch it, kiddo. I’m helping you out here, so you better not go pissing me off like you usually do. You were supposed to help at the gallery, and what were you doing? Running around with Eliza over here and attracting Vanya’s attention.”

“He’s not that big of a threat. You don’t have to worry.”

“I know him better than you do. He’s a coward, sure, but he’s also angry after... you know... his brother and all that. You know what I’m talking about.”

I narrow my eyes, attempting to discern what he means by that. I know they’re dancing around information, speaking in a way that I can’t fully understand. It’s frustrating but I remain silent, hoping I’ll be able to gain a better understanding of what’s going on without getting kicked out of the conversation.

Lev throws back his glass, drinking half the whiskey in it like it’s apple juice. “I don’t want you thinking this is going to be a major problem. Get more people at the gallery in case he shows up there, but don’t go overboard. There’s a good chance he’s bluffing.”

“You think he would be?”

Lev pauses for a moment, looks over at me, then turns to Valentin. “Yes, you know what I mean.”

“Ah, right,” Valentin replies, and I’ve once again been cast out of their cryptic conversation.

It’s frustrating, but I also feel better that Valentin is involved. He seems to back Lev up, even if the two constantly insult each other.

I spring up from the coach the moment my stomach growls, hoping that excusing myself to the kitchen for a snack will encourage them to speak more freely. I’ll still be listening, of course, but they don’t have to know that.

“Anyone want a sandwich?” I ask cheerfully.

“You got this girl making food for you?” Valentin asks, acting more surprised than he really is.

Lev just sighs in response to Valentin, turning to me with a polite smile. “I think we’re fine, but make yourself comfortable. Anything in the kitchen is yours if you want it.”

“Thank you,” I reply in a sing-song voice, moseying over to the kitchen in search of something salty and crunchy. I’ve already discovered the hard way that Lev doesn’t eat much junk food, but I thought I saw some pretzels in the cabinet somewhere.

I look through his cabinets, going slowly as I listen to what they’re saying in the living room. It’s almost impossible to make out any full sentences, only the occasional word, something about guns, maybe.

This doesn’t sound good.

I find the bag of pretzels in the middle cabinet as the conversation switches from English to Russian. Dammit. Now I’m never going to be able to decipher what they’re talking about.

I sigh, dragging myself back to the living room with the bag of pretzels and not caring in the least as I get crumbs and salt flakes all over the rug. Lev doesn’t even notice, and Valentin only seems to find it slightly amusing.

Neither of them gives me the time of day.

After almost a full half hour of me trying to decipher their increasingly verbose and emotional conversation, Valentin gets up suddenly to leave. “Nice to finally meet you, and I’m sorry I couldn’t stay longer,” he says, smiling a bit as he turns away.

Lev gives me an apologetic look as he grabs a pretzel from the almost empty bag in my hand.

Lev

I toss my keys on the kitchen island as I come home. I smell paint, and it's been growing more intense no matter how many windows I open. Eliza has started painting all the time, and I'm starting to get concerned.

After an entire week indoors, she's painted anything and everything in the penthouse, including the toilet. I've been in and out often, but my concerns about Vanya keeps me from taking her with me on my trips.

I hate to see her get like this, but her safety is more important than anything else.

Luckily, I have some very good news that should cheer her up considerable.

"Hey, sunshine, what are you painting today?" I've taken to calling her sunshine because her hair looks so bright and golden when she's standing by the window painting. She lights up the whole room.

Eliza peeks out from behind her canvas, a slight frown on her face and a paintbrush in her hand. "I'm trying to get the details right, but it's exhausting," she says, shaking her head.

Details of what?" I ask, coming around to look at her progress. When I left, she had just planted her canvas in the middle of the living room, and she wouldn't say what she was working on.

I gasp when I see what she's painted. It's my living room in immaculate detail. Everything down to the pilling on the wool blanket strewn over my couch has been captured in such vivid detail that it feels like I could walk right into the canvas and actually be there.

"Oh my god, this is incredible."

She waves her hand in a dismissive way, but I know she appreciates the compliment. It's a hundred percent true, though. I've never lied about how good her work is, and I don't need to. She gets better every day.

"I'm trying to get the wood right here, you see," she says, pointing to the half-painted coffee table. "But the grain is weird. I haven't seen anything like

that before, so it's difficult."

I smile. "The grain is weird because it's an Elm Burl. This particular piece was put together by an artist in Yonkers."

"Well, it's nice but it's hard to paint," she replies, her scowl melting away as she laughs.

"Hey, speaking of painting, I have some news for you," I say, trying to hide the excitement in my voice. Normally, I wouldn't be this excited for something that doesn't have anything to do with me, but I find myself especially empathetic when it comes to Eliza.

She perks up. "Do I get to leave your little castle, or is that too much to ask just yet?"

"Maybe we can go for a little trip sometime, but let's wait a little bit," I reply.

She pouts, but she doesn't argue. She's been pretty good about this whole thing, but I think she enjoys living with me enough to forgive me for locking her up here away from the world.

I haven't heard a peep out of Vanya since he left the note, and now I'm starting to wonder if I'm overreacting. He might just be trying to harass me. He's a coward, so what's the chance he'll actually end up following up on his threats?

Still, Eliza's life is too precious for me to risk it. It's only been a week, and I don't know what he has planned. He could just be waiting to see her, and it only takes a single bullet from a hidden rooftop location to end her life and ruin mine forever.

No, I'm not going to risk it, but at least I have good news to keep her happy until things cool down.

"All of your paintings have sold," I say, a smile stretching across my face as I allow myself to feel my excitement fully. "I just went down to talk to Asher today, and he told me the news."

She throws down her brush and jumps away from her canvas, her eyes bulging and her mouth dropping in apparent disbelief. "All of them? I was

starting to feel guilty about taking all those advances, and then I was hoping even one would sell, but... All of them?"

"All of them," I say, my smile widening even further. "And they bid up rather high. I'm telling you, these people haven't seen art like yours, and they're blown away by it."

"Oh my god," she breathes, slapping her hand over her heart. "I'm not even sure if I want to know. Enough to pay off the advance, I hope."

"You really like to sell yourself short," I reply, shaking my head.

She rolls her eyes. "Okay Mr. Know-it-all. Spill the beans, then. How much did we make?"

"A hundred thousand..."

Her eyes threaten to pop right out of her head.

"On the first one. The second sold for a quarter of a million, and the third for about two-hundred-thousand dollars."

What the fuck, she mouths.

I shrug. "It is what it is, babe. You're a fantastic artist, and people are starting to recognize that. People have deep pockets in New York."

"Fuck," she mutters, shaking her head. "It's so hard to believe."

"You'll believe it when Asher cuts you the check. We're going to have to go down there together to collect it, and you can drop it off in the bank."

Her face lights up as her eyes snap to me. "I can go out?"

My chest tightens, but I try to hide my aversion to letting her come with me. It's just a quick trip, and the chances of her being in danger are slim to none. Besides, the bank has to have her cash the check herself, and Asher doesn't do regular wire transfers for first-time sellers.

"Very quickly, and then you'll be back up here. I know you're bored, but I want to keep an eye on the situation for a little longer," I explain.

She rushes up to me and hugs me, squeezing me so hard that my ribs bend. I

let out a wheeze, and she lets go, looking up at me with tears in her beautiful hazel eyes. “The money is worth it, Lev. And you are worth it, too.”

I smile, gently moving the hair away from her face with the back of my hand. “That’s exactly how I feel, sunshine.”

She smiles back, gritting her teeth with excitement as she jumps back. “I’m rich!”

I laugh as she does a victory lap around the couch, pumping her fists in the air and hollering. Her elation is my drug, and it makes me higher than any man on this earth. I wish I could relive this moment a million times over, but I know you can only see that breakthrough once.

That golden moment when a person realizes they’ve made it. That’s a one-time thing.

So, I don’t interrupt her as she does another lap. I want to grab her and kiss her on the lips, but I allow her to continue running around like she’s frolicking through a field of yellow flowers under the golden sun.

Eliza stops suddenly after her fifth lap, lowering her head and looking at me with a devilish grin. “Can we go now?”

I frown. “For the check?”

She nods vigorously, and it feels impossible to say no to her. She’s so excited about this, and I’m not going to be the one to rain on her special moment.

“Okay,” I reply, trying to hide a sigh. “But you’re staying close to me, and we’re not going to be out for long. Asher’s gallery, bank, then straight back here. We’ll be in the car most of the time.”

She straightens up, pulling her shoulders back like a soldier. “Yes, sir.”

“Alright, enough of that. Let’s go.”

She lets out another excited holler as she runs to get her shoes. She’s such a precious soul that it hurts to keep her locked up like this, but I do what I have to do in order to prevent Vanya from getting to her.

One bullet. That’s all it takes to change everything.

Eliza

The drive to Asher's gallery feels too quick. Every moment I get to spend outside of Lev's penthouse is much more exciting than it should be. I really can't stand to be inside all the time. My mind needs stimulation, and I'm simply not getting enough of it there.

Even in my small town back home, there were always new places to check out, new people to talk to. Even if you end up knowing half the population, that's still half that you can still get to know.

The only thing I'm getting to know in Lev's place is how many fibers are in his carpet.

That's why I'm slow to get out of the car once we arrive at Asher's gallery, even with Lev ushering me along. It's also why I drag my feet and take slow breaths once I'm outside, basking in the last rays of afternoon sun before it disappears behind the tall buildings surrounding us.

I need fresh air. I get it in Lev's apartment, but it's tainted by the scent of paint thinner.

"Okay, slowpoke, please get inside. The bank will close before we arrive at this rate," Lev grumbles, pushing me through the door.

"Don't push me," I reply, swatting his hand away. "I'm a celebrity now, aren't I? You have to treat me like one."

He chuckles. "It might take a little longer for you to gain that kind of notoriety, but you're off to a good start. Don't let it go to your head."

But it's too late. I've already let it go to my head. I'm elated as I walk into the gallery and see all the blank spaces where the paintings used to be. Some of those were mine. People actually came in here, looked at them and decided they were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

I don't think I'll believe it until I have the check in my hand. Even then, I'd want to cash it before I can *fully* believe it.

And even then...

How is all this possible?

My chaotic thoughts come to a pinpoint focus as Asher walks into the room, his leather shoes echoes across the marble floor. He doesn't really walk. It's more like a slink he does, like he's trying to sneak up on you but failing miserably because of how loud his shoes are.

He walks with one of his shoulders first. Sideways, almost. It's a bit off-putting and I already am wary of him. He gives me vibes that are only getting weirder despite the money he's giving me.

"They *love* you," Asher says in a loud whisper as he hurries up to me. "Oh, goodness, they really do. People were bidding like mad on your paintings."

"That's... great," I say, unsure how to react. I'm having trouble processing the amount of money I'm getting. It feels like winning the lottery.

"You're just the best. Really. I *love* you work," he says, his eyes growing so large I feel like they're going to swallow me whole.

What an odd person. He was so reluctant before to give me the advances Lev was asking for, and now he's acting like he's been following my art career since day one. That's just one more reason not to trust him.

"You got the check?" Lev asks, cutting through Asher's creepy performative excitement like a butcher's knife through flesh.

Asher scoffs. "Of course. This fine young lady deserves every penny. I just want to make sure it goes to her, and not her manager." He shoots Lev and a challenging stare.

Lev just rolls his eyes. "I'm not in the mood for the theatrics. Write the check so we can get out of here. We'll have more painting for your buyers the next time we visit."

Asher slaps his hands together with a loud pop and rubs them vigorously, smiling at me. "Yes, that's great. I'll be right back."

He walks away with the same unusual shuffle, and Lev puts his hand on my shoulder. "You're doing great. Don't let him freak you out. He takes a cut, and your stuff is selling well, so he's excited."

“He’s fucking creepy,” I whisper.

Asher slows down, almost as though he can hear me, but he doesn’t turn around. He just disappears through a large arching doorway, and comes back a moment later with a checkbook.

“Really great stuff,” he says to me, ignoring Lev entirely.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

He smiles, scribbling information onto the check and speaking under his breath. “Five-fifty... Eliza Wilson...”

How does he know my surname? I guess Lev must’ve mentioned it to him, but I don’t even remember telling Lev.

“There you are,” Asher says, tearing the check out of the booklet and handing it to me. “Don’t spend it all in one place.”

“Very funny,” Lev grunts. “Let’s go.”

My pleasure. I’ve never been more eager to leave an art gallery than I am now. I feel like Asher is about to pounce on me, consuming me with his oversized brown eyes. He won’t stop staring. Even as we turn away and walk toward the exit, I can feel his eyes on my back.

But it’s only once we get outside and slip back into the luxury comfort of Lev’s car that I feel comfortable speaking about it. “Jesus, is that guy always so... odd?”

Lev lets out a dry chuckle. “I think he has a crush on you or something, but don’t worry about him. If he says anything truly weird to you, I’ll turn his brains into a fine mist.”

“Oh,” I reply taken aback by the brashness of his statement. It’s comforting, but it seems a little extreme. I guess I should expect that from Lev by now, but it’s definitely something to get used to.

“So, we’re going to the bank, right?” I ask, trying to get away from the topic. I don’t want to dwell on Asher for longer than I need to.

“Yes, and then home.”

“What if I want ice cream?” I ask, cocking my head to the side.

“I’ll have some delivered. I know a place.”

Of course, he *knows a place*. He always does, but I want to stay out for a little longer, and I’m dying to find an excuse to. I highly doubt that Vanya is going to jump out of the shadows and attack us in broad daylight. Lev is being overprotective.

“No ice cream in the park?” I ask, trying again. “It would be romantic, perhaps even inspiring. I could paint it later.”

“You can paint your nails later,” he replies sarcastically. “Bank and then home.”

I’m starting to get annoyed with the way he’s talking to me, like he gets to decide how I live, but I keep my mouth shut about it for the time being. It’s impossible for me to hide my emotions fully, however. I turn away from him with my arms crossed, watching the world go by outside.

The world I can’t touch, or smell, or paint. It’s just a passing image through the filter of Lev’s impossibly thick glass. Is it bulletproof or something? If so, why?

The signs I’ve been trying to ignore are practically screaming at me now, but I continue to act like nothing is wrong. The money is screaming louder, I suppose.

And the sex.

Fuck, I’m the one screaming when it comes to that, pressed into Lev’s mattress, totally forgetting about anything and everything as he fills me up from the back. I’ve been meaning to get on birth control, but every time I remember it, Lev isn’t home, and every time he is home, he’s fucking me so hard I forget.

Maybe now is a good time, actually. I could buy an extra hour outside the house, and Lev isn’t going to say no. In fact, he’ll probably be wondering why I never mentioned anything about it before.

Because I was stupid. And careless. And totally lost in his charm and unable

to make rational decisions.

I'll just tell him I ran out. He doesn't have to know that I wasn't taking it in the first place.

I look back at him, and I can see that he's just as irritated as me. I don't see why, though. He's not the one who has to stay inside all day.

I clear my throat, trying and failing not to verbalize my exasperation. "Well, if we *can't* get *ice cream*, then *maybe* we can *at least* get birth control. I'm all out."

His jaw clenches, and he looks straight ahead while he's talking, refusing to meet my eyes. "What did I just tell you? Huh? Did I not say a million times that we were only going to the gallery and the bank? Or am I going crazy?"

I wrinkle my nose at what I feel is an unwarranted level of anger toward me. "Um, I need birth control. That's different."

He holds up his hand, shaking his head like I'm distracting him from something. In reality, he's just staring at the seat in front of him. "I don't want to hear it. We're going home from here. Anything you could possibly want or need can be ordered and brought to you."

"Okay, but you're acting like you're in charge when you're honestly not. I'm an adult," I reply, heat rising to my face. I hate being told what to do. This is the same crap that Noah tried to pull and it's why I left him.

"You agreed to this," he snaps as the car begins to slow. We're coming up to the bank.

"Yes, and I can revoke that agreement at any time," I reply through clenched teeth.

He scoffs. "Really, Eliza, you're making this into a bigger deal than it has to be. Stay inside and stay safe. That's all you need to do."

"Oh, but look," I say in a high and haughty voice. "We're stopping, so I can get out. What do you think is going to happen when I do? Is Vanya going to jump out and stab me to death in front of the bank?"

Lev glares at me, his annoyance filling the car like deadly carbon monoxide

gas. “Just go inside and cash your check. I’m done talking about this.”

I’m not done, but I’m also not going to pass up the chance to put half a million dollars in my bank account. I won’t need anyone after that. I can disappear to a little cottage in the country and spend the rest of my life painting outdoors.

No more men. Wouldn’t that be nice?

I pop the door open and step out onto the street, the city around me putting an immediate bounce in my walk. I don’t know if it’s the money, the freedom, or both, but I feel infinitely better than being locked up in Lev’s penthouse or his car. I don’t care how nice they are, nothing beats freedom.

But freedom comes at a price. I find that out all too soon as I walk up to the bank and the air is broken by a gunshot. It’s so crisp and clean that it almost feels like it came from somewhere in the heavens, not on the street.

The wall on the bank building in front of me explodes in a mess of red brick chips and gray cement dust. My heart leaps into my throat, and I let go of the check. It drifts away like a paper airplane, picked up by the wind as the city erupts into chaos.

I begin to chase after the check, but it’s lost as a second shot rings through the air. People are running, and I hear screaming. I jump back toward the bank, plastering myself against the wall and sliding down to make myself smaller.

A third shot hits the brick above me, and it’s only then that I realize that I’m the target.

Lev

Nothing else in this world matters but Eliza. Any misplaced anger and frustration I felt toward her has dissolved into desperation. I need to save her. If I lose her, I'll never be able to forgive myself.

I wouldn't deserve to be forgiven. The best thing that could possibly happen to me would be for my own life to be taken as well, so at least I can apologize to her if there's a life after this.

But I'm not going to let that happen.

I jump out of the car, using my body to shield Eliza from the flying bullets as I charge toward her. They're coming from the building across the street, judging by the volume and echo, so my best bet is to get her away from the bank and back toward the car. It's bulletproofed, making it a far better option for cover.

Eliza's hazel eyes are wide with terror as I rip her away from the shattered brick, barking orders that even I can't hear over the deafening noise of gunshots and screaming. I grip her wrist tightly because her hand is too sweaty to hold, pulling her toward the car as it idles by the sidewalk.

I toss her in the backseat, diving in after her and pulling the door closed. "Go, go, go!"

The driver peels off into the road, swerving around frantic pedestrians and nearly hitting a man as he tumbles out onto the street.

"Fuck!" He veers off into oncoming traffic, returning to our lane a moment later as the road clears ahead.

Eliza and I are tossed around in the backseat like bags of unsecured groceries, falling over each other as I try to hold her down against the slick leather seats until the traffic clears. Once we're on a regular road away from the chaos, I'm able to buckle her into her seat and check her out.

"Are you hit? Are you okay?" I ask, my eyes and hands searching her body. Sometimes, people are in too much shock to even realize they've been struck,

and they'll go several minutes without acknowledging their injuries. I've seen people die without even knowing they're bleeding out until it's too late.

Shock can be useful when you're dragging yourself to safety, but it can also be what kills you.

Thankfully, shock seems to be the *only* thing that Eliza is suffering from. I can't find any wounds on her body, so she wasn't hit by the gunman, though she was obviously the target. The shooting started the moment she was in view.

My concern quickly turns to boiling rage as I realize Vanya was almost able to take the most precious person in the world from me.

I will no longer hide. I'll be the one hunting him down and casting a cold shadow of fear over his pitiful existence. And when the time comes, I'll be the one pulling the trigger and ending his life.

"Lev, you have to tell me what the fuck is going on." Eliza is shaking now that the adrenaline has started to wane. Her eyes are wide, and her cheeks are turning to an exasperated pink instead of the yellowish white they were a few moments ago.

"There was a shooting, but you're safe now," I reply, dodging her demands almost entirely.

Her eyes narrow and there's a vicious gleam in them that I haven't seen before. I know I'm on thin ice, but I can't tell her about the Bratva. It's too much, too soon. Vanya showing up was bad enough, and if I open my mouth and start revealing how deep into this mess she really is, I'm going to lose her forever.

It's pure selfishness that's holding me back, but I refuse to change. The world has already taken so much from me, and I won't let it take Eliza.

"You're so full of shit," she snarls, looking around the car, probably for something to throw at me. When she finds nothing, she uses her words instead. "All you do is lie to me, Lev. You're a fucking asshole. I want you to know that. You're an asshole and I fucking hate you."

Her words hurt more than any physical injury ever could. They slice straight

into my heart like an ice-cold blade, causing my whole body to freeze up and become rigid. My bones ache, and my breathing stops entirely for several seconds before I let it out in a long sigh.

“Eliza, I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t enough. I need answers, or I’m going to the police.”

At the mention of the police, the heat in my blood returns, and I instinctively reach for the lock on the door beside Eliza. It activates with a loud metallic click, and our eyes meet. She’s uncertain, but I know exactly what needs to be done now. We’re past the point of negotiation.

“You’re not going to run to anyone,” I growl.

Eliza’s furious glare evaporates in an instant, replaced now by an expression not so dissimilar to when bullets were flying at her.

“You’re staying with me until I find Vanya and kill that son of a bitch. No police, no phone calls, no leaving.”

“You can’t just kidnap me,” she says, but her words are soft and doubtful.

“I think you’ll find that I can anything I want. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

“You’re crazy!”

I chuckle. “Oh, sweet girl, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Stop the car. Let me out right now,” she says, panic rising in her voice as she reaches for handle.

I grab both her wrists in one hand, jerking them away from the door. “Oh, no you don’t. You’re staying with me.”

“Get off me!” She attempts to throw an elbow into my stomach, but she isn’t strong enough to do any damage. She’s powerless in my hands, but that doesn’t stop her from trying to escape anyway.

“Stop squirming. We will be at my place shortly and I will allow you to move.”

“Fuck you!” She flails around in the car like a fish out of water, but it’s all in vain. My driver doesn’t care, and nor do I. The Bratva can be cold like that, but she’ll get used to it. It’s for her own good.

“Please,” she whines once she realizes she can’t escape. “Please, I won’t tell anyone. I don’t even want to keep the money. I’ll disappear and nobody will ever hear from me again.”

I hate that I have to do this to her, but I won’t allow her to die, even if she hates me for it.

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words so that she stops panicking. “Eliza, this isn’t going to work like that. Vanya will find you and he will kill you. He’s more dangerous than you think.”

“So, call the fucking police.”

“We don’t do that here,” I grumble.

“Do it anyway, fuckhead!”

“Watch your tongue,” I snap, jerking her wrists again. “You have no clue who you are dealing with.”

“A fucking lunatic,” she replies.

I smirk. “Much more than that, but we shouldn’t get into it. The truth is that you’re safer with me than as a free woman. Hell, even if the cops locked you up for running around New York City shouting about being hunted by some mysterious killer, you wouldn’t be safe in that cell. Vanya would come for you, and then it’d be all over.”

“For the last time, who the fuck is Vanya? Tell me the truth!”

The car stops, and I decline to answer her as I open the door and pull her out onto the sidewalk. She tries to run, of course, but I just toss her over my shoulder and walk into the lobby with her.

“Help me!” She screams at the receptionist, who promptly ignores her. He’s not paid to interfere with what I’m doing, and I think he’d really prefer not to. It would only get him in trouble if the cops ever decided to stick their nose in my business.

“Nobody cares, so please stop making so much noise,” I grumble as I haul her into the elevator.

She pounds my back with her small fists, but I can barely feel it. It’d even be cute if I wasn’t so annoyed at the way she’s behaving. Never before have I had to entertain the drama that a civilian brings to the table when confronted with the violence of the Bratva.

It’s a new experience for me, but not a welcome one.

The elevator feels like it’s taking ages to reach the top floor, but once it does, Eliza falls silent. I think she’s accepted that her fate is to either go along with my plan or jump from the window. The latter is likely less appealing.

“Alright, darling, make yourself at home,” I say as I put her down.

She immediately jumps into a fighting stance, as though she can box her way out of the apartment.

“What are you doing?” I ask, laughing at her incorrect footing and wobbly fists.

“Don’t laugh at me,” she barks. “I’m going to make you regret it if you come any closer.”

“Darling, I was *inside* you at least a dozen times already. You can’t get any closer than that.”

Her expression sours further than I thought possible, and she raises her fists. “Not anymore, asshole. We’re done. Finished. The second I get out of your crummy little apartment, I’m going to make you regret ever meeting me.”

“Oh, I could never regret that,” I reply lightly, hiding how much her words hurt me. “You’ve really changed me, and I mean that in a good way.”

“Do you hear yourself? Talking like nothing just happened. Lev, we were shot at. *I* was shot at, and you’re the reason for it.”

I hold up my index finger. “No, that would be Vanya, actually.”

“Yeah, the psycho killer you do business with,” she says, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“He’s my cousin, actually, and we don’t do business anymore,” I reply calmly.

“Valentin mentioned something about him being your cousin. I guess your entire family is just a bunch of psychos, right?”

She’s spot on with that statement, but it’s probably better if we don’t get into that. She’s only going to hate me more when she finds out that every single person in my family has killed someone before. Hell, even my mother did, though she never liked talking about it.

“Maybe you should sit down. Today was probably a lot for you,” I say, gesturing to the couch.

“Maybe you should let me leave,” she counters.

“Nope.”

“So what are you going to do? Keep me here forever? You know, people will come looking for me, and they’re not going to treat you very well when they find out you’ve been keeping me prisoner. Is this why you’re so terrified of the police? I bet they already know you. I bet you have a criminal record.”

I laugh. “Oh, yes, it’s a mile long, but I’d prefer not to add you to it, so let’s try to work something out.”

“I leave, and I don’t talk about this to anyone,” she says. “Oh, and I dropped my check, so I need a new one. That’s half a million dollars you owe me.”

“We’ll talk to Asher about that.”

“And then I leave.”

“No, you don’t leave,” I reply, growing impatient. “You stay here, and you realize you’re safer with me than you are out there alone.”

I feel like we’re talking in circles at this point, and I don’t like it. If I’m going to get anywhere with her, she’ll have to realize what her involvement in this ordeal entails, and that means revealing the one thing I swore to keep hidden from her.

“Okay, you know what?” I ask, throwing my hands up. “You really want to

know the truth?”

She nods, her eyes widening. She almost looks excited.

I take a slow, deep breath. “I’m a Bratva boss, head of the Russian Mafia in New York City.”

Eliza

The alarms that should be going off in my head at Lev's admission to being in the Mafia are silent. Instead, a feeling of calm washes over me because everything makes sense.

I should be terrified, but I'm not. I just have more questions.

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?" I ask, finally sliding onto the couch as Lev had requested. I figure it's better to create some kind of understanding instead of continuing to argue, especially since he's opening up.

He stands beside me, leaning on the couch but refusing to join me. Maybe he's still scared that I'm going to punch him.

And maybe I will, depending on what he says.

Lev laces his fingers together, looking down at his feet as he thinks. Even though I'm mad at him, I still find him unbelievably attractive, especially when he carried me on his shoulder like I weighed nothing. His power is intoxicating, and it's all I can do not to throw myself at him again and get myself into even more trouble.

Which reminds me of my lack of birth control. I need to take it and make sure I haven't already screwed up and gotten myself pregnant. Knowing that he's a Bratva boss makes it even worse. I can't go around making kids with a criminal!

"I'm sorry I lied," Lev says, looking up at me. "But I did it because I liked you. I didn't want to scare you away."

My stomach is already twisted up in too tight of a knot to untie, but his words make it a little better. At least his feeling for me were real, if nothing else. I still feel that connection between us, much deeper than pure lust could provide. Something else draws us to each other, and I long to explore what it is.

But can I really trust him if he's a Bratva boss? Do I want to continue putting

myself in that kind of danger?

Or do I even have a choice? He's not acting like I do, and he claims it's because of Vanya.

"Just tell me about Vanya," I say, refusing to consider his apology until I have all the facts. "Give me the entire story. Don't skip anything."

Lev slides onto the couch beside me, his eyes losing focus as he stares out the window into the cold gray sky. I feel like I know his words before they leave his mouth because of how strongly they're portrayed through his unwavering gaze.

A thousand truths spill out of his soul as he begins to speak. "We were Family. Do you know what that means in the Bratva?"

I shake my head. "I barely know what family is anymore."

"Well, in the Bratva, Family is the unseen force that holds everything together. In the blood, there are cells, and these cells are a collection of molecules, and these are a collection of atoms. These atoms, they are held together by an invisible force, the willpower of the universe, and I believe this extends back up to the animal kingdom, and to Family in particular."

I wasn't expecting such a deep explanation from him, and I'm already captivated. I lean forward, clasping my hands together as I soak up every word he utters.

Lev shakes his head slowly. "Family is supposed to be stronger than anything, but there are demons among us, negative forces that go around creating chaos and breaking even the strongest of bonds. These demons, they take the form of people sometimes, and Vanya is one of them."

"He certainly is out for blood, but why?" I ask, cocking my head to the side. "There must be a reason other than the fact that he's evil."

Lev smirks. "Forgive me if I sound like a demon too, but the reason he wants you and me dead is because I killed his brother."

His words put a chill in my bones, not because I know he's a killer, but because of how casually he admitted it.

No emotion. No regret. Just a cold, hard factual statement that he killed a man.

But why?

“I’ll explain,” Lev says before I can ask. “Vanya and his brother Feliks weren’t particularly fond of the role they had in our Family business. You know, the whole money laundering through fine art thing.”

My mouth drops. “That’s what it is? Is Asher part of your family too?”

“No,” he snaps. “Asher is not to be trusted the way you can trust people like Valentin. Don’t ever trust him to do what he says. You have to bend his arm to get him to follow through with anything.”

“But you still work with him,” I say, squinting at Lev.

“Money talks.”

“Is that really all there is in your life? Would you work with the devil if there was enough money in it for you?” I ask, trying to understand his motivations.

“Good people and criminals don’t tend to have a lot in common,” he replies. “And that’s why I took such a strong liking to you. You’re not a criminal, and I guess that fascinated me. Opposites attract.”

“But you’re still fine with Asher,” I reply, pushing back as he tries to veer off-topic.

He sighs. “Asher is a necessary evil. The Bratva needs money to stay alive, and I’m as good as dead if I can’t afford protection. Living in the highest penthouse in the city doesn’t come cheap.”

“It’s just... weird. Like, all of this is weird, and I don’t see why you’d want to get involved with it in the first place,” I admit, hoping he’ll be able to explain my doubts away.

“Listen, when you’ve been in the Bratva your whole life, there’s no other way. That’s just how it is. The only way out is being judged by twelve or carried by six.” He runs his finger across his neck. “And neither of those options sound too appealing to me. Once you get used to it, though, you’re not going to want to give the luxury up for anything. We don’t live like

regular people, and you're going to have a very hard time returning to a civilian life once you've been drinking pure opulence for decades. Everything else is dull and uninspiring."

"So, it's like a drug."

He nods. "Exactly."

"One that I've already tasted and want more of," I admit with a small laugh. "You've ruined me."

"And I'm sorry for that," he says, his eyes finally meeting mine. They're so bright, even in the dimming light from the cloudy sky. I can see the whole universe inside of them. Plodding outward with such passion and energy that it makes me feel like I'm just a speck of nothing compared to Lev's brilliance.

But he doesn't see me that way.

He sees me as someone special, someone different from what he's used to. Someone he needs in his life.

There's a shift in the air, a mood that sweeps over the room like a weighted blanket. It's heavy but comforting. This situation is the most incredible, insane, and intense thing I've ever had to experience, but as Lev reaches over to me and takes my hand, I know I'm safe if I walk through it with him.

Lev squeezes my fingers lightly. "I think you understand where I'm coming from now, but I still owe you an explanation about Vanya and Feliks."

"Right," I say, shifting my weight on the couch to face him.

"Feliks and Vanya wanted more from the business. Namely, they wanted to own the gallery that Valentin currently manages. I almost allowed Valentin to turn it over to them before I discovered what they really wanted to do with the place." He grits his teeth. "As if the world doesn't already have enough suffering, those two clowns wanted to mass-produce fentanyl and distribute it across the city."

I inhale sharply. "That's insane."

"Not just insane, but needlessly cruel. The two of them checked off all three

boxes for the Dark Triad – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. You get a lot of psychopathy in the Bratva, a bit of narcissism, but rarely all three at once. Yes, Vanya and Feliks are real pieces of work, but once I found out their little plan to separate from our Family, I made quick work of Feliks. Vanya fled the state, and I thought that might be the end of it.”

“Until he came back,” I finish for him.

“Yes, I believe he returned because he realized he could finally enact his revenge by taking something precious from me. But I won’t let him. Not now, and not ever. That’s why he needs to die,” Lev says, his pupils doubling in size as he looks deep into my eyes. “You have to understand that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

“I know,” I reply, my voice unable to produce more than a whisper. I didn’t think I’d be this overcome with emotion, but it’s flooding over me like an inescapable tidal wave. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and Lev uses his thumb to wipe them away.

And then his lips are on mine, a searing kiss that wipes away any doubt I had left in my mind. It’s a merging of souls, a kiss that binds up together and seals his protective intentions.

I’m his to defend, his to claim, and his to own.

And I wouldn’t want to belong to anyone else. I need Lev like I need air, and that’s how I know I’m falling for him.

“I will protect you,” Lev says, his voice low and steady.

“Thank you.”

He stands up suddenly, letting go of my hand and looking towards the door. “And I’ll get your money, too. I’ll call Valentin to watch over you. It’s time for me to pay Asher another visit.”

“Just like that?” I ask, my system shocked by his sudden change of intentions. “I thought we were having a moment.”

He smirks at me. “I’ll give you what you want when I get back home, but until then, I need you to be a good girl and wait here for me.”

I'm left with an open mouth and the dull throb of arousal in my lower belly as Lev leave the room to call Valentin.

Lev

I step out of the car, the cold air raising the hairs on the back of my neck. I have a feeling that getting money from Asher isn't going to be as easy as the first time. He'll want to wait on writing another check until the one Eliza lost expires, but that would be a whole ninety days.

I'm not allowing that to happen. If this Bratva is going to function properly, there needs to be a basic level of trust, especially when it comes to money.

Most of the lights are off when I step into Asher's gallery, but I spot him on the far side of the common area, adjusting a lopsided painting while standing on an old wooden stepladder.

There's this little part of me, the impishly impulsive one, that wants to shout at him and cause him to fall from the ladder. I don't like him, and the idea of him breaking his knees on the marble floor is oddly appealing to me.

Perhaps I'm the one with the Dark Triad of traits, and I'm just projecting them onto Vanya and Feliks.

But I know when to ignore temptation, unlike those two unfortunate people, so instead of scaring Asher, I walk up to him, making my presence known by the sound of my footsteps against the swirling marble floor.

He looks over his shoulder, his eyebrows rising up several inches and almost touching his hairline.

"Surprised to see me again so soon?" I ask as he steps down from the ladder.

"Yes, considering you were in such a hurry to leave. Is something the matter?" he asks, his face growing pale as I step up to him.

He has this guilty look, one that appears often when I'm around. I wonder if he's hiding something, but it's not my mission today to find out. I just need the new check.

"Nothing is the matter, so long as you disregard the shooting that happened on the way to the bank," I reply with a thin smile. "I hope you didn't have anything to do with that."

He frowns, the guilty look gone. “There was a shooting?”

I nod. “But nobody was hurt. The only thing that really happened was that Eliza got a bit spooked and dropped her check. And you know how New York is. You let a little piece of paper like that loose in the wind and it’s gone forever.” I wave my hand through the air. “Poof!”

“That’s terrible,” he says, his eyebrows drawing together in some form of mock sympathy. I know he’s not really capable of caring. His emotions are an act, just like mine are around anyone but Eliza.

“Truly unfortunate,” I say, rubbing my chin. “But I figured you could just write another one. That’s why I’m here.”

“Oh.” His voice drops, and he gives me a nervous look. “You mean, right now?”

“Why else would I be here?”

He chuckles, tapping his foot against the ladder. “Well, Lev, you know I can’t do that. What’s to stop Eliza from cashing both checks?”

“Did you not hear me the first time?” I ask, my anger rising at his predictable yet irritating resistance. “She lost the check. It’s gone. You need to write another one.”

He purses his lips, shaking his head as he looks up at the crooked painting behind him. “Oh, no, that won’t work. You could wait for the first one to expire, and then we could –”

“Write the damn check, Asher. I don’t want to have to tell you again.”

“Lev, you can’t just come in here making demands like that. Half a million dollars is no small sum.”

“Which is why I don’t want you stealing it from Eliza,” I growl. “The check. Write it.”

He sighs like I’m a little boy who can’t understand what an adult is saying and why it’s good for him. Honestly, I want to break his face just for that, but I control myself. It’s just money, and I still have a few threats to make before I lose my temper entirely.

“I enjoy doing business with you, but this kind of thing really has to stop,” Asher says, running his fingers over the edge of the ladder. “I mean, coming into my business at such a late hour, trying to take more money than I owe... That’s really not the way we do things around here.”

“Write the check,” I say, my voice dropping down to almost a whisper.

Our eyes meet, and mine narrow. He’s been nothing but trouble for me since I brought Eliza along. I don’t know what his problem is, but I need to put him in his place before I lose control over him entirely.

“Write the check or I’ll break every fucking bone in your body,” I say.

He pulls his head back. “Do you really think you can do something like that to me? Do you know who I am? Do you know who my *clients* are? I’m the reason you have any money at all. I’m the reason you –”

I cut his sentence off by following up on my promise. My fist slams into his pretentious face with a satisfying crunch, blood spurting from his nose and splattering onto the wall behind him. He stumbles back, but I move forward to follow him, not allowing him the chance to recover before I hit him in the nose again.

Another crunch, but it’s mushier this time. I guess you can’t break what’s already broken.

“Fuck! What the fuck?!” Asher squeals, cowering against the wall as I hover over him.

“Write the fucking check!” I yell, my voice echoing through the gallery like the battle cry of an ancient beast.

“Okay! Okay!”

He tries to step around me, but I shove him to the ground, standing over him as he curls up into a tight ball. I throw a punch into his ribs for good measure, which results in a holler so desperate that anyone who walked in would believe Asher was about to die at my hands.

But a dead man can’t write a check.

“Where’s the checkbook?” I growl, pulling back my fist to hit him again.

“In my office! Please, I’ll write it!”

“You’d better,” I grumble. “Get up and don’t try to run. If you do, I’ll smash your fucking skull against the floor.”

Asher scrambles to his feet, almost running from me before he remembers my threat. He knows I’ll make good on it, so he begins limping slowly toward the other end of the room. I almost want to tell him to hurry the fuck up because he’s going so slowly, but that would probably only confuse him.

As it stands, I’m going to get what I want, and he gets to keep his life. It’s mutually beneficial thing we have going on here.

By the look on Asher’s face when we reach his office, it seems possible he’s going to try to stab me with his pen instead of writing the check. I welcome the violence, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he scribbles down Eliza’s name and the payment information on the check, signing it with a big, sloppy signature before thrusting it out to me. “Now get the fuck out of my gallery,” he hisses.

I snatch the check from his hand, examining it carefully, mostly just to annoy him. If he messed anything up on purpose, I’m going to come back and kill him.

“You’re lucky I didn’t ask for double,” I say, waving the flimsy paper at him before tucking it into my jacket pocket. “Next time, you play by my rules, Asher. Don’t try anything funny.”

He glares at me as I leave, furious at what I’ve done, how I’ve humiliated him. I can’t be sure he won’t seek revenge after this, but that would certainly result in his demise. I doubt that’s what he wants.

Eliza

It's hard to believe it when I look at my banking app and I see over half a million dollars sitting in my account. Where I'm from, people retire on less than that, and Lev seems to believe that's only the beginning of what I'm going to make as an artist.

The only issue I have is where the money is coming from. I know that I'm not the one responsible for the money laundering, and it's other people who are trading my art and washing their dirty money, but I can't help but feel complicit.

The only thing that's keeping the idea of being in collusion with criminals from weighing down my conscience is my ever-growing concern about missing my period. That's dramatically more important to me right now.

Even Lev knows something is wrong, but he keeps guessing it has something to do with Vanya and the shooting.

He couldn't be more wrong, but I'm not sure if this is something I should tell him about just yet. What if I'm not actually pregnant? I would look like I'm just trying to stir up drama to keep myself from dying of boredom.

That's doubt talking. I've been trying to get a handle on it my entire life, but the more success I have, the bigger my doubt grows.

An outsider may find that contradictory, but it makes perfect sense to me. My doubt is telling that I'm at my limit, that I've done all that I can do. If I've convinced Lev to like me, I should be grateful I was even able to do that and not strive for love.

More feels greedy, and the doubt returns. I doubt Lev will take me seriously. I doubt he'll believe that I'm actually worried about getting pregnant.

And I doubt he'll want to keep me if I do turn out to be pregnant.

That's the biggest point. It's far past what I currently know, but it feels close enough to taste. What we've built could crumble in an instant if I took a pregnancy test and discovered that I was carrying Lev's child in my belly.

My stomach feels like sticky, sappy, burnt and bubbling red candy on a cast iron pan. The aroma of my discomfort is so strong that Lev can smell it when he walks into the bedroom and sees me lying in bed with both hands over my belly.

I'm protecting a baby that might not even exist.

I throw my hands away from my body, gripping the sheets like I'm trying to prevent myself from being abducted by an alien spaceship. Lev leans against the doorframe frowning, and I wish he wasn't so handsome. It makes me feel like *I'm* the problem. How could a man as attractive as he is do anything wrong? He never has, as far as I'm concerned.

Rose-tinted glasses. I wear them daily now. Is this what being in love feels like?

I wish I could say I'm above falling in love, especially after what happened with Noah, but Lev is different. He's the type of man every woman dreams about and very few are able to find.

And he chose me. Out of all the women his piercing blue eyes could've landed on, it was me.

That must count for something, though I still don't quite understand how he thinks I'm special.

I guess I'm about to find out just how special I really am to him, because with the way he's looking at me, I'm not going to be able to hide what's been weighing on my mind.

"Something is wrong," he says, his frown deepening.

I grimace, releasing the sheets and sitting up. "I've just been thinking."

He raises an eyebrow. "About?"

"Why don't you come inside and sit with me?" I suggest, patting the bed. I'm really only stalling, but it still feels important that he be seated for this type of conversation.

His eyes narrow but he removes himself from the doorway and walks into the room, sitting down beside me. His weight on the bed is comforting, making

what I'm about to say easier.

Not easy. But easier.

My hand is on my belly again. I try not to do that, but ever since I started suspecting this pregnancy, I feel the need to protect the child. Even if a hand isn't going to do anything, it's comforting.

Lev's steady hand slides over to my thigh, and he squeezes it lightly. "Take your time, darling."

I smile. His patience is a blessing.

"Well," I begin with a sigh that turns into a nervous laugh. "I don't want you to jump to any conclusions, but the reason I've been stressed lately has very little to do with the shooting. And I know what you're thinking. How can anything be more stressful than that, but there is something else, something important."

He nods, silent and present with me. He doesn't attempt to control the conversation. He just listens.

"Okay, you know what? I'm going to cut straight to it," I say, waving my hand in a slicing motion through the air. "Just get right to the point. Let's go. Let's do this."

I get another eyebrow raise from him in response.

"Okay, my period is late, and I think I might be pregnant."

Now, I get a reaction, but it wasn't the raving angry one I feared. His pupils widen, but his expression stays mostly the same. Perhaps there's a twitch of movement at the corners of his mouth, but nothing more.

"I don't know for certain, of course, but that's why I'm telling you. I need to take a test," I continue, hoping for a more readable expression from him. Happy, sad, angry... anything!

He looks toward the door, and I can almost hear the cogs turning in his head. He's processing this. He's not the type to react to things. He thinks about then and then he acts in accordance with his values.

It's admirable, but it also makes me want to jump up from the bed and shake him by the shoulders. I've already done all the thinking about this, days' worth of brooding. There's nothing left for him to think about!

Every cell in my body is vibrating when he finally looks at me again. "We will get the test, and then we'll see," he says calmly.

It's too composed. He can't possibly not be freaking out inside like I am. Maybe he's hiding it.

"So... how do you feel about it?" I ask, desperate for answers.

He swallows, and his Adam's apple moves violently in his throat. "I... I would be honored to be the father of your children, Eliza."

His words hit me much harder than I thought they would, like swinging a baseball bat into my tear ducts. I'm bawling immediately, relief washing through me as he stands up and pulls me into a tight embrace.

"Thank you for telling me," he says, his voice deep and soothing.

I feel guilty for crying into his shirt like this, wrinkling it up and staining it with my emotional outburst, but this feeling of inadequacy has been building up in my body for too long, and I need to let it out.

Lev is a good man, despite his past. He's not going to leave me over a baby.

That should be expected of any man, of course, but in this day and age it's not unusual for a woman to find herself with a child and no father to help raise them. It's unfair that the men have all the power, but thankfully I don't need to fear Lev misusing his.

The anxious heat in my body turns to shivering cold as I finish crying, and I curl up against him for warmth. He tries to pull away, but I don't allow it, clinging to his shirt like I'd die without him.

And maybe I would. Everyone in the world is out to get me and Lev is the only person standing in the way of them destroying me.

"Let's go get the test," Lev says softly, pulling away again.

"Together?" I ask, looking up at him and sniffing.

“Yes, I will not let you out of my sight again. Either Valentin or I will be with you at all times going forward until we find that bastard Vanya.”

His words are like hot chocolate after a cold walk in the winter snow. I want to steep in them for longer, but he pulls me out of the room and begins to get ready to leave.

I find myself stalling again, unable to face the reality I already know in my heart to be true. It’s not that I don’t want a child with Lev. It’s a dream come true, but the circumstances make it much more dangerous than it should be.

I don’t want my baby to be in danger. I can’t stand the idea of creating someone so precious only to lose them. It makes me think about my brother, and how my parents must’ve felt when he died. It was hard for me, but it broke them in an irreparable way.

I don’t want to be broken like that.

“Are you ready?” Lev asks once he’s put his shoes and coat on.

“Yeah, I’m just... thinking about Jake.”

“Your brother?”

I nod. “It’s weird to think I could be bringing another person into the world. It feels like I’m setting myself up for suffering. After witnessing what happened to my parents after Jake died, it’s really hard to think about losing a child.”

Lev’s face drops and his tone goes down a full octave. “You’re not going to lose anyone,” he says, coming over to me and putting a hand on my shoulder. “So, don’t think of it. Don’t *ever* think of it.”

I can’t help but smile at the way he’s chosen to protect me. It’s not just my physical safety that matters to him, but my emotional safety as well.

And I believe what he’s telling me. If anyone is capable of protecting the family we’re creating, it’s Lev. He’s the stronger person I know, and he’s shown that my wellbeing and happiness is more important to him than anything else.

I smile at him, pulling a green wool coat over my shoulders and tucking my

hair behind my ear. “Okay, baby. Let’s do this.”

He opens the door, and we step out into the great unknown.



I ALMOST WANTED to take the pregnancy test right at the pharmacy counter, but I doubt the cashier would take too kindly to me pissing on the floor. On a more serious note, I know I’m going to get emotional when I see the result, and I don’t need people staring at me as I try to come to terms with my new reality.

I’ve already made up in my mind that I’m having a baby and they’re going to be a boy. I’m going to name him Jake after my brother, so that he can be remembered. My parents don’t even talk about him, but I will. I’ll be saying his name daily, and that will keep his spirit alive long after I’ve already left this earth.

I haven’t told any of this to Lev yet, of course. I don’t want him to think I’ve lost my mind. He has enough to worry about already. He’s been so focused since we left the apartment that I fear he’s going to give himself an aneurysm.

Oddly enough, I’m not afraid as we ride to and from the pharmacy, even after the shooting that happened last week. Everything seems so important compared to my potential pregnancy.

Lev takes care of the details while I’m deep in my mind, thinking about what the baby might look like once he’s born.

I want him to have Lev’s beautiful blue eyes, but I also want to see Jake there somewhere. We look quite similar, to the point that people thought we were twins when we were younger, despite him being older. I’m sure I’ll see him in the baby if he looks anything like me.

The car is silent the entire ride back to the penthouse. Even the sound of the road disappears as my mind sinks deeper into thoughts about the future.

I don’t want our baby to be afraid, even as they grow older and realize that they’re the heir to a powerful Bratva Family. I want them to always be as confident and intelligent as Lev is. Ideally, they would just be an exact clone

of Lev, but I know that isn't possible.

I do smile to myself at the thought of it, though. A little miniature Lev, running around like he owns the entire planet. It's a cute image, and I smile as we roll up to the building that I'll be staying for the next nine months if this pregnancy test reveals what I already suspect.

The ride up the elevator is more silence. I prefer it that way, and Lev respects it. He's still focused on my safety, right up until the door closes and we're once again locked away from the danger of the outside world.

"I'll be in the bathroom," I say to him, clutching the pregnancy test we bought like I'm going to use it as a weapon.

Lev nods. "Let me know if you need anything."

A smile flickers across my face, and then I turn and retreat into the master bedroom, where the bathroom with the double sink is. I don't know why, but it feels like I need extra space for this test. The bathroom in the main room is claustrophobic.

I set the test down on the edge of the sink while I pull down my pants. They remain at my ankles like a pair of handcuffs, and it's a balancing act to sit on the toilet and grab the test from the sink.

I have no issue peeing, though. Thank my unbridled anxiety for that! Usually, it's a curse, but today it's an unusual blessing to be able to pee despite not having drank much of anything today.

The steady trickle into the toilet is deafening against the bleak silence of the room. I should've at least turned the fan on, but it's too late for that.

A couple of minutes is all I need for the test to show the results, but as those minutes tick by, I feel like they're stretched out to an eternity. Why can't the moments with Lev be like that? They're always so fleeting, no matter how many sweet hours we spend together.

I wish I could take every second and capture it in a little silver box, trapping those precious emotions so that I can open it when I'm lonely and drink from the bliss inside.

But Lev is never too far. He remains close, even when he's not with me. I can hear him outside the bathroom, his heavy feet dragging against the carpet as he paces back and forth.

He does a good job of hiding his nervousness most of the time, but I secretly love being able to sneak little glimpses at it like I'm doing now. It's charming in an unexplainable way.

I'm able to pass the final minute by listening to Lev, which speeds up the seconds and makes the wait tolerable again. My hand slides over to the pregnancy test I put back on the edge of the sink, and I take it off without looking at it, holding it against my lap.

When I look down, it's almost impossible for me to see the two pink lines running down the center. It's not because they're faint, but because I'm already crying.

I'm pregnant!

I'm going to be the mother of Lev's baby!

Lev

The look in Eliza's shimmering hazel eyes tells me everything, but I still get a rush when her lips part and she tells me that she's pregnant.

I drop to my knees in front of her, my body trembling in a way that's never happened. The fiercest enemy wouldn't be able to humble me in this way, but a little speck of life growing in Eliza's belly can put me on my knees.

I can't find the words to tell Eliza how much this means to me, but I suspect she already knows. My mouth is dry, and my throat is closed up. I can barely breathe. I have to force myself to speak to make sure I won't pass out from lack of oxygen.

"That's incredible," I gasp as my lungs find air again.

She nods, pulling her lips into her mouth as fresh tears come to her eyes.

I place my hands on her stomach, feeling the warmth there and imagining the child we created inside. The fiercest protection is required for such a delicate creature. I must double security. No, I must *triple it*.

No cost is too high. No protection is too much to ensure that the heir to the Bratva is kept safe.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, looking up at her as my concern for her safety eclipses everything else. "Do you need anything? Do you want to see a doctor? Are you sure you weren't injured from the shooting?"

She laughs, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. "You're such a sweetheart. I think I'll be fine, though. I just need time to process all this."

"You're right. You need time, and space, and probably healthier food." I stand up, my mind racing. "I'll have Valentin bring groceries. He's coming over, you know? I have to tell him about this."

Her body stiffens, and I see concern in her eyes. "Are you sure he's.. safe? I mean, after all that with Vanya..."

“I’d trust Valentin with my life,” I reply, feeling a surge of defensiveness. “He’s always been there for me, and he was one of the first in our Family to agree to cast out Vanya and Feliks. He’s a good man, despite appearances.”

“Okay, okay,” she says with palpable notes of amusement. “I’m just making sure.”

“He’s fine, just don’t let him talk you out of being with me. He seems to think you’re too young and beautiful to be with an old man like me.”

She laughs. “Oh goodness, do you think any of that is true?”

I shrug, a smirk dancing on my lips. “Maybe, but it’s too late. I’ve already claimed you.”

She puts her hand on her belly and blushes. God, I miss those glowing cheeks. She’s seen too much from me to blush at anything I say or do anymore. I’ve desensitized her, and I’m paying the price.

But if I can get a little more, I’ll be happy.

Just another blush. What do I have to say to make her cheeks even redder?

“I wouldn’t mind doing it again. You’re an awful lot of fun to claim,” I say, my eyes meeting hers as the temperature in the room rises. “I’d even put another baby inside you.”

“I’m already full,” she says, trying to play her nerves off while her voice shakes. She rubs her belly. “You can’t put twins in there. That’s not how it works.”

I chuckle. “Maybe in the other hole.”

Her cheeks burn a much darker shade of red. That’s the reaction I was looking for, her beautiful innocence being ruined right in front of me. She even tries to hide that she likes it, tucking her chin down and avoiding my eyes.

“Tell me you wouldn’t want me to cum there,” I say, taking a step toward her and placing my hand on her waist. “Would it feel too dirty for you? Too degrading?”

She shakes her head. “Probably too big.”

“Oh, we’d go *very* slow,” I assure her.

“Are you for real?” she asks, her eyes as big as dinnerplates when she looks up at me.

“You haven’t learned, have you?” I pull her closer, pressing her scalding hot skin into mine. I can feel the heat through the fabric of our clothing, but there’s about to be very little in the way of our skin in a moment.

“I haven’t showered, though,” she says, but her words are soft and playful.

“I’ll give you a good reason to,” I reply, leaning in and pressing my lips against her ear. “You’re going to be a very dirty girl once I’m finished.”

“At least let me get rinsed off.” She tries to hide a smile as I let go of her, but it’s impossible. We need to celebrate what we created together, and what better way to do that than to explore each other’s bodies in a new way?

I watch her walk back into the bedroom, and as the shower turns on, I fantasize about how incredible it’s going to feel to be inside her again. I feel like it’s been ages, even though it really has only been a day or two.

Eliza has me giddy every time, but I need to play it cool. I can’t let her know how excited I am to experience her in this daring new way.

I lay back on our bed, feeling the silk sheets beneath me as my body buzzes with anticipation. The coolness of them distracts me from the growing need inside of me, and I turn my attention to them, how my skin slides on it like nothing is there until there’s the slightest bit of moisture from sweat. Then, there’s traction. They stick to my skin, and I have to peel myself off of them like they’re made of plastic.

I feel like I’m going crazy as I listen to the shower turn on, then off. I hear the glass door to the shower rolling open. I hear the hair drier.

That’s unnecessary. She’s drawing this out and it’s going to kill me.

I grit my teeth, looking down at my pants. They’re suddenly too tight, too uncomfortable to continue wearing. I rid myself of them, kicking them into the corner and diving back onto the bed as the door to the bathroom opens.

“What are you doing in here?” Eliza asks as she peeks out. Steam billows out from behind her.

My eyes are drawn to her nipples as they harden in the cold air. “I’m waiting for you, sunshine.”

She turns off the light in the bathroom and steps out, her body glowing pink from the heat of the shower. She smells like my shower gel, but for some reason I find it sexy. She makes even the most masculine scent smell delicate and alluring.

As she walks up to the bed, my cock jerks upright. I thought it couldn’t get any harder, but it has at the sight of her, and it aches with need. I’m almost considering ditching the anal idea and fucking her normally just to release my demons, but when she lays down in front of me on her belly, pushing her ass out and inviting me in, I know I’d be a fool to turn down this opportunity.

I reach over to the marble-topped nightstand and pull open the drawer, retrieving a bottle of lube I use when I masturbate. I prefer real sex, but sometimes a man needs a moment to himself.

This time, I’m sharing that moment with Eliza, and it’s about to rock her world.

Eliza

Lev's weight on me is comforting, but I can't help but feel nervous that he's actually going to put it in the other hole. I've never been so open to something I thought I'd never do, but that doesn't change that I'm intimidated by it.

Noah asked about it all the time, but I knew he wouldn't respect my body and take it slow. He was selfish, and Lev is the total opposite. He knows when to be commandeering, but he also knows when and how to listen to my body.

He could make anything feel good, and that's why I'm trusting him to take my anal virginity.

I yelp as I feel the cold drizzle of lube over my ass. It warms quickly as Lev rubs in it. His fingers move across my skin slowly, teasing closer and closer inward until he's sliding them between my cheeks.

I've never had anyone touch me like this before, but it's exciting to know that his fingers are already on my asshole. It feels surprisingly good, relaxing in a way that makes my whole body open up to him.

It's vulnerable and arousing, slowly easing my nerves so that I won't be clenching when he's ready to enter me.

When the time comes, he eases in slowly, almost to the point where I can't feel him moving at all. I feel a pleasant stretch, something surprisingly arousing, and I get wet at the thought of him having his cock somewhere nobody else has ever been.

This feels like claiming me beyond just the physical this time, like he finally owns every part of my body *and* my soul. Nothing is off-limits to him, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

Lev reaches around and touches my pussy as he sinks in deeper, giving me pleasure as he feeds his growing need to lose control. His cock is so big that he can't go all the way, but he's satisfied by what he can do, moving in and out now, playing with the sensation off my ass around his cock.

The simulations stimulation from both sides of me sends me spiraling almost immediately. All he has to do is whisper in my ear that he's going to cum in my ass and I'm climaxing like I never have before. I can feel myself contracting around his cock, milking him as I become lost in sexual ecstasy.

"Oh yes, baby," Lev groans, leaning back as he explodes in my ass, pumping hot cum inside the one place I thought it would never go.

He's changed me, turned me into the kind of woman I never thought I'd be, but now that I'm on the other side I'm thankful for it. I get to experience what few others can, and it feels like heaven.

Pure, beautiful, powerful heaven.

Eliza

Lev is out again today. He's supposed to be meeting with Valentin to discuss how they're going to track down and *deal with* Vanya. I know that means killing him, but I hate thinking about that kind of violence.

It'd be nicer to put him behind bars, but I understand that's not how things work in the Bratva. Lev has made that very clear.

In fact, he's been making a lot of things clear, and instead of scaring me away, all it's done is made me more understanding of where he's coming from. The money laundering through fine art, the high-security apartment at the top of a skyscraper, and even the fact that I can no longer leave home are all falling into my neat little box of reason. It makes sense, and that's a lot better than the confusing illusion he was trying to create before.

But people do a lot of unnecessary things out of fear, so I don't hold it against him. As long as he's willing to continue being honest with me as my pregnancy develops, I'm going to try to stick around and see this through with him.

No drama. Just two *very* different people trying to work things out together.

Am I crazy to believe we can do it?

Before I can give myself an answer, my phone rings. Nobody ever calls me except for Lev these days. Even my parents aren't terribly interested in what's going on. We haven't talked since I moved to New York.

But when I grab my phone off the coffee table, I discover that it isn't Lev, nor is it my parents.

It's Noah.

The last thing I want to deal with when I'm processing the fact that I'm pregnant with Lev's baby is a phone call from Noah. I thought he gave up, but apparently, he's still dying to get me to come back.

That ship has obviously sailed. Between the pregnancy, the danger, and the incredible sex with Lev, I've all but completely forgotten that Noah exists.

Unfortunately, he feels the need to call and remind me, making it impossible to move on fully.

After a moment of silent deliberation, I decide to answer him. Lev isn't here right now, and I'm absolutely bored out of my mind. Besides, this is my chance to end things with him once and for all. I don't need my past rearing its ugly head in when I'm starting a family. Noah needs to understand that we're really, truly done.

I grit my teeth as I answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey..." His voice is small and apologetic, but I've grown so used to the volume and power of Lev's that hearing Noah's whining makes my stomach churn. I don't know how I ever put up with that idiot in the first place.

"What do you want?" I snap.

"Is everything alright? You sound tense."

"I don't want you calling me, that's all," I reply, looking toward the door like Lev's going to walk through any second. I can't imagine what he'd do to Noah if he knew we were talking right now. I'm sure many bones and laws would be broken as a result.

"I was going to tell you congratulations, but if you don't want to hear that, then I guess you can hang up on me or whatever."

My stomach drops. "Congratulations on what?" There's no way he knows about the baby. How could he? I haven't told a soul except for Lev, and he's not the kind of person to run his mouth on social media. I'm pretty sure he doesn't even have any online profiles, which I'm more grateful for every day.

"I saw your name in a listing online and I got curious. I guess you sold some paintings or something?"

I let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, yeah, those."

He laughs. "They must've gotten the numbers wrong, though. Missed a decimal point or something because it's way off from what it should be. What were they, about twenty buck each?"

Noah never valued my painting. He thought they were worth less than the

paint I used to create them, but he's been proven so wrong now that it isn't even funny. He might be laughing, but I'm dead serious when I respond. "The numbers you saw were correct. Don't assume things about my career."

"Career?" he asks, clearly stunned by my response. "You make your little pictures. That isn't even a real job. I can get prints online for twenty dollars."

"Wow, Noah, I knew you were an asshole, but you're really showing me the bullet I dodged by dumping you."

"*I dumped you, stupid bitch,*" he growls. "And now you're fudging the numbers online to make it look like you're living high and mighty in New York. But you aren't. You're probably whoring yourself out on the street to pay for your next meal, and I don't want used pussy. I've moved on to better things."

It crosses my mind that I could have him killed for talking to me like that. Lev would do it in a heartbeat, but would it even be worth it? I've already thought enough about Noah. I'm done bothering myself with his nonsense.

I don't even feel the need to get the last word in. I just hang up the phone and toss it onto the couch beside me.

Lev

The drama has mostly faded into the background, but it's not a good feeling. I can't really rest when I have a pregnant woman pacing around my house, raiding the cabinets at all hours while I try to figure out where the hell Vanya has disappeared to.

Nobody can find him. Not Valentin, not any of my guards, and not anyone else of my illusive Family members who would rather hide around the city peddling artwork at various galleries then get off their asses and look for him.

I've sunk probably half a million dollars into finding this guy, and we've come up with nothing. I just don't get where he could be hiding.

If he's been arrested, I would've found out by now. There's a slim chance he killed himself or was murdered in an unrelated incident, but I doubt it. Vanya knows how to keep himself alive. That's why he's still running around causing trouble while Felix got himself killed almost instantly when he crossed me.

I'm on my computer at home daily, looking for any piece of evidence that can bring me closer to solving the mystery of Vanya's mastermind vanishing act. Eliza is starting to think I've lost my mind, that I'm too obsessed with this, but I forgive her for not understanding.

The Bratva doesn't forget, and they never give up a target once they're locked in.

Today is no different. I'm scrolling through images captured by public cameras around the city when I'm interrupted by a knock on the door. I nearly have a stroke before I realize who it is.

"Is that the doctor?" Eliza asks from the living room.

It almost certainly, but I can never be too careful. I rush out with my gun drawn, holding out a hand to stop Eliza from answering. She gives me this look like I'm severely overreacting, especially since we knew the doctor would be coming to check on her pregnancy today, but that's exactly the point.

Vanya is undoubtedly studying us, watching what we do so that he can figure out how to catch us in our most vulnerable moments. That's what I would do, anyway. I would wait until everyone thought I disappeared, and then I would spring out when my target was certain they were meeting someone else.

A prickle of sweat dots my hairline as I peek out from the fisheye lens into the hallway. It's the only part of the door that isn't bulletproof.

My shoulders come down from my ears when I see that it's just the doctor outside with a cart full of equipment. Dr. Santo has an unmistakable appearance – jet black hair and skin as pale as fresh snow. He obviously dyes his hair and it's laughably unnatural, but he's also the best OBGYN doctor in the state. Appearances fall to the wayside when you're that skilled.

I open the door, looking past him to doublecheck the hallway before ushering him in.

Eliza is standing by the couch with her hands clasped together nervously. She had her nails done yesterday, and I'm certain it's because of the ultrasound. I guess it's been a while since we had guests.

"You must be Eliza," Dr. Santo says, stepping around his cart and extending his hand.

Eliza shakes it delicately and puts on a polite smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Very lovely to meet you," he says, smiling as he looks down to her belly. "And it's going to be very nice to meet you, as well." He laughs in an innocent sort of way that puts everyone in the room at ease. It's so nice not to have to deal with terrible people for once.

"Alright," he says, clasping his hands together and looking around. "Why don't we get started? Eliza, you can just lay back there on the couch. Yes, just relax. And Lev, would you be so kind as to get me a glass of water? I'm simply parched."

"No problem," I reply, hurrying over to the kitchen and filling a glass from the pitcher in the fridge. Eliza likes to keep the water as cold as ice as possible, but I'm a bit concerned it's going to shatter Dr. Santo's glowing porcelain teeth.

“It’s cold,” I say as I hand it to him.

“No worries.” He takes a small sip, placing it down on a coaster on the coffee table. Then, he moves to his cart, rearranging a few things and switching on a yellowing piece of medical equipment with a screen on the front.

“Never thought to replace that with something newer?” I ask, pointing at the device.

He chuckles. “Oh, you fat cats will never learn. Not everything has to be new to work properly. They don’t make these like they used to.” He pats the top of the machine. “I can see a heartbeat in a thousand-pound woman with this little guy. Works like a charm.”

Eliza snickers from the couch, and I retract into myself, folding my arms and choosing to observe in silence from now on. I feel like I’d manage to embarrass myself otherwise.

Dr. Santo goes to work quickly, moving at a surprising speed for a man his age. He hooks up his machine, puts a clear jelly on Eliza’s stomach, and begins to look for the baby.

Suspense hangs in the room as he rolls a little wand over her belly a few times. I lean forward, trying to make sense of what’s showing up on the display, but it might as well be a black screen. I can’t understand anything.

“Very interesting,” Dr. Santo mutters, frowning a bit. “Interesting, indeed.”

“What is it?” Eliza asks, jerking up from her restful position on the couch.

He grins at her, then looks over at me with a twinkle in his blue eyes. “Congratulations, Lev. You’re going to be a father of... twins!”

I had only joked about putting another baby inside her. I know it isn’t possible but what are the fucking odds?

I laugh. “Seriously?”

He nods. “Yes, there are two distinct heartbeats. Eliza is having twins.”

My legs threaten to give out from underneath me as I begin to comprehend what he’s saying. We’re having two babies instead of one. This is one hell of

a way to experience fatherhood for the first time.

“Maybe you should sit down,” Dr. Santo suggests, pointing to the couch where Eliza is making room for me.

“Yes, probably a good idea,” I mutter, my vision blurring a bit as I take a seat beside Eliza. I can barely breathe now, and it feels like the entire apartment is caving in on me.

“He looks a little shocked,” Dr. Santo says to Eliza with a laugh.

“Babe?” Eliza places her hand on mine. “Babe, are you alright?”

I shake myself from the daze, looking over to her as tears come to my eyes. I’ve never been the type to cry, but this is the most beautiful day of my life, and I don’t know how else to react.

I hold my breath, trying to contain the tears, but it only makes me feel like I’m going to pass out. I release the air in my lungs with a half-laugh, half-sob, and pull Eliza into my arms. “Yes, I’m okay,” I say, tears streaming from my eyes. “I’m more than okay.”

The warmth of Eliza’s body is comforting, but the way she holds me without judgment is what causes my heart to melt. Finally, after years of being the one who never breaks, I’m able to let go.

I can see Dr. Santo smiling as I open my blurry eyes. If Valentin were here, he’d be laughing, so I’m glad I decided to keep this between Eliza and myself. Jokes can wait.

I pull away from Eliza, planting a kiss on her belly before jerking back. I taste whatever weird jelly Dr. Santo put on her, and I can’t say I like it. I wipe it away with the back of my hand as Eliza giggles.

“Alright, enough embarrassing myself,” I say, getting off the couch and looking toward the ultrasound machine. “Are we a hundred percent certain she’s having twins?”

Dr. Santo nods. “Yes, the readings were quite clear. We just have to keep a careful eye on their development. There are more risks involved when a woman carries twins, but it’s nothing to be concerned about just yet. We have

to see how they develop.”

I nod, rolling my tongue under my lips. I’m no stranger to risks, but I’m so used to taking them on myself that the idea of Eliza having to take any at all scares me.

When did I get so soft? How did this woman make me into a walking sponge?

It must be witchcraft. My mother did warn me about that when I was a boy, but I never really listened. I wonder what she’d say if she were here right now.

But Eliza is obviously too sweet for such devious things. I’m the one with the skeletons in my closet and a thousand sins I must unpack, and every time she makes me feel anything at all, even the faintest glimmer of emotion, I project my negativity onto her.

That ends today. I must do better for the twins she’s going to give me.

And for her. She deserves it after everything she’s been through, and I doubt I’ll be able to keep her otherwise. She believes me to be a better man, and now it’s my job to live up to that illusion.

Dr. Santo cleans the jelly from Eliza’s stomach with a paper towel and arranges a few things on his cart. “Let’s do a follow up a month from now, and we’ll see how everything is coming along,” he says with a warm smile.

Eliza thanks him profusely, but I still feel the need to thank him again as he’s leaving.

“You’re a saint,” I say as I shake his hand by the door. “You really don’t know how much this all means to me.”

He looks over my shoulder to Eliza on the couch, then leans in and whispers to me. “You have a huge responsibility with these kids, Lev, bigger than anything else you’ve had to handle before. I know you well enough to know the kind of work you do, and I’ll still tell you that those twins are more important than all of that.”

I nod, his words sinking in as truth and flowing in my blood. “I won’t fail

them. Thank you.”

He smiles, patting me on the shoulder before he turns around and leaves.

In an instant, my life and my priorities have changed, but this won't be the only time. It'll happen again and again as we approach Eliza's due date. And when those two little angels are born, I will also be born again as a new man. I'm certain of it.

Eliza

I feel like I'm always on my phone. There's really nothing else to do here, and I'm all out of white paint so I'm not making any progress on my latest painting. Lev is supposed to be getting me some tomorrow, but until then, I'm flicking my thumb through videos at an increasing rate.

I'm just bored, but it's becoming unbearable. I read something about that once. The human brain can't go long without stimulation, or it legitimately becomes torture, and you can go insane.

I have to check myself sometimes to make sure that's not happening.

Yes, I'm really sitting on the couch. And yes, I really did get knocked up by a Russian mafia boss. I still haven't told my parents about it, but it's one of those things where I'm not sure if I ever should.

Like, I could hide it from them and disappear forever, but then they'd just be losing another child.

Sometimes, it feels like I'm already lost, but I can still choose what happens. I've just been delaying that choice, and it feels like it's going to come back to bite me eventually.

I suppose they could also reach out, which hasn't happened. In fact, nobody has talked to me since I told Noah off over the phone.

Maybe my whole hometown is just done with me.

That'd be a relief. I'd rather be cast out than be the one to abandon everyone.

But, as if the devil heard me and is sending his little demons to come fuck up my life again, my phone rings.

Shit, that better not be anyone but Lev. If it's Noah again, I'm going to smash my phone and be done with it.

But when I swipe up to see who's calling, it's neither of them.

The person calling me is Asher.

I'm hesitant to pick up the phone. What does he want from me that he can't get through Lev? I don't trust this man at all, and after hearing about what Lev did to get the second check from him, my suspicion is through the roof.

I can trust Valentin, but Asher just gives me the creeps.

But what if it's important? My curiosity builds to a quick peak, and I'm unable to stop myself from answering the phone, even if I don't know what I'm going to say. Lev isn't here, so I won't be able to give Asher much information if he's calling about displaying more of my paintings. I let Lev handle that side of the business, and I focus on using art as a creative outlet.

"Eliza, thank God I was able to reach you," Asher gushes the moment I answer his call.

My chest tightens. "What's up? Is there something wrong?"

"God, yes, very wrong. Oh, Jesus, Eliza, we need help down here at the gallery. Lev has been shot, and he's asking for... peroxide. Yes, he says he has some in the bathroom," Asher says, his voice high and twisted with distress.

My stomach drops so fast and so hard that it nearly draws me to the floor. My entire future flashes before my eyes, what could've been against the terror I'm facing now.

"Is he alright?" I ask, panic climbing up my throat like heartburn. Everything in the room is cold and fuzzy, and I can barely hear Asher's voice on the line.

"He needs it fast, Eliza. You've got to get down here."

"What about Valentin?"

"Valentin is dead. Jesus, just get down here before he dies! Seriously, he needs you."

My heart slams in my chest as I rush to the bathroom in search of peroxide. Of all things, why the fuck would he need something like that if he's dying? And why haven't they called an ambulance? Surely, that would be faster than me running all the way to Asher's gallery with a bottle of peroxide!

"Are you coming? Eliza, you need to hurry," Asher urges, his voice

bordering on scolding.

“I’m getting the damn peroxide!”

“Just get over here. He says he doesn’t want to die without you here.”

I feel like I’m going to puke, but I have to keep myself composed enough to get to Lev without passing out. It’s a very real possibility with how light-headed I am right now. This news might even kill me before Lev has the chance to even consider dying.

“Shit,” I mutter as I knock half the contents from the mirror cabinet into the sink as I grab a brown plastic bottle. It’s peroxide, but I still don’t see why he’d ask for something like that if he’s literally dying.

“I got it,” I say, panting as I run to the door barefoot. I can’t be bothered to put on shoes as I flee the apartment like it’s burning to the ground.

“Good, now bring it here, and hurry.”

If I could jump out the window and get downstairs faster, I’d consider it, but I’m already in the elevator, rolling down floor by floor, the crisp digital red number above the door changing every few seconds. It’s too long. I’m not going to make it in time.

“Can I talk to him, at least?” I ask, remembering that I’m still on the phone with Asher.

The line breaks up as Asher responds, and I can’t make out what he’s saying.

“Fucking piece of shit,” I growl, pulling the phone from my ear and shaking it. You’d think that they would’ve fixed the phone signal not working in the elevator issue a long time ago, but apparently, we’re permanently stuck in the goddamn eighties.

“Eliza? Eliza, can you hear me?” Asher’s voice crackles through the phone as I arrive at the ground floor.

“I’m here,” I blurt as I sprint out of the elevator. “I’m just... Fuck, I’m just trying to leave.”

A man in a dark suit jumps in front of me as I try to reach the door, but I

sidestep him with the agility only a near lethal dose of adrenaline can provide. My heart is beating so fast that I feel like a fly observing the slow-motion world around me. It's all crystal clear, and yet somehow still a blur as I rush out onto the busy streets of New York.

Lev's guards are chasing me as I fly barefoot down the gun-ridden sidewalk, weaving through pedestrians like this is a racing simulator. Lev put his men around the building to protect me, but they're not going to stop me from reaching him and potentially saving his life.

"I'm coming," I yell into the phone as I look over my shoulder. Most of Lev's guards have already faded so far into the distance that they're no longer a concern.

"Good, come quickly. Lev is looking very bad. He's pale. God, he's so pale."

I feel like Asher is playing this whole thing up in an unnecessary way, almost like he takes joy in what's happening to Lev. What a fucking snake. I ought to slap him when I get there.

"Have you called an ambulance or anything?" I ask as the buildings and traffic blur by.

"Lev doesn't want one."

"Well, if he's dying he doesn't have a fucking choice," I growl. "Just call one for him."

"He insists that he wants you here. That's all," Asher replies, his voice growing oddly impatient. "I hope you're on your way."

I am on my way, faster than I ever thought possible. My legs feel like they're moving on their own, flesh machines driven by some divine power that I'm certainly I'll pay for with interest when I wake up tomorrow.

But for Lev, there might not be a tomorrow if I don't get to the gallery in time, so I push past the growing resistance from my body, ignoring the alarms and warning in my head as I run at an even faster pace to the gallery.

The tall wooden doors are closed when I arrive. They were always too heavy for me when I went with Lev, but today they feel like they weigh nothing at

all as I yank them open and dash inside.

I brace myself for what I'm about to witness – Lev sprawled out across the pristine white floor, blood pooling around him like warm syrup. Asher would just be standing there idly, not helping, not doing a damn thing as Lev fades away.

Fuck, I don't know what I'd do with myself if I couldn't save him. I wish I'd be able to kill myself, but the babies make that impossible. I wouldn't deny them their existence.

But my twisted imagination turns out to be the sourest of lies. As I round the corner and come into full view of the gallery, it's not Lev who I see. It's two men. One of them is Asher, standing with his hands clasped together and a wide grin on his evil face.

And the other man couldn't be anyone but Vanya. I know it in my gut, and I also know that it's too late for me to escape.

Vanya sprints toward me, his teeth bared as he swings a rope around my body like a lasso. Asher cheers as Vanya pulls me to the ground, climbing over me and punching me in the face so hard that I taste hot metal in my mouth.

I scream, but so much blood is rushing to my face that I can barely hear myself. It's just the bass thump of panic in my ears, and the deep grunts from Vanya as he ties me up.

My heart is slamming in my chest so hard that I feel like it's going to explode. The ropes are going tighter around my wrists, ankles and even my neck. Are they going to kill me? I don't see what else they would do.

I scream again, and I'm met with another punch to the face, splattering fresh crimson blood against the cold marble floor.

"Don't mess her up too badly," I hear Asher say from above me, his voice thin and high with excitement. It makes me sick to my stomach to hear him like that. I shouldn't have ever trusted him.

"If she'd stop struggling, I wouldn't have to hit her," Vanya growls. "Stupid bitch."

“She won’t be able to struggle much once she’s all tied up, then we can really have some fun with her. That why you need to keep her pretty. Don’t fuck her up too much.”

Lev

Dead silence is rarely a good thing, but that's what I get from my guard when he calls me on the phone and I ask what's wrong. It's this overwhelmingly guilty pause that I'm receiving, something that scares even a man as hardened as I am.

Because there's only one thing this could be about. Only one person. Nothing else would leave my guard lost for words when I ask what's going on.

"Speak, goddammit!" I hold the phone like it's a snake trying to bite me, yelling at the screen like that will cure the awful feeling that's growing in the pit of my stomach. It burns like a whole bottle of vodka for breakfast.

"Eliza made a run for it. We don't know why, and we don't know where," he finally says. "Boss, I'm sorry, but she got away from us. We ran after her, but she was so fast. It almost seemed impossible the way she was moving."

"She ran away?" I ask, hardly believing what he's telling me. There must be another explanation. A woman who's pregnant with twins doesn't just sprint out of her home in the middle of the day on a whim. There must be a reason for this, and I know in my heart it's because she's in danger.

"Did you check the apartment?" I ask, quickening my step as I approach the building. It's a good thing I'm already here. I might be able to track Eliza's route if she hasn't gone too far already.

"I'm here with a few others right now. Nothing looks to be out of place, and all her stuff is still here," my guard explains. "And a few others went out looking for her."

"Which direction?" I ask, stopping in front of the building and looking up at the top floor way off in the distance.

"Out and to the right," he replies.

"Okay, I think I have an idea where she could've gone. I'll call you if I need backup." I hang up the phone before he can reply, dashing off toward the only place I can imagine Eliza going – Asher's gallery.

It's apparent now that she wasn't driven out of the apartment by someone. She was lured out, possibly tricked into thinking that she needed to leave in a hurry. It's either that or she really did decide to drop everything and make a run for it.

I just can't imagine her doing that. Maybe her parents got a hold of her and convinced her to leave, but the danger that would come with such a drastic move makes it difficult to believe.

It has to be Asher. Maybe he told her that something happened to one of her paintings? That wouldn't warrant such a theatrical reaction, though. I'm lost for the reason for all this, but I'd better find out soon before she gets hurt.

I'd blame myself if anything happened to her. The place should've been more secure. I should've taken her phone. I should've locked her up and refused to allow her to see the light of day.

Cruel, but perhaps it would've prevented this disaster.

Now, I'm left to worry about the only woman I've ever loved, and two babies that she's carrying away with her.

Is this a punishment for some great sin I've committed? God knows I probably deserve it for all I've done, but it shouldn't have to involve Eliza. She's never done anything wrong. She's a saint and as pure and soft as cotton.

This is all so confusing, and I'm not the type to be okay with being left in the dark. I have to know everything at all times, and if I don't, I get very frustrated. Angry. Enraged, even.

In this case, if someone is out to hurt Eliza, it would do more than enrage me. I would become a beast like no one has ever seen, fixated on ripping my target to pieces in the most bloody and painful way possible.

There's no room for mercy in this state of mind. There's no room for anything except death.

The beast threatens to take over completely before I've even reached Asher's gallery. I have to keep it at bay because I'm not certain that Asher is behind any of this. It's just a gut feeling because of the way I've had to deal with

him in the past.

But if it isn't him, then I'm truly lost as to what could be going on, and I'm not willing to accept that possibility until I've ruled out what's right in front of me. For my sanity, I need to be right this time.

I draw my weapon as I sprint up the marble steps to the double doors that separate me from the love of my life.

I'm relieved when I catch a whiff of her perfume, floral and sweet. She's here, but why? And what was the cause of her urgency?

I don't have time to consider what happened, only what's happening right now as my shoulder slams into the door and I break the silence in the air with a bang. The entire door falls to the floor inside the gallery with an echoing boom, and I hear shouting.

Two voices, both men. Asher and...

Vanya.

And then I hear Eliza.

I'm moving so quickly that I nearly slide into the opposite wall as I round the corner. I've been in stressful situations before, high stakes moments when lives were on the line, but never before have I had to witness the woman of my dreams with a gun to her head.

I don't have time to think. There's no way to negotiate with terrorists like these. Vanya is the one with the gun, so he's the one I hit first. I aim and shoot, praying that Eliza doesn't get hit but knowing in my heart that I have no other choice but to catch him off-guard.

Vanya collapses immediately, struck in the chest four times in the span of half a second. He doesn't have time to react, no opportunity to pull the trigger on Eliza before his life is taken and his consciousness vanishes.

I pray he ends up in hell.

Asher throws his hands up as I point my gun at him, but I'm not the type to show mercy. I blast that motherfucker too, peppering his body with the rest of the bullets in my gun. His eyes expand as he looks down at his bleeding

chest, in disbelief that he's about to die right before he falls to the floor beside Vanya.

Eliza struggles against the ropes that bind her, desperate to escape. She has a fighting spirit, but I hope I never have to witness it again. She doesn't deserve the peril I'm responsible for putting her through.

"Stay still," I say, dropping my gun and pulling a knife from my belt. "I'll cut you loose."

A whimper escapes her mouth as I slice through the ropes around her wrists. They're bound tight, but my blade is sharp enough to free her.

I scoop her off the floor once she's free, holding her in my arms as I look over her injuries. "What have they done to you, my love?"

She looks up at me, her eyes glistening with tears. "Nothing your love can't fix, darling."

I swallow hard, looking down at the blood under her nose and bruising on her face. If I could, I would bring Vanya and Asher back to life just so I could kill them slower the second time around, to really make them pay for what they've done to my sunshine.

But it's over now. It's time to heal.

"I'm sorry I failed you," I say, looking over Eliza's battered face again.

"No, Lev, you didn't fail me," she replies, wincing as she smiles. "You *saved* me."

Once more, she's able to cut through the façade of never-ending strength and cut me at my core, nearly bringing me to my knees as I feel a rush of emotion. I open my mouth, but words are difficult when my emotions are beyond description.

The only way I can say how I feel ends up being simple.

"I love you."

Her beautiful hazel eyes grow wide, and then she smiles again. "I love you too, Lev. Thank you for saving me. I owe you everything."

“You owe me nothing.”

“Not even a kiss?” she asks, wiping the blood from under her nose. “Or is that too gross?” She laughs.

I shake my head, leaning down to kiss her full lips. I taste the suffering on them, but I also taste a new beginning, a chance to leave this all behind and start over.

I taste the woman I intend to marry.

Eliza

“Push... That’s right, take a deep breath and... push!”

I dig my nails into the back of Lev’s hand but he’s gripping mine just as hard. They said the second baby would be easier but I’m not even sure I’ll be able to get the first one out. Jesus, how can something so innocent cause a woman so much pain?

I blame Lev. Motherfucker. He’s the one who put these babies in me. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t need the goddamn morphine.

But even in the heat of the moment, I can’t be too mad at him. He’s been by my side this entire time, throughout the doctor’s visits, the cramps, the sleepless nights, and the emotions swinging out of control. Lev is my rock, and he’s the only person I wanted in the delivery room with me during the birth of our children.

Not my parents, bless their hearts. I don’t want them to see me like this. It’s their first time meeting Lev as well, which has been... interesting. They didn’t know about him or the pregnancy until a few weeks ago, and they only got to meet him when we all gathered for the birth of the twins.

To say my parents were shocked when they finally saw Lev would be an understatement, but I’m sure they’ll get used to him. Under all the tattoos and muscle, he’s a sweetheart.

Unless you cross him, and then he might just kill you.

But my parents don’t know that. He’s playing the wealthy businessman card like he did when I first met him, keeping things vague enough to divert any suspicions about how he really makes his money.

My parents aren’t the types to ask too many questions, anyway. They just want to know that I’m taken care of, and with this new diamond ring on my finger, I’m sure they’ve stopped worrying.

Lev doesn’t just take care of me.

He spoils me rotten.

“Push!”

God, I really wish they’d stop saying that. What the hell do they think I’m doing?

Suddenly, I feel a release in me, something finally changing as I breathe deeply and squeeze Lev’s protective hand.

“There’s the first one,” the doctor announces.

“You’re doing so good,” Lev whispers, his eyes twinkling under the bright white hospital lights.

I see my dreams coming true in those eyes, the reflection of the baby I’ve just put into the world.

The second boy comes out easier, and soon I have them both resting on my chest. “Oh, you precious boys,” I mumble, my heart swelling with love and pride as I feel their skin against mine for the first time. “You beautiful angels.”

EPILOGUE

Eliza

Jake is hanging around Lev's neck like a monkey while Ivan clings to Lev's leg, trying to bring him toppling over into the grass. They play this game often, but the bigger they get, the more I see Lev struggling not to fall.

One of these days, Lev isn't going to be able to handle those two. They'll overpower him, and then he'll really need to watch out. There's no telling what a couple of clever boys can do to their dad once they figure out they have the upper hand.

Until then, I enjoy Lev being able to tire them out before bed. It's nice to get them tucked in early on the weekends so that we can sit outside and drink wine as the sun sets.

Or whisky, in Lev's case. He likes wine but he's been needing something stronger since the boys learned how to use their little legs and run laps around him.

Jake and Ivan's laughter fills the air as I watch them play. Lev, deciding he's had enough of this madness, pretends to succumb to the persistent tug of tiny hands and tumbles over into the grass. "Oh, you got me," he says, feigning defeat.

The boys crawl on top of him, bright smiles on their little faces as they declare victory over their father. Lev looks over at me, his eyes twinkling with joy that mirrors my own, and in this moment, I see the beautiful life we've built together from the chaos of our pasts.

It's clear to me that everything had to happen this way for a reason. How else would I appreciate the beautiful family I've become a part of? How else would I know that these moments are more precious than the giant diamond ring on my finger?

The air is warm, but the sun is starting to set. We need to get these little gremlins to bed before they start getting grumpy. That tends to happen when they're tired, and I'm already seeing yawns from them as Lev gets up off the

grass and scoops them up in his powerful arms.

When the stars begin to peek through the dusky sky, we coax the boys inside, their eyelids heavy with the weight of a day well-spent. The house is quiet, peaceful for the first time all day. We leave the boys to rest so that we can have our little fun before we collapse into bed together.

And if tonight is like most nights, that's when the real fun begins.

Lev and I retreat to the porch after making sure the boys won't get up for water or the potty. We bring our glasses out with us and snuggle together on the swing as the stars put on a show for us.

I love finding the constellations with Lev. I've made him paintings of his favorites, but he keeps finding new ones that he insists he likes even more than the last. I suspect it's a trick to get me to make more paintings for him, but I would do that for him, regardless.

"That one's cool." Lev points to Orion.

I giggle. "Lev, that was your favorite a month ago, before you changed it to Leo."

"Really?"

I nod, taking a sip of my wine.

"Oh, they look different every time." He rubs his chin, looking up at the stars. "Still beautiful, just like you."

"Always such a charmer," I say with a little hum, raising my glass. "To us!"

"To us," Lev echoes, his blue eyes meeting mine as he raises his glass with me.

The night deepens around us, but the warmth between us is like a bonfire, a reminder that no matter how cold the world becomes, we won't let it affect us. We burn bright in the darkness, and warm in the coldest of winters.

Together.

PREVIEW OF FILTHY BRATVA

Savva

It's not the heat, it's the dust that gets you out here, and after spending the weekend in Las Vegas with my boys, the long sprawl of the desert feels like the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression.

I'm looking forward to a drink. I don't normally take my whiskey on the rocks, but I've lost so much sweat from the sun beating down on my leather jacket that I'd drink mud if it had a few ice cubes in it. I know Angus restocks his ice daily, so it shouldn't be an issue.

It's just getting there that's the problem. Out here, the only place to stop for gas is owned by the Triple Six Angels, and while I'm not normally bothered by biker gangs, they jack their prices up so high that I'd rather fill my motorcycle up with my dehydrated piss than support their extortion.

Thankfully, I filled my tank before we left Vegas. I think Pasha even has an extra cannister of gasoline in his saddle bag, and Angus should have a supply in one of his storage units out back. I'll always find a way to avoid the Triple Six Angels' station.

I roll back the throttle as we approach Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey, pulling a cigarette from my pack and slipping it between my parched lips. I'm itching for a fix, and since I know I'm getting a drink soon, I'll allow the smoke to aggravate my throat. Out here, you get used to rough conditions.

The wind takes the effort out of smoking, burning down my cigarette so fast that I barely get a few puffs from it before it's rolling down the asphalt behind me.

Greg pulls up beside me and points to the horizon. Normally, I'd be able to tell we've arrived at the bar before I can even see the building. There's usually a cloud of dust around it at all hours from traffic, but today, there's nothing. It's just the lonely brown rectangle in the distance.

As we get closer, I notice there isn't a single motorcycle or car parked out front. I check my watch. It's four in the afternoon, prime time for people to start coming in. I wanted to have a chat with Angus before rush hour, but

there doesn't appear to be anyone here.

Odd.

The hairs on the back of my neck stands up when Greg, Pasha, and I roll into the parking lot. It's a ghost town. There isn't a single person in sight, and the lights inside the bar are off. What's going on?

I park directly in front of the building, signaling for Greg and Pasha to hold back while I check the front entrance.

CLOSED.

The red sign on the door hangs by a thin metal chain, swaying in the breeze. I touch it, pulling back my hand as I find the metal to be scalding hot. It must've been hanging up all day.

Angus didn't come in this morning, and if he did, he never opened the bar for business.

I knock on the door and then try to peer inside, cupping my hand over the glass and searching the inside for movement.

Nothing.

"What the fuck, Angus," I growl, lighting up a cigarette and turning to Greg and Pasha. "Nobody's here."

"Well, I could've told you that," Pasha says, stepping off his lime-green Harley and crossing his arms. "The sign says that they're closed."

I'm tempted to ash my cigarette in his eyes. "Today is payday. He's not weaseling out of this one. We're going to have to go find the bastard."

"Maybe he's sick," Greg says.

"I don't give a fuck what he is. Money owed is money owed. You pay what you're supposed to, and if there's an issue, send a goddamn text or something." I pull out my phone and check it, but there's nothing from Angus. The last message I got from him was a month ago.

"Shit," I grumble, dialing him up.

I hold my hand up to Greg and Pasha and turn around, putting the phone to my ear. If Angus knows what's good for him, he'll pick up.

But before I even have a chance to think about what I'm going to say to him, I hear a cheerful female voice on the line. "We're sorry, but the number you're trying to reach has been disconnected."

Seriously? If he was late on the payment, I'd give him more time, but trying to make a run for it will get him killed. If you borrow money from the Russian Bratva, you pay it back in cash...

Or with your life.

I pocket my phone and turn around. "Looks like we got a runner."

"Angus? I didn't take him for that kind of guy. Always seemed like an honest man," Pasha says, sounding disappointed.

I shrug. "I don't see what else it could be, but we'll give him some time. Let's grab some drinks, cool down, and then we'll hit the road. We can come back in a couple of days."

"But they're closed," Greg innocently points out.

I toss my cigarette on the ground and fling my elbow back into the glass window on the door, shattering it into the building. Reaching through the shards, I find the lock and turn it. Easy.

The door swings open and I gesture inside. "It's self-serve tonight, boys."

Pasha joins me as Greg climbs off his bike. Nobody is going to tolerate another two hours riding through the desert without a couple drinks in their blood. At the very least, we need to cool down. I know Angus has a shower in the back. He practically lives here.

Plus, I'd like to take a look around. I doubt Angus would be hiding out here, but it's worth taking a look to see if he left any evidence as to where he could be. You can tell a lot about a man's intentions by searching his belongings.

Stepping inside, the first thing I notice is the heat. Normally, Angus would have the A/C blasting, even when he wasn't open. If you leave it off, you're surrendering to the desert heat, and that will spoil your booze within just a

few short days.

I make my way behind the bar and notice the condensation in some of the bottles. That's not good.

I flip open the ice box behind the bar and frown when I see that it's been reduced to water. Dipping my pinky in, I find it to be warm. Someone cut the power, and they haven't been here for at least a week. An insulated ice box wouldn't melt that fast.

"Check the office before you drink anything," I bark at Pasha as he pops open a bottle of whiskey. "Something's not right here."

Pasha takes a swig before trudging away to the back where Angus's office is located. Angus likes to sleep back there, and if there's any evidence to be gathered, it'll most likely be in the office.

I sweep the rest of the bar while Greg joins Pasha in the back, opening the register and finding receipts from two weeks ago inside. There's a bit of cash, as though Angus stopped working midday and just vanished.

"What are you up to?" I mumble.

The fridge below the bar is off just like the ice box, and inside, the fruit inside is fuzzy with mold. There's no hum of electricity coming from it, no light inside, and no indication that anyone has been here in a long time.

But why? Did something happen to Smoke, Steel, & Whiskey that would cause it to fail, striking fear in Angus and causing him to flee before I could confront him about missing payments? He's wrong if he thinks he can run from me.

"Hey, boss," Pasha says, coming out from the back and pointing over his shoulder. "You're going to want to see this."

I close the fridge and move out from behind the bar, following Pasha down the hallway to the back office where Angus hangs out when the bar is closed. The lights are off, but enough light streams through the splotchy yellow windows to illuminate the hallway.

It smells like mold, and not the kind that was growing on the lemons in the

fridge. It's black mold, which is rare out here due to the lack of humidity. I used to see it when I first moved to the United States from Russia, and I was living with a group of immigrants in a basement that we rented with what little cash we could pool together.

Pasha was there with me, but not Greg. He came along later when our criminal organization took hold in Nevada, and we needed more people to keep things running smoothly.

They say crime doesn't pay, but it's made me a rich man.

When we arrive at the office, I stop, wrinkling my nose at the smell. It's all too familiar, bringing me back to the nights when we would huddle around the fan in the basement, trying to trick ourselves into thinking it could make the air taste better. I'm pretty sure the mold was worse for me than smoking.

"It's like a swamp in here," Greg says, shaking his head.

I look around, and I'm inclined to agree. There's a window in the office with the blinds up, hot desert sunlight streaming in with a rich yellow glow. It cascades across a desk with wilted blue plastic bags on it, once filled with ice, but now melted down and soaked into the carpet.

The door must have been closed this entire time, because it locked the moisture in, causing black mold to make its home on the lower part of the walls. Angus just dropped everything he was doing and left without explanation.

The carpet squishes when I take a step into the room. I start pulling open drawers, searching through Angus's belongings for nothing in particular. I already know that he's gone. There's not much left to see here. He didn't leave a note, not even a message on my phone.

He's just gone.

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