

THE
DIRECTOR

RENEE ROSE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE DIRECTOR

RENEE ROSE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers: Thank you so much for picking up the first book in my new bratva series. If you've been reading me for a while, you know abduction / seduction is my favorite trope. When I started writing this one, I realized, of course, mixing it with the secret baby trope was rather tricky! I can't stress a pregnant heroine, and yet I love my heroines a little stressed.

Just a reminder that this is fiction and fantasy. Not everything Ravil and Lucy do in the story may be medically advised. If you're pregnant or plan to become pregnant, please play responsibly. :-)

CHAPTER 1

*L*ucy

IT MIGHT BE time to stop wearing heels. Or choose the lower ones.

Fresh from another courtroom win, I step into the crowded elevator. I hide my wince, courtesy of swollen feet stuffed in my boss-bitch stilettos—the ones I use to assert my seniority, stature, and overall dominance in the courtroom and, more importantly, within my father’s firm.

I nearly wince again when I see Jeffrey’s on this ride.

He glances at my swollen belly then meets my gaze with a torment of conflict behind his grey eyes.

It’s not his.

We broke up six months before I had the very out-of-character sexcapade in DC that resulted in my changed state.

“Lucy,” he says. It’s a statement, not an opening. An acknowledgment of the eight years we wasted together.

I bite back a sigh. “Jeffrey.”

Thankfully, there are four other people in the elevator, so I snap into position beside him to stare at the doors as the elevator moves upward.

“How’s your dad?”

Oh, jeez. Were we really going to do this?

“Same.” I make the required glance his way.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes. Well, it is what it is.”

I face unfriendly counsel daily—in my firm and opposite me in the courtroom. I can handle another elevator ride with my ex. But the mixture of pity and remorse in Jeffrey’s stare makes my Lafayette 148 New York blazer—the one with a straining button above my belly—suddenly unbearably tight and hot.

But, then, I imagine wearing any blazer in July while pregnant would be unbearable.

Still, I wish he’d work through his emotional crap and stop making my growing belly the source of some internal conflict. I assume he wonders what it would be like if it were his. Or maybe he feels guilty that I’m doing this baby thing on my own because he would never commit.

The fact is, I’ve gone on without him.

End of story.

The elevator stops on the floor of his architecture firm, but he hesitates, shifting his arm in front of the sensors, but not getting out. “We’re going to get drinks at The Rocket tonight if you want to join us,” he says then grimaces, probably realizing drinks are out for me considering the tiny life growing inside me.

“Another time,” I say in that disinterested tone of voice that’s supposed to convey *never* but falls a little short. I might have mixed feelings about Jeffrey, too.

Or maybe I’m just terrified I can’t do this alone.

I hold my head up, keeping my courtroom stance until the doors shut. Then it gets easier to maintain when the doors open on my floor, and I affect my confident stride to the shared secretary’s desk.

“First appointment?” I usually know my schedule without being told. I’m the type of person with the proverbial mind like a steel trap, but the hormones are messing with my memory, too. I feel muddled. Soft around the edges.

And I hate how vulnerable and out of control that makes me feel.

“The first appointment is with Adrian Turgenev, the young man charged with arson of the sofa factory on 11th,” Lacey, the secretary, tells me.

Right. Russian *mafiya*, or *bratva*, as they call it. The client was referred by Paolo Tacone, one of my Italian crime family clients.

Funny, are the Russians and Italians in bed together now? It doesn’t matter. It’s not my job to know the real details of their business.

It’s just my job to defend them with the facts collected by law

enforcement.

I have to admit the slight foreboding tickling the back of my neck at getting involved with the Russians. Not because I take a moral high ground with the people I defend. You can't be a defense attorney and ride that horse.

Only because of *him*.

Master R, the sexy Russian criminal I met in Washington, DC last Valentine's day.

The unwitting sperm donor for my adventure into single parenting.

But he was in Washington, DC. Probably zero connection with the cell here in Chicago.

I unlock my office and go in then pull the file on Adrian Turgenev to review the notes the secretary made on the case. I sit behind my desk before I kick off the three-inch heels, which are digging into my swollen feet.

Lordy. Pregnancy is not for wimps. Especially not at age thirty-five.

"Lucy. Did I hear you're taking on a new organized crime outfit?"

I try not to narrow my eyes at Dick Thompson, one of my dad's partners in the firm. I've known him since I was a kid and have to work very hard to keep him from still treating me like one.

"You heard correctly." I raise my brows to inquire about his point.

He shakes his head. "I don't know if that's a good idea. We spent many hours deliberating the wisdom of taking on the Tacones back in the day when your father represented Don Santo or whatever his name was. We can't have this firm pulled down with a nasty reputation."

I remember. I worked here during my summer and winter breaks from the time I was sixteen. I also remember what my father had said at the time.

"This firm is famous for defending murderers and criminals. Organized crime simply provides the guarantee of return business." I flick my brows with a cool smirk.

This isn't about some moral high ground. It's Dick being a dick. He pushes me on purpose. He always has. I've had to work doubly hard to prove I deserved the spot in this firm, both because I'm female and because my father helped me get it. Now there's some kind of campaign going on behind my back regarding the partnership. Dick's building a case against me. Or maybe my dad. Likely both of us.

We'll see.

As a woman in a cut-throat business in one of the most cut-throat firms, I'm always fully expecting the dagger that's inches from my back.

My phone rings.

“That’s probably him. I have to go,” I breeze to Dick as I shove my feet back in my pumps and answer the phone.

“Mr. Turgenev and Mr. Baranov here to see you.”

“Send them in, please.”

I stand and walk around my desk, ready to shake their hands when they come in.

I should’ve been prepared for it.

I had that niggling feeling. Still, when the door opens and I catch the handsome, brutal face of the man standing there, the room swoops, dips, and momentarily goes black.

It’s him. *Master R*. My partner from Black Light, the BDSM club in DC.

The father of my child.



Ravil

“LADY LUCK.”

I catch the elbow of the lovely blonde attorney as she sways. I’m so shocked to find her here—in Chicago of all places—I fail at first to notice the cause of her swoon.

Then I see it. Her belly protrudes indelicately below the button on her designer suit jacket.

Her *pregnant* belly.

I do the math very quickly. Valentine’s night. Broken condom. Five months ago. Yes, her bump is the right size to be mine. But I could’ve skipped the calculation—everything’s there on her colorless face.

She’s having my baby. And she didn’t want me to know it.

Blyat.

I may have thought many times about our night together. I may have even returned to the club in DC to seek her—without luck. But her thoughts of me have not been so fond.

She’s definitely not happy to see me. In fact, she looks downright alarmed.

As well she should be.
I take in a measured breath.

“LUCK INDEED,” I murmur, releasing her elbow as she quickly recovers, her ice-princess mask snapping firmly into place on her lovely face.

Lady Luck was the name she chose at the roulette event where I met her. Until today, I didn’t know her real name. Nor that we live in the same city.

“Mr. Turgenev.” She offers a slim hand to Adrian, who slouches a little as she shakes it, intimidated by her presence. “And Mr. Baranov, was it?”

“Call me Ravil.”

Or Master, as you called me the last time we were together.

Her brown eyes skitter to my face again. She’s even more beautiful than I remember. Pregnancy has softened her already lovely face with a few extra pounds. She has a radiant glow.

“Nice to meet you. Please, sit down.” She indicates the chairs across from her desk.

“You came highly recommended, Ms. Lawrence.” I sit, and I watch her as she shuffles the papers in her file. Her hand trembles slightly. When she sees me looking, she immediately drops the papers, snapping her head up and fixing Adrian with a shrewd gaze.

“So, you’re charged with aggravated arson. You allegedly burned down West Side Upholstery where you worked. Your bail posted at one hundred thousand and was paid by Mr. Baranov.” She flicks a glance at me then returns to focus on Adrian. “Tell me what happened.”

Adrian shrugs his shoulders. He’s one of the newest to join my fold. His accent is still thick, despite my edict that he must only speak English. I require that of all my men because it’s the quickest way to learn.

“I work at sofa factory, yes. But I know nothing about the fire.”

“The police found lighter fluid on your uniform.”

“I had barbecue after work.”

He sure did. Right after he broke into Leon Poval’s home, hoping to kill him with his bare hands. When he found the man’s apartment empty, he burned his factory down to console himself.

He’s obviously unconvincing, still in his defensive posture from being questioned by the police. I don’t tell him to act otherwise. It’s not my habit to reveal any cards before they should be turned over, even if she is working for

us.

I'm also far less interested in Adrian's case now that I am working out what's going on with my beautiful attorney. Why didn't she tell me?

"You were only hired there last week?"

"*Da.*"

I cut him a look.

"Yes," he amends.

"Before that you worked for Mr. Baranov?" she glances my way. "As a...structural engineer?"

Adrian shrugs again. "Yes."

"Why did you take a minimum wage job at a sofa factory when you're trained as an engineer?"

"I have an interest in building furniture."

Lucy sits back, a flicker of annoyance crossing her face. "I am better able to help you if you give me the truth." She glances my way, as if for support. "Do you know about attorney-client privilege? Anything we discuss about your case will remain confidential and can't be compelled from me in a court of law."

I do nothing to intercede. This is her job. She can work for my money.

Adrian gives her a bored look.

She blows out a breath. "So you didn't go back to the factory after work that night? Or stay late?"

Adrian shakes his head. "*Nyet*—no."

She continues to interview him, jotting things down and studying both him and me. I remain silent. Let her wonder and worry.

I'm already making my plans. This afternoon I need to find out everything there is to know about Lucy Lawrence. And then I'll know exactly what angle to take with her.

"I can probably plea-bargain it down to arson. It carries three to seven years in prison instead of four to fifteen for aggravated."

"No," I cut in. "He will plead not guilty. That's why we hired the best to represent him."

She doesn't look surprised. "All right. I require a fifty thousand dollar retainer, payable before I enter the plea. And I will need more to work on if I'm going to win this case."

I stand, signaling the end of the interview. "I'll transfer the money today, and we will discuss the events some more. Thank you, counselor."

She stands and walks around the desk. Her high heels would say *fuck-me* if they were red, but because they're nude are more of an *I'll-fuck-you*. Especially the way she struts in them like she lives at that altitude. I'll bet she's a barracuda as a lawyer. Paolo Tacone said as much.

The pregnancy does nothing to soften the edges of her imposing stature. If anything, it makes her even more goddess-like. The female form to be both worshipped and feared.

Except I know she's the one who prefers to be dominated.

I'm guessing that's a secret not many share. She was untried at submission when I had her. If she hasn't pursued it since, I may be the only man who's dominated her.

That thought shouldn't get me hard, but it does.

I will dominate her again.

I adjust my cock at the idea, and her gaze drops to my crotch. Some of her regal composure falls away. A flush colors her neck and the flesh visible in the open V of her expensive blouse.

I take her hand when she offers it, and I squeeze, but don't let go. Her intelligent brown gaze tangles with mine, and I hold it.

Her breath stutters and stops.

"Adrian, wait in the hallway for me. I'll be there in a moment." Adrian leaves, and I shut the door behind him, still holding her hand.

Her eyes slightly widen. She resumes breathing with a little gasp as she tugs her hand away as if I scalded her. "Ravil."

A prickle runs through me at the sound of my name on her lips. Because she says it like she's claiming it for herself. Like she, too, regretted the absence of personal details after our encounter.

But that's impossible. If she's carrying my child, she had every reason, right, and responsibility to contact Black Light and request my personal information. To contact me with the news.

And she didn't. Which means she didn't want to know my name.

"Do you have something to tell me, Lucy Lawrence?"

"No," she clips, turning away, her business-like demeanor in full command.

I catch her arm, and she rubberbands back. I immediately release it when she shoots a laser-beam glare at my hand.

"You really should have called." I give her belly a pointed look.

She draws herself up taller, the muscles in the front of her neck going

stiff. “It’s not yours,” she blurts as color suffuses her face. Her pupils are tiny points of fear.

The lie hits me square in the chest. I was right. She didn’t want me to know the existence of this child.

I cock my head. “Why lie?”

Her neck and chest spread with color, too, but she keeps her voice as even and low as mine. “I know what you are, Ravil. I don’t believe your”—she clears her throat for emphasis— “*profession* lends itself to fatherhood. I won’t ask for child support. Don’t ask for visitation. Don’t make me prove in a courtroom why you’re unfit to parent.”

My upper lip curls at her threat. I am a man who’s reached the top of my organization and this city with quick, emotionless thinking. I don’t usually take offense. I don’t usually make things personal.

But this time, it’s fucking personal. Lucy Lawrence thinks I’m unfit to parent my child? She thinks she’ll keep this child from me?

Fuck. That.

I give her a smile that promises retribution. “Don’t worry, counselor. I won’t ask.”

I’ll take.

“I look forward to seeing you again.” I pack everything into my words—innuendo and warning—and she reads it all.

CHAPTER 2

*L*ucy

I LEAN on my desk after Ravil and his young bratva soldier leave my office and breathe deeply.

Not yogic breathing. More like the kind of frantic panting to keep from passing out.

What are the fucking chances?

After all my concern that my best friend Gretchen would tell someone at the Black Light and that it would somehow get back to Master R, my partner from that night, he ends up in my office purely by chance.

A referral from Italian mafia kingpin Paolo Tacone.

Gretchen will call it fate when I tell her. She believes in the Universe delivering your highest good and all that crap. She also told me I had an obligation to tell Ravil about my pregnancy.

But I had a very good reason not to.

God, I don't know if I played that right. Threatening a Russian mafiya kingpin probably wasn't my smartest move.

And I definitely offended him.

But maybe he has no interest in the child. For all I know, he could be married. Or hate kids. Or agree with me that his profession doesn't lend itself to fatherhood.

A shiver runs across my skin remembering the way he held my hand way

too long. How I turned into a doe in the headlights, his masculine magnetism making me weak in the knees even when I know I should run.

I definitely shouldn't have lied. It's not my style and insulted his intelligence. There was no way he didn't guess it's his. I remember him being extraordinarily perceptive. Knowing how I'd react to his every suggestion before I did. Planning our scenes together with every nuance of perfect timing and action to coax my surrender.

I also remember him choking a man for saying something disrespectful about me.

Ravil is dangerous. Lethal, even. He's in the *bratva* or Russian *mafiya*. I knew it when I met him at Black Light by the tattoos that cover his skin. He's probably high up, considering the Russian diplomat he was at the Black Light with. He operates outside the laws I spend my day tap dancing around. He takes what he wants.

I don't mind lethal in a client. I've been exposed to the Tacone family since I passed the bar. Part of me finds the power and danger they wield exhilarating. I found it just as thrilling in a play partner at Black Light. Until the violence unfolded before my eyes. That was when I used my safe word and walked.

And I definitely mind it in the father of my son. Someone filling the actual role of father, not just the sperm-donor part. As a sperm donor, Ravil Baranov is perfect. I don't know his medical history, but he's physically fit and good-looking with piercing blue eyes, fair hair, and a body built of solid muscle. He's also highly intelligent.

He's just not the sort of man I want as a role model for our son.

Dammit.

Now I'm on pins and needles, waiting for his reaction. Will he try to insert himself into this pregnancy, or will he walk away? He's in the driver's seat with me anticipating the sky falling.

And I do fear it could fall.

I just don't know how. Or when.



Ravil

“IT’S A BOY.” Dima—the best hacker on this continent and Russia’s— winks at me over the top of his laptop.

A boy.

I’m having a son.

I lean over Dima’s shoulder as he scrolls through Lucy’s medical records. I ordered Dima to give me every piece of information he could find on her, starting with medical records.

“Due date is November sixth,” Dima reads aloud. His twin, Nikolai, looms over his other shoulder.

“That makes the conception date...hang on...” Nikolai’s thumbs work over the screen of his iPhone. “Valentine’s Day.” He meets my gaze. “But you already knew that.”

I suck in my breath and rub my jaw. Yes, I knew. The baby is definitely mine.

I’m having a son.

I never thought I would be a father.

“We’ll have to share our papa with a new baby brother,” Nikolai teases, clapping me on the shoulder. *Papa* is a name sometimes used for the *pakhan*, or head of the *bratva*. It’s not one I’ve ever claimed, but my men use it jokingly.

The hard look I shoot him makes him immediately retract his hand. He offers a shrug. “Congratulations? Are you going to claim him?”

Part of the *bratva* Code of Thieves is to swear off all family—disassociate yourself from mothers, brothers, sisters, wives.

Lovers are all right because we don’t swear off sex. We’re the opposite of monks.

But severing ties is a way to protect the organization. It keeps everyone’s interests clean and unimpeded. Protects the innocent.

It’s one of the reasons I never pursued Lucy after Valentine’s Day, despite the fact that she utterly captivated me that night. That I haven’t stopped thinking of her since. Finding out she’s pregnant changes everything and nothing at all.

Not that *bratva* rules don’t get broken.

Especially by those higher up.

Igor, our *pakhan* in Moscow, reportedly has a beautiful, red-haired daughter. He didn’t marry the mother—she’s been kept as his mistress all these years, but he essentially has a family. Of course, their whereabouts are

unknown. He has to keep them safe. When he dies—and word is his cancer is spreading rapidly—he may try to leave his very large financial interests to them.

In which case, that pretty red-head probably won't survive his funeral. I'd give her three months after his death, max.

And now I will have a child to protect, as well.

Am I going to claim him?

Lucy seems to think I have no right. That I'm unfit.

"The child is mine," I say darkly.

No one takes what's mine.

"Send me every bit of information you can find on Lucy Lawrence," I order Dima. "What she does. Where she eats. What she buys. Who she calls. Everything."

CHAPTER 3

*L*ucy

AFTER STOPPING at a cafe near work to eat a quick dinner, I take a cab home. My feet are too swollen to even consider taking the El and walking the few blocks to my place.

I limp out of the elevator and open my apartment door, dropping my work satchel inside the door. My place is small but immaculate because I need order around me to manage everything on my plate. I turn on the lamp by the door. I have one heel already kicked off before I catch sight of my luggage standing near the door.

What the—?

I suck in a sharp breath, filling my lungs to—

“Don’t scream.” He barely speaks it. Just a low intonation from the shadowed figure in the armchair in my living room over by the window.

My heart stutters and thuds painfully when I identify him, one elegant leg crossed over the other, lounging back like he owns the place.

He unfolds his large form from the chair with grace.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” I catch the back of the sofa with my fingertips to steady the swoop of the room. Damn blood volume.

He doesn’t answer, just saunters toward me with a devilish smirk in place. Like he knows everything that’s about to happen and enjoys that I don’t.

Damn Russian.

“I came to get what’s mine.” He advances slowly.

The floor stops tilting enough for me to take my hand away from the couch and jab it into the purse still slung over my shoulder to find my phone. I might be able to call 911—

Ravil catches my wrist and takes the phone away, pocketing it.

Or not.

He divests me of the purse, which he drops on the floor by the satchel.

If he looked angry, if his touch had hurt me, I’m sure I would have screamed. At least, that’s what I tell myself.

In reality, I’m trapped in his azure gaze, memories of how he commanded my body so masterfully the last time we were together flooding back.

I find indulgence in his eyes... not rage. Only a hint of danger.

I put a hand protectively over my belly and take a step backward toward the door.

He catches my wrist again and pulls me back. Places my palm back on the sofa. “I liked you where you were, *kotyonok*.”

Kotyonok. His pet name for me.

Kitten.

He picks up my other hand and puts it on the back of the sofa, and I have no doubt why he enjoyed this position. I’m perfectly presented for a spanking. He presses down on the backs of both hands, his body crowding mine from behind. “Don’t. Move,” he murmurs against my ear.

I instantly rebel, pulling one hand up and away.

“Hmmm.” He’s patient. He catches my hand and pins it down again. “No safe words for you this, time, kitten. But I’ll be gentle.”

He bands one arm around my waist and splays his hand over my growing belly. “You shouldn’t have kept this from me.”

I go still, breath clogged in my throat.

Ravil’s aggression is leashed. Suave. He’s no more threatening than a handsy date, and yet I’m not foolish enough to underestimate him. He’s confident he holds all the cards here, and until I know what those cards are, I must be cautious. He rubs a slow circle over my baby bump.

I don’t insult his intelligence by attempting to play dumb. Say I didn’t know how to contact him. We both know I could’ve figured it out.

Keeping his hand over my belly, he uses the other to drag up the hem of my skirt in the back.

I'm wearing thigh-highs for hose—not to be sexy but because regular pantyhose are too hot to wear in July. Especially for a pregnant woman.

I hear Ravil's intake of breath when he discovers them. "Fuck," he chokes. "Who did you wear these for?"

I'm suddenly tempted to lie. To tell him there's someone else. That I'm back together with Jeffrey, or maybe, I met someone new. Maybe that would stop his sexual advances.

Except I don't *want* to stop the sexual advances. They are what frighten me the least about this man.

He's already proven himself an attentive lover. He gave me the best orgasms of my life.

And I haven't been with any man since.

So I opt for the truth. "They're cooler than regular hose."

"Cooler." He practically purrs his approval. He strokes his palm around the left globe of my ass. "Yes. That would be important." He arranges the skirt of my dress above my waist and nudges my feet wider. I wobble, still halfway in one heel, and he bends down to slip it off.

Like a modern-day Prince Charming, only his form of charming is quite a bit more terrifying.

"Your feet are swollen," he remarks gruffly. "No more heels for you, kitten." He tosses the shoe down the hall.

I'm tempted to challenge his right to make rules for me, only I'm afraid to discover his response. He certainly believes he has a right to one.

I'm inclined to believe he might.

His hand claps down on my ass with a surprising smack.

"Hey!" I jolt upright and try to swivel my hips away from him, but his hold around my waist makes it impossible.

"Hush, *kotyonok*. Punishment is in order." Somehow he makes it sound more like a delicacy than something to be feared. But then, I have submitted to his dominance before. Another smack, this time on my other cheek. He smacks hard—hard enough that the place where the first slap landed starts to smart and sting.

"Ravil," I gasp, and he strokes his palm over my offended cheeks.

"I like to hear you say my name, lovely Lucy. We did not exchange names last time, which seemed a great shame." His hand leaves my ass, and I brace for another smack. It comes, followed by a rough, claiming squeeze.

"But of course the biggest shame is this." He strokes my belly. "Not that

you're having my son, but that you wanted to keep him from me."

I get dizzy hearing he knows I'm having a boy. It supports my theory that he has laid a trap, and I've already stepped in it. Dammit! Why didn't I take charge of the situation in my office this morning?

"I'm sorry," I say.

"I don't believe you." His accent grows thicker. He smacks my ass again, three times, hard, then slides the satin of my panties down to my thighs.

"I'm sorry I offended you," I amend. He's right, I'm not sorry I tried to keep the child from him. I still wish he didn't know.

And with good reason, as I'm now the subject of his punishment.

Not that there isn't something deliciously erotic and pleasurable about it. Especially when he slips his fingers between my legs and runs them over my extraordinarily wet folds.

"That may or may not be true, kitten." He continues to explore between my legs, gliding a lubricated finger up to my clit and tapping.

I let out a breathy moan. I don't mean to—I was just trying to exhale, but it has a wanton sound that makes Ravil rumble approvingly.

"But I will make sure you are well-punished for the offense you gave me."

Tap-tap-tap.

I squirm at the touch on my clit—suggestive and not enough.

"And believe me, kitten, if you ever want to come again, you'll do as I say."

My heart thunders because I know we're not just talking about sex here. There is unmistakable danger in his voice, even though he only threatened to withhold my orgasm.

"Y-you need to leave now," I say, but I don't move from the position he put me in. I don't jerk away or clamp my legs closed or do anything at all physically to show I don't want his touch.

Because I do want his touch.

Rather desperately.

I have to say that pregnancy hormones have turned me into the horniest, most unsatisfied female in the entire state of Illinois. I spend my nights with my laptop open to porn and my fingers between my legs, but I'm never satiated.

And I blame Ravil for my choice of porn. BDSM—preferably Russian. And believe me, there's a lot of Russian porn out there. I never had the

slightest interest in either before Valentine's day.

Tap-tap-tap.

I whimper.

"I will leave, kitten. And you will come with me."

I start to shake my head, but he chooses that moment to increase the pressure on my clit, slowly circling it with the pad of his finger.

I whimper again.

"I-I'm not going anywhere with you," I assert.

We both know it's a lie. I'm just not sure yet how he plans to make me.

"Open your legs wider."

The fact that I obey says everything. He holds all the power here. Not because of his threats—he hasn't made them yet although I'm sure he will.

But because of the magic of his fingers.

I want more.

Need more.

So desperately.

He shoves my panties lower, like he needs them out of the way. "Take them off," he orders. His voice is rough and guttural. He's not unaffected by what he's doing to me.

Breath coming in ragged drags, I kick off the panties and resume my position.

Ravil slaps me between the legs.

I gasp, instantly trying to close them. I may let him spank my ass, but my pussy is something different. It's so swollen and slick right now with my juices. Embarrassingly so. It's like this every time I masturbate since I got pregnant.

Too much of the baby's testosterone, I imagine.

"Open." One word, very firm.

I do, only because I want him to go on. I may not have liked having my pussy spanked, but it only served to make me needier. More desperate.

He slaps me there again. And again.

"Naughty kitten. I will enjoy punishing you."

I flush with heat, the throb between my legs driving me mad.

He stops spanking and rubs his fingers through my wetness again. "Now, if you want me to finish this later in a way that has you screaming my name, you will do exactly as I say."

My pulse picks up speed.

He removes his fingers, slaps my ass on each side again, and pulls my skirt down over my bare, smarting cheeks. “It’s time to go. You’re coming to live downtown with me for the remainder of your pregnancy. You will tell your office you’re on bedrest and can no longer come in. I will permit you to maintain your work and friendships remotely so long as you never mention me or your situation. I will be monitoring.”

I stand upright but cling to the back of the sofa with one hand for stability. “And if I don’t?”

The question I dread to ask.

“Then I will take you to Russia until the baby is born. No promise of your safe return when it is over.” He completely leaves out whether my son would be with me when—if—I returned, so I’m guessing the answer is no.

The room spins.

I must look like I’m about to faint because Ravil scoops me into his arms, honeymoon style. “Come, no need to be upset. I will make sure you have every comfort and necessity for this pregnancy.” He carries me to the front door and opens it. “These are easy guidelines to follow.”

Behind the door stands a giant. More of a bear than a man, with broad, Paul Bunyon shoulders, a scruffy beard and dark piercing eyes.

I shriek a little.

“Shh. It’s Oleg. He will carry you to the car.”

“I don’t need to be carried,” I say quickly. I don’t find the man threatening, per se, but he’s huge and a stranger. And I don’t love that Ravil is handing me over to anyone else.

Ravil tips me down to stand. “You will walk out with me quietly? No alerts or alarms. No problems from you?”

I look down at my stockinged feet. “I need shoes.”

“Not the heels,” Ravil says firmly. He tips his head at Oleg and says something in Russian to the giant man who steps inside. We stand silently in my apartment hallway. My mind races the entire time.

What would I do if a neighbor came by? Would I try to signal for help despite Ravil’s warning?

No. I believe his threat.

If he took me to Russia, I’d have even less means of escape. I don’t speak the language. I don’t know anyone there to help me. And the chances of me escaping would be slim to none.

Oleg returns carrying all four of my suitcases at once, along with my

purse and leather work satchel.

Ravil bends to open one of the suitcases, seeming to know exactly where to look and produces my flip flops. He drops them on the floor for me. Oleg picks up the suitcase and marches toward the elevator without a word.

I try to shove my feet in the flip flops with my thigh-high hose still on, but I can't really get the thong between my toes.

"Hold on, kitten." Ravil surprises me by squatting in front of me to drag one of my thigh-highs down. I lean over to help with the second one, and he pushes me back, pinning my pelvis against the wall. "Don't rush me." His accent grows thicker. "I was enjoying my view."

He rolls the second thigh-high down my leg and off my foot but keeps the hand pinning my hips against the wall firmly in place. "Such long legs." He grips behind my knee to pull it slightly forward and kiss my inner thigh.

Tingles race up my leg straight to my already needy sex. He slides his hand up my inner thigh to brush my bare pussy then lifts my skirt and brings his face between my legs.

I moan before his tongue even makes contact. "Uhn. Ravil."

"That's it, kitten. Say my name."

My pussy clenches. I'm annoyed with my own neediness. I should definitely not be begging this man for anything—especially not sex. He doesn't deserve my surrender. He's essentially stealing me from my life, and only God knows what he plans to do with me and the baby once it's born.

But the tip of his tongue takes a turn around my clit, and I moan again.

Ravil grips both my thighs and swirls again but then pulls away, dropping my skirt and standing up, my juices glossing his lips. He licks them. "You taste even better than I remembered."

His words worm under my defenses. Maybe it's just something he says to everyone, but I like hearing he might have spent as much time remembering me as I remembered him. I'd doubted he did. I was a bumbling newbie just discovering what she likes, and he was obviously an experienced dominant, comfortable with his skill and sexuality.

But then, he told me that night he felt differently about me. *You're something special*, he said. And I wanted to believe him. Not enough to pursue anything beyond that night. Just to preserve the memories of the man who gave me the gift of this child.

What I'd so desperately wanted from Jeffrey, but he would never give me.

But now sexual frustration is getting on top of me. I want to kick Ravil for teasing me like this. It seems downright cruel considering my pregnancy hormones have me almost feverish for satisfaction.

I jam my feet into the flip flops and toss my long hair as I walk to the elevator. Oleg has already gone down, so it takes a moment to return, and I stand there, staring at the steel doors rather than look at the man at my elbow.

“You can’t keep me prisoner,” I say finally, even though it’s only wishful thinking.

“Not prisoner,” he says mildly. “Special guest. I must keep you close, so I can protect you and be sure you are very well cared for. You carry precious cargo, of course.”

Now I cut a look at him. “I go unwillingly. Under protest.”

His lips twitch. “Noted.”

Dammit. I shouldn’t find sparring with him so sexy.

It must be the hormones talking.

Because my worst nightmare about having a baby with a member of the Russian bratva is coming true.

And I seem to be incapable of stopping it.

CHAPTER 4

*R*avil

WE TAKE the back elevator up to the top floor. I own this entire downtown building—the Kremlin, as it’s known in the neighborhood. Everyone in it is Russian.

And I put the word out before I left to break into her apartment. Everyone speaks Russian in front of Lucy. No English.

If she wants something, she’ll have to rely on me.

Lucy told me she already ate dinner, so I called on the way over and canceled the order for a full meal, asking instead for a variety of snacks and amenities to be prepared.

I keep my hand on her lower back as we go. I don’t like the pinched quality in her face nor her general pallor.

It’s a very fine line I walk here—making sure she takes my threat seriously enough not to disobey me yet making her relaxed and comfortable, so she stays healthy and can rest at ease.

Already I’m questioning my plan. I’m not one to hold onto anger. I remember it, I file it away to use as a reason for whatever revenge I’m enacting, but I don’t keep the emotion.

Still, I didn’t expect to find myself quite so eager to see her under my thrall, legs parted, body surrendered for my plundering.

I don’t think she even wanted to surrender to me back at her apartment. It

was like she couldn't help herself. Her brain revolted, but her body said *yes*.

Said *more*.

Said *please*.

And now I'm already planning our night together. Her punishment.

Possibly even a reward.

Blyat. She will have me wrapped around her finger if I'm not careful. Simply by being Lucy.

I don't know what it is about her, but I felt it from the very start. The moment I saw her at Black Light, I wanted her. Perhaps I recognize something similar in her that's also in me.

That drive for perfection. Excellence. Like she has something to prove, and she wants to get it right.

It makes me want to help her get there. Protect her from failure.

At Black Light, it made me want to draw out her surrender. Show her she could trust me not to humiliate her or degrade her, yet still to own her every response, every quiver, every orgasm.

And I still have that urge, despite the very disrespectful ideas running through my mind.

She's definitely getting a flogging.

I'll probably tie her up—but with something soft and forgiving like a silk tie. My hand creeps lower on her ass. Knowing she's not wearing panties makes me sprout a semi.

We enter the top floor—my headquarters.

After I bought it five years ago, I had the entire building remodeled, a little every year, using only Russian laborers. Many of them live here, too, on the lower floors. They do their best for me because I take good care of them. I pay well, help them when there's a problem, and provide protection from the American law and larger world. Plus, they live in prime real estate for a fraction of the price they'd normally pay.

Because none of the *bratva* have their own families, my brigadiers all live on this floor with me. We make our own family.

They come out of their rooms now to gawk at my captured princess. Her back straightens even more—ramrod stiff.

“Lucy, these are my men. You've already met Oleg, my enforcer, if you hadn't guessed.”

Oleg lifts his chin in a ghost of a greeting.

“Maxim is a bit like me—he's the fixer.”

“*Rad vstreche.*” Maxim shakes her hand. His English is excellent, but he’s playing along with me. No one will let on that they can understand Lucy while she’s here. Not unless I change my edict. My word is law in this building.

“Nicholai is my accountant.” Of course by accountant, I mean *bookie*.

“Dima, his twin, is the IT specialist.” *Hacker*.

“Twins,” she murmurs, gaze flicking between them. I don’t know why everyone finds twins so fascinating, but between the two of them, Dima and Nicholai get far more pussy than the rest of the men in the building.

“Pavel is a *brigadier*.”

“What’s a brigadier?” I like how quickly she digests it all and asks questions. She has an inquisitive mind. It will be hard to stay three steps ahead of her, but I will.

“It’s like a captain.”

“Capo,” she says.

“Yes, like the Italian *capo*.”

“And what’s your job? Also fixer?”

I shake my head. “I am the director. *Pakhan* of the Chicago Bratva.”

“Papa,” Maxim says with a smirk.

I shoot him a warning glance. He’s not supposed to understand what I’m saying. And I don’t go by *Papa*. Igor is still technically Papa, even though he’s on his deathbed and in Russia.

She looks around at the layout of the floor. It had originally consisted of four thirty-five hundred square foot penthouse apartments. I knocked out the walls of two of them to make it one giant mansion with separate wings. “You all live here? Together?”

“Yes. We are a family.”

Maxim and Dima watch her reaction with amusement. They enjoy my games, and the fact that this one is aimed at a beautiful woman makes it all the more entertaining. Having her share our space will be a novelty for all of us.

“Come.” I take her elbow and guide her toward my master suite where Oleg has already brought her bags. Like everything on the top floor of the apartment building, it’s been appointed in total luxury—every fixture is high end, the floors a Brazilian oak, the bathroom countertops and shower a soft white quartz with flecks of gold and purple swirls.

She looks around doubtfully. “This is your room?”

“Yes. This is where you will stay. So I can take care of your needs.”

“I want my own room.”

I’m not surprised by her request. The truth is, I debated the choice. Having her in my space will tax us both.

But ultimately, I want her taxed. I want her to live under my constant benevolent rule until she accepts me.

At least for the pregnancy.

Keeping her permanently may not be in the highest interest of either of us.

“You will stay here with me,” I say firmly. “Whether I let you out of this room depends on how well you follow my rules.”

Her nostrils flare and eyes flash, but she says nothing. She’s not the type to throw a temper tantrum. I have no doubt when she picks her battle, she’ll be well-armed. She’ll gain more information before she makes her move.

She and I are very similar.

This is a game of chess we are playing. It could be pleasurable for both of us, even though one of us—*me*—will always win.

A tap sounds at the door.

“Come in.”

Valentina, our housekeeper, enters with a pitcher of iced water full of sliced cucumbers, as well as a plate of snack foods—cheese squares and chocolates, some grapes and fresh cherries. She pours a glass of the spa water for Lucy and holds it out.

“Drink lots of water. It’s important for the baby,” she says in Russian, bobbing her head and smiling.

“This is Valentina. She’s our housekeeper. She prepares some of the food, but we also have a chef who preps and cooks our main meals.”

Lucy takes the glass of water from her. “Thank you.”

Another tap sounds at the door, and Oleg steps in, carrying the pregnancy massage table I purchased today. Natasha, our resident massage therapist, traipses in after him, carrying a basket of supplies and beaming at me. She’s delighted I bought this new table for her use and will be requiring daily massages for my captive.

Her English is perfect—the twenty-five year old grew up in America—but she puts on a great act, turning to Lucy and offering a stream of Russian. “Hello, you must be Lucy. Congratulations on your pregnancy. I’m so delighted to support you through it. I work with a lot of pregnant women

because my mom is a midwife.”

Lucy’s brow furrows.

“This is Natasha, your massage therapist.”

Lucy takes a step back, recoiling. “Oh no. No. Thank you, but I must decline.”

I arch a brow. She was so willing to accept pleasure from my fingers earlier, I didn’t expect resistance now. I’m not sure whether to be flattered that she enjoys my touch so much or dismayed that she’s unwilling to accept this simple pleasure I can provide her.

“I want the stress of your change in residence erased,” I say firmly. “The baby should not suffer simply because his parents are at war.”

“I said no,” Lucy says, just as firmly. “I don’t like massages.”

“Why not, *kotyonok*?”

She eyes Natasha. “Is it even safe during pregnancy?”

“Natasha’s mother is a midwife. She massages pregnant women all the time. She knows exactly what you need.”

Natasha bobs her head, dutifully. “Tell her I have a special certification for pregnancy and lymphatic massage, as well as hot stone massage, reflexology, acupressure, tui na, cranial sacral, reiki, trigger point, watsu, Zero Balancing and Access Bars. If she’s nervous, I can just do an off the body energy healing today.”

I translate the gist of that to English for Lucy, who sucks her lower lip against her teeth as if she’s uncertain. The fact that she doesn’t like being touched by a stranger shouldn’t surprise me. It does make me feel a bit smug about how easily she surrendered to me in her apartment. I didn’t expect her to. It had been harder to coax a response from her at Black Light, and this time, we were at odds with each other. Maybe she has thought fondly about me.

“You will enjoy the massage,” I say firmly. “Lie on the table and relax. From now on, I will take care of your needs.”

“I *need* to sleep in my own bed,” she snaps. “I *need* my freedom.”

“And I need to keep you close,” I say smoothly, stopping to turn at the door. “It’s a compromise.”

She snorts. “One-sided concessions aren’t compromises, Ravil.”

I give her a dangerous smile. I like when her claws come out. “The past five months in the dark were my concession. This is how you repay me.”

I see her ice mask slip as I shut the door, and I smirk.

My plan is going exactly as intended.



Lucy

A GORGEOUS PENTHOUSE suite with views of Lake Michigan, an in-suite massage and chocolates. What's to complain about?

Nothing if I weren't a prisoner. If it weren't all being forced on me by a mad man.

But no, that's wrong. Ravil's not crazy. He's playing a game here. Teaching me a lesson. It's a soft lesson, no doubt because I'm pregnant. Any stress he inflicts on me goes directly to our child.

I'm grateful he at least understands that much.

He's not a mad man.

I look at the pretty red-headed massage therapist. She has strawberry blonde hair and pale, unfreckled skin. I'd guess her to be in her mid-twenties.

I'm dubious about her skills. Can I trust that the training and certification in Russia is the same as here? Does she really know how to massage a pregnant woman safely?

But other than the language barrier, she appears perfectly capable. Looks American, even, with her short-shorts and cap-sleeved tee, a bird's wing tattooed on her biceps.

She sets up her table, which has foam pull-outs for my breasts and belly, and drapes it with two sheets. I stand and watch her awkwardly. I can't let go of the nagging feeling that something bad is going to happen to me although she seems perfectly trustworthy.

But, of course, I am a prisoner to the head of the Chiciago bratva, so that feeling isn't unwarranted.

She chatters at me in Russian, her smile easy and comforting. She walks to the en suite bathroom and pulls the door shut, gesturing to the covered table and me like she's giving me instructions. After she shuts herself inside, I realize she's waiting for me to undress and climb on the table.

I close my eyes and force myself to exhale. Screw it.

I might as well enjoy. If Ravil wants to counteract the stress he inflicted

with a massage, I shouldn't be spiteful enough to cut off my own nose.

I pull off my dress and bra. My panties are still on the floor of my apartment, a thought that makes me grind my teeth now. I shouldn't have let him do those things to me.

You wanted them, a little voice whispers.

And it's true. Even now, just taking off my clothes in Ravil's room has me wet. As if my body knows it will finally get the attention it so desperately craves.

And that attention wasn't a massage.

But I sure as hell am going to enjoy this one. I climb under the top sheet and arrange myself face-down on the table, lining my belly up with the available gap.

Natasha taps on the door and cracks it open, asking something in Russian.

I murmur into the face cradle.

Spa music starts up from some speaker she's set on the dresser.

I suddenly wish she spoke English. I want to pump her for information about Ravil. How long she's known him, how he treats his hired help, what he's like. Anything there is to verify or refute the ideas I already have about him.

The image of him choking the man at Black Light pops into my mind again.

Ravil is violent. He threatened to cut the man's tongue out if he spoke disrespectfully about me again.

But he was gentle with me.

Far more gentle than most of the doms I saw scening with their subs at Black Light. There were no canes and heavy whips. He left no marks on my skin nor did he humiliate me much. More than that, he was measured. Controlled. He took in my responses and adjusted accordingly. We'd existed inside the same version of reality.

This is the same internal debate I've had every time I had second thoughts about my decision not to tell him about the pregnancy. Whether he deserved to know. Whether it was safe for him to know.

It certainly doesn't feel safe now.

I can't decide if that means I made the right or wrong choice in keeping this from him. Would he have been reasonable if I'd been straightforward and honest from the beginning. Or was this strong-arming inevitable?

I hear the snap of a lid and the rubbing of Natasha's palms together, and

then she makes contact. I flinch at first. Until Ravil's earlier assault—seduction—*whatever*, I hadn't been touched in months. Certainly not in a way that's pleasurable. Sure, I hug my mom once a week when I meet her at Dad's rehab center, but that's about it.

My muscles bunch and tighten under her slow strokes, but eventually, I relax. She soothes my jumpy nerves, and the tension releases little by little. She's good. Very good. She doesn't dig in deep and kill me working out knots, but she finds them all, nonetheless, and somehow gently coaxes them out of their contraction.

Gradually, I unwind and eventually start to drift in and out of a light sleep. I wake when she murmurs something in Russian with the sense I'd been far, far away. There's been no disturbing, frantic dreams—not the ones where I'm trying to prove myself at the law firm or in court, not the ones where I'm at my wedding, but I can't find my groom.

None of that. Just a deep sense of peace.

Of me.

It's like coming home.

She touches my shoulder lightly and murmurs again.

The massage is over. She steps into the bathroom and shuts the door, and I take a few minutes to get my bearings and find my way off the table. I open one of my suitcases and pull out a pair of pajamas. No sense in putting my work clothes back on—especially if Ravil isn't going to let me out of this room.

Natasha emerges and waves toward the overstuffed armchair by the window. The one with a magnificent view of the water. She directs me into it and refills my water and hands it to me.

“Thank you,” I say, though I'm not sure she understands me. “That was magnificent. You are truly a gifted healer.”

She smiles, receiving my gratitude whether she understands the words or not.

She strips the table of the sheets and folds it up, carrying it to the walk-in closet, where she props it against a wall. She says something more in Russian and waves to me as she leaves, her large wicker basket with the sheets, massage oil and speaker, slung over her shoulder.

“Goodbye. Thanks again. Sorry I doubted you.”

She flashes an impish smile before she waves again and leaves.

Well, silver linings and all that. I should've treated myself to a massage

months ago. That was pure heaven.



Ravil

THE GUYS ARE GATHERED in the living room when I come out, no doubt waiting for me. The television is on, but Oleg turns it down when I enter.

Dima's already taken Lucy's laptop out of her bag and is doing his thing with it. Making every bit of it accessible to me. Inserting tracking chips in it, her purse, and her phone in case she somehow gets away.

"She is beautiful," his twin, Nikolai, observes from an armchair, still speaking in Russian as I ordered.

A thread of irritation ripples through me. I'm not the jealous type, but I suppose I am possessive. Not that I believe for even a microsecond any of these men would ever touch what belongs to me. We are brothers in arms, and I am their *pakhan*. Loyalty runs deep between us.

"You will make pretty babies," Maxim agrees in English.

"*Russkom*," I growl.

He rolls his eyes but continues in our mother tongue. "First you order everyone to speak English only. Now the entire building must speak Russian. And for what? For how long? Let us in on your plan, Ravil."

I shove my hands in my pockets to bury my irritation. I don't sit with them. Not yet. They're awaiting news from their leader. "She is my prisoner until the baby is born. After that, I have not decided."

"This really can only go one way," Maxim says. He lounges on the large red sofa, his feet propped on the ottoman, his hands behind his head. Like me, he prefers expensive clothes—button-downs and slacks. Shined shoes.

The others are in more casual attire—t-shirts and jeans or khakis.

I arch a brow. Normally, I appreciate his input. He's a born leader and strategist. If he hadn't been sent away by Igor, he would be next in line as *pakhan* for the entire organization when Igor dies. "What way is that?"

"You must keep her. Seduce her. Make her fall in love. Otherwise... she's a high-power defense attorney. She has the intelligence and connections to bring us down. You don't want to turn her into a weapon against us."

I rubbed my face. “*Nyet.*”

Maxim’s right, but I want to throat-punch him for it.

Make her fall in love.

Dima chuckles from his work table. He’s wearing a black t-shirt with the image of glowing lines of code from *The Matrix*, his favorite movie. Dima has an office, but insisted on setting up a workstation out here, so he can watch television with the rest of them while he breaks every code ever written. “Making her fall in love might not be so hard.”

Maxim puts his feet down and leans forward. “What did you find?”

“Well, her Kindle is full of Viking romance, all bought after Valentine’s Day. Before that, she only read non-fiction.”

“So?”

He shrugs. “She has a thing for being carried off by big blond men. But it gets better. Way better. Guess what your little lady Googles late at night when she’s lonely?”

Goosebumps prick my skin. “What?”

“It’s good. You’re going to like this.” He looks around, grinning and flicking his brows at all of us to make sure we’re listening.

“What?” I snap with impatience.

“Wait for it.”

“Dima,” Nikolai growls.

“Tell us!” Maxim raises his voice.

“Russian...*spanking!*” Dima shouts with glee.

The room erupts with jeers and laughter.

Part of me wants to smash them all for laughing at her expense, but I’m too pleased by the information.

My lovely lawyer *did* miss me.

When I mastered her at Black Light, it had been her first time playing with BDSM. She was on a rebound, and her friend in DC talked her into going. She came in dressed all wrong, but perfectly, in a red wrap-around dress. The moment I saw her, I knew I wanted her, but the evening was set up as a roulette game. Partners were picked by the role of the ball in the wheel. I’d planned to buy her from whomever she was paired with, but as luck would have it, Lady Luck—Lucy’s scene name—was paired with me.

“Did you spank her, Ravil?” Pavel sounds slightly alarmed. He’s younger—in his mid-twenties. His sexual experience might not be quite as colorful as mine.

All of their gazes fix on me, waiting for my response.

I shrug. “*Da*. Of course. I met her at the BDSM club Valdemar dragged me to in DC.” I spanked the hell out of her. Over my lap with a plug in her ass. It was hotter than Hades.

“Right. The exclusive club where you have to pay to whip a woman,” Maxim says, parroting my own words when I’d complained about going.

“Exactly this.”

“Guess you did quite a bit more than spank her,” Nikolai observes.

“Enough.” Lucy may be my prisoner, but I still don’t like her being disrespected.

My men force the laughter from their faces, resulting in the twitching lips and darted glances of school boys.

“So you will give her what she needs and make her fall in love. When the baby comes, she will stay,” Maxim sums up his take on the situation.

I purse my lips. “We’ll see.”

“Am I the only asshole to point out that families are against the Code?” Nikolai asks. He wasn’t separated from his twin when they joined, despite the edict, but they were an exception.

The mirth drains out of the room. Oleg sits forward, a crease on his forehead.

I don’t answer. Of course, this has been on my mind from the beginning. I’m also at the point where I tend to make my own rules.

But it would open me up for replacement. Breaking the Code would mean I’d have to worry about someone burying a knife in my back to send me on my way.

“I mean, I’m not challenging you, Ravil. You know that.” Nikolai takes on a conciliatory tone. “I’m with my family.” He tips his head toward Dima. “But he’s also in the brotherhood.”

I give him a nod.

“Someone in Moscow could challenge you,” Maxim says. “Especially if Igor dies.”

Oleg’s meaty palms form fists, the frown on his forehead increasing. I think that means he has my back, but it’s hard to say. He was fucked by his own cell back in Russia. He’s been nothing but loyal to me, but I don’t know what his feelings on breaking Code are. And well, Oleg doesn’t communicate much.

“Would it be better,” Pavel starts, then holds up both his hands in

surrender— “I’m not saying you should... but would they be safer if you left them alone? Kept some distance between you? You could keep her like a side piece, the way Igor has his mistress and daughter.”

“She stays here,” I growl.

My baby. His beautiful mother. In *my* building.

As it should be.

“I will protect them. And if any of you” —all the men immediately start shaking their heads— “want to challenge me on breaking the code...?” I slap an icy stare on all of them, even though they’re clearly not going to. “Good. Then you’ll have my back.”

“Always,” Dima murmurs.

“*Da*,” Nikalai concurs. Maxim and Pavel also give their assent.

Oleg nods.

“Thank you.”

I take a seat on the sofa beside Maxim. “Anything else of interest on that laptop?” I ask Dima.

“You can see for yourself.” He hands me my laptop, which was open beside him. “I made you a link to everything, but here’s some of the sites she landed on, if you want any pointers.” He grins as a smack and a cry sound from the laptop, and he flips it around to show us some amateur porn scene with a girl bent over the back of a couch.

“Mention this again, and you die,” I say coolly. “I won’t have her mocked.”

Dima instantly sobers. “Sorry. Of course not.” He ducks his head but not before I see his lips twitch.

Fucker.

CHAPTER 5

*R*avil

LUCY DOESN'T ATTEMPT to come out of the room when her massage is over, even though I haven't locked the door nor stationed a guard. I'm still toying with how hard a line I draw with her.

I have to keep reminding myself that she wanted to raise our son without me ever meeting him. That she thinks so little of me, she does not think me worthy of parenting him.

Maybe I'm not. I had lowly beginnings. I was a poor son of a prostitute. I ran through the snow and slush of Leningrad in boots with the soles flapping open, stealing produce or digging in the garbage for enough to eat.

That was where Igor found me. Where I learned the Code of Thieves. Pay for nothing you can steal. Forsake all family for the brotherhood. Rise up through the ranks with my loyalty and courage.

The *bratva* became my identity. Within it, I am respected. Within my circles, I am God. Outside, though? On the streets of Chicago? A man covered in prison tattoos with a Russian accent doesn't command a lot of respect.

I suppose that's why I created the Kremlin. Bought this building in the most coveted area of Chicago and filled it with my own people. It's why I demand everyone here practice their English. Learn the culture and laws, so they can be manipulated to benefit our kind.

Lucy's rejection—knowing the beautiful attorney who is well-bred and well-respected in this city—didn't find me good enough... Well, it stabs me where it hurts.

And so, I intend to hurt her a bit in return.

No one takes my son from me.

I step into the room where I find her standing at the window, looking out at the lights of the yachts out on the water.

My dick gets hard because she's wearing nothing more than a pair of tiny shorts and a camisole, both stretched tight around her pregnancy curves.

Blyat.

I want her now.

But operating from desire is never a winning strategy. I adjust my straining cock.

She turns and looks over her shoulder at me, her mouth in a tight line.

“What happens to the baby?”

Ah. Finally the question I've been anticipating. And yet my answer to it has changed in my own mind several times. Still, I'm going to play hard-ball. She can work on softening me if she likes. She has four months to try.

“The baby stays here, in this building. If you wish to be a part of his life, you will play nice with me.”

She stands very still. Only the slightest flaring of her nostrils and tightening of her fingers show her ire. She expected this.

“You can't—”

“You know I can, so let's drop the pretense. Your laws can't touch me. If you tried, I would go underground with the child in a matter of hours. You'd never see him again.”

I'm ready for any argument she throws my way. What I don't expect is for her eyes to grow bright with tears.

It does something raspy and harsh to my insides.

She blinks them back without changing anything on her face. I don't take her for a crier, but I'm sure the hormones make her more susceptible.

I'll have to make sure not to push her that far again because I dislike how off-balance it makes me feel.

“You tried to keep our son from me,” I say, too harshly. I'm reminding myself as much as her. “I'm being far more generous with you. All you need to do is cooperate with me, and you'll keep your son. You'll get to nurse him and raise him. Teach him and watch him grow.”

“All the things you wished to deprive me of.”

She turns away from me, back to the window.

I have the impulse to turn and leave. But it’s my room, and I chose to put her in here with me for a reason.

I need to tear her walls down... not strengthen them. Even when I want to build my own.

I go to her. Touching her before was electric. She’d been so responsive. More responsive than Valentine’s night. It was like her body was primed for me, waiting for my touch.

She may have not thought me fit to be a father, but I now know with total certainty how much she loved my mastery at Black Light.

I slide one hand under her camisole to cup her breast, the other across her belly, stroking lower. “There’s still your punishment to deal with,” I say against the shell of her ear.

I’m satisfied to feel the shiver run through her. She doesn’t answer, but I sense her body listening. Waiting. Like before at her apartment, she wants this. Or at least her body does.

I love seeing the transformation her body’s made with the pregnancy. Back in February, she was on the too-thin side. Like she held her body to a rigid standard for weight. Now she has curves—not just her belly and larger breasts, but all of her has a beautiful softness. I knead her breast gently.

“These are much bigger than before. Are they tender?”

“Yes.” She stirs against me—little twitches and jerks, like pockets of resistance absorbed into my hands.

I pinch her nipple, tug it into a stiff, beaded peak. She shifts on her legs, her breath quickening. I slide my other hand into her tiny pajama shorts, curling my fingers to mold them over her mons.

She swallows and gives me more of her weight, leaning back against my body. “Doesn’t punishment counteract the massage? Weren’t you trying to keep me from stress?”

“All the stress I inflict will be relieved by the time I’m through. Unless you disobey.”

I sense a trembling in her—excitement, I assume, not fear. If she was afraid, she’d pull away.

She hasn’t.

I rub my fingers over her sex. She almost instantly gets wet, like her pussy was waiting for me to stroke it. I pull the tiny camisole over her head

and toss it on the floor.

“Come.” I turn her toward the bed. “I want you on your knees for me.” She hesitates a little, but then allows me to direct her. “Up,” I command.

For a moment, she goes rigid, like she’s just decided she shouldn’t give in to me.

“Be good, or I won’t give you the satisfaction I know your body craves.”

She glances over her shoulder, searching my face. Her lawyer mask is in place, and it’s hard to read her. I interrupt whatever internal debate she’s having with a sharp smack on her ass, and the slow drag of her booty shorts down her legs.

“On your knees.” I cup her elbow and lift to show her I want her on her knees on the bed. I spent all afternoon researching pregnancy. What’s safe for her, what’s not. Which positions are best. Which are contraindicated. How to make her comfortable. How to punish her.

I plop a bolster and the large body pillow I had Nikolai buy for her today in the center of the bed. “Ass up.” I slap the pale globe of her ass to punctuate the order.

She kneels in front of the bolster. I arrange the body pillow under her torso. “Chest down, kitten. Get comfortable.”

She stands on her hands and knees instead. I let her have her small defiance. The real punishment is my keeping her here. This, in actuality, is the pleasure of the situation.

For both of us.

She looks over her shoulder again, her brown eyes clouded with misgiving. I stroke my palm over her ass.

“Relax, *kotyonok*. I know what you need.”

I pick up a leather flogger—another afternoon purchase—and trail the soft tendrils across her skin. “The last time I flogged you, you had my dick in your mouth,” I recall.

“And you didn’t let me come,” she says immediately, like the scene is as fresh in her mind as it is in mine.

I chuckle. “No, I made you wait for it. But you saw the benefit of delaying the orgasm.”

She turns her head back to look down at the pillow. I position myself behind her and begin to twirl the flogger in a figure eight motion, swirling it so just the tips graze her skin.

She lets out a surprised little “Mm.” I keep it up, drawing closer, so more

of the strands come in contact. I can tell it's getting stingier by the way her ass clenches, and her breath draws in. She doesn't move from the position, though. She certainly wants this.

I draw my arm back and let the flogger tassels swing, whipping her soundly once.

"Ow!" She draws in a sharp breath.

"Take it, kitten." I whip her again. A pink mark blooms where I struck the first time. I return to my more gentle figure-eights to diffuse the sting and warm her ass all over.

She moans and sinks down, first to her elbows then to rest her chest on the pillow I provided.

"Good girl," I praise, even though she's not doing it to be obedient—she's doing it to make herself more comfortable. Still, this is how she learns to trust that my orders are for her own good. This is how she learns to trust.

I remember from Black Light how long it took to win her trust, and that was just as a partner for the night. Now, I'm looking at something altogether different.

My right to father our child.

I increase the power behind the twirls, smacking a little harder, and she flinches, squeezing her buttcheeks. I lighten it again and go down the back of each thigh then over her lovely back. "I should make you suck my dick tonight," I observe. "Except I'm not sure I trust you not to bite it off."

She murmurs her assent into the pillow, and I smirk to myself.

"I will have to take my pleasure," I say, returning my attention to her ass. All her skin has a light pink glow. I set about darkening that hue on her ass.

Her fingers tighten on the pillow, her asshole clenches and releases.

I stop flogging and trail the tassels lightly over her reddened skin between her ass cheeks, against her pussy. I swing it and lightly whip her pussy.

She squeaks. I flick again. And again.

Then I drop the flogger and rub over her slit with my fingers.

So wet. Incredibly swollen. Very inviting.

If I cared more for her pleasure, I would drag this scene out like I did at Black Light. But part of me is still angry. So I consider my own desires first.

Right now, I want to fuck my new attorney until the room spins. I unzip my pants and free my straining erection.

"I am clean," I tell her, my voice rough with desire. "I haven't been with anyone since I was with you."

I didn't mean to tell her that. I'm not sure why I did.

Annoyance with myself makes me shove into her without waiting for her agreement, for her acknowledgement of my plan to enter and ride her bareback.

"I haven't either," she gasps as the force of my thrust pushes her forward. I catch her hips, my heart suddenly lodged higher in my chest.

I shouldn't be surprised at her admission, considering what I found on her laptop. It's more that she willingly shared it with me.

But my thoughts start to unravel because being inside her hot, wet channel feels better than I remember. Better than any fuck I've ever had.

Can it be because I know she's carrying my child? Something primitive and caveman in me finds it so appealing?

Or is it that her body is just so much more welcoming under the influence of all the hormones? Either way, I revel in the way her flesh seems to hold my cock tight as I arc in and out of her.

I grip her long blonde hair and wrap it in a fist, using it to lift her head. "You've needed this," I tell her, my own raging lust making me cocky as hell. "Needed my big Russian cock fucking you senseless. Didn't you, beautiful?"

She only mewls in reply. I didn't expect her to agree. "You thought you'd given this up forever, didn't you? Is that why you've been watching Russian porn?"

She bucks her hips in surprise, and I tighten my grip, increase the tempo of the fucking. "You needed a good Russian spanking?"

"Shut up!" she snaps.

I've embarrassed her. I don't mind. I am being a *mudak*, I know. In the heat of the moment, I'm letting my own hurt show.

"Fuck you, Ravil."

I chuckle. "As you wish, beautiful." I slam in harder and harder, closing my eyes to savor how good it feels. Lightning strikes the base of my spine, my thighs shake as my balls draw up with the need to come.

I reach around and rub her clit roughly a couple swipes, but I'm too close. I need it so goddamn badly. I cup her nape to hold her in place as I fuck her hard and fast. I shout as I come—roar, actually—and reach around to give her clit my full attention.

She comes almost immediately, her channel squeezing and releasing around my cock, drawing out more and more of my seed.

“*Blyat, Lucy. Blyat.*” I stroke my hands all over her body, gratitude following fast on the heels of my pleasure.

Forgiveness.

Affection, even.

I wait until her orgasm has passed and she’s regained her breath before I ease out and get a washcloth to clean her up.

She doesn’t wait but walks past me into the bathroom. I hand her the washcloth, and she points to the door. “A little privacy?”

I shake my head. “Be nice or I’ll use my belt next time I punish you.”

Her eyes flare, but I’m certain it’s half with excitement. I walk out and shut the door. Let her have her privacy. She’ll have very little of it here with me.

I will own her every minute. Monitor her every communication, control her entire existence.

So yeah, if she wants to rinse off alone after I fuck her, she can have that tiny win.

There won’t be all that many.



Lucy

MY LEGS TREMBLE and my ass tingles with heat. Mostly, I just feel pleasure. The post-orgasmic languor of heavy limbs and bliss.

All those nights watching Russian porn trying to get myself off, I never got any satisfaction. Even when I did bring myself to orgasm.

But I’ll be damned if I tell Ravil that he satisfied me.

Asshole.

I partly hate myself right now for letting him do that. It’s just that he’s already proven himself a careful and attentive lover. And this pregnancy has me so damn horny.

Besides, I’m a feminist. I don’t believe that sex is the only power a woman has—a gift to be given or withheld. That’s bullshit. A remnant of patriarchal rule. Not one we need to subscribe to.

That sex was for me, even if it did look degrading.

And I got what I needed out of it.

And if he happened to enjoy it, too, well, good for him. It might help our negotiations.

I use the toilet and then turn on the shower. As I'm stepping in, Ravil knocks lightly and opens the door. He holds up my cosmetic bag for me to see and sets it on the counter before backing out again and shutting the door.

A chill runs down my spine remembering that man packed my things today. Moved me in with him. His threat to take me to Russia for the duration of the pregnancy is believable enough that I'm scared. He obviously has a great deal of money and connections. He doesn't care about laws. He does what he wants.

Takes what he wants.

This is the type of man I wanted out of my son's life.

But unless I come up with a way to get rid of Ravil, that won't be possible.

I'm not capable of murder. So that leaves prison. I need to use my time here to observe and collect evidence of crimes. I could build a case and hand it over to the district attorney. Get Ravil put away.

I'd have to come up with a way to make sure whatever I put him in for sticks. And keeps him in there at least twenty years.

Unease prickles all over my skin. The chance of such a plan backfiring looms large. If I tried to put him away—whether I was successful or not—chances are good there'd be retribution. If not from him, then from his "family". They seem tight. And he could still give orders from prison.

I shiver under the hot water.

It's a bad plan. My options are severely limited. I keep thinking.

Better plan—collect the evidence. Store it somewhere very safe. Use it as leverage on him.

Yes, that's a decent strategy.

So I just need to treat my time here as a chance to spy on Ravil.

Find out everything I can about him and his operation.

And if he happens to satisfy my rather ravenous sexual needs during this time, there's no harm in that, is there?

No.

I finish my shower and step out, grabbing a soft gray towel from the wire rack. It's fluffy and absorbent, and it feels heavenly against my sensitive skin. Well, at least I get to live in luxury while I'm here.

I wrap the towel around my hair and walk out, naked. “I’m hungry.” I’m not usually rude or demanding, but frankly, he deserves it.

Ravil’s sitting on the bed, leaning against the headboard. He’s still in his button-down shirt and slacks, which he barely took down to have sex with me. The contrast of the business attire with the tattoos across his knuckles and at his neck is sexier than it should be.

The bad boy who arrived. Who reached the height of success despite his bad boy ways.

“What are you hungry for, *kotyonok*?” He’s unruffled by my complaint.

“Chicken wings,” I blurt. “With honey barbecue sauce.” It’s true, that’s exactly what I’m craving, but I’m also testing him. He said I’m here so he can take care of me during the pregnancy. I’m going to make him work. I’m going to act like a freaking pregnant diva.

It doesn’t seem to phase him in the slightest. He picks up his phone and hits a button. He says something in Russian to whoever answers, then ends the call.

“Your wings are on the way,” he says mildly.

I’m irrationally happy at that. Only because when a pregnant woman has a craving, it really does feel like the end of the world if she doesn’t get it. I swear, sometimes I get so hungry I want to cry. I haven’t resorted to ordering takeout at ten at night or whatever time it is now, but I sure have wanted to.

Ravil’s gaze roves over my naked body.

I don’t hate being pregnant like some women do. I actually thought I might, but after I broke up with Jeffrey, I’d really feared it was too late for me. That it would never happen. And so, until now, this baby has felt a bit like a miracle. I relished all the changes my body’s gone through. Even the less-than-pleasant ones like getting up to pee twice in the middle of the night and wanting to cry at sappy commercials.

Still, no one has seen me naked since I changed shape.

“*Prekrasnyy*,” Ravil murmurs.

“What does that mean?”

“Beautiful. Truly. I’ve never seen anything or anyone so beautiful in my life.”

Three things simultaneously grow warm—my chest, my neck and my lady parts.

“What else can I get you, kitten? More of this?” He holds out the glass of cucumber water.

“May I just have some plain water?” The cucumbers were nice at first, but they don’t sound good anymore.

“Of course.” He picks up his phone again. When he gets off, he tugs down the covers of the bed. “Come. Cover yourself. Or put on your pajamas. If my men see you naked, I’ll have to kill them.”

I shoot a glance at his face because I’m not sure how serious he is. Does he really feel possessive of me?

He doesn’t smile.

Okay, then.

That sets my thoughts on a hamster wheel. Does he think I belong to him now? Is he claiming me along with this baby? Or do I have some chance of him letting me go? Of course, I wouldn’t want to leave without my baby, and he knows that. In fact, that would be the worst possible outcome.

So should I *want* him to claim me as his, too?

That thought’s too crazy to even consider.

I pull on my camisole and pajama shorts and climb under the sheet. He hands me my laptop with my phone resting on top of it.

“Listen to me, Lucy.” He doesn’t release his hold on the laptop when I try to take it from him.

I meet his icy blue gaze.

“You will do as I said. Tomorrow you will call your office and tell them you must work remotely. You may call, email or be in touch with anyone you need to do your job, but I will be monitoring your communications. One word—one plea for help or hint about your situation, about me—and you go to Russia. If you return—and that’s a big if—it will be alone. Understand?”

I pick up the glass of cucumber water and throw it in his face. It’s childish and stupid but fuck him. “I hate you,” I spit.

Ravil doesn’t move. He blinks the water droplets from his lashes as he regards me coolly. “Be careful, kitten. I can take away privileges, too.”

I close my eyes because I feel tears coming on again, and I don’t want him to see. “I hate you,” I repeat.

He shakes his head. “Don’t say it again. Our son is listening.”

It’s a crazy thing for him to say. I’m not sure if he actually believes it or not, but it gives me pause. Gretchen, my best friend from law school, would say he’s right—that the baby would feel it energetically.

“Your son was listening when you threatened to take him from his mother, too,” I retort. “Don’t threaten me again.” There’s a wobble in my

voice that I hate.

He pins me with his blue gaze. “All right. You understand our arrangement?”

“I understand,” I say tightly.

“Good. I have no wish to threaten you again.”

The tears burn behind my eyes once more. I force myself to swallow. I’m saved from his scrutiny by a knock at the door.

He yanks the sheet up higher on me before he calls out in Russian.

The door swings open, and Pavel comes in with one tall glass of ice water and one without ice. He looks at me and says a few sentences in Russian. I’m guessing it’s something like he didn’t know which way I liked the water, so he brought both.

“Thank you.” I reach for the ice water.

“*Pozhaluysta*,” Pavel says. His smile is warm and friendly, like I really am a guest and not a prisoner. I find myself lifting my fingers to wave at him when he turns to say something at the door.

“*Pozhaluysta*. Does that mean *you’re welcome*?”

“Yes. And also, *please*,” Ravil says.

“Does anyone here speak English besides you?”

“I will be your translator.”

Oh no. Screw that. Does he think I’m stupid? If I’m going to be prisoner to a building full of people who only speak Russian. I’m sure he loves the idea of me being helpless around here, but that’s not what’s happening. I’m signing up for Russian lessons on that language app first thing tomorrow. By the time that baby’s born, I’m going to be fluent in Russian.

That goal takes some of the fear out of me ending up in Russia. Knowing the language would definitely make that scenario less terrifying.

I down the water, even though it guarantees I’ll be up in two hours to pee, and lie down with my back to Ravil. I’m just going to close my eyes until the food gets here.

CHAPTER 6

*R*avil

LUCY DOESN'T WAKE up when the food is delivered, so I send Pavel to bring it to the kitchen refrigerator, strip down to my boxer briefs, and climb under the sheets with her.

And then I lie awake, my hands behind my head. Thinking.

I didn't get to my position at the top of the bratva by changing my mind once I'd made a decision. That doesn't mean I don't modify a plan in motion. Just that when I set my sights on something, I don't stop until I get what I'm after.

In this case, I might not have been totally clear on what I am after.

Is it Lucy? Or only the child? Or is it mostly to punish Lucy for the offense? A good *pakhan* is capable of seeing his own weakness. Knowing his motives.

Blyat. I wanted to punish her.

Some sliver of that hungry boy from Leningrad still exists in me and believes that people like Lucy Lawrence are better than me. That when they decide I'm not worthy of respect and decency, they must be right.

And then the older me, the one who proved himself with knuckles and knives, has to smash those people into the ground to prove it's not true.

And Lucy disrespected the hell out of me.

An hour passes. Then another. I ran every angle of every possibility again

and again just to know my options. Decisions still don't come.

Lucy stirs, then sits up.

"Hungry, kitten?"

She pads to the bathroom with one hand on her belly. "Um, yes."

"Do you want those hot wings now?"

"No," she groans. She closes the door, and I hear her pee on the other side.

I get out of bed. "What are you hungry for?"

"I don't know. Food."

"Very helpful, Counselor. Come. I'll take you to the kitchen."

"Ooh, my very own escort. I guess I should be thanking you for letting me out of my cell."

"After the water throwing incident? Yes," I say although it's not true. I bear no grudge over that. I threatened her. She retaliated in her small way. I like her feistiness. Now we can move forward.

If only I was sure what forward should look like.

I take her elbow and lead her to the giant kitchen, praying none of the guys are up and around because I don't want anyone seeing her in miniscule pajamas.

"Please tell me you have more than just Russian food," she whispers as I flick on the low lighting over the stove. It's a dream kitchen, or so I'm told.

I don't cook. The kitchen is adjacent to the living room, open on one side, with a breakfast bar and center island, all in pink and black granite. The appliances are stainless steel. The cupboards are solid maple with the soft-close feature and built in lighting underneath. I flip the switch to turn that on, too. If I turned on the overhead light, we'd both go blind.

The soft glow lights up Lucy's pale skin and hair. She looks beautifully rumped. I want to caress the hell out of that swollen belly of hers, but we're not really on those terms at the moment.

I open the refrigerator and peer inside. "You have something against Russian food?"

"Well, your culture isn't exactly known for its culinary finesse."

"Be careful or you'll get nothing but borscht and perogies for the rest of the week."

She blinks at me, and I expect another insult, but she says, "Do you have perogies?"

I smile, indulgently. "Does that sound good to you, kitten?"

“Maybe.”

I pull out a container. “You have to at least try these. They are the best perogies I’ve ever tasted. Made by Mrs. Kuznetzov on the fourth floor.” I pop the lid and drop them onto the tray for the toaster oven. I’ve learned the outer pastry gets soggy if you try to microwave them. “Just a few minutes.” I return my attention to the refrigerator. “What else sounds good? Some berries?” I pull out a container of organic blueberries.

“Mmm. Yes.” She reaches for it and brings it to the sink, rinsing the berries under a stream of water. I watch her ass. From the back, you wouldn’t know she’s pregnant. She carries in front, so it still looks like she has a waist. Her ass is fuller than it was Valentine’s day—round and fuckable. Very hot.

It’s been a couple hours, and I’m ready to tap that ass again.

All night long.

Too bad she needs her rest.

Of course, an orgasm might help her sleep.

The toaster oven dings, and I check the perogies, making sure they got warmed all the way through.

Lucy pops a few blueberries in her mouth. “What’s your favorite food?”

“Russian food?”

She nods, chewing on a plump berry.

I shake my head. “I don’t like Russian food.”

“See?” she says, then claps a hand over her mouth because it was too loud.

I smile because I love seeing her unbuttoned a little. I want more of it.

She looks at me, her eyes dipping from my face to my bare chest, over my tattoos. Her gaze continues down my abs to my boxer briefs, where my dick salutes her interest.

Her expression is hard to read, but the way her nipples tent her thin camisole, I know she likes what she sees.

“You want more?” I ask, giving my cock a rough squeeze.

She swallows, lifting her gaze once more to my face. I see indecision there. Her body wants it. Her mind rebels. She had the same dilemma at Black Light although now I think it’s more about not wanting to give anything to me than about surrendering to her desires.

I make it easier for her, stepping into her space and lightly resting my hands on her waist. I turn her around to face the counter. “I won’t even spank you this time,” I murmur.

She doesn't move. She doesn't refuse me, either. With her, I take it as a yes. She's not going to ask me for it, even if she knows it's what she wants.

I slide my hand down between her legs. "I'll make you a bet." I brush my lips across her neck, the silky strands of her blonde hair sliding across my stubbled face. "I'll bet I can get you off before the toaster dings."

She glances at the toaster oven. There's two minutes left.

"I thought men were supposed to be proud about taking a long time... not a short time." Her voice is thick.

I slide my fingers under the little pajama shorts and brush over her folds. She's already wet.

Dripping wet.

"That would be me lasting a long time. We're talking about you getting off." I sink one finger into her. "I won't even use my dick. Deal?"

She braces her hands on the slick countertop. "Actually" she looks over her shoulder at me, an imperious expression on her face. "I want your dick."

I smirk. "Is that so?" I grind my erection against her cushy backside.

"Fingers don't always work for me," she confesses.

I flick her shorts down with a swift movement, and they drop to the kitchen floor. In the next second, I have the head of my cock rubbing over her entrance. "Your fingers or mine?"

She draws in a breath as I breach her entrance, gently nudging inside. "Mine," she confesses.

"I assure you mine are more skilled," I boast, which may or may not be true. I did manage to coax many orgasms out of her the first time we were together. I push forward until I'm fully seated, then slowly draw back, almost all the way out. She shivers in response. "But I will let you call the shots tonight."

I pump in and out again slowly, then grip her hips for a series of short, shallow thrusts.

Her breath quickens, fingers flatten on the counter.

I wrap an arm around her waist, so I know her belly is protected and slam in harder and deeper.

She moans, and I cover her mouth with my hand, not that I give a shit if the guys hear us, but she might. I'm not going to embarrass her. I ride her with my hand over her mouth then loosen my hold and slide it down her throat, lightly caging her there.

"I think, though, *kotyonok*, that you prefer when I'm in charge."

She pussy squeezes my cock, even as she shakes her head no.
I slide my hand down lower, to her breast, where I pluck her nipple.
Her breaths become sobs. I keep traveling lower, settling the pad of my index finger over the little nubbin of her clit.

“You like my fingers now, kitten?”

“*Ung.*” She makes a needy sound.

I glance at the timer on the toaster oven. I’m running out of time. I rub a little harder.

She cries out.

“You want it harder, *prekrasnyy?*”

She arches more, pushing back at me. I take it as a yes.

I abandon her clit to the fingers of both hands around her hips and fuck her hard, my loins slapping against her pale ass, filling the kitchen with the sound of sex.

My balls tighten. Thighs shake. I could come.

The timer’s almost on zero. “Come for me, kitten.” I close my eyes and let myself succumb to the pleasure of being inside her—how incredibly juicy and snug the fit is, how forbidden it feels with her hating me, here as my prisoner. How right.

I lose control and plunge deep to come. The moment I do, she spasms around my dick, milking it for my cum, orgasming in perfect concert with me, like our bodies were meant for each other. Like we can only come together.

“That’s it, beautiful.” I rub her clit again, slowly now.

The timer dings.

I kiss her neck and ease out, grabbing a couple napkins to clean us up.

She sobs out her breath, dropping to her forearms on the counter, like she’s not capable of standing.

“Are you light-headed, *kotyonok?*” I clean her with the napkin.

She draws in a long slow breath. “I’m okay.”

I throw away the napkins and pick up her pajama shorts from the floor, crouching down to help her step into them.

She steadies herself with a hand on my head. After the shorts are up, I nip, then plant a kiss between her legs, lifting my gaze to hers.

She releases my head and takes a step back. She might let me satisfy her, but post-coital intimacy is still not on the table.

I get up and wash my hands then pull the tray out of the toaster oven and

slide the warm perogies onto a plate. “If I *had* to pick a favorite Russian food, it would be these.” I tell her, offering the plate. “Try one.”

She reaches for it then stops herself. “With my fingers or a fork?”

I pick it up with my fingers and hold it to her lips. “Who cares?” I murmur, as she opens for it. “You’re in a dark kitchen in the middle of the night. There’s nothing to get right or wrong, kitten.” I already know she’s the type who wants to get everything right. There’s too much nervous control in her life. I had to blindfold her at the club to get her to tune into her me and her body.

She bites into the meat pie and moans. “Oh my God, this is good,” she says with her mouth full, catching the flakes of pastry on her lips with her fingertips. “What is that spice?”

“Dill.”

“Dill?” She asks incredulously, holding the pie eye-level and looking at its innards.

“Beef. Potato. Cheese. And dill. It’s perfect, yes?”

She takes another bite like she’s suddenly ravenous. “So good,” she murmurs.

“Come here.” I lead her by the elbow to one of the barstools on the other side of the breakfast bar. “You’re allowed to sit when you eat.”

“I’m allowed? What else will you allow, *master*?” Her words are tart, but there’s no edge to them. She darts a quick glance at me like she remembered too late that she has called me *Master* before.

And enjoyed it.

I pour a glass of milk and set it in front of her then lean on the counter, watching her eat. She polishes off three perogies and drinks her milk.

When she looks up, she holds my gaze. “I’m sorry I didn’t try to contact you, Ravil.” I sense the sincerity in her voice, and I almost believe her, until I hear her pitch. “But you’ve found me now. I won’t try to keep our baby from you. Just let me go. We’ll work out a custody arrangement. Fifty-fifty if that’s what you want.”

I know it’s a huge concession. She doesn’t want me in our child’s life at all. But I’m not biting. I shake my head. “We’re not negotiating, Counselor. You missed the window for that. I’m driving now, and you’re going to be a good girl and do everything I ask.”

Her eyes narrow. “You can’t—”

“Ah, but I can. I am, kitten. Get used to it.”

She gets up from the stool and stalks away, straight to the front door.

Cute.

She reaches for the handle.

She wouldn't make it out. Even if I let her walk through this door, I have a man at the elevator and another street-level. She'd never get out of the building unless I let her. Still, I snap, "*Don't*" with every ounce of authority I have.

She freezes, hand wrapped around the knob.

"This is your only warning."

I see the shiver run through her.

To help her save face, I go and collect her, grasping her elbow and guiding her back to my room. She doesn't say anything, but I sense a storm brewing inside her.

Not good for the baby.

Or her.

I don't mind her frustrated, but I can't have her stressed. Kidnapping a woman pregnant with my child might not have been my smartest move.

I close the door softly behind us, and she shakes free of my grasp. "Calm yourself, kitten. It's not so bad. What's making you panic?"

I flip on a lamp to see her face. It's flushed with anger, and she's breathing quickly.

"My life!" she throws her arms up in the air.

"You will work remotely."

She shakes her head. "My parents."

I nod. "You visit them on Saturdays."

She goes still. "You've done your homework."

I shrug. "I like to be prepared. Your father is a partner at the firm where you work. He had a stroke recently."

"Yes," she whispers. "If I don't go to see him Saturday, my mom will know something is wrong. If I tell her I'm on bed rest, she'll come to the apartment."

I give my head a small shake. "You're a very smart woman. I'm sure you'll figure out something to tell her."

Lucy's lips thin. "You don't strike me as insane, Ravil. You strike me as a very reasonable, perceptive man. Why are you doing this?"

I climb in the bed. "You're a perceptive woman, yourself. Figure it out." I flick off the light.

She stands still in the darkness for several seconds then pads to the bathroom.

I gaze at the ceiling or where I'd see the ceiling if it wasn't dark.

Funny. I want her to figure it out when I'm not even sure myself.

CHAPTER 7

*L*ucy

I DON'T THINK I'll fall back asleep because I'm upset, but I do. My dreams are sensual and lush. Like many of the dreams since I've been pregnant, they feature Ravil and Black Light. This time, Gretchen and I arrive at the elite BDSM club. It's my first time back since Valentine's. I'm looking for Ravil—he's the only one I want to play with. I'm not pregnant in the dream. Ravil finds me, but he's angry.

I never called.

He takes me to the big cross structure to tie me up and whip me. I'm scared but also totally excited. He attaches cuffs to my wrists and ankles...

And then I wake up.

Horny.

Disappointed I didn't get to finish the dream.

And furious that I'm a captive in this man's domain.

I blink at the clock. It's much later than I usually sleep. If I were going into my office, I'd be rushing out the door already. Good thing I'm calling in.

Strike that from the record. It's not a good thing. I'm a prisoner who's being kept from going in.

Ravil steps out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. He's solid muscle. Golden skin with a light dusting of hair, tattoos across his chest, down his arms even onto his knuckles. Tattoos are part of the *bratva*.

Markings for crimes, prison time, cells. They were how I recognized what he was when I partnered with him. Why I didn't want to be paired with a man like him, even though he'd turned out to be an attentive and thoughtful partner.

Too bad he's still a criminal who thinks he can do whatever he wants.

Correction—who probably *can* do whatever he wants.

He steps into the walk-in closet and drops the towel, so I have the full view of his naked body. I'm not the type who ogles men's physiques, but even I know he's a perfect specimen. Tight glutes that flex when he pulls on his boxer briefs. Muscles that ripple across his broad back when he pulls on a white undershirt.

He's sexy. Everything about him is sexy, from the accent to the cool, confident demeanor to the ice-blue eyes. I wish I weren't so affected by his presence. Maybe I'd be able to think my way out of this. Then again, maybe it would make this situation a million times worse. Because the only thing that makes it even remotely palatable is the sexual satisfaction.

"You will call into work this morning," he says without turning, knowing I'm watching.

I don't answer.

"Tell them you have preeclampsia. I can get you a doctor's note if you need it."

I guess he's thought of everything.

"A desk will be delivered in an hour."

I frown but pick up my phone, which I find charging beside the bed. I call into the office.

God, this sucks.

Understatement of the year.

I start with Dick because he's the asshole who will make the most trouble for me. I put on my most brusque, business-like voice. Nothing like calling the good old boys boss with female problems. "Hi Dick, it's Lucy. I will call HR next, but I wanted to start with you. My doctor's put me on bedrest. I will be working from home and fully available via video or teleconferencing. I don't require any reduction in load and can handle all my cases."

"Bed rest?" he snorts. "What happened?"

"That, of course, is personal. I'll be happy to provide my medical records to HR if required."

"What about when you're needed in court?"

“I don’t know yet, but I’ll be working on a plan and will keep you in the loop. All you need to know is that none of my cases will suffer as a result of this change. In fact, they will probably all benefit, since I’ll be saving time on the commute.”

“I see. Well, I hope everything’s okay. You know, with the baby.” He drags out the last syllable like he’s hoping for more information, but I’m not going to give it to the bastard.

“I will be just as available as always,” I say firmly. It’s illegal to discriminate against me for this situation, but I’m certain they will all try.

“You sure? I mean, if you need to take a leave of absence—”

“I don’t,” I cut in and say nothing more, letting the censure of my voice reverberate.

“All right.” I hear the manufactured doubt in his and, like usual, want to kick his shins with my pointiest shoes.

“I need to make some more calls, Dick. I will talk to you later.”

“Yep.” He hangs up.

I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I like your boss bitch voice,” Ravil says from the entry to the closet, squeezing his dick through his pressed trousers.

I stalk past him on my way to the bathroom. “I thought you liked being in charge.”

“It’s not a question of like, kitten. I *am* in charge.” He slides a Rolex on his wrist. “Always. But it’s more pleasurable to take charge of a strong woman. Winning your surrender is a challenge I enjoy.”

“You won’t,” I tell him as I shut the bathroom door.

“We’ll see,” he says mildly. “I will get your breakfast. Do you want eggs? They are a good source of protein when you are pregnant.”

Somebody’s been doing his research.

I’m not the fussy diva type, but it’s tempting to test how many demands I can make. Ravil’s pledged to take good care of me during my pregnancy. I’m curious how far I can push. I crack the door. “I’ll take a spinach omelet—three eggs—with cheese. Buttered toast and some kind of fruit.”

He nods without comment and leaves.

Okay. I’ll keep pushing then.

I take a quick shower. When I come out, I find he’s put my clothes away in his closet. I don’t know how he even knew what to pack, but he picked my favorite work clothes, minus the high heels, as well as a decent selection of

my home wear. I want to complain, but really, there's nothing to rail against. The man is somewhat uncanny in his ability to decipher me.

And I'm not even certain I know how to decipher myself half the time.

I wear a wrap-around dress—my favorite staple of pregnancy since it accommodates my growing breasts and belly. I make the rest of my calls to work, checking in with HR, the secretary I share with three other attorneys, and the summer associate who has been assigned to help me with a few cases. I have no idea what I'll do about going to court, but I guess I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

I try the door to find it locked from the outside—a fire hazard, I must note. I'll be registering that complaint with Ravil immediately.

A knock sounds and Valentina is there with a tray carrying a spinach omelet, toast and cut up strawberries. I start to push past her, but the giant Russian—Oleg, I believe—is sitting outside my door, his chair facing me. He looks at me impassively.

I step out of the room.

He stands up.

“Okaaaay,” I say to him. “I guess you're my prison guard?”

Nothing changes in his face. He doesn't speak to me in Russian like the others have. He doesn't even show he's heard me.

I turn toward the kitchen and take a step, and he shifts to angle his body in front of mine, blocking my way. Christ, he's big.

Well, I guess I don't have to worry about the fire hazard. The giant would surely let me out.

If the smell of the food didn't have my mouth watering, I might have stayed to wrestle my guard, but considering the food's in the room and my body is busy growing a baby, I turn around and go back inside.

I can fight the Hulk later.

Valentina has set the tray on the bedside table, as if I really am on bedrest.

“I'm not going to eat in bed,” I tell her even though I'm guessing she doesn't speak English, either.

She looks at me blankly. I point to the armchair and table by the window. Might as well enjoy the view. At least my cage is gilded.

She bobs her head and complies, setting the tray down and chattering to me in Russian.

I wish I had a clue what she was saying. I'm getting on that language

app... right now, while I eat. I sit down and tuck into the food, which is delicious. Apparently there's more than just Russian food in this place, thank God.

I wolf it down while getting started on my Russian practice. At least I have something to focus on. It keeps me from flipping out over my situation.

Still, when Ravil comes in, I'm ready to skin him.



Ravil

THE DESK ARRIVES RIGHT on time, and I have the guys carry it in to set up in my room. I follow them in to act as the unnecessary translator.

“Where would you like the desk, Lucy?”

She shoots daggers at me with her glare. “In my own office. In my own home.”

Seeing she chose to sit by the window for breakfast, I direct my men to set it up in front of the window, so she can have the spectacular views of Lake Michigan while she works.

“*Spasibo*,” she thanks them in Russian when they finish.

I hide my surprise. Crafty lawyer. Of course she's already teaching herself Russian. My beautiful prisoner is not going to sit back and play Rapunzel for me. She's gathering her resources and plotting her escape.

The thought makes me smile.

I do so love an able adversary.

Especially one as beautiful as she.

“It's good you are learning Russian,” I tell her when the men leave. “Otherwise, our son and I will be able to talk about you behind your back.”

She blinks. I'm sure my presentation of the idea of the three of us functioning as a family comes as a shock. Honestly, it surprises me as well, in a decidedly pleasant way. The image of me and our son stopping in at Lucy's prestigious law firm, our small boy carrying the flower I bought for him to give to her as a surprise flits through my brain. I don't have any idea why I would've manufactured such a fantasy, yet its appeal is real.

Right now, she's putting on that strong-as-nails courtroom persona. She

brings her hands to her hips and draws herself up. I get the feeling she misses wearing the four-inch heels.

“Ravil, this is insane. I will go nuts locked in this room. You want me healthy and calm for our baby? It won’t happen with me confined in here. No matter how beautiful the view.” She gestures to the window.

I tilt my head toward the door. “I didn’t say you cannot leave the room although I will use that as punishment if you misbehave.”

She narrows her eyes. “So what’s with the giant outside the door?”

“If you do leave the room, you will be accompanied by me. Any ventures out will be at my discretion.”

Her lips press together.

I put my hands in my pockets. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

She glances out the window. “Outside?”

“Yes.”

She nods. “Yes.”

I’m tempted to correct her. To make her call me *Master*, but she’s already pissed off. It wouldn’t go over well now. It may not ever go over again despite her interest in being dominated sexually.

She goes to the closet and slips on the pair of sneakers I packed for her. When she sails past me out through the bedroom door, I let her, dismissing Oleg from his post and following her to the front door.

She hesitates at the doorway, perhaps remembering I stopped her there last night. I reach past and open the door for her, settling my palm on her lower back. “Let’s go, beautiful.”

She slides a sidelong glance my way and steps into the hallway then into the elevator with me.

Downstairs, I stop at the doorman’s desk to introduce her to Maykl. “Lucy, this is Maykl, the doorman and a member of our cell.” In Russian, I say to him, “And this is Lucy, the beautiful mother of my child. Do not allow her to leave here without me at any time. She is my captive. Understand?” I’ve already told him this, but it doesn’t hurt to say it again.

“Understood.” He bows his head with respect. To Lucy, he says in Russian, “Nice to meet you, captive.”

Her gaze drops to his knuckles where he bears a tattoo then up to his face. “*Zdravstvuyte.*” She greets him in Russian—her accent not half bad considering she probably just started learning today.

His face splits into a grin. “*Zdravstvuyte.*”

“Come.” A possessive streak flushes through me. I take her hand and lead her out.

“Are we holding hands now?” Her hand is limp in mine.

“Yes. Unless you prefer I handcuff us together?”

She shoots a glance at me as if to check if I’m serious. I’m not, but I don’t smile to let on.

Her hand takes shape, conforming to my palm, holding mine back. It’s a pleasant feeling. I lace our fingers together, instead, and lead her out toward the lake.

It’s a warm summer morning—not too hot yet, especially with the wind off the lake. I lead her to the walking path along the shore. It’s clogged with people out enjoying the gorgeous day. Children running through the sand, shrieking and laughing, people on bicycles, on skateboards, with dogs. A young mother walks by pushing an empty stroller, a fat kicking baby strapped to her chest. He reaches a chubby finger out to point at Lucy, and she stops, smiling at him.

Not a serene smile, but the giant, uncensored smile reserved for babies. The kind that lights up your whole face and makes the birds sing.

My knees go weak at the sight of it on her. I’ve never seen that level of joy on her—not that it isn’t manufactured. But still. It makes me suddenly want to earn that smile myself. It makes me yearn to see her playing with our baby. Holding him in her arms. Or strapped to her chest like the young mother who laughs and coos to her child as she walks away, giving Lucy her own smile back.

Or better yet, I’ll wear the baby strapped to my chest, and then I’ll get to see the smiles, too.

Suddenly, Lucy stops walking, her hand yanking from mine to hold her belly. The people behind us grumble as they jockey past. I push her back against the parapet to get out of the foot traffic.

“Are you all right? What is it?” It occurs to me she could be faking as an escape attempt, but then I see her face is full of wonder.

Her eyes brighten with tears. “He kicked.”

I press my hand to her belly, too. “First kick? Or first time you’ve felt it?” I’d meant to ask her because I’d read that the quickening should be happening soon.

She nods, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

I listen with my fingers.

“There?” she says. “You feel it?” She presses her hand over mine, pushing it deeper into her belly.

Faintly, like tiny bubbles or flutters, I register something. I crowd closer to her, molding my body to hers, taking up all her personal space. “Our son,” I murmur against her neck.

Her breath hiccups.

I brush my lips across her skin.

She doesn’t move her hand from mine. She doesn’t move at all. I nibble lightly. Nip her earlobe, kiss her jaw.

I tip her chin up to look into those downturned brown eyes. “I understand now why they call pregnancy a miracle.”

She studies me, like she’s measuring for the truth. “Yeah,” she nods after a moment of scrutiny. “Me too.”

“This baby is a gift.”

One she tried to keep from me. But I don’t say that. I don’t begrudge her right now. I just want to soak in the moment. The sweetness of our baby kicking.

I sense a current of tension run through her, but I ignore it and lower my lips to hers. I’ve fucked her twice, but it’s our first kiss since Black Light, and I take my time, brushing lightly over softness, nibbling, then finally descending for a full, deep drink from her mouth.

When I pull away, her face is flushed, eyes dilated.

Her body is so responsive to me, even when the rest of her hates me. It makes me want to kiss her again, so I do. And then a third kiss, a punctuation to the first two. I don’t wait for her to process it, but slip an arm around her back and guide her into foot traffic, pacing myself at her speed as we walk a couple miles up and down along the shore.

When she slows down and is breathing hard, I guide her back to my building.

“The people in the neighborhood call it the Kremlin,” I tell her as we approach. Maykl comes around from behind the desk to hold the door open for us. It’s not a courtesy he normally employs—he’s definitely stationed there more for security—but the mother of my child gets special treatment.

“*Spasibo*,” she says, practicing her Russian. To me, she says, “Do you only allow Russians to live here?”

“It’s not a hard rule, but yes. That’s the way it’s worked out.”

“And is everyone... *in* your organization?”

“No. Not at all. Most are not.”

She chews on that as we get in the elevator. “What kind of business are you in, Ravil?”

“Imports.” *Smuggling.*

“Legal?” Smart woman.

I shrug my shoulders and let her interpret that as she will. She nods like she understands perfectly.

“Also microlending.”

She studies me like she’s trying to figure out if that’s legit. “Loan shark?”

I smile. “Not anymore. Most of my clients live in the building. I invest in their small businesses. They either pay me interest or make me a partner. It’s a win-win.”

“Tell me about the fire.”

I shake my head. “That’s Adrian’s story to tell.”

“Did you order it?”

“No.”

“Was it bratva business?”

“No.”

Her eyes narrow like she doesn’t believe me. “Did you tell Adrian not to tell me the full story?”

I tilt my head to the side. “No, but I did not encourage him to speak, either.” As far as I’m concerned, she doesn’t need to know Adrian’s story unless he wants to tell it, and I doubt he will. I didn’t stop him from trying to burn that building down, and I won’t stop him if he keeps going after the building’s owner, Leon Poval. He has every right.

Adrian is new to America and new to my cell, but if he’d asked for my help in ending Koval, I would’ve given it. I still will.

We arrive on our floor, and I escort her out of the elevator.

Oleg, Nikolai and Dima are in the living room, as usual, when we come in.

“*Privet, kak dela?*” Lucy calls out brightly. Her accent needs work, but the greeting, “Hi, how are you?” is totally recognizable.

Nikolai exaggerates his surprise, smiling back at Lucy. “She speaks Russian!” he crows in Russian. “I’m good, doll, thank you for asking.”

His twin grins as well. “Yep, all good here. Probably better than you’re doing, considering you’re being held prisoner by our boss.”

“Careful,” I say. “She’s smart. By next week, she’ll probably understand

you.”

“By next week, she’ll have figured out we all speak English,” Dima says.

“*Privet, Oleg.*” Lucy makes a point of waving at Oleg, who, of course, hasn’t responded.

He lifts his chin a notch to acknowledge her.

“Oleg doesn’t speak,” I tell her. “The bratva cell he was in cut out his tongue to keep him from talking about the things he’d seen before they left him to take the fall for it. He spent twelve years in a Siberian prison before he was released and escaped to America.”

Lucy’s eyes round, and she swallows. “I’m sorry, Oleg. How do you say *sorry?*”

“*Izvinite,*” I tell her.

“*Izvinite,*” she says.

Oleg still makes little sign of acknowledgement, which isn’t unusual. The man is like a boulder. Huge, solid and about as expressive. I think when he lost his tongue he stopped attempting to communicate in any form other than with his fists and sheer size.

“Need anything?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I have work to do.”

I lead her to the bedroom. “Of course. I programmed my number into your phone. Text me when you’re ready for lunch.”

She shoots a hardened look at me. “I’m not eating in the room again.”

I pause in the doorway and pick up her hand, bringing her wrist to my lips. I brush a light kiss over her pulse. “Care to rephrase that, kitten?”

A muscle ticks in her jaw. She doesn’t want to ask me for anything, that much is plain.

She huffs a little. Instead of asking nicely, she lifts her chin and meets my gaze squarely. “Don’t make me.”

That’s about as close as she’ll come to begging, I imagine.

“I’ll fetch you for lunch, then. Twelve o’clock.”

She turns into the room without a word.

“Text me if you’re hungry sooner.” I can’t have her blood sugar getting low.

She flips me the bird over her shoulder, and I smirk because the gesture’s more juvenile than I’d expect from the bad ass professional, but I love it all the same.

I shut the door and call Oleg to sit outside it again.

To watch over my beautiful bird in her cage.

CHAPTER 8

*L*ucy

I SPEND the morning working on my cases and communicating with the office—trying to make sure everyone understands I’m still available and working just as hard even though I’m not on site.

With the partner position being voted on soon, I can’t afford any slip-ups.

Despite the insanity of my present situation, feeling the baby kick buoys my spirits. I don’t get into the whole spiritual “it was meant to be” thing the way Gretchen, my best friend from law school does, but it did seem like a message from the universe that everything is okay.

Or not to sweat the small stuff, and it’s all small stuff. Because in the big picture—I’m having a baby, and that baby is healthy. And really, that’s all I can worry about at the moment. As for how I will get myself out of this prison or what will happen after the baby’s born... I can only take it one day at a time.

Learning Russian already makes me feel better about Ravil’s threat to send me to Russia. I have a penthouse full of people to practice the language with. Every word I learn frees me from his tyranny.

And I’m settling into the certainty that he won’t hurt me. He has looked after my physical needs with massive attentiveness. I have zero complaints other than wanting my freedom.

So maybe this happened for a reason. Some reason I can’t see yet. That’s

what Gretchen would say.

As if Gretchen senses my thoughts, she chooses now to call. I stare at the screen. I'm dying to talk to her. She's the one person who knows about Ravil. She knows how I met him and what he is. But that means talking to her and keeping my present situation a secret would be too difficult. I'd want to tell her everything.

I let it go to voicemail with a sigh.

I choose to dig into Adrian's case since I'm here, wrapped in Ravil's world. I open his file again. He lives in the Kremlin, too. What a surprise. I review our interaction, which had been brief. At the time, all I could think about was the fact that the father of my baby was in my office and knew my secret.

Now, I examine the few words we exchanged.

He spoke in Russian and Ravil corrected him. It sounded like something they'd discussed before—a reminder. I tap my lips with my index finger. That doesn't fit with the man who told me no one here speaks English.

To me, it sounds like the opposite. Like he's insisted they learn and use it. So my guess is that Ravil's trying to put one over on me. Keep me helpless.

A little rush of smugness filters in at figuring it out. My instinct to learn Russian was dead on, but it may not even be necessary. I just need to trick one of them into answering me.

So Ravil is playing games with me. What else has he bluffed about? Sending me to Russia? That's the only real threat he's made. He hasn't sworn to take our baby from me, only that our baby stays here. Does that mean I stay here, too? He's left everything very nebulous.

I pick up my phone and call Sarah, the summer associate, to tell her to request a copy of all the evidence against Adrian, including search warrants and arrest records. I want to ask her to research Ravil's arrest record, too, but I don't dare. He said he'd be monitoring my communications. I'd be stupid if I assumed that was a bluff, too.

An email pops into my inbox from Jeffrey with the subject line, "Thinking about you."

My stomach drops out a bit.

For God's sake. I don't need Jeffrey's midlife crisis and post-breakup realizations on top of all this.

I open the email.

Hey Luce,

You're looking great—pregnancy really suits you. Can we get together for lunch today? I miss you and I'd love to touch base.

No signature.

Something old and distressing coils in my solar plexus. The old familiar anxiety of wondering if things with Jeffrey are going to work out. If we could make it as a couple. If he'd be the dad I wanted him to be for the family I wanted us to create.

I would've welcomed this email four months ago. Before I hooked up with Ravil. Maybe even after I knew I was pregnant, when I realized how daunting it was going to be to do this thing on my own.

But now?

Now it's damn inconvenient.

And still hurts, somehow.

Maybe *hurt* is the wrong word, but I don't like the way it makes me feel. It opens old wounds. Me wondering why I'm not good enough for Jeffrey to want to put a ring on my finger. Wondering when he'd be ready. Bending and contorting myself to fit into his very long timeline for when things should happen. Wanting to make it all work perfectly for him, so there could be an us. And then finally realizing his timeline was never going to speed up to the pace I needed it to if I wanted to have a baby before my body got too old.

Eight years we were together. I grieved my decision when I made it, not because it was the wrong one but because I loved Jeffrey. I'd had all kinds of visions of a future with him as the stable, loving husband and father. But those were projections not a reality.

I hit reply.

Hey Jeffrey. I'm actually on bedrest, so I can't meet today or any time in the near future, but I appreciate your thoughts.

—Luce

His reply is immediate.

Oh my God, is everything okay? Do you want me to come by? What do you need?

Well, crap. Not this. I definitely don't need this. I blink back tears, thinking that if I really were on bedrest—if Ravil had never shown up, and if Jeffrey had circled back—I'd probably be so relieved to have him back in my life. But only because he's familiar. Like family.

Not because I believe he'd actually show up the way I needed him to. I doubt he'd stick around and father the baby. He'd just make me hope and

grasp at the idea that he would.

But what if it was his? Would he then?

Probably not.

Ugh. I give my head a quick shake. These thoughts aren't useful in the least. It's not Jeffrey's baby, and he missed his chance. I'd thought he'd be a stable and secure kind of dad. The guy who looks good on paper. In reality, would he?

Or would I be the one still trying to orchestrate everything in our lives to make it work for him?

I think of the way Ravil crowded me back against the beach wall, his hand on my belly, his lips at my neck. *Our son.*

He sounded so awed. We shared the moment equally. If Jeffrey was the father, would he have felt the same reverence? I seriously doubt it. He isn't uncaring, but he can't seem to make himself feel much, either. Like he wants to care, knows he's supposed to care but is ambivalent about everything in his life, especially me.

Ravil wants this baby.

Very much.

He's not the man I want for my son, he's not the father I pictured, but at least he cares.

That's something.

I hit reply and type, *No, thank you. I'm fine, just need to follow doctor's orders for now. Thanks.*

A few minutes later, Ravil opens the door without knocking. "Who's Jeffrey?" he demands.

I frown at him, trying to hide the shiver that runs through my body. His monitoring was definitely not a bluff.

I look at him coolly. "My ex."

"The man you came to Black Light to forget."

He remembers. He guessed that night I was on a rebound. It was one of those moments of extraordinary perception that struck me.

I nod.

Ravil regards me, a shadow on his normally impassive face. He shoves his hands in his pockets and leans against the doorframe, his posture deceptively casual. "Get rid of him."

I raise my brows. "You obviously read the emails. I did my best. I'm following your guidelines, *Warden.*"

Ravil shakes his head. “Get rid of him completely. Out of your life.”

“Or what?” I snap, annoyed.

“Or I will.” He’s the sort of man who lowers his voice when making a threat rather than raising it, and it sends icicles through my veins.

Genuine fear for Jeffrey makes me grip the edge of the desk. I don’t know much about Ravil, but I imagine he might be capable of terrible things. Including murder.

I stare back at him. “Fine.”

The idea of saying something that would completely cut Jeffrey out of my life turns my stomach sour. We left things amicable—we were kind to each other during the break up. He helped me move into my new apartment when I said I was moving out. There was no fight or hateful things said.

But it’s over. And I don’t want to endanger him.

“I’ll take care of it.” I narrow my gaze at him. “Get out.”

Ravil’s lips purse, and he leaves without comment.

I’m not surprised when he reneges on his plan to let me out for lunch and sends Valentina in with a tray of food instead.



Ravil

I’M NOT JEALOUS. I’m simply not a jealous man. I learned as a young boy not to covet what someone else has but to work all the harder to surpass them.

Still, it takes me all day to get over being pissed off about Jeffrey.

Blyat.

Dima already had a data file on him, and I review it. I want to kill the man, and all he’s done was show he still cares about the mother of my child. But it brings home again the fact that my lovely attorney deemed me unfit for our child.

And that twat was good enough?

Fuck that.

True to her word, Lucy does send him an email ending things definitely.

Jeffrey,

Thank you for reaching out today, but it’s too confusing and painful for

me to open things back up with you. Please respect my wishes and give me the space I need to move on.

Thank you,

Luce

Luce. She's fucking *Luce* to him. A spike of irritation rams straight through my forehead at reading the pet name. And *painful*? Seriously? Was she still mourning that prick?

She Googled Russian porn, I remind myself. She's over him. At least sexually. At least I have that with her.

And for the rest? Well, fuck. I haven't even decided if I want more than to use her body for my own pleasure while she's here. It's not like I'm trying to win her heart.

Maxim's summation comes back to me, though. *Make her fall in love.*

Fuck that. She'll learn to surrender. That's all I need from her.

I don't need her love.

In the afternoon, I call Natasha's mother, a midwife and birth educator, to come check on Lucy.

Unlike Natasha, who was thrilled with the guaranteed work from me and the fact that I bought her a pregnancy massage table, Svetlana sees the bigger picture and gives me hell. "Why can't I speak English to her? Why is she locked up?"

"It's for her own protection," I reassure her. "She's carrying my child; if my enemies found out, they'd both be in danger."

It's a stretch. I tend to eliminate my enemies pretty quickly. Unless the Ukrainians turn into trouble, the only threats I face are from within my organization, and they'd take me out, not my unborn child.

Svetlana narrows her eyes at me. "So you keep her prisoner? Against her will?" The woman knows she lives in a bratva-owned building. That she benefits from it in a multitude of ways simply by being Russian. She's been happy to accept my generosity and protection without questioning any of my methods until it comes to a pregnant woman.

Her domain.

"Are you refusing to help me?" I ask the question mildly, but the color drains from her face.

"*Nyet*. Of course, I will do as you ask." She draws herself up. "But if I see your treatment of this woman endangers the baby, you cannot count on my silence."

I hold her gaze in silence, and unease seeps back into her posture. I've known great violence in my life, but I prefer to simply use the aura of danger to get my way. I don't have to actually do much, I simply suggest a threat.

I learned it from watching American movies. The ones that keep you most on the edge of your seat—the ones that really instill fear are the ones where the danger is unknown. It's the sound of scrapes and bumps in the dark, the music that makes you jump or keeps you on edge, not the actual plot. The most tension occurs before the audience actually sees what's making the sounds. Once the danger is actually identified—when the audience has seen the alien or the girl in the well or whatever it is—it loses much of its power.

People's imaginations usually concoct far worse consequences than the ones I would actually be willing to dole out.

Svetlana swallows, her breath turning shallow. "I don't mean to threaten you, Mr. Baranov."

Now I get to be magnanimous. I hold up my hand. "It's all right. I am glad your primary concern is with the health of my baby and his mother."

She nods quickly. "Yes, it is."

"Good. Come and see her."

I unlock my bedroom door and push it open. Lucy's at her desk, typing rapidly on her laptop.

"Lucy, this is your midwife, Svetlana. She's going to check on you." I wave Svetlana in and shut the door behind us.

Lucy's long blonde hair swings around her shoulder when she turns. "My what?"

"Your midwife. Svetlana specializes in home births. You have the extraordinary advantage of having your very own midwife right here in this building, so she will be close when it's time for the birth."

Lucy swivels in the office chair and stands. "I'm sorry, did you say *home* birth?"

I lift a brow as if her question is absurd. "Yes." In all actuality, I wouldn't be against a hospital birth, especially if that's what Lucy requires. But I'm playing a game now where I dictate the terms of everything related to her birth.

"I have an ob-gyn," she glances at Svetlana, "No offense." She lasers her gaze at me. "And I'm birthing this child at St. Luke's."

"Medically managed births result in thirty percent greater chance of

injury to mother or child. You'll give birth naturally here in the building. Svetlana has twenty-five years' experience delivering babies in both Russia and this country. She teaches child birthing classes, trains doulas and can even provide you with a water birth. You will be in very good hands. Or don't you believe a Russian is worthy of delivering your child?"

Lucy flushes. "I—Ravil." She draws a breath and puts her fists on her hips. "Do not pretend for one minute you think I have a bias against your country or its former citizens."

I cock a brow. "Don't you?"

Her flush grows deeper, as if the very suggestion of having a bias upsets her. "No." She glances at Svetlana before looking back at me. "You know my bias is based on your... profession."

Svetlana chooses this moment to interrupt. Speaking in Russian, she instructs Lucy to sit on the bed. Lucy obeys her gestures.

"Ah, so you claim to have had complete knowledge of my profession—exactly what I do and how I manage my business? You researched this thoroughly before you made the decision to keep our son from me?"

Svetlana pulls out her pressure cuff and attaches it to Lucy's arm.

Lucy's gaze drops from my face to the pressure cuff, her cheeks stained with pink. "I already apologized for that," she mutters.

"No," I say firmly. "You didn't." She may have offered some version of an apology, but it wasn't for that, and it wasn't accepted.

She watches Svetlana check her blood pressure and write it in a chart. She steals a glance at the numbers.

"That chart is in English!" Lucy points. "Svetlana, you speak English, don't you?"

Svetlana is wise enough not to even lift her head or acknowledge the words.

"Come on, I'm supposed to believe she's a licensed midwife in this country and doesn't speak English? I'm not a fool, Ravil."

I fold my arms over my chest, my lips curving slightly. Maxim was right. It didn't even take her a week to figure it out. "That doesn't mean anyone will speak English back, kitten."

I watch that notion settle over her and don't necessarily like the way it lands. With Svetlana, I wanted to create unease. When I do it to Lucy, it makes something twist in my gut.

Whether it's a protective instinct for our child or because I can't stand

seeing Lucy knocked too far off balance, I can't be sure. I've always been protective of her, even at Black Light.

Svetlana hands Lucy a test strip and a cup and, in Russian, tells her to pee on it.

Apparently Lucy is familiar with the test because she takes it into the bathroom and returns a moment later and hands the strip back. Svetlana compares the colors on the test strip to her chart. "That's good," she says in Russian as she writes it down. She pulls out her stethoscope and listens to Lucy's chest then her belly.

Svetlana palpates Lucy's belly then takes out a cone-shaped instrument, placing it on the side of her belly and listening to it.

"Are you listening to the baby's heartbeat?" I ask.

"Yes." Svetlana takes her ear away. "You want to hear?"

Blyat.

Like earlier, when Lucy first felt the baby kick, the idea of hearing its heartbeat makes him seem so real. Our baby, swimming inside Lucy right now. I kneel on the floor beside Lucy and put my ear to the small end of the cone. It takes me a moment to focus. To really listen. And then I hear it—the steady, fast rhythm. Our baby's heartbeat.

So tiny. So faint. So precious. This tiny, helpless miracle will be coming into our lives.

My eyes burn. I blink rapidly as I look up to find Lucy's gaze intent on me. Her fingertips lift to cover her mouth. "Benjamin," she blurts.

"Benjamin," I repeat.

She lets out her breath all in a rush with her words. "I don't know, it just popped into my head. I think his name is Benjamin." Her eyes grow bright.

I find her hand and hold it, not moving from my place at her feet. "Benjamin is a perfect name."

Svetlana gently takes the cone from me and packs it in her bag. I hardly notice as she pulls out a few sheets of paper and sets them on the bed. "Have her fill in her diet to track her protein on that chart. I don't need to come for another month, but if you want, I'll come again next week."

I don't look away from Lucy's beautiful face. I love seeing it soft and overcome with emotion, as changed as I am by a baby's heartbeat. "Yes, next week," I say to Svetlana, squeezing Lucy's hand again.

Svetlana leaves, and still I don't move, except to push Lucy's knees wide. I stroke my thumbs up the inside of her thighs, dragging the fabric of her skirt

up.

Conflict swirls in her eyes. She shifts her pelvis on the bed, probably turned on. Probably against her will.

Then she slaps me. “That’s for telling everyone to speak Russian around me.”

I let it fall, then catch her wrist and bring her fingers to my mouth, sucking one into my mouth.

With her other hand, she cuffs the top of my head lightly. A symbolic act, not a real one. “And that’s for...”

She stops as I take her middle finger and suck it into my mouth. She squirms some more.

“For what?” I ask when I release her finger and move my head to trail light kisses up her inner thigh.

Her breath catches and releases. “For...”

I make the kisses firmer as I grow close to the apex of her thighs, nipping and licking until I reach her panties. I bite lightly over the gusset.

“For hiring a midwife who will give you all the personalized attention you could need?”

Her breath comes out as a soft moan when I push her panties to the side and flick my tongue over her nether lips. Her knees jerk closed, but I push them back open.

“You’re so...” —her fingers bury in my hair, tugging me closer to her as I delve my tongue between her folds— “*infuriating.*”

I lick up and down her with the flat of my tongue, slide my hands under her thighs to pull her core closer to the edge of the bed.

“When will you stop,”—she breaks off with a cry of pleasure —“punishing me?”

I lift my head and lay a wicked smile on her. “Never, kitten.” I return to laving her with my tongue, penetrating her with it, flicking it over her swelling clit. She grows wet and swollen, and I slide two fingers inside to stroke her inner wall while I coax her clit out to play more. Getting the little nubbin between my lips, I suck hard.

She screams and grips my head with both her hands, tearing at my hair. I pull my lips off before she comes, still stroking slowly with my fingers.

“Not so fast, *kotyonok*. You think I’m going to reward you after you slapped my face?”

Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t say anything. She’s smart enough to

know to wait. If she'll just surrender to me, she'll get what she needs.

I get up from my knees and untie her dress, pulling the sash all the way out. "Looks like you'll have to be restrained."



Lucy

RAVIL STRIPS me and ties my wrists together then secures them to the headboard. I lie on my side because back lying is contraindicated now, something Ravil seemed to already know.

If there's one thing I can't fault him for, it's doing his research. I'll have to do my own now on home and water births.

Slapping him felt good. I'm not the type to slap men. I've never done it before, but dammit, he deserves it. And while I'm scared of what he's capable of, I was almost certain he wouldn't hurt me.

And he didn't. He didn't even get angry.

Probably because he knows he deserved it.

Funny how I can be so angry with him and still crave his touch everywhere. Still want his brand of dominance. It's like he holds me in a spell. I don't want to be here, I don't want to surrender, but my body melts like butter any time he lays those wicked fingers on me. That tongue.

And even now while I want to refuse this, I want to tell him to get the hell out, but my raging hormones overrule all reason and just scream *yes, please*.

More.

He climbs over me, a tube of something in his hand. He pushes my top knee open and rubs a couple drops of whatever is in the tube over my clit. I blink at him, wanting him to go on, to massage that place until I go off, but he doesn't. He looks down at me, studying my face. "Do you need a blindfold, kitten?"

My first instinct is to snap *no*. Like he issued a threat not a true question. But it occurs to me that he's not against me when we're in bed. This is the man who seems to know my body better than I do. He played me like a fine instrument at Black Light.

So I answer truthfully. "I-I don't know."

He nods. “I think you might.” He leaves the bed and returns with one of his ties, which he wraps around my head and secures in the back. I sink my head down on the pillow.

“Comfortable, kitten?”

I nod.

“Good. Because I intend to take my time with you this afternoon.”

“I-I have work to do,” I say. It’s true, I always have work to do. It’s also true that there’s nothing pressing.

“It will wait,” Ravil says.

Whatever he rubbed on my clit starts to send hot and cold sensations through all the sensitive nerve-endings. A tingling spreads through my entire genital area.

Yeah, I’m definitely not going to work right now. Or any time soon.

Ravil slaps my ass.

I jump, surprised at the sensation. Damn. He was right. The blindfold heightens everything. Helps me settle in. I sink into the scene, knowing there’s nothing I can or need to do. Ravil is in charge and—in this scenario—I trust him.

His fingers wrap around my knee, and he lightly trails his lips up my inner thigh again. I shiver at the sensation, pleasure blooming everywhere. He opens my labia and trails his tongue around my inner bits. I moan softly. It feels so good. Every time he touches me, my body comes alive.

It’s like I never even had sex before Ravil. Sure, I did the deed, but it was mechanical. Vaguely satisfying. Nothing at all like this.

This is hedonism—something I’ve never allowed myself. I don’t drink too much. I don’t overeat. I don’t take vacations, even though I know I should.

My parents instilled in me the belief I had to work hard and prove myself at all times. That’s what they did. That’s what my older brother, the NASA engineer did.

And I was told I’d have to work even harder because I’m a pretty woman. I’d have to prove myself over and over again. In college, through law school, at my father’s firm. Especially there—so no one would think I was handed the position through nepotism.

But Ravil doesn’t make me prove my worth. Not when I’m tied up, blindfolded and at his mercy.

Here, I am his to punish. His to pleasure. All I need to do is surrender.

Receive. Enjoy.

“Ravil,” I find myself croaking, rolling my hips and needing more than just his tongue.

“Tell me about your orgasms, kitten.” Ravil says, removing his glorious tongue from between my legs. “Are they mostly vaginal?” He tucks a couple digits inside me and strokes my inner wall.

Another moan falls from my lips. It feels so good.

“A-as opposed to what?” I manage to pant.

“Clitoral or cervical. They say there are three kinds of orgasms.” Suddenly he’s up by my head, trailing butterfly kisses along the column of my neck. “Four if you count this region.” He arrives at my jaw and kisses me harder there, then nibbles my ear.

Shivers run through me in all directions—up and down my spine, along the insides of my legs, in the arches of my feet, down my arms.

“Ravil,” I croak again.

He strokes down my cheek—I think with the backs of his fingers. “So beautiful,” he murmurs, his accent thicker than usual. “I love it when you say my name like you’re dying to be fucked.”

I lick my lips. “Please.”

It didn’t take me long to get from slapping him to begging.

“Surrender, kitten. You’ll get your pleasure when I decide.”

“I know,” I say faintly.

He chuckles and kisses the bobbing of my throat, then the notch between my clavicles, then the center of my breastbone.

He strums my right nipple lightly with the pad of a finger. There’s a patience with which he approaches my body that intensifies everything. He doesn’t just pinch or lick right away. Just lightly touches until it stiffens and lengthens under his touch.

“Soon these beautiful breasts will provide sustenance to our son. Benjamin.”

My body shivers in response. I plan on breastfeeding. At least a little. Pumping for certain, to leave milk with the nanny when I’m at work. But Ravil speaking of it now while I’m in this receptive state, in touch with my body, makes me almost crave the act. Like my body knows and believes the beauty of it. As perfect and pleasurable as sex. As natural and easy.

And for me, nothing’s ever been natural or easy.

Until Ravil showed up yesterday, I’d been out of sync with my body for

the pregnancy. Between the morning sickness in the early months and then the unquenchable horniness, not to mention growing out of all my clothes and my feet swelling, I wanted to step out of my body. Divorce it.

But now I'm fully in it—more than I've ever been—and it feels wonderful.

Ravil lightly tickles his fingertips on my inner thigh as he swirls his tongue around my nipple, then comes off and blows it dry.

“Ravil,” I moan. “Please.”

“I know, kitten.” He sucks my nipple into his mouth, taking a long hard pull on it, like he's a suckling baby, and I feel the answering tug in my core. “I know what you need.”

“How?” I warble. My brain, as ever, refuses to shut off.

He scrapes his teeth over my nipple. “How do I know? I pay attention, *kotyonok*.”

I shiver. “S-so, what kind of orgasms do I have?”

“Vaginal,” he answers immediately. “But you like stimulation everywhere.”

My body surrenders to him even more. I register it like a wash of relief, a deepening relaxation. Giving up control has never felt so incredible.

“Ravil?” Somehow it's easier to talk to him with the blindfold on. With my body under his control.

He kisses around the swell of my belly. “Yes, kitten?”

“What will you do with me?”

I mean after the birth. At least, I think that's what I mean. I want to know his intentions. Why he's kissing every inch of my body while holding me captive.

I want to know if he'll keep me.

And I honestly don't know how I want him to answer.

“This, kitten.” He holds my knee open and rims my anus. I shriek, squeezing and tightening with the pleasure and taboo of the act.

This. I can't bring myself to ask again. To clarify. Because I've realized I don't want to know the answer.

And then I lose track of my thoughts because the pleasure he wrings is so blissfully intense I don't even care anymore.



Ravil

I KEEP Lucy on the edge of an orgasm for the better part of an hour. I fuck her with a butt plug, suck her clit, use a vibrator with the G-spot curve. I spank her a little. Suck her toes. I go on until she's practically weeping with need, and then I end my own torture by freeing my cock and pushing into her.

It feels so good not to have to use a condom. To know she's already carrying my baby. That she's my only partner, and I hers.

I have to close my eyes and breathe deeply to keep from coming as soon as I'm inside her. "You feel so good, kitten," I rasp, my accent sounding as thick as when I first moved here.

"Yes, Ravil, please," she babbles. She lost her mind long ago, reduced to a wanton puddle of beautiful need.

I pride myself on drawing this response out of her, especially knowing how tightly laced she keeps herself. I doubt she ever allows herself this pleasure. Which is why I'm going to make sure she receives it every damn day.

I loosen the tie that holds her wrists to the headboard, so I can put her on her knees, her arms outstretched long above her head like she's in some kind of yoga bondage pose. I smack her ass because she looks so gorgeous.

"Ravil, Ravil...."

"Lucy. Beautiful Lucy." I slap her again and slide in once more. The shudder of pleasure is no less in this position. "I love fucking you, kitten. I could do it all night long."

"No," she protests, already desperate to get off. "Ravil, please. I need..."

"You need my cock?" I slam in firmly, pressing my loins against the soft curves of her ass.

"Yes!" She sounds impatient.

I grip her hips and take several short thrusts, bumping her ass each time.

She whines. The silky strands of her long blonde hair fan out across her bare back and onto the bed. She looks like a fallen angel.

Debauched by me.

"You need it hard, Lucy?"

She pants. "Um..."

I give her a demonstration, slamming in hard half a dozen times. The moment I stop, she cries, "Yes! Don't stop! Oh God, please, Ravil."

I want to torture her more. To make it last longer for my own pleasure. But the combination of her surrender and pleading along with the sensation of being inside her and claiming her fully pushes me to the edge.

“*Blyat*,” I curse in Russian, my movements becoming rough and wild. I fuck her harder, losing focus on her pleasure, careening into my own. “Lucy.”

“Yes! Oh God...”

I grow dizzy. The room tilts and spins. My balls tighten, thighs quake. I drill into her like I have something to prove. Like this is the moment she will learn to accept me as the rightful father of her child, make room in her life for us to be a family.

Even if that’s not really what I want.

Or is it?

Fuck.

Fuck.

Yes!

I slam hard into Lucy and stay deep, tumbling over the edge into orgasm.

She comes around my cock, her inner walls squeezing my dick, massaging out every last drop of my seed.

I don’t know how long I stand there on my knees, buried deep in Lucy with the room spinning. After a moment, I become aware of her whimpers. I catch her around her waist and tug us both to our sides, staying inside her. I reach around and rub her clit, and she comes some more, wringing another mini orgasm out of me.

I groan, my arm tightening around her. I rock my hips, pumping slowly in and out as I float in the ecstasy produced by the release. The sense of well-being. Of gratitude. Some might mistake this moment for love.

I’m not so foolish.

I rub her clit again, and she squeezes around my cock again.

Still, this must be the closest I’ve ever come to feeling love. The connection and affection I feel with her is real.

I nuzzle her neck and kiss a patch of skin I find under her soft hair.

What will you do with me? She wanted to know.

Keep you.

I wouldn’t. I won’t. She doesn’t deserve it. But if I were selfish. If I were truly the bastard she believes me to be... I’d keep her forever.

Tied up on my bed.

Filled with my cock.

Moaning my name in that hoarse, desperate way of hers.

Lucy. My brilliant, well-defended attorney-lover. The woman who doesn't trust me to father her child.

The woman I want to turn inside out. Master.

Love.

Yes, *love*.

I do want to love in this lifetime. Too bad I'm even more defended than she is.

CHAPTER 9

*L*ucy

AFTER A SNACK AND A BRIEF NAP, I wake to find Ravil standing at the window. He turns when I sit up.

“How do you feel, beautiful?”

I stretch, feeling the relaxation in my limbs. A slight soreness between my legs. The lingering sensation from having something plugged in my ass.

Amazing. I feel incredible.

Not that I’m going to tell him that.

I climb out of bed.

“Are you going to let me out of this room now?”

I shouldn’t sound so testy. Not after he just devoted himself to giving me the most incredible orgasm of my life.

“Yes,” he says mildly. “I’m going to take you to the rooftop pool.”

Pool is a magic word to any pregnant woman, I guarantee it. I perk right up. “Do I have a swim suit?”

“I packed one for you. But you could swim nude if you like, too. The pool is private.”

Skinny dipping isn’t my thing although after our afternoon session, I am feeling far more comfortable in my skin than normal. I find my bikini and put it on. The bottoms still fit, but my breasts spill out of the top.

Ravil’s gaze falls on them, hungry. He grabs and holds out a terry cloth

robe that's too large—probably his—and I slip into it. Then he changes into a pair of turquoise and navy swim trunks.

Like always, I stare at his chiseled, tattooed chest. The light dusting of golden hair across his chest. He tosses my flip flops out of the closet and comes out in a pair of his own, two beach towels tucked under one arm.

It's a different look for him, and if it weren't for the prison tattoos, he'd look like a California lifeguard. Blond, built and manly. Not wholesome. But it's almost like I can see how, under different circumstances, he could've turned out wholesome. At his core, he's not an evil man.

He can't be—not with the care he takes with me.

Can he?

I ignore his hand when he holds it out but let him lead me out of the penthouse and up a short flight of stairs to the roof.

There, I nearly gasp at the scenery. There are large potted trees. Flower boxes. Colorful umbrellas. Fake grass gives it more color. We round past the roof fixtures, the concrete walls cleverly concealed with bamboo fencing, and emerge at the pool.

Where a pair of teenagers are fooling around.

“Oh my God,” the girl squeaks. Her bikini top is off, floating in the water, and she dives under to hide her bare breasts from us.

Her boyfriend turns around to face us. “Mr. Baranov!” He places his body in front of hers as he grabs the bikini top and surreptitiously holds it behind his back.

“I thought you said it was a private pool,” I murmur.

“I'm really sorry. I know these aren't the open swim hours,” the boy stammers. His face is red although not as red as the neck of his girlfriend, who has her back to us, ducked down as she puts her top back on.

Ravil says something to him in Russian.

“No, sir,” he answers in English. The teen shakes his head emphatically. Seeing his girlfriend is dressed, he grabs her hand and tugs her toward the steps. “No, I swear we didn't. I'm sorry we were here when we weren't supposed to be. It's just... no one's usually here during private hours.”

Ravil looks at him coolly. “Come by my apartment tonight around eight, Leo,” he says.

Leo's eyes widen. Out of the pool, he stands taller than I initially thought, but he's still lanky. Probably no more than fifteen or sixteen. He holds his free hand up. “I'm really sorry. Being here when I wasn't supposed to was

really disrespectful. I promise it won't happen again."

Ravil nods, setting our towels down on a chaise lounge. "Apology accepted. I still need to see you tonight. Eight o'clock. Understand?"

Leo grabs a towel and opens it for his girlfriend in a decidedly gentlemanly move. "Yeah, okay." He doesn't bother drying off himself, just shoves his feet in his flip flops, grabs his towel and girlfriend's hand and starts toward the doors.

He turns back. "Mr. Baranov?"

"Yes?"

"Are you going to tell my mom about this?" His voice cracks a little on the word *mom*.

"No," Ravil says. "We'll leave her out of it. Unless you no-show on me tonight."

"I won't," the young man swears.

"See that you don't." Ravil's already given him his back, kicking off his flip flops and heading for the pool steps.

I watch the couple leave before I join him. The pool is beautiful. The kind that's made to look like a natural water feature, with a gentle hourglass shape and a spa that cascades down soft rocks into the pool.

"It's salt water," Ravil says. "Perfect for your waterbirth."

My waterbirth.

This man must be insane.

I am not giving birth on a roof in a pool.

I slip off the robe and step in. The water is perfect— refreshing on a warm summer afternoon.

"What did you say to Leo when you spoke in Russian?"

Ravil's lips twitch. "I asked him if he had sex in my pool."

I laugh despite myself.

Ravil's eyes trace my face as if he finds my laugh fascinating.

I quickly tuck my smile away. "What's going to happen at eight?"

Again, Ravil's lips curve at the edges. We stand in the shallow end, the water rising to our ribs. "I'm going to have the sex talk with him. Give him condoms and make sure he knows how to treat a girl."

My lips part. Whatever I expected, it wasn't that.

"You are?" I say, inanely.

Ravil nods. "He lives with his single mother. I have a responsibility to step in for these man-to-man talks. Especially when I catch him stripping his

girlfriend in my pool.”

I can't help it. I laugh again. It's so damn sweet. Here I was thinking Ravil was going to make some wicked threat to the kid. Instead, he's... well, *fathering* the boy.

“Is he a relative?” I ask.

“No,” Ravil says. “But the Kremlin is my village. And I'm their leader. I have a duty to look after all of them... if I can.”

Something uncomfortable twists under my ribs. An unease.

Maybe I misjudged Ravil.

Maybe horribly.

But no. He's a criminal. His tattoos prove it.

You claim to have complete knowledge of my profession—exactly what I do and how I manage my business? You researched this thoroughly?

I didn't. I essentially racially profiled him. Although he did choke a man at Black Light for insulting me. That was a huge red flag for me.

Still, I have no other proof against him that he's a bad man. Unfit to be a parent.

So perhaps that's where I must begin. To build my case against him. Or for him. Either way, I need to build a case. Look at the evidence, weigh it.

I duck my head under the water and breast stroke to the opposite end of the pool. It feels great to be weightless. To exercise without the discomfort of my new shape. Without that bone tired feeling I sometimes get when I haven't eaten enough protein or red meat for the baby.

I swim laps back and forth. Ravil sits at the edge of the pool and watches.

Eventually, I get tired and come up for air near him, water streaming down my face and hair.

“Why did you become a defense attorney?” he asks.

I squeeze my hair out and labor to climb out and sit beside him. “My father is a defense attorney. He represented some of the biggest organized crime leaders in Chicago. Some people said he must be soulless to represent them. That he lined his pockets with blood stained bills. But the thing is—my father believed, as do I, that every man has a constitutional right to a fair trial.”

Ravil raises a brow, and I catch the accusation in it. I didn't offer him any such due process. I tried and convicted him based on hearsay. I tried to keep him from his own flesh and blood based on my own prejudice.

I drop my gaze to my bikini top and adjust it to keep my breasts covered.

“I grew up hearing my father defend his choice at the dinner table or family gatherings. People inevitably ask, why would you defend a criminal? Especially if you know he’s a criminal?”

I meet Ravil’s pale blue gaze and swallow.

“He would say, every man I defend is someone’s son. Someone’s brother. Someone’s father. If you were a doctor, you wouldn’t refuse to treat a man because he’d been accused of a crime. You’d do your job. My job is to help him through our legal system, which would be difficult for him to navigate on his own. Just because I stand up in court and touch his shoulder and make him relatable to the jury doesn’t mean I approve or condone what he’s done. But I am going to do my job representing him.”

“And you feel the same?” Ravil asks.

I draw an unsteady breath and nod. “Yes.”

“But you do judge them. Even when you represent them? You won’t condone a criminal?”

The late afternoon sun’s dropped behind a building. The breeze against my wet skin suddenly makes me cold.

The truth is, despite what I just resolved to do—to research Ravil’s background and deeds—I’m not sure I want to know. I’m afraid of what I’ll find.

Which must mean... I’m starting to care about the man. And I don’t want to know if he’s as bad as I originally imagined.

I don’t want to know how many graves he’s dug.

Or women he’s kidnapped—apart from me.

I shake my head. “My judgements and feelings are irrelevant. My job is to guide them through the legal system.”

“Do you work harder if you believe they’re innocent?”

I look down at my fingernails. I keep them short but polished with a French manicure. They’re getting chipped. “Honestly? I don’t think that way. Sometimes, the less I know, the better. I make my case based on the prosecutor’s. It’s not about working harder. It’s more about how solid or weak the case is. If any procedures were violated on the part of the police or prosecution.”

“So you don’t care if Adrian set the fire or not?”

“No,” I answer immediately. “Honestly? My assumption is he did. That won’t stop me from doing my best to get him off.”

“Will you be able to get him off?”

I lift my shoulders. “I have a good chance. Their case isn’t great. I can probably show bias based on the fact that he’s an immigrant. Of course, a jury might have the same bias. But if we’re lucky, I can stop this thing before it goes to trial.”

“Was he working for you?” My throat tightens as I ask the question. I’m not sure I want to hear the answer.

“Are you building your personal case against me?”

Yes.

“No.”

“Do you believe your laws are perfect, Lucy?”

“Of course not.”

“Do you think there may be reasons to break your laws that still fall under a code of what’s right and wrong?”

I go still, knowing he’s telling me something here. I’m not sure I want to hear it.

“Yes,” I admit. “I’m sure there are. I’ve argued cases like that before.”

Ravil simply nods and climbs to his feet. “I’m sure you’re getting hungry.” He offers me a hand.

I take it and let him help me to stand. “Famished.” I sigh because I’m almost always famished these days.

“What do you want to eat tonight? I’ll take you out... if you like.”

Huh. Guess the warden is not that much of a hardass.

“I’m tired, actually. And...” I give him an impish grin. “Are there any perogies left?” I’ve been thinking about the damn meat pies all day long. They are definitely my new pregnancy craving.

Ravil’s lips twist into a grin. “I think there are. I’ll make sure we always have some on hand for you, kitten.” He holds a towel open for me just like young Leo had for his teen girlfriend.

Maybe it’s the sweetness of that image or maybe all my thoughts about Ravil are rearranging, but I suddenly can’t see him as the terrible villain any more.

CHAPTER 10

Lucy

FRIDAY, a text comes in from Gretchen. *What's up? Call me!*

We're both busy attorneys, so me not picking up her calls or having time to return them isn't totally unusual. I knew she wouldn't take offense if I didn't call right back.

But I still don't know how to manage a call with her.

Part of it is my own ambivalence. If I were going to give a coded message to anyone, it would be her. We lived together all three years of law school. That was some serious bonding and gives us tons of history to draw upon. Plus, she knows about Black Light and Ravil. I could probably improvise something. Given a little time, I could certainly craft something in particular to send to her.

But should I? Would I really be risking being sent to Russia and possibly separated forever from my baby when he's born? Is it worth losing the growing trust between Ravil and I? Trust I plan to use to negotiate for an arrangement we both can live with?

I'm not sure.

I'm definitely not ready to take that risk today.

I text Gretchen back. *Sorry—I've been slammed! I'll call you when I have a chance to catch up.*

There. That should hold her off for a few days if not another week. It will

give me time to figure out if I'm going to lie to her or try to alert her to my situation.

My phone rings again. It's Sarah, the summer associate helping me with Adrian's case. I pick up.

"Hi, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I say, not bothering to hide the irritation in my voice. "As I said, bed rest is precautionary. I'm at full capacity, I just have to stay at home."

"Right, right," she says. "Of course. I have all the materials you requested, so do you want me to courier them over?"

Well, shit.

"No," I say quickly. "Please just scan them all and send them digitally."

"Ew. I really don't have time for that, and I don't think Lacey does either." Lacey is the legal secretary that four associates share.

"Fine. I will send a courier to pick them up."

"Okay. I'll put them at the front desk."

I breathe a sigh of relief when she doesn't question why I don't want her to send our usual courier service out with it. Ravil will have to send one of his guys to do it. Or book a real courier.

"Listen, I found something else out about the case. Dick seemed worried about us representing the Russian mob, so he had me do some digging."

Dick? She's on a first name basis with him? Jesus, is the summer associate fucking a partner? Sounds like it.

"Anyway, word is the FBI is pissed about the fire because they had that building on watch. Seems like a suspected sex slavery ring is or was being operated out of there. Or something like that. So you just might want to think about who you're representing."

I draw a slow breath. "Defense attorneys represent their clients, period. In this country, we have a constitution that affords all human beings the same rights, and one of those is a fair trial."

"I know, I know. No offense. I just thought you should know."

"Well, thank you. I will figure out if it's of any use to me."

I'm pissed now. Because I see exactly where this thing is going. Dick's screwing the new law student and using her to build his negative smear campaign against me for the partnership debate.

Well, screw them.

Screw them all.

I hang up without a goodbye, my teeth clenched. Only after I sit in silence for a moment do I start to unpack the information she gave me.

Human sex trafficking.

Is it possible Adrian burned down the building to destroy evidence because the feds were getting too close to an illegal operation?

Despite what I told Sarah, the idea makes me sick.

Especially because this case is tied to Ravil.

Does this mean Ravil's a sex trafficker?

A wave of nausea blows through me, and a splitting headache comes on.

Screw it. I'm not going to even bother trying to work through it. I'm officially on bed rest.

I'm going to bed.

I grab a paperback out of the box of books Ravil brought to me—a mixture of Viking romance and the latest non-fiction bestsellers. I suspect he reviewed my Kindle purchases.

I crack open a book featuring a man with a bare chest and washboard abs on the cover. I used to think reading romance was too low-brow for me. I mean, I read them as a teenager but stopped when I went to college. But screw that. Romance is exactly the thing a pregnant woman should read. Love, sex and happily ever afters. There's no reason to put anything negative in the mix.

Especially not the real-life negative news Sarah just laid on me.

CHAPTER 11

*R*avil

AGAINST MY BETTER JUDGEMENT, Saturday, I drive Lucy to her father's rehab center as a reward for her good behavior.

She settled into an uneasy routine for the rest of the week. We took daily walks and swims, shared meals. Shared long, intense sex sessions. Natasha came by to massage her every day. To my amusement, she requested perogies every day and devoured them like they were the finest delicacy. She practiced her Russian with the guys, whom I still have not allowed to speak English to her, despite the fact that she knows they can.

Dima and I closely monitored her phone calls and communications, but she didn't seem to make any secret or overt pleas for help. Gretchen, her friend from DC—the one she came to Black Light with—called a couple times, but Lucy didn't answer or call back.

For whatever reason, she's being compliant. I'm not foolish enough to believe she's accepted her fate. I know she's biding her time.

"Thank you for this," she says, staring straight forward through the windshield of my Jaguar I-Pace.

"You will not make me sorry." It's a warning.

"Are you going to come in?"

"Yes," I say. "And you won't leave my side for a single moment." I can imagine her trying to slip a note in her mother's purse or leave it somewhere

in the room. Or even blatantly call for help. Bringing her here is a terrible idea. And yet, denying her something so important also felt wrong.

She chews on the inside of her lip, considering me.

“Who do they think is the father of their grandchild?” I ask.

“An anonymous sperm donor,” she says.

I allow a smirk to play on my lips. “Which isn’t that far off. It was nearly anonymous.” We hadn’t exchanged real names at Black Light.

She appears relieved by my reaction. Or non-reaction. “Yes.”

“Except you told me you’d take a morning after pill. Did you know then that you didn’t plan to?”

I can tell by the way her gaze slides away that she did.

“I’m glad,” I offer. “Families are forbidden to bratva. We live by a code that requires us to remove ourselves from all previous family, to never marry and to swear allegiance only to the brotherhood. So I didn’t think I would ever have a child.”

“And now you can?” she asks.

I shrug. “I’m not in Russia anymore. I am the leader of this cell. I am changing the rules.”

“Will our son be in danger?”

“Neither of you will be in danger. I promise you that. If there’s a challenge, it will be for my seat, and the danger will be solely mine. But there will be no challenge. I have no interest in the power struggles back in Russia, and here there are none.”

She stares down at her fingernails. The pale paint is starting to chip. I make a mental note to bring someone in to give her a mani-pedi. “I was afraid I wouldn’t have children. I broke up with Jeffrey because after eight years, he wouldn’t commit. He loved me, but for some reason, he just wasn’t sure about the marriage and family thing. And I knew I wanted it. And I was scared—” her voice chokes, and she stops speaking.

I reach over and pick up her hand, squeezing it.

“I was scared it might never happen for me. I’m thirty-five. I put law school and my career first. I thought I’d have time to have babies once I was established. But then Jeffrey never got on board. And by the time I realized he never would, it seemed like it was too late to meet someone new. So when your condom broke... well, it seemed like an opportunity I might not have again. So I took it.”

I release her hand, remembering that she took it without telling me. And

that she still believes she made the right choice. She would still prefer me out of our child's life.

We arrive at the rehab home, and I park the Jaguar. "Leave your purse in the car," I tell her, in case she has a note prepared. I check her pockets before taking her hand and leading her in.

We sign in at the front desk where the pretty young attendant greets Lucy by name and looks at me curiously. "You can go on back. Your mother's already there," she tells Lucy.

The place is nice—definitely on the higher end for a rehab home but still with the medicinal smell that stings my nostrils. Lucy leads me down the hallway to a room where the door is open. She enters. "Hi, Dad," she says overly brightly.

An older man in a wheelchair looks over, and the left side of his mouth lifts in a smile. The right side of his face remains slack and unexpressive. Controlling the wheelchair with a joystick, he spins it to face us.

"Hi Mom." Lucy gives the elegant but depressed-looking woman in the room a hug. "How's he doing?"

"Who is this?" her mother demands without answering, her gaze resting on me.

I step forward and shake her hand. "Hi Barbara," I greet her by name. "I'm Ravil Baranov. I'm the father of Lucy's child."

Lucy and her mother both suck in shocked breaths. Her father spins the wheelchair to face me, one bushy gray brow down.

"What? How did this happen?" her mother exclaims.

Lucy clears her throat. "Ah, I think that part would be rather obvious, Mom."

Her mother still stares in confusion, not understanding. "I thought donors in this sort of thing sign away all their rights." She looks to Lucy's dad for confirmation, even though the man is no longer capable of speaking.

"We met last Valentine's Day," I say. "The baby was conceived naturally." I've learned that sticking close to the truth is always the best strategy. "We've only recently become reacquainted." I hold my hand out to Lucy's father although I'm not sure he's capable of shaking it. His right hand is curled into a ball on his lap. "Ravil Baranov."

He offers his left, working hand. I quickly change hands and clasp it. He squeezes too hard—far too hard. I can't tell if it's a message or he can't modulate his grip.

Judging by the way his alarmed gaze takes in the tattoos on my knuckles, it's a message. That's when I realize Nick Lawrence has all his faculties intact. He's just trapped in a body incapable of speech or walking. Lucky for me, I guess, or he'd be raising the alarm about Lucy's freedom.

"How's Dad?" Lucy asks again, obviously trying to change the subject.

"Your father's had his physical therapy already today, and the speech therapist was in. They have him using this iPad to communicate, but he doesn't seem to like it," her mother reports. "How are things at the firm?"

Lucy shrugs. "They want to replace Dad with a new partner, and I don't think they want me." She shoots a wry glance at her father, who frowns even deeper. He opens his mouth a couple times, his lips rounding like he's trying to form words, but he eventually gives up, shakes his head in obvious frustration.

"They can't pick a new partner without your father's vote," Lucy's mother says.

"Oh, I think they plan to," Lucy says. "I think that's precisely why they chose now to act."

Her father makes some unintelligible sounds.

"They'd have to buy out his share," Barbara says. "And I've had no offers."

Nick lifts his good foot and plops it down on the wheelchair foot pad, like he's stomping it.

"I know, dear. I wouldn't accept them anyway. You plan on going back."

I hide my wince. In my unprofessional opinion, there's no way in hell Nick Lawrence will practice law again. But you never know. Miracles do happen.

"But he still has a vote and a voice in any decision they make. I will call Dick myself and tell him I'll stand in as his proxy until he recovers."

"No, Mom," Lucy snaps. "They already think I've had everything handed to me because Dad is a partner. If I make partner, it's going to be on my own merits not because my mother called and pitched a fit."

Barbara sniffs. "Well, who do you think they want to be partner?"

"I don't know. But Dick stopped by my office to tell me again how representing members of organized crime is destroying the firm's reputation. Nevermind that nearly all my cases are referrals from the Tacones. Nevermind I made as much or more for the firm as any associate last year."

Nick turns his wheelchair to face me directly and tries to speak again.

Lucy darts a glance at him then me.

I don't play dumb. The truth is, I see the man's obvious frustration with being unable to interact.

I grab a stool and sit myself right in front of him, meeting his defiant glare. "I care about your daughter, Nick," I tell him. "I was surprised but happy to learn about her pregnancy. We are committed to seeing if we can work things out to raise our baby together."

Lucy goes still. Nick studies me intently, like he's trying to read the rest of the story.

"Wh-where did you say you two met?" Barbara asks.

"Washington, DC," Ravil answers. "I was there on business. Neither of us actually realized we both lived in the same city until I was in her office this week."

"Lucy?" her mother warbles. "Is this... all true?" The woman appears shocked. I'm sure Lucy engaging in a one night stand in Washington, DC is completely out of character for her daughter.

"Yes," Lucy murmurs. "It's true. Ravil actually showed up as a client Monday," she tells her father. "Well, I'm representing a young man he posted bail for. He hired me."

I take her hand and squeeze it.

"Well, lots of people learn to co-parent without becoming a couple," Barbara offers.

Christ. Do I really seem that unsuitable? Offense taken.

"Indeed." I stand. "Well, we can't stay long. We have a birthing class to attend."

"Lamaze?" her mother asks.

"Bradley Method," I answer. Lucy hides her surprise because this is the first I've mentioned the class or the method. "But we're also considering hypnobirthing. Harnessing the power of the mind to create a relaxed and painless birth. It's up to Lucy, of course."

She gives me a tight smile.

I lean over to shake Nick's left hand again. "I'm going to take good care of Lucy, don't worry."

Lucy leans over and kisses his cheek. "I love you, Dad. I'm sorry I can't stay longer." She hugs her mom again. "Bye, Mom."

As we walk out, I take her hand and find it trembling. She sniffs. I stop, realizing she's holding in tears. A deep sense of horror ripples through me.

Like my body physically can't stand seeing her upset.

"Lucy..."

She jerks her hand out of mine and waves it at me. "It's all right. I cry every time I leave here. It's the pregnancy hormones. And I hate—" she chokes a bit— "seeing him like that."

"Oh, kitten, I know." I stop and pull her gently into my arms. She doesn't exactly resist, but she doesn't hug me back. Her back shakes with another sob. We stand in the hallway, and I rub a slow circle over her back, holding her body flush against mine, the curve of her belly pressing against my hips. After a moment, she softens and presses her face into my shoulder.

"It's just not fair, you know? He's such a smart man. And I can tell he's still there, but he just can't speak any more. It kills me."

"It's possible for the brain to rewire," I tell her although I'm not so sure. His skin was gray. His breath sometimes labored. Her father didn't look healthy to me. Like the stroke might have been the first of many signs of deteriorating body due to old age and a stressful career.

"I want him to meet Benjamin," she says, as if she was thinking the same thing.

"I'm sure he wants that, too. I'll bet he'll make sure to hang on for that, kitten."

She pushes away and wipes at the smudge of her mascara on my white button-down. "I'm sorry."

I cover her hand. "I'm not." It's true—comforting Lucy feels like a privilege. I kiss her temple. "Come on, I'll bet you're hungry again."

She sniffs and gives me a watery smile. "Actually, I am. I really want an Oreo Blizzard from Dairy Queen."

I smile. "Coming right up. Let's go, beautiful."



Lucy

IN THE CAR, I arrange my purse on my lap, digging in it for some lip balm. I swear, pregnancy makes my lips drier than the desert despite the fact that I drink and drink all day long.

I'm still emotional from seeing my dad and mixed up about Ravil.

"I have a present for you," Ravil says.

"You do?" It's funny how the promise of an unexpected gift has an instant lightening effect. Some carryover from childhood when gifts meant everything, I'm sure.

Ravil reaches into the back seat and produces a white box with a pretty light blue bow.

"What is it?"

Ravil's smile is indulgent. His eyes crinkle at the corners. "Open it."

I tug the ends of the silky ribbon, and they unravel and fall open. I take the lid off and peer inside. "Matryoshka dolls!" I lift out a beautiful wooden doll painted as a woman in traditional peasant dress, only her face looks remarkably like mine. "Is this me?" I gasp, opening the doll to reveal the next one.

"They are all you until the last one," Ravil says.

I crack them all open until I get to the baby. A little boy, judging by the light blue swaddling.

"In Russia they are a symbol of fertility and family. An honoring of how mothers carry the legacy of family into the future."

My eyes mist. "I love it. Thank you."

Ravil starts the car. "I honor the gift you are bringing me. Us," he amends.

"Were you mocking me when you said those things to my father?" I restack the sweet nesting dolls, admiring their craftsmanship. How well they open and close.

"I spoke the truth," he says quietly. "Every word."

Tears threaten again, and I'm not the crying type. Damn hormones!

"What about the birth class?"

He nods. "We are really going. Svetlana holds a weekly class in the building on Saturdays. The new session starts tonight."

"Bradley Method?"

"That's right."

"I don't know what that is."

"Well, it's the one Svetlana likes best, after hypnobirthing. And she's passionate about birth education."

"Will it be in English?"

Ravil's lips twitch. "It will."

“And other couples will be there?”

“Yes.”

I sit back, somewhat buoyed by this information. I look over at Ravil, my handsome Russian captor. “Are you finished being mad at me?”

His lips twist wryly, and he keeps his gaze on the road. “I’m getting there.”

The baby kicks, and I gasp and smile, putting my hand over the place.

Ravil reaches over to lay his hand there, too. I cover it with mine and press it into my belly to show him where I feel the tiny bubbles of movement.

“Thank you,” I say.

He looks over.

“For taking me to see my dad. It means a lot to me.”

“I know, kitten,” he says. And I believe him. Because he does seem to know what’s important to me and what isn’t.

“Take me home,” I say, even though my instincts scream at me to hold back. That it’s too soon to make that request. Of course, I’m right.

“Your home is in the Kremlin,” he says firmly. “Our son’s home is in the Kremlin.”

I drop my head back against the seat back. Dammit.

I need to ask him about the sex trafficking, but I’m too terrified about what I’d find out. Things are finally settling between us. I know that’s cowardly, but protecting my mental state has some value when I’m growing a baby.

He pulls through a Dairy Queen drive-thru and orders me the Blizzard.

It wouldn’t be true to say I’m not getting somewhere with Ravil. He took me to see my parents, which he hadn’t agreed to before. He’s taking me to birthing class. He’s starting to show some trust.

I need to be careful and not violate that trust. Because Ravil told my father he cares about me. And he told me every word he said in the rehab was true.

So if I can build his trust, if I can win his forgiveness for trying to keep the baby from him, I believe I can eventually appeal to his more magnanimous side. This is a guy who gives the teens in his building a lecture about sex and offers them condoms. I believe he can be reasoned with.

Not today.

But I can bide my time.

And in the meantime, I’m not suffering. I’m in luxurious surroundings

with daily massages, delicious food and more orgasms a night than I had in a year before Ravil.

And as for Ravil—well, I know he’s a criminal. I don’t believe he made the money to buy a multi-million dollar building overlooking Lake Michigan legitimately.

But I haven’t seen anything terrifying yet. He doesn’t seem mentally unstable. I have no reason to believe he’d be a bad father, if he promised to keep his business away from our child.

That would have to be the stipulation.

But we’re not ready to negotiate yet.

First, I surrender.

Give him what he wants—the security of having me under his thumb. Full access to my body at all times—I can’t say I mind that part—and the control over his son’s future that I tried to take away from him.

Later—much later—I will bring him to the bargaining table and negotiate for my freedom.

I scoop a spoonful of the blizzard and hold it out to him. “Would you like a bite?”

CHAPTER 12

Lucy

SVETLANA HOLDS BIRTHING class in a conference room on the third floor of the Kremlin, where there appears to be various offices. I see a sign on a door that says, “quiet, massage in session,” and guess that must be where Natasha sees her clients.

There are a few other couples sitting around the large conference table and a mother with a baby on her hip standing up, talking to them.

“Lucy, Ravil, welcome,” Svetlana says in English with a relatively thick accent. “I’m delighted you could come.”

She gives me a hug like we’re old friends. Like the last time she saw me, she didn’t stonewall me by speaking only Russian. Of course, that was Ravil’s fault.

Svetlana pulls down a projector screen and plugs her Macbook in. She starts by having us introduce ourselves.

Hi, I’m Lucy, and I’m a prisoner in this building. The father of my child is a dangerous criminal who wants to control every aspect of my pregnancy and birth.

Wonder what they’d say if I led with that?

But no. Trust-building, I remind myself. Surrender.

“Hi, I’m Melissa,” a very young woman with long dark hair and olive skin says. “We, uh, got pregnant on our honeymoon. It was sort of

unexpected, but we're happy."

"I'm John," her husband says.

"I'm Larry, this is my wife Jane. This will be our third home birth with Svetlana, so we don't really need the class, but it's an excuse to get away from the other two kids and have a date night together," a bearded man says. His wife laughs and snuggles against his side. "Plus, we love the videos," Jane says.

"Oh yes, the birth videos," the woman with the baby says. "I've seen them twenty times, and I still cry every time."

Everyone smiles.

"I'm Carrie. I don't have a birth partner," a hippie-looking blonde says. "But I'm planning on hypnobirthing. I've been listening to my audios."

Hypnobirthing. Ravil mentioned something about that to my parents. At the time, I was fairly certain it was yet another crazy thing he was throwing at me to keep me off balance. Now, it sounds more like a real thing. I make a mental note to research it.

"That's all right. I will be your birth partner," Svetlana says. "Or Genevieve." She indicates the mom, who is now nursing her chubby baby in the corner. "My assistant." Genevieve lifts her hand and waves. "I'm Genevieve. This is Sammy." As if the baby knows he's being talked about, he pops off her breast, leaving it exposed to the room, turns around and gives us all a dazzling smile. Milk drips from his reddened lips.

My own nipples tighten at the sight, as if my body is willing to nurse him, too, if something happens to his mother.

Everyone laughs, waves, makes baby-faces and coos over the adorable Sammy, Ravil included. It's sweet. I relax a little.

These aren't my people—they all seem like the crunchy, granola type, which makes sense, if Svetlana is their midwife and/or birth coach. But we're all here for the same reason. The same result.

To have our own fat, happy, adorable baby at the end of it.

"Hi, I'm Lucy," I say, kicking myself for sounding every inch the stiff, frigid lawyer.

"I'm Ravil," he cuts in, like he realizes I don't know what else to say.

Svetlana fires up her computer and goes through a Powerpoint on proper diet during pregnancy. It's basically the same checksheet she left with me on Tuesday.

Then she starts talking about birthing techniques and baby positioning.

How important it is to have the baby head down, face down for the birth and what we can do toward the end of our pregnancies to ensure that happens, like crawling on our hands and knees, or doing handstands in a swimming pool.

Part of me wants to roll my eyes and blow this all off as a bunch of hippie nonsense, but the other part of me can believe there might be some old wisdom here, passed down through the ages through women like Svetlana, before the time when doctors took over births and giving birth in hospitals became the normal thing.

That doesn't mean I want to forego the hospital birth. Lord knows, I want the epidural and the oxygen and everything else that might be necessary to keep me and my baby safe. Especially considering my age.

Svetlana puts on a video of a home birth. I'm a little shocked at first to see a pregnant woman fully naked on her hands and knees on a bed.

Moaning.

She circles her hips and sways from knee to knee as her birth partner strokes her back.

"He is using very light touch, making figure-eights on her back," Svetlana says in her Russian accent. "This helps her relax." The woman's moans get louder.

"She's having a contraction. See how she doesn't stop breathing? Instead she lets out a low sound. This low sound helps relax the pelvic floor. What the mouth does, the pelvic floor does. Relax your mouth, relax the pelvis. Baby comes out."

I'm embarrassed watching it. It seems like such a private moment, and yet here we all are, intruding on it, watching the poor woman struggle through the most intimate of acts. "I can't believe she let someone videotape this," I mutter.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Jane pipes up. "You think you're going to care who sees you give birth or sees you naked, but when the moment comes, none of that really matters. You're willing to share it because it's beautiful and natural and your baby is a miracle."

John squeezes her closer to him. "That's right," he agrees. "Jane even let my mother in the room."

"It's okay if you want it private, too," Svetlana interjects. "Your comfort is the only thing that matters."

The couple on the screen change position. She squats on the floor in front

of the bed, her partner sitting on the bed, supporting her beneath the armpits.

A woman—Christ, it’s Svetlana, herself!—sits in front of her, hands outstretched. Svetlana speaks to the woman in Russian. A dark head appears, and we all gasp. In the next few seconds, shoulders appear, then the rest of the baby slips out.

“Oh!” Carrie covers her mouth with her hand, tears in her eyes.

I’m not feeling it, but maybe I’m too shocked by the whole scene. I sneak a peek at Ravil. He is also unmoved.

Svetlana puts on another video. “This is a water birth. I know some of you are considering it.” She darts a look at me.

Like hell we are.

“Waterbirth was pioneered in the 1960’s by Igor Charkovsky in Russia to reduce or eliminate birth trauma to the baby. It became popular in Russia in the 1980’s. I have assisted one hundred and twenty-nine waterbirths,” she claims proudly. “I think you will see the appeal when you watch the video.”

A pregnant woman is in a giant plexiglass tub, like a whale in an aquarium—totally on view to the camera and audience. Her head and shoulders are out of the tub, and her husband strokes her neck and shoulders, murmuring to her in Russian.

She moans and holds her belly. You can literally see it tighten, the muscles squeezing the baby down and out.

It goes on for a little while—long enough that I start to wonder how much longer we have to watch and then, suddenly, the baby’s head appears. Svetlana reaches her hand into the tub, not to catch, but to gently massage a circle on the baby’s head. There’s no shouting or yelling like in the movies. Svetlana and the birth partner speak in murmurs, the mother moans in a low, guttural tone.

The rest of the baby slips out. Still, Svetlana doesn’t catch him. She lets him gently float a moment while the mother cries her tears of joy.

It’s the mother who scoops the baby up and out of the water to hold against her chest, and only then does Svetlana nudge in to surreptitiously hold a stethoscope to the baby’s back while the parents weep with joy.

I burst into tears. It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. The birth was so peaceful. The parents’ joy is so palpable. The miracle of it all so intrinsic.

Ravil drapes his arm across the back of my chair and strokes my shoulder. When I hiccup, Jane looks over at me, her eyes and cheeks wet.

“Right?” she says.

I sniff and nod. “Yeah. That was beautiful.”

Svetlana beams at me, like I just passed some kind of test. “As you can see, water births are extremely peaceful for the mother and baby.

Tears continue to stream from my eyes. It’s absolutely mortifying and completely unlike me to cry at all, much less in front of a bunch of strangers. All I can do is bob my head and try to choke back my terraced breaths.

Maybe Ravil wasn’t just being a dick when he told me I was having a water birth. I mean, he definitely was a dick because the choice should be mine. But the idea doesn’t seem quite so insane or abhorrent now.

Ravil massages the back of my neck, strokes my hair. I find myself leaning into him, drawing his strength, the comfort he offers. And despite the logic, despite knowing I’m still his prisoner, and he’s keeping me here against my will, I’m grateful to him for bringing me here to this class. I never would’ve seen a video like this without him. Wouldn’t have known about water births and the beauty of them. Wouldn’t have researched home births, or hypnobirth or any of this alternative information.

And while it’s not me, I feel far more capable of having a baby than I did a week ago. I have more trust in my body and nature and the beauty and miracle of birth.

I look over at Ravil.

I have more trust in him.

I’m playing the game to get him to trust me, and yet, I’m the one falling under a spell. Because all I see is kindness. Good intentions. Heart.

I reach out and rest my hand on his thigh. He draws me closer with the arm around my shoulders.

I turn my face into his neck and lay a tentative kiss there.

Ravil goes still.

Carrie slides a glance at us. “You’re lucky,” she says. “I wish I was having this baby with someone I love. But hey, it’ll be me and baby, and we’ll love the hell out of each other.”

My eyes pop with tears again. Not because she’s made the wrong assumption about us. But because a week ago, I was in her shoes. Planning on doing it all, all by myself.

And now I’m suddenly being waited on hand and foot. Cared for. Pampered. Massaged. Having my toes sucked. My body played like a fine instrument.

Do I really think I'd be so much better off alone? My old life suddenly seems so empty.

So sterile.

And that's what I'd be bringing a baby into. To a sterile, empty apartment with a nanny to feed my baby by bottle while I work my ass off all day trying to make partner at my dad's firm.

None of that feels right any more.

Watching the videos made the idea of a baby seem so much more real. A tiny, miraculous being that would come into my life. That should be celebrated and honored. And birthed naturally in peace.

Christ, did I really just think that? I must be crazy.

But I am thinking it. I am considering what it would be like for my sweet, sweet baby to come gently into the world in Ravil's salt water hot tub. With him behind me, massaging my shoulders and weeping with me as I lift our son reverentially from the water.

CHAPTER 13

*R*avil

I GO HARDER than stone the moment Lucy places her hand on my thigh. It's the first time she's touched me of her own accord, and my body comes alive as if she's the one who commands me in bed and not the other way around.

I've been fantasizing about having her lips around my cock. About ordering her on her knees and feeding my length into her smart mouth.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. My goal is keeping her stress-free and pleased for the benefit of our baby. Holding her prisoner is plenty stressful. And while she's been willing to receive my punishment and pleasure, it's different than forcing her to reciprocate, even though it's common sex play with submissives.

But now all I can think about is getting inside her. Not for her pleasure but for my own desperate need.

I can barely get her out of there fast enough when class is over. We get in the elevator going up, and I'm ready to fuck her right there, but sadly, we're not alone.

"Hi, Mr. Baranov." One of the kids in the building is in the elevator with his mom in full soccer gear, holding a box full of chocolate bars.

"Hello, Nate, coming from a game?"

"No, just practice." He holds out the box. "Would you like to buy a chocolate bar? It's for the team."

“I’ll take the whole box,” I tell him. “Can you do the math on that?” I fish in my wallet for a hundred dollar bill.

“Um.” A look of panic flares in his eyes. His mom pulls out her phone like she’s going to use the calculator.

“It’s all right. Take your time,” I say. I’m going to give him the hundred regardless of how many chocolate bars he has. I just want him to use his math skills. I want to say he’s in fifth or sixth grade. Old enough to know how to multiply. “How many bars are in the box?”

The kid drops to his knees and starts to dump them out, counting quickly. “There were sixty,” he reports. “But I already ate one and sold three on the bus ride home.”

“So what does that leave? You don’t have to count. Just do the subtraction in your head. Sixty minus four is what?”

“Um...fifty...six. Yeah, fifty-six.” He shoves the bars back in the box and stands.

“That’s right. And the cost per bar?”

“One dollar. So fifty-six dollars.”

“That was easy.” I smile at him. “No change necessary.” I hand him the bill. “It’s my donation to your team.” I take a couple chocolate bars from the box and hand them back. “And these are for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Baranov.” The elevator stops on their floor.

“Yes, thank you,” his mother says, her Russian accent thick. “So much.” She holds the door for her son and darts a glance at Lucy.

“This is Lucy.” I want to add, “The mother of my child,” but Lucy’s not amenable to being claimed by me yet. “Lucy, this is Anna and her son Nate.”

Lucy’s the type who commands that kind of admiration.

Not that I have even decided if I want to claim her.

Oh, who the fuck am I kidding?

If she’d have me, I’d claim the fuck out Lucy. Body and soul. Especially that soul of hers. I’d teach her what it’s like to be truly loved. Deeply loved. Revered, cared for, cherished. Honored.

“Nice to meet you, Lucy,” Anna says, ducking her head almost like she’s bowing to a princess. She releases the door, and it slides closed.

The moment it shuts, I’m on Lucy. I back against the elevator wall and pin her wrists beside her head. I deliver a searing kiss to her mouth then across her jaw and down her neck. I nip and bite at her nipple beneath her blouse. All the while, I push my thigh between her legs and rub it.

Surprisingly, she kisses me back.

Eagerly.

Like she wants me as much as I want her.

Me. Not just sexual satisfaction.

I don't know what changed. I'm not sure I care. I just know I can't wait to get inside her and pound until we both shout.

The elevator stops on the top floor, and I don't stop kissing Lucy. Using her wrists as leverage, I rotate her away from the wall and walk her backward out the elevator and into the hall. My lips lock on hers, my tongue sweeps between her lips, fucking her mouth like our lives depend on it.

She moans softly.

"I need you naked," I mutter, my accent thick.

I push into the penthouse and stop kissing her only because we have a momentary audience.

Maxim chuckles as I maneuver Lucy quickly past the living room to my room. "I do believe someone's getting under Ravi's skin," he observes.

I ignore it all. Nothing matters but getting Lucy in my room, in my bed. I close the door behind us and pull off her blouse. She undoes my pants, reaching in to grasp my member. I shudder at the pleasure, catching her nape and drawing her up close to my body.

"That's it, kitten," I coax hoarsely. "Squeeze it like you mean it."

She tightens her grip on my cock, pumping a few times as I try to focus enough to unclasp her bra.

"You're so beautiful. A goddess," I murmur. I'm not sure if I'm speaking English or Russian. I toe off my shoes and step out of my pants. Lucy doesn't take her hand off my dick when she tries to take off my shirt. Instead, she thrusts her fingers in the open V at my collar and tears it open, popping buttons and dragging my mouth against hers again.

"Beautiful, beautiful woman." I get her skirt off. Her panties down.

She drops to her knees.

I nearly come at the sight.

"Lucy," I choke before she's even taken me into her mouth.

"I want to taste," she says in a very un-Lucy-like, coquettish way. She licks around the base of my head.

A drop of pre-cum emerges, and she licks it off, lifting her sultry gaze to me.

Oh Jesus. *Blyat.*

She takes me into her mouth, and my knees kick back and lock, I throw my head back in ecstasy. But then I have to look down again because there's nothing quite so beautiful as my unsubmitive-submissive at my feet. She takes me into the pocket of her cheek, sucking as she moves over my length, then directs me straight down the back of her throat. She chokes a little but doesn't pull off, just goes slow, adjusting.

My thighs start to shake. I'm already so close to the edge. It feels so good. Lucy is skilled, but it's not her expertise, it's the fact that it's Lucy. That she wanted to give me this. After holding everything from me from the very beginning. Something hard and hidden deep in my chest comes unmoored.

I wrap my hand around the back of her head and fuck her face, starting to lose control.

But no.

I want her satisfied, too. With great effort, I manage to pull out of her mouth. "Come, kitten," I say roughly. I help her up and guide her onto the bed. "On your side," I order, and she obeys. I tug her stacked knees around to angle her ass at the edge of the bed where I can enter her from standing.

One stroke of my finger verifies she's dripping wet.

She always is. Even when she's slapping my face and angry, her body always wants me.

Always welcomes me.

It knows its master even if she does not.

I ease in even though I'm ready to slam. She lifts one knee to give me better access. Looks at the place where our bodies connect with glassy eyes, pupils blown.

I hook my elbow under her top thigh to hold it up as I push in deeper. One slow withdrawal. Another deep push.

She reaches between her legs to rub her clit.

Blyat.

"Nyet," I scold.

She withdraws her hand, looking up at me in confusion.

"Who owns your orgasms?" I'm feeling fucking proprietary at the moment. She gave herself to me, and I'm taking her. All of her. Every. Last. Bit.

I bring the pad of my thumb to the apex of her sex, applying gentle pressure as I continue to scythe in and out of her. "You sucked my cock so

well, kitten. Should I let you come first?”

She shakes her head. “No,” she pants. “With you.”

With me.

Well, fuck.

That hard hidden thing that broke free in my chest crumbles even more. I fuck her harder. Faster. I bang the hell out of my beautiful, pregnant lawyer, watching as she turns as incoherent as I feel, her cheeks feverish, her hair tangling on the bedspread.

I lean in, pushing her top thigh toward her shoulder, applying more of my weight in each brutal thrust.

“You like it rough, kitten?”

“No,” she gasps. “Yes!”

She probably doesn’t even know her own name right now. I’m sure I don’t.

“You ready to come, *kotyonok*?”

“Yes,” she gasps quickly. “Yes, yes, yes. Please.”

Blyat. I’m ready, too.

I close my eyes and drag in ragged breaths. My movements grow jerky as I get closer, closer, and then pleasure explodes. I slam in deep and come hard, rubbing Lucy’s clit like it’s my lucky button.

She comes immediately, her muscles gripping around my cock, squeezing and pulsing. I stay deep inside until I’ve caught my breath. And then I still remain inside, staring down at my beautiful captive.

And that’s when I know with total certainty: I won’t be letting her go.

Lucy is mine, and the sooner she accepts that, the better for all of us.



Lucy

COOL SOFT SHEETS touch my bare skin. I wake up in total bliss. My body feels relaxed and wonderful. I smell something wonderful from the kitchen.

I sit up and look around. The sinking sun makes Lake Michigan glow a beautiful peachy pink. I must’ve fallen asleep after sex.

And that sex.

Whoa.

That was how Ravil was at Black Light. After I cried *red* because he choked a man for me. After he had to win me back. The time he got me pregnant.

I hadn't forgotten, but that passionate side of him is normally so hidden, I'd started to wonder if I'd made it up. Or embellished. But no. That was the Ravil I've been masturbating to. Not the cool, manicured dominant who knows exactly what to say or do to make my body turn inside out. I appreciate that side, too. But seeing him unbuttoned, seeing a glimpse of the real Ravil—that's the part that means something.

Our child was conceived in a fit of total passion.

Passion we both still feel for each other.

I get up, pull on a t-shirt and pair of yoga pants and test the door handle. It's open. No giant Russian sitting guard outside the door, either.

On my bare feet, I pad toward the living room where I hear the boisterous sounds of men speaking in accented English. I guess they've given up the farce? Or maybe they'll switch back to Russian when they see me.

I spy Ravil in the kitchen, pulling a tray of perogies from the oven with a hot pad, looking far more domestic than I could have imagined. His face blooms into a warm smile when he sees me. Gone is the inscrutable mask he normally wears. The handsome but cool facade. There's genuine delight in his expression.

And damn, he looks adorable cooking.

"You didn't actually make those yourself, did you?" I ask. My voice sounds husky from sleep.

A guffaw sounds from the couch. Maxim tosses an arm over the back of the sofa to twist grin at me. "As if. Ravil only knows how to heat food up." English. Huzzah!

I lift my brows playfully. "Are you speaking to me now? I'm so honored." I'm teasing—there's no rancor behind the words. I simply don't feel it right now.

Maxim darts a glance Ravil's way. "I always spoke to you. It just wasn't always in a language you understood." He winks at me.

"Stop flirting with my—" Ravil breaks off mid-growl. I'm not sure what he was going to say. *My captive? My prisoner? My lover?* "—lawyer," he finishes. He slides the perogies onto a plate.

"Your *lawyer?*" I scoff, strolling into the kitchen like this is my house,

too. Like I'm a roommate here not a prisoner. Like I'm Ravil's girlfriend.

Was that what I wanted him to say? Surely not.

"I'm *Adrian's* lawyer, not yours," I remind him. "Bear that in mind because you do not enjoy attorney-client privilege with me. Your secrets aren't safe."

Dima makes an exploding sound from the table where he's working. His twin mimes a plane crashing. They're laughing at Ravil.

The whole scene puts me more at ease than I've been since I arrived. Like I'm in on the one big happy family thing they have going.

"Don't worry," Dima pipes up, looking my way. "He doesn't bake for any of his other lawyers. You're definitely something more."

I smile because it's funny to see Ravil getting ribbed. It's even more fun to see him as relaxed as I feel.

"Come, kitten." He beckons me over. He has a tall glass of milk sitting on the countertop. "Drink this while the perogies cool. And the answer is no, I didn't make them. Mrs. Kuznetzov brought them up ready to bake. I have them on daily order for you."

"And he won't let us touch them!" Pavel calls from the living room. "Not even the day-old ones. In case you get hungry in the night."

"That's good because I seem to want them for every meal." I reach for one from the plate, but Ravil pulls it out of my reach.

"They're too hot."

He plops a container of organic strawberries in front of me. "Snack on these. I already washed them."

Damn. Ravil is sweet. Sweeter than I want him to be. I could get used to being treated like that. And where would that get me? I'm not staying here permanently—that idea is ludicrous. Ravil doesn't get to kidnap a woman and keep her.

But would it be so bad? a little voice in my head whispers.

Yes! It would. I bite into a juicy strawberry, savoring the taste. I've never sampled one so juicy, so sweet. Or is that my senses are all heightened from the sex and the physical pleasures Ravil constantly throws at me?

"What else do you want?" Ravil asks. "You don't have to eat perogies, I just wanted them on hand if you craved them again."

"I want perogies."

"I guess there's no doubt that our baby's Russian, ah?" Maxim says, wandering into the kitchen. He grabs a perogie and bites into it, then exclaims

and opens his mouth, panting. “Hot!”

“You should’ve warned him,” I scold.

“He should’ve obeyed my order not to touch them,” Ravil counters.

“Cocksucker,” Maxim mutters, but it’s obviously with affection.

Oleg gets up from his chair in the living room and walks to the door.

“Where are you going, Oleg?” Ravil asks, even though he can’t speak.

“It’s Saturday night,” Maxim reminds him.

Ravil looks blank.

“He goes to that club to listen to music on Saturdays.”

Oleg lifts a hand to wave goodbye and walks out.

Maxim says, “There’s a girl.”

Ravil’s brows shoot up. “Oleg goes to a club to meet a girl?”

Maxim shrugs. “To see a girl. She’s the lead singer of the band. He has a thing for her.”

Ravil shares a *who knew?* look with me, as if I know Oleg well enough to be as surprised as he is.

“He has a big thing for her,” Maxim says, waggling his brows.

“So you’ve met her? What’s the story?”

“Well, I went with him once to see where he was going every Saturday. And that’s when I saw. She knows he comes to see her and flirts up a storm with him.”

Ravil cocks his head. “Huh. I’m having a hard time picturing it.”

“You’ll have to see it for yourself. Maybe you can help him ask her out.”

“Why didn’t you?” Ravil demands.

“Because he acted like he was going to knock my teeth out if I pushed. But with you, it might be different.” Maxim’s phone rings, and he looks at the screen. “Ugh. It’s Igor.”

Ravil sends him some sort of meaningful look.

Maxim holds the phone, looking at the screen.

“Are you going to answer it?”

Maxim says something in Russian that sounds like a swear. “No.”

“The man is dying, and you won’t take his call?”

Maxim waits until the phone stops ringing then tucks it into his pocket, his shoulders sagging. “He wants me to come back to Russia.”

“To take his place?”

“Fuck if I know, but there’s no way I’m going. I prefer it here. With you.” He elbows Ravil who rolls his eyes.

Ravil's phone starts ringing. He looks at the screen and sighs. "Igor." He points a finger at Maxim. "You're the cocksucker." He answers the call in Russian. His voice grows gentle, and I realize they weren't being figurative about the man dying. Ravil speaks as if he's soothing the man.

"Who's Igor?" I whisper.

"The bratva boss in Moscow," Maxim says in a low voice. "He has pancreatic cancer. Everyone's jockeying to take his place." He holds his hands up. "But not me. You couldn't pay me enough to move back and run the show there."

"Is he Ravil's boss?" I try not to sound too interested. Or that my interest is more than mere curiosity.

Maxim gives a casual shrug. "*Da*. But he won't be called back because he's done so well here. Our real estate mogul owns six buildings here."

Ravil hangs up and looks at Maxim. "You're in luck. He's already named Vladimir as his successor. There will be challenges, but none of that concerns us."

"So why does he want me out there? I'm not going to play advisor to Vladamir. That rat doesn't deserve my strategies."

"He said he wants to give you something before he dies. In person. It sounds like it's very important to him. Get on a fucking plane tomorrow, I don't think he'll last much longer."

Maxim scrubs a hand over his face and sighs. "Fine."

"And call him the fuck back. I told him you were in the shower."

"The shower? Really? That was the best you could come up with?"

Ravil smirks. "Call him, *mudak*."

"Oh that's cute. Are you cursing in Russian so you won't offend the lady?"

"Get out of the kitchen."

Maxim's hand shoots out, and he snags another perogie before Ravil gives his backside a shove with his foot.

I reach for a perogie and bite into the meat and potato goodness.

Maxim steps into the living room and uses his phone.

"Mmm. Do you think it really is Benjamin who loves perogies?"

Ravil gazes at me fondly. "I think you both will always like them."

Something light flutters in my chest. The idea of *always*. And our baby Benjamin. And Ravil looking at us both the way he looks at me now.

CHAPTER 14

*R*avil

A WEEK LATER, I watch Lucy slice through the water, her body lit only by moonlight. She's spectacular—a clear, concise, strong swimmer. I imagine she swims the same way she does everything. With attention to detail and little extraneous noise.

She woke at midnight to pee and then stood at the great window staring out at the moon and the water. When I asked if she wanted to bathe in the moonlight, she said yes. She didn't even bother with a swimsuit, which means I'm now harder than stone watching her. After exactly ten laps, she swims to the edge where I sit with my feet in the pool.

Water droplets run down her smooth porcelain skin. "Ravil?"

"Da?"

"How did you get into the bratva?"

I dip my hand in the water to cup her heavy breast. "The bratva found me on the streets of Leningrad when I was eight. What is now St. Petersburg. My mother was a prostitute and a drunk, and I'd already been fending for myself for as long as I could remember. Stealing food, hustling for money. They gave me little jobs—running errands, sitting lookout, picking up their clothing from the washer woman, and they paid well.

"By the time I was twelve, I'd sworn loyalty. When I was thirteen, I found my mother dead in a pool of her own vomit and blood."

Lucy wraps her hand around my calf and looks up at me, compassion swirling in her brown eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

Something in her expression tears a hole in my armor, and I don’t like the resulting vulnerability. Throwing my barriers back up, I say, “At seventeen I went to prison for strangling a man.”

Lucy attempts to hide her shock.

“Is this more than you wanted to know?”

“No.” She shakes her head, but I still see traces of horror on her face.

I experience a stab of defensiveness at her shock. But I’ve always been ashamed of my beginnings. It’s what made me determined to succeed at all costs. “You’re afraid I’ll raise our son to be part of the brotherhood,” I accuse.

She swallows. “Will you?”

Her mistrust of my intentions for our son angers me. It’s stupid. It’s not like I’ve told her differently. But pride makes me refuse to grovel and prove my worth. If she can’t see my honor by my actions toward her, she’s blind.

“You won’t see past your own judgements.” I stand. I leave because if I stay, I will say something I’ll regret. Let her see too much of what matters to me.

I hear the splash of water as she climbs out. “You never tell me anything! What am I supposed to think?” she calls after me.

The protective part of me wants to turn around, pick up the towel and wrap it around her. Make sure she doesn’t slip on the surface in her bare feet. But no. I was walking away.

“Ravil, if you refuse to tell me the nature of your plans or the nature of your business, I must surmise it’s because they are illegal or incriminating. Am I wrong?”

I stop to make sure she has her robe on. She doesn’t.

I stride back, pick it up and hand it to her.

“What is your business, Ravil?” she demands.

“I told you, Lucy. Imports.”

“Smuggling.”

“Yes.”

“Smuggling what? Sex slaves?”

I draw back as if she slapped me. “What in the fuck would make you think that?”

She loses steam in the face of my anger. “I heard something.”

“About *me*?” I thunder. “*My* organization?” As if we’d ever be as low as fucking Leon Poval.

She swallows. “About the sofa factory.”

“Ah.” I can’t stand the bitter taste in my mouth. “Yes. That’s Adrian’s story to tell not mine.”

Her eyes widen.

Despite my piss-off, I’m still the fucking gentleman, so I escort her in and leave her in our room before I bark orders at Oleg to guard her door, and I head out of the building for a walk.



Lucy

EITHER I GOT EVERYTHING wrong or Ravil is a really good gaslighter. He’s distant the next day although he still ensures all my needs are met, sending Valentina with my to-order breakfast.

He definitely made me feel like shit for suggesting he had anything to do with the sex trafficking. But he does know what it’s about. And apparently, so does Adrian.

I need to unravel the puzzle. I’ve scheduled the preliminary hearing for Adrian this week, so I’ll see him in court if not sooner.

To make matters worse, Gretchen calls and, feeling like I really need a friend, I pick up.

“Lucy! You’re on bed rest? Why didn’t you tell me? I’m flying out there tomorrow.”

Oh shit.

“No, no, no, no. I’m fine. Who told you about the bedrest?”

“I called your office since you’ve been so hard to reach lately.”

“Trust me, I’m totally fine. I feel great. I’m still working. I just have to do it from home. I don’t need you to come out. In fact, it would be a huge hassle if you did because I have a bunch of trials coming up, and I need to keep my nose to the grindstone.”

I guess I made my decision. No secret messages. No grand rescue from my best friend. Apparently, I’m sticking around willingly. Or semi-willingly.

“Well, so what happened?”

“I have preeclampsia. But it’s not serious. The doctor just wanted me to stay off my feet for the rest of the pregnancy.”

“She probably also wanted you to cut down on the stress. So why are you still working?”

“Ugh. Taking off time is not even close to an option. The partners are talking about opening a new slot for partner, and with me being out of the office, I feel like I have to work twice as hard to prove I’m still worth considering.”

“Let me just ask you this—devil’s advocate.”

I sigh. Lawyers are very big on playing devil’s advocate. “Okay.”

“If something happens to this baby because of your stress, will you really care whether you made partner or not?”

My neck tightens, and I try to rub the stiffness away. Thank God for Natasha and her daily visits. She’s going to earn her money today.

I consider Gretchen’s question. “Honestly? It’s hard to care about anything I used to care about right now.”

“Well, that’s understandable. A baby changes everything.”

A baby...and Ravil.

“Yeah, I suppose. What I don’t know is after I’ve given birth and my brain isn’t hormone-addled, if I’ll regret the choices I’m making now.”

“What choices?” Gretchen doesn’t miss my slip.

“I just mean, if I decide not to go for partner.” Or even...not to go back to work. As a single mother, that wouldn’t be an option, but Ravil’s loaded. Not that he’s offered for me to be a stay-at-home mom. But I suspect it’s on the table. Whenever we finally sit down and come to an arrangement.

Whenever I convince him to set me free.

“Well, let’s talk this through,” Gretchen says. “Being partner would mean more money, but it would also mean more pressure and longer hours. Is that what you want when you’re single-parenting a newborn?”

I rub my baby bump, and Benjamin kicks as if answering my touch.

“Maybe it’s time to coast a bit. Back off the hamster wheel of success.”

I close my eyes. “Maybe it is,” I admit.

“Tell me the truth—have you ever been happy there?”

“Well...” I consider. “I’m happy when I do my job well. When I win a case.”

“Okay. That’s important. But that could happen anywhere. At any firm. It

doesn't have to be your dad's. Especially now that he's..."

I sigh. "I don't know. I feel like with his stroke, it's even more important now that I make partner. I have to preserve his legacy, you know?"

"What do you think matters more to your dad, a healthy grandson or you making partner?"

I hesitate because I'm honestly not sure. My dad's pushed me so hard from the beginning.

"It's the healthy grandson," Gretchen supplies when I don't answer. "I know you've internalized his career goals for you, but trust me—if he could talk—he'd tell you to give yourself a break. Starting a family on your own isn't going to be easy."

"Is this supposed to be a pep talk?" I complain.

"I'm just worried about you. Are you sure I can't fly out?"

I close my smarting eyes. I desperately want to talk to her about my much bigger problems right now, but I can't. "Yeah, I'm sure." I somehow manage to keep my voice even. "But let's talk soon."

"Yeah, don't make me call four times before you pick up next time."

"I know. I'm sorry. Thanks for being such a good friend."

"Aw, you know I'm here for you. Any time. And if you want to quit that job and move out here so we can give that baby two mamas, I'm down."

I laugh.

"Thanks, but my mom would never speak to me again. I love you."

"Love you too. Take care."

I hang up and wipe my brimming eyes.

A light tap sounds on the door. I don't realize I'm foolishly hoping for Ravil until I register disappointment at seeing Maxim instead. He pokes his head in. "I'm leaving for Moscow. Just thought I'd say goodbye." He holds up a hand like he's waving. "I'm not sure how long I'll be gone—but hopefully, I'll be back before the baby's born."

I look past him to see if Ravil's there. He's not.

"Ravil's licking his wounds," he says, reading my body language. "The thing you have to remember, counselor, is that male egos are quite fragile. Especially when it comes to beautiful women."

I twist my lips, considering him. So, did Ravil share with him what happened? My cheeks heat.

"He's painted himself into a corner with you." Maxim shoves his hands in his pockets and leans his back against the door. "Something, I suspect, he's

coming to regret. He loves you, Lucy. Or he's falling in love."

My stomach somersaults at that news, but I shake my head. "This isn't love."

"What you should know is that he'd do just about anything for you." He cocks his head to the side. "Short of letting you and that baby go." He opens the door and takes a step backward to stand halfway out. "He doesn't like to show his hand, which serves him well in business but not in love. That's why I'm here to help him along." He leans his head back in. "Before it's too late."

It was too late the moment he took me prisoner, I want to say, but Maxim's already shut the door.

"Have a safe trip," I call out.

The door pops back open, and his friendly face appears. "Thanks, doll. You keep yourself and that baby safe."

I find myself smiling a little at the closed door when he leaves. It's hard not to like Ravil's whole crew.

Do these men seem like sex traffickers? Murderers? Heathens?

No.

Still, I know for a fact they're *bratva*. And so is Ravil. So my question last night wasn't that far out of line. Especially considering the limited facts I have.

But Ravil was hurt by it. That was my impression, and Maxim said as much.

So I guess I owe him an apology.

Some of the tension in me leaves at that decision. It feels right.

You claim to have had complete knowledge of my profession—exactly what I do and how I manage my business? You researched this thoroughly before you made the decision to keep our son from me?

Maybe I did bruise his ego. He doesn't seem insecure, but Maxim seems to think my mistrust of him and his business dealings hurt him.

If only I believed I could trust him. But how can I? He's a criminal mastermind, and I have no idea the nature of his crimes.

When Valentina brings my lunch, I say to her, "Tell Ravil I refuse to eat unless he joins me."

By the way her eyes widen, I can tell she understands me. She's still been speaking Russian until now, but she bobs her head. "Okay. I will tell Ravil now." She hurries out like the baby will starve to death if I don't eat in the next thirty seconds.

I have to admit, it sometimes feels that way.

Ravil throws the door open two minutes later, his ice blue eyes clouded. “What are you doing?” he demands.

I stand up and walk toward him, shrugging. “I wanted to apologize.”

His face softens, his shoulders lose their tension. He shuts the door and holds open his arms. “Come here, kitten.”

I didn’t know I wanted him to hold me, but I instantly step forward into the circle of his arms. In his embrace, my own tension and anxiety drains away. Ravil doesn’t even let me speak, he cups the back of my head to tip my face up and devours my mouth.

He walks me backward as he kisses the hell out of me. I kiss him back. It’s like the night after birthing class all over again. His hands roam all over my body, tugging my blouse over my head, stripping off my bra. He grips my hair and tugs my head back. It’s a rough act—rougher than he’s been before—but then he kisses down the column of my neck. His open mouth drags across my collar bone. His thigh presses between my legs, giving me something to grind down on as I rock my hips.

“Are you going to let me apologize?” I gasp, my mouth finding his neck as he lowers his head to suck one nipple.

“No,” he says. “I was being a child. Forgive me.”

My heart lurches and skids. I think of all the fights Jeffrey and I had. They weren’t horrible, but there was a lot of blame thrown from both sides. It was usually me who just swallowed the whole thing, so we could move on. Jeffrey was never big enough to apologize.

Funny, I never even realized it until now, when Ravil proves himself to be a much bigger man. I suck on his neck, probably hard enough to leave a mark.

It makes Ravil wild. His breath turns to panting like mine. He pushes me onto the bed and spreads my legs, letting me roll to my side for comfort as he licks into me, my top leg tossed over his broad shoulder.

“Ravil!” I burrow my fingers into his hair and tug it. I’m as desperate as he is, and it’s for something more than sex. It’s for communion.

It’s for baring myself to Ravil and seeing him bared to me. In true vulnerability. This is true passion. Not just the product of raging hormones but something more.

Something significant and bold. Something to be revered.

Ravil slides a finger inside me and strokes my inner wall, and I whimper

and squirm not wanting to come until his manhood is inside me.

“Please. Ravil?” I beg.

“You taste so good, Lucy.”

“I need you in me.”

“*Blyat*,” he curses and rises, unzipping his pants to free his length.

I shiver in pleasure the moment he pushes in. He presses his thumb to my anus as he rides me, which shouldn't feel as pleasurable as it does. Especially when he works it inside me. There's nothing like the dual sensations of having both holes filled at once. It's a pleasure overload.

He fucks me that way, each stroke making me more and more desperate to come, the coil of need tightening and tightening.

“I'm going to fuck your ass today, Lucy,” he says roughly.

“Okay,” I say. He's pushed my boundaries continually. I'm still embarrassed by anal play but no longer afraid of it. I'm not afraid of anything Ravil wants to do to my body. He's proved over and over again he knows how to make it good.

He pulls his thumb out first then his cock and leaves me to get lube. When he returns, I watch him over my shoulder as he spreads my cheeks and dribbles lube over my back hole. He rubs some over his cock, too.

Thankfully, he goes slowly, applying steady but gentle pressure to my anus until I relax to let him in.

“Push a little,” he tells me.

I do, and he slides in. It's too big, and I draw a sharp breath, but once his head is in, it gets better.

“All right, kitten?”

“Yes,” I pant.

He eases the rest of the way in, inch by inch until he's all the way seated, and he gives me a moment to get used to the sensation. Then he begins a very slow pump.

My eyes roll back in my head. It shouldn't be so pleasurable.

Ravil rubs my clit hard and fast.

I moan and hiccup, moan again. He begins to pick up speed fucking my ass, pushes in deeper, pulls out farther. Everything feels good. Stretchy, full, but good.

Ravil fucks my pussy with the cone of his fingers put together, and I cry out, needing desperately to come.

“Not yet,” Ravil warns.

“Please. Oh please, oh please, oh please. I need to come now. Stop. More! Oh God.”

Ravil’s breath grows erratic. I open my eyes to watch him, watch his passion take over his face, watch him lose control.

His fingers tighten on my hip, the ones in my pussy falter.

He makes a choking sound then shouts as he shoves in deep. He lets out a stream of Russian that sounds like praise. Maybe gratitude.

I don’t come. I don’t know—it feels too weird with his cock in my ass, but then he pumps his fingers in and out of my pussy some more, and my legs thrash as I come all over his fingers, my anus almost painfully tight around his cock.

“Ahh-ah!” he groans. He leans over and kisses my shoulder. “That’s an apology,” he says with satisfaction when he straightens.

I let out a puff of laughter and watch him as he eases out. He helps me up and propels me to the shower, stripping off his clothes and stepping in behind me.

I turn to face him under the spray of water. “I’m sorry I offended you,” I say. I want to be able to say, “I’m sorry I misjudged you,” but the jury’s still out on that.

He leans his forehead against mine. “Don’t. I was a cunt.”

“You weren’t.” I pick up the bar of vanilla-scented soap and roll it around in my hands getting them soapy. Then I set it back down in the soap tray and press both my palms to his tattooed chest, spreading across his pectoral muscles and down his rigid abs. “What do these mean?” I ask.

Ravil backs up, and I follow. He leans his head back against the tile and sighs, catching my hands. “I don’t want to tell you, kitten.”

“Haven’t you realized yet that the things I make up in my head might be worse?”

He winces. “Doubtful.” He touches a large tattoo on his right pectoral. “This is the symbol for the brotherhood and inside it, the symbol of my first cell—the one in Leningrad.”

He points to one on his right ribs. “This is the cell in Moscow. Igor’s cell. He is still my boss, but I won’t be bending knee to his successor.”

“Is there one for your cell?”

He shakes his head. “No. I have no need for these old ways. I’ve woven a different network here in Chicago.”

“What are these?” I touch the ones across his knuckles.

His face grows stony. “Kills.”

I suck in my breath, trying to keep a poker face, despite my shock. I shouldn't be surprised. I'd guessed that's what they meant. Still, it's different to hear it said out loud.

“The placement on the knuckles is to intimidate. To let my adversary know these hands have choked the life out of others.” His eyes are dead when he tells me.

I should run. I should be afraid. But instead, my instinct is the opposite—to lean in. I press my body against his and wrap my arms around him, as if I might impart the same comfort he offered me with his embrace earlier.

He sucks in a surprised breath then lets it out, his arms coming around me. “I would never, in a million years, wish this life on my son,” he murmurs into my wet hair.

A sob breaks my throat, and I bury my head against his chest. “I'm sorry,” I offer although I'm not sure what exactly I'm apologizing for.

For his pain.

For judging him.

And yes, for trying to keep Benjamin from him.

I know now, with far more certainty, that Ravil will make an excellent father.

CHAPTER 15

*R*avil

“*ZDRAVSTVUYTE, MAYKL,*” Lucy greets my doorman brightly when we return from our morning walk the next day.

“*Zdravstvuyte, Ms. Lawrence,*” he answers, smiling. She’s already won over everyone she’s met with her continued attempts to speak Russian. I love the fact that she didn’t stop learning after I allowed others to speak English to her.

“There’s a bit of a situation in the elevator.” Maykl jerks his thumb toward the bank of elevators.

Frowning, I walk over to find Adrian and Nadia, his sister, camped out in one, Adrian’s foot stuck in the door to keep it open. Nadia’s facing the wall, crying, gripping the handrail for dear life as Adrian attempts to coax her out.

I hold the elevator door open with my shoulder. Lucy’s hand gets tight in mine, her eyes wide. “What’s going on?” she asks nervously. “Does she need help?”

Adrian twists to look over his shoulder at her with irritability, but seeing it’s us, fully faces us. “I can’t get her out of the building,” he says to me in Russian.

“In English,” I tell him. I’m long over making everyone speak Russian in front of Lucy. It’s far more important that Adrian and Nadia learn to speak English.

“Sorry,” he says to Lucy. “My sister has some... phobias. She doesn’t want to leave the elevator.”

“This is your sister?”

Nadia sniffs and looks over her shoulder at us.

“*Da*. Nadia.”

“Nadia, you’re safe here,” I say gently in Russian because she doesn’t speak English yet. “No one will hurt you,” I say in English, for Lucy’s benefit.

“Did someone hurt her?” Lucy’s alarmed. Her hand’s clammy and stiff in mine, and I can sense her mind spinning. “What happened, Adrian?”

Adrian shoots a look at me.

I nod.

“Yes, she was hurt. Badly. Now she’s too afraid to go outside.” He throws his hands in the air in frustration.

“We should get her some counseling, Adrian,” I say.

Adrian shrugs helplessly. “If you know one who speaks Russian, I will drag her there.”

“Maybe telecall,” I say, thinking of how Lucy conducts all her business seamlessly from my room. “I’ll arrange something.”

“Was this why you set the fire?” Lucy asks.

I blink, surprised at how quickly she put it together.

Adrian frowns, darting a glance at his sister. He neither confirms nor denies.

“Was she hurt at the sofa factory?” Lucy gasps, putting the rest of it together. “She was a sex slave?” Tears fill her eyes.

As if reminded of the horror his sister went through, Adrian loses his irritation with Nadia and the situation. He steps forward and wraps his arms around his sister. “Another day,” he murmurs in Russian. “We’ll try another day.”

I pull Lucy in, and we hit the button to go up.

“So the fire was for revenge? Or was it part of a rescue?”

“Revenge,” Adrian says coldly. When he turns, there’s still murder in his eyes. “I freed them all the week before.”

Lucy nods a tear skidding down her cheek. “Well, that makes a great defense.”

Adrian eyes her. He’s brave, but I know he’s afraid. Mostly afraid of leaving his sister here alone if he ends up in prison. I’ve already pledged to

take care of her if that happens.

“No promises, but I don’t believe we’ll need it. I think I can get the evidence suppressed on a technicality. We’ll find out tomorrow at the prelim.”

Relief makes Adrian slouch against the elevator wall. He brings the heels of his hands to his forehead. “That would be great. Thank you. Thank you, that would be great.”

“I’ll do my best,” Lucy promises.

After we leave them on their floor, she turns to me, a line between her brows. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she accuses.

“I told you. It wasn’t my story to tell.”

“It’s horrible.”

“I know. She was kidnapped in Russia by Ukranian slavers. Adrian is lucky to have found her alive.”

“Did he come here just to find her? Or was he already here?”

“He came to find her. He’s been here eight months, but he only found her last month.”

Another tear slips from Lucy’s eye. She swipes at it. “Damn hormones. I cry at everything.”

“Nadia is worth your tears,” I say.

She nods. “Yes.” She lifts her gaze to mine. “You helped him,” she says. “You helped him find her, and you bailed him out of jail.”

“Of course. But I did not set the fire, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“It’s not. I’m just starting to understand the whole picture.”

“If I had set the fire, Leon Poval would be dead, and no one would’ve been caught,” I say.

Lucy goes still a moment, and I realize I said too much. She doesn’t like my violent ways. But then she gives me a single nod. “I’m sure you would’ve done it right,” she says.

I wrap my arm around her back and escort her off the elevator, drawing her close to me, so I can kiss the top of her head. “Do you really think you can get him off?”

“There’s a good chance. We’ll find out tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 16

Lucy

“THE PRELIMINARY HEARING IS LIKE A MINI-TRIAL,” I explain to Adrian and Ravil as we sit on the long wooden bench outside the courtroom. “The prosecution will call witnesses and introduce evidence, and then I can cross-examine witnesses. It gives us a chance to see what they have and intend to use against you. From what I can tell, their case is pretty flimsy and hinges on evidence they found at your apartment, which they searched without a proper warrant.”

My phone dings, and I check the text. It’s from Sarah.

I told her I would go to court for Adrian’s preliminary hearing despite my bed rest. She asked a ton of questions, the answers to which I’m sure she rushed to share with Dick.

She’s supposed to meet me here with the documents I had her prepare, as well as the entire file for the case, but she sends me a last minute text saying she’s sending a courier instead.

“I don’t like it,” I mutter aloud when I read it.

“What?”

“I don’t know. I think our summer associate is sleeping with one of the partners. The one who wants me out. And now she says she’s not coming with the paperwork I need but is sending it by courier.”

Ravil’s eyes narrow.

“Whatever you’re thinking, don’t.”

His brows pop up. “You can’t know what I’m thinking.”

“Was it doing something evil to protect me from the assholes at my law firm?”

“All right, you do know,” he concedes, his lips twisted in a grin. “I will think of something only semi-evil, then.”

I can’t stop the smile that tickles my lips. I tap my lips with my finger, trying to punch down my anxiety over not having my files. I hate feeling unprepared. Damn, Sarah.

She probably did this on purpose to make me look bad.

I flip open the folder I brought. I can bluff with it.

My phone rings—it’s Gretchen. I slide it to decline.

As I feared, we get called into the courtroom before any courier arrives. I shoot Sarah a text. *The Motion to Suppress did not arrive. You’re fired.*

I probably don’t have the authority to fire her, and she will surely go running to suck Dick’s dick and make sure it doesn’t stick, but I sincerely hope she sweats it.

We go inside and take our places. I try to push the Motion out of my mind. I can bluff through this. Pretend I have the motion in my briefcase and demand they drop the case.

I can do this without the actual paperwork.

Brett Wilson, a prosecuting attorney I have tangled with many times before, gets up and presents his evidence. I start to slow my breath. Good. As I suspected, they have nothing but the illegally obtained evidence.

I get up to cross-examine the arresting officers and ask about the warrant. The officer gives me his reasons for not needing one, but I cut through his arguments.

“Your honor, I brought with me today a Motion to Suppress the evidence as it was obtained illegally.” I swivel to face the district attorney. “And without that evidence, I don’t believe you have a case. Do you still want to keep this thing going?”

“Adrian Turgenev had a beef with his employer and torched the place.”

“You have nothing to prove that.”

Wilson opens his mouth, but the judge shoots him with a look that says he’s not buying it.

“Fine.” Brett Wilson sighs and closes his eyes. “Prosecution moves to dismiss the case without prejudice, your honor.”

Yes!

Thank you, baby Jesus.

We stand, and Ravil beams at me. I can tell he wants to embrace me but knows it would look strange.

I shake both his and Adrian's hands like we're nothing more than attorney and client.

And then I have to pee again.

Gretchen calls again while I'm in the bathroom. I decline again—I don't have time to talk now—and head out.

Ravil takes the three of us out to lunch at a pizza place where I definitely eat enough for two.

Gretchen calls again as we approach the Kremlin. I don't take it, but I text her, *Can I call you later?*

She texts back, *No!*

But it doesn't matter because as we pull into the Kremlin's parking garage, we're suddenly surrounded by cop cars. "Stop the car and get out with your hands up," they say over a loudspeaker.

I look around to find cop cars swarming the garage. Dima, Nikolai, Pavel and Oleg are in handcuffs, being put into the backs of them.

Ravil twists around to glare at me, the betrayal in his eyes nearly burning me alive.

I want to deny it. Tell him I didn't have anything to do with it, but I can't find my voice, and the cops are dragging open the doors, guns pointed, everyone yelling.

I'm dragged out and hustled into the back of a car.

Adrian and Ravil are put face down on the filthy concrete, their hands cuffed behind their backs.

"No," I finally manage to say. "Wait. This is a mistake. What's happening?"

My phone rings again.

Gretchen.

Fuck!

With a trembling hand, I bring the phone to my ear. "What's happening?" I warble into the mouthpiece.

"Lucy! Where are you? Can you talk?"

A sob wells up and lets loose. "Gretchen," choke on the next breath I can manage. "You made a mistake."

CHAPTER 17

*L*ucy

“HONEY, they say you’re not cooperating. What’s going on?” Gretchen says.

I shake my head, tears spilling down my cheeks. I’ve been at the police station for hours. I’m so tired I want to pass out, and I’m hungry enough to eat my own hand.

“I’m hungry,” I complain.

“I’ll be right back.”

She leaves and returns with a granola bar and a mini-pack of Oreos, obviously from a vending machine.

I rip into the cookies because God knows, I need a blood sugar fix.

She sits beside me and squeezes my shoulders in a side hug. “Hey. Talk to me.”

I just shake my head and drain the Dixie cup of water they gave me last time I whined about food and water. I haven’t answered any of their questions. As an attorney, I know better than to say anything at all that might be incriminating. Even if I don’t press charges, they can still build a case if they want to.

“You know about Stockholm Syndrome,” she says gently.

“Yes, I know about Stockholm Syndrome,” I snap. Dammit. Do I have Stockholm Syndrome? Why am I protecting Ravil? He did kidnap me, afterall.

More tears spring to my eyes. Every thought I have just makes me cry. I can't seem to shut off the waterworks to save my life.

"What did you do?" I finally manage to ask. "How did you find me?"

"I called your mom to ask about the bed rest thing. Just to make sure you're really all right and didn't need anything. And she told me you weren't on bedrest that she knew of because you'd shown up to your dad's rehab with a Russian. And I put it together. I flew out here and checked your apartment and, of course, you weren't there on bedrest.

"That's when I called the cops. Your mom told me the Russian was a client, so they got his name and address from the file and, guess what? He's on the FBI's watch list for smuggling."

I bury my head in my hands. Smuggling. Yes, I'd guessed that match.

"Smuggling what?" I mumble to the table.

"Russian antiquities. It's illegal to take them out of Russia, but he's got some kind of direct line for them. Probably going through that diplomat he came to Black Light with."

"Gretchen. You have to get me out of here."

"They really want a statement from you, Luce. They've been looking to get something on these guys for a long time. You could be their ticket."

Up until now, I'd been lost. Like I got thrown off the boat and was flailing around, trying to find a buoy to hang onto. I didn't know which shore to swim to.

But the moment Gretchen tells me that, I pick my side.

I crumple the empty Oreo wrapper and throw it at the observation window. "Not going to happen," I say, glaring at the one-way glass. "I've been on bed rest, and I moved in with the father of my child, so he could take care of me. End of story."

Gretchen's eyes narrow. She knows it's not true.

"Now get me out of here."

She covers my hand. "You're sure? That's your statement?"

"Get me out of here."

Gretchen gets up. "Yep. I will get you out of here right away." She strides out of the room, every inch the barracuda lawyer, herself, when she wants to be.

It takes twenty minutes. I give the statement I gave Gretchen, and then she hustles me out by the elbow to a cab outside.

CHAPTER 18

*L*ucy

IT'S NOT until after I've eaten a meal and cried my last tears that I can even function. Gretchen hangs around my apartment making tea, sitting quietly near me, waiting for me to talk.

Finally, she says, "So talk to me, please. I had it right, didn't I? Were you in trouble?"

I nod, mutely. "I don't want to talk about it." I couldn't stand the thought of the feds going after Ravil, and I don't like the idea of Gretchen hating him, either.

It's strange that I would feel protective of him, but I do.

"I know you don't want to, but I think you need to."

"You need to get them out of custody. The feds have nothing on them, unless they found something when they searched the penthouse."

God, I hope they didn't find anything.

Gretchen blinks at me. "You want me to act as their attorney? After I blew the whistle?"

"I think Conflict of Interest might come into play if I do."

"Seriously? That man kidnapped you, right? Tell me what happened."

"His name is Ravil. Ravil Baranov. I'll tell you what happened if you get them out of there."

"I'll get them out of there when you tell me what happened," she

counters.

We stare at each other at an impasse.

“I don’t know if you’re in the proper state of mind to make this decision,” she explains.

“You see!” I point a finger at her. “That’s why I won’t tell you until it’s done.”

She raises her brows. “Because I won’t want to after you do?”

I purse my lips. “I need this from you, Gretchen. That’s the father of my child.”

“Let me ask you this: do you want me to get them out of there because you’re scared of him? Or because you’re in love?”

I shake my head. “I’m not scared,” I say. And it’s true. Yes, it’s possible Ravil will go through with his threat to carry me off to Russia because he believes I triggered the arrest, but I can’t bring myself to believe it. And honestly? As long as he was there with me, I’m not sure I would mind it so much.

“So you’re in love.”

My hand trembles as I lift the cup of tea to my lips. “I guess I am.” I’m in love with Ravil Baranov, head of the Chicago Bratva, known smuggler, murderer and criminal.

Father of my child.

It’s a terrible match, and yet I can’t imagine any other man in my life. He’s the one.

The man who understands me. Protects my pride, takes care of my needs, cherishes me. I love him.

“Fine,” Gretchen says. “I’ll go back down there and stomp my feet until they release them. But if anything happens to you... Nevermind. I’ll save that threat for Baranov.” She slings her purse over her shoulder and walks out.

I slump back against the couch and close my eyes. Gretchen will take care of it.

After that? I don’t know what will happen.

Ravil wronged me. He doesn’t get to come collect me again. Not if he wants to stay in this country.

I guess now we sit down and have that negotiation for shared custody I was buttering him up for.

Something painful twists in my heart. Is that really all I want? An amicable shared parenting agreement?

Or is there a way for the two of us to come together for more?



Ravil

IT'S LATE EVENING. I've been sitting in this interrogation room for hours.

I haven't said a word to them. Not Russian. Not English. They asked if I wanted a lawyer present, and my heart bailed out of my chest, flopping on the floor like a wounded eel.

Yeah, I want my attorney.

Oh, right. My attorney's the one who put me in here.

It was her friend Gretchen, of course. I knew they'd had a conversation. I'd listened to it. I didn't hear any kind of hints or veiled secrets passed, but the two are good friends. Maybe there was something I missed.

I can't even bring myself to be angry that I was bested by Lucy.

I hardly care what they do to me. Whether I find out what it's like to serve time in an American prison, or whether they send me back to Russia to serve time there. None of it matters compared to the pain in my chest.

The utter destruction of my being when I realized she was faking it all. That she doesn't care. She was just biding her time until she could get free of me.

I was a fool to think I could make her fall in love. That I could keep her. I was a fool to put the entire operation at risk for something that isn't even allowed in the *bratva*.

And this is why, of course.

I just fucked everyone over this woman and my unborn child.

I've sat for hours while they tried to interrogate me with threats and intimidation techniques. They are fools if they think their methods will work. I've served time in Russian prisons.

I'm not afraid of them.

Two new agents are in here now. They started about an hour ago.

The door opens and one of the guards says, "His attorney," and hands a card to one of the agents.

Stupid me. For one split second, hope reared its head. But no, it's not my

Lucy. It's her friend, Gretchen.

If I were smart, I would say she's not my attorney because I don't know what game she's up to, but I'm not smart. I haven't been smart from the beginning when it comes to Lucy, and right now I need to know if she's all right. Where she stands.

"I demand you release my client at once," Gretchen says.

The agent narrows his eyes at her. "Excuse me? Aren't you the one who notified the police about your friend's suspected abduction?"

She lifts her chin. "I did, but I was mistaken. As you know from Ms. Lawrence's statement, there was no abduction. She moved in with her boyfriend and the father of her child. Willingly. There is no reasonable suspicion of a crime. Unless you have something on Mr. Baranov or any of his four associates, I demand their release immediately."

"Ms. Proxa. From the Attorney General's office in DC," one of the agents drawls, looking at her card. "You're not a defense attorney. Are you even licensed to practice law in this state?"

"I can practice Federal law anywhere, Agent Rossi. As you should know."

He snorts and folds his arms across his chest, showing how unimpressed he is.

"We're not finished questioning the suspects."

Gretchen walks over in her tight brown pencil skirt and stilettos, perches her ass on the table and folds one leg over the other. I seem to recall she is a switch. She does the *domme* thing very well. "I will advise my client not to answer any further questions."

Agent Rossi tips his head to the side, taking in the length of Gretchen's legs. The way she uses her sexuality as a weapon. "I do know I can keep them for twenty-four hours without charge."

"There's no reason to do that, Agent Rossi. No crimes were committed. My clients won't speak to you any more. It's been a long day, and I'm sure you want to get home, too. I apologize for my role in this wild goose chase. To both of you," she says, nodding my way but not meeting my gaze. It's an apology she doesn't mean.

I don't give a shit, though, because my mind keeps tripping back to what she said about Lucy—the statement she'd given. *She moved in with her boyfriend and the father of her child. Willingly.*

Lucy lied for me.

I touch the tips of my fingers together to think. Could it be that this wasn't a betrayal? Did Gretchen act on her own?

After a little more tit for tat between Agent Rossi and Gretchen, mainly for sport as far as I could tell, Rossi agrees to release us. I'm fairly certain it was mainly because he became incapable of refusing the sexy attorney anything she demanded.

I find Gretchen waiting for us outside. "A word, Mr. Baranov?"

"Ravil," I correct, stepping several yards away from the building with her.

She stops and squares off to me. "I know what really happened," she accuses. "And I have documentation. So if you come near my friend again"—she lifts one red-tipped finger in my face—"I will have you put away. Those guys in there are dying to nail something on you. They wouldn't need Lucy to press charges. All they would need is my signed affidavit. Which I have put in a safe place. So don't even think—"

"She sent you," I interrupt. I have to know.

Gretchen closes her open mouth, a grudging expression on her face. She folds her arms across her chest. "Yes, she sent me."

"She didn't call for help."

Gretchen regards me coolly. "No." The finger comes back out into my face. "You fucked with her head. Now leave her alone. Unless you want the stress to harm the baby."

I know she's posturing, but the suggestion hits me in the solar plexus just the same. The idea of anything harming our sweet baby kills me. I can't imagine how stressful today must've been for her.

"Where is she now?"

"She's back at her place. Where she will stay. Leave her. The Fuck. Alone."

I draw a breath and nod. Not because Gretchen's threats scare me. Because it's the right thing to do. I was wrong to force Lucy into my penthouse... not that I wouldn't do it all over again if given the choice.

But I won't force her again.

She's paid her penance for trying to keep the baby from me. Now I have to pay mine and suffer the heartache of giving her up.

Even though it fucking guts me.

CHAPTER 19

*L*ucy

I OPEN AND close the largest matryoshka doll. Staring at the gift leaves me feeling like a bomb exploded in my chest. Somehow I made it through the last few days. Ravil hasn't called or come over. I didn't call him, either. I'm too confused. Gretchen explained what she'd told him, and that he agreed to leave me alone.

Part of me didn't believe he would. But the next day, Oleg showed up with all my things, which he brought in and left without a word. Well, of course, without a word. But also without a message. Which made me wonder if that's why Ravil sent him and him alone.

He barely looked at me when he brought the stuff in. I caught his arm as he was leaving. "*Mne zhal'*," I said. *I'm sorry*. I'd been practicing that one.

He just shook his head and left. Left me with even more angst.

If it had been one of the twins, I might have asked how Ravil was. Apologized for their arrest.

Although—what do I really have to apologize for? They *were* accomplices to Ravil's kidnapping. And he *did* abduct me.

I can't forget that.

Maybe I do have Stockholm Syndrome. I find myself missing them—all of them. I miss the massages and the food. I miss the easy banter between the guys. The warmth they all showed me despite the fact that I was a prisoner.

And mostly I miss the hell out of Ravil.

Guilt eats at me. This gnawing sensation that I've done something wrong. That I screwed Ravil.

But that's not right.

He's the one who abducted me. He held me prisoner and threatened to send me to Russia.

But was it really so bad? a little voice keeps whispering.

Dammit, if I don't want to be his prisoner, still.

I try to keep working from home. I keep up the farce that I'm still on bedrest, at least until I stop feeling like a zombie.

Sarah wrote me a very groveling email which she copied all the partners on, so of course, she wasn't fired. I find myself unable to give two fucks or even one fuck about her, the partner position, or the firm.

I can barely make it through the day. Barely feed myself or shower. I've been sitting on this couch in the same yoga pants since the night everything blew up.

I don't even realize it's Saturday until my mom calls and startles me. I must've dozed off. The dolls clatter to the floor and roll around.

"Honey? Are you coming today?"

I sit up with a sharp inhale and the room spins. "Oh, mom. I'm sorry, I was asleep, I've been having a hard time sleeping at night because of the hormones and having to get up and pee three times a night."

"What's this I heard about you being on bedrest?"

Gretchen had been smart enough not to put my mom on full alert when she'd called about my bedrest, so my mom still doesn't know about the kidnapping situation.

"Yeah, it's just for a week or two. I'm fine, though. Hopefully I'll be able to make it next week. I miss you guys."

"Well, should I come over there?"

"No, Mom. You have your hands full with Dad. Gretchen flew out to help me this week, not that I needed any help. I promise I'm fine. Give Dad a kiss for me, okay?"

"Lucy?"

"Yes?"

"What's going on with you and Ravil? Are you two seeing each other?"

The heaviness in my chest grows even weightier. "No, Mom. We're just going to figure out how to co-parent."

“He doesn’t look like your type.” That’s my mom’s very polite way of saying he looks like a criminal.

“He’s not, Mom, but that doesn’t mean he won’t make a great dad.”

That much I believe. With my whole heart.

But does Ravil even still want to be part of the baby’s life?

How ironic that when I didn’t want him to be a part of it, he demanded his place, and now that I’m comfortable with it, he’s ghosting me.

Of course, Gretchen told him to ghost me.

And I haven’t called to say anything different.

I just can’t figure out if I want to call. If I should call.

Are things easier this way? He is a criminal, after all. The FBI are just waiting to take him down. Is that the kind of role model I want for our son?

Hell, no!

My eyes swim with tears. “I’m going to go, Mom. I love you.” I try to make my voice sound normal.

“I love you, too, dear. Let me know how you’re doing.”

“Thanks, I will.”

I look at the clock on my phone.

Birthing class.

It’s ridiculous. I don’t need to go to that class. I can now go back to my plan for a hospital birth with the epidural where I don’t have to worry about anything, the doctors take care of it all.

Except... now that I’ve seen those beautiful home births, my birth plan has lost its appeal.

And I really want to go to that class. I want to see more videos and cry at the beauty of birth.

And yes... I do secretly hope Ravil will be there.

Or that I’ll see him.

We can talk. Figure things out.

I get up, shower and head to the Kremlin. As I approach, my heart starts hammering in my chest. Harder, louder, more insistent than in any courtroom. The place holds so much meaning for me. Tangled, knotted up, confused meaning.

Maykl gives me a wary, suspicious look as I come in, and my heart sinks. Of course, everyone in the building would know what happened. The feds were all over this place.

“Is Mr. Baranov expecting you?” he says, too formal for friendliness.

I swallow. "I'm here for the birthing class."

His face clears and he straightens. "Right. Third floor. You remember how to get there?"

"Yes, thank you."

He picks up his phone and starts texting. Telling Ravil, no doubt.

I get a similar reaction from Svetlana when I show up. A bit of shock to see me, but she recovers quickly. "Is Ravil coming?"

I shrug. "I don't think so. I didn't tell him I was coming."

"I see. Well, welcome. I'm glad you came." She waves a hand in Carrie's direction. "As you know, birthing at home without a partner is just as beautiful."

Birthing at home.

Without a partner.

Is that what I'm doing?

I don't know about that. I just came for the videos. But I don't tell her that. I have months to decide, still.

I sit through class, sob at the end of each birthing video, and go home alone, without seeing Ravil.

The moment I walk into my apartment, I burst into tears.



Ravil

"NO DISRESPECT, but what in the fuck are you doing?" Dima says.

I crack my lids against the afternoon sun to see Dima standing over me, Nikolai beside him. Both of them have their arms crossed over their chests. Twin demons waking me from a drunken stupor.

I'm on the rooftop, getting sunburnt by the pool and drinking enough Beluga Noble vodka to permanently pickle my liver. I've been here since last night, I think. I might have slept here.

I lift a sloppy finger and point. "Watch how you speak to me," I slur. My lids close again to block out the glare.

"Lucy is getting an ultrasound today. And she *invited you to come*," Dima intones pointedly.

I crack a lid. “How do you know that?”

“I’m still monitoring all her devices. She texted you last night.”

“And you didn’t bother to answer,” Nikolai supplies.

I wave my hand like I’m shooing a fly. “Get outtahere.” I would tell him to stop monitoring her, but I can’t stand the thought of not knowing what’s going on in her life. It’s unbearable enough to let her go.

They don’t move. I know because I crack an eye again. “*Yob vas.*” Fuck you.

“Ravil.” It’s Nikolai this time. “Why are you being a dick to her? She literally has done nothing to you. You kidnapped her and forced her to fall in love with you, and now you treat her like dirt?”

I snarl and sit up. “Who said she’s in love with me?”

Dima gives me an *are you stupid* look. “When her friend gets her rescued, she lies to make sure you don’t go down for it. Even after what you did. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

“And now she’s reaching out to you. She came here to the building for birth class. She invited you to go see your goddamn baby swim around in utero, and you fucking ignore her? You’re being a *govnosos.*”

“I let her go.” In my head, it explains everything. “She wanted to be let go, and I let her go.”

Nikolai shakes his head. “Letting her go and being a *govnosos* are two different things.”

“She wanted you at that ultrasound,” Dima says. “Are you going to let her have this baby on her own?”

“That’s what she wanted.” I make a wide gesture with my hand, sloshing more Beluga over my chest. I hiss because it stings where it hits my sunburn.

“Jesus, Ravil, you’re getting burnt. Get off the fucking roof.” Dima speaks, but they both move in concert, grasping the sides of my chaise lounge and tipping it over, so I tumble off.

“Now you’re both dead,” I mutter, lumbering to climb to my feet, which takes more effort than I expected.

“You gotta sleep that shit off,” Nikolai says, ducking when I swing at him and catching my arm instead.

“And take a fucking shower.” Dima grabs my other arm.

I make a half-hearted attempt to shake them off. “*Yob vas.*” Cursing in Russian is about all I’m capable of at the moment.

“Trust me, boss, you’re gonna thank us later,” Nikolai says.

“No,” I mumble. “I won’t.” I stumble to the door. Or maybe they drag me. It’s hard to tell. There are stairs that are very difficult to navigate.

I’m not going to call Lucy. It’s fucking killing me, but I let her go. If I open that door again, I won’t stop. I’ll claim her as mine, and I’ll never, ever let go.

And Lucy’s not the type of woman who can be held. She can’t be kept.

She’s a bird, and she needs to—

I hit my bed with a thud, and then all thought disappears.

CHAPTER 20

*L*ucy

I WAS A FOOL. I was a fool to hope and wish and expect Ravil to show up at the ultrasound yesterday even though he didn't answer my text.

And I'm an even bigger fool now.

But I don't care.

The pain I felt when he didn't come, the emptiness, made it all too clear.

I *don't* want to do this alone.

Ravil is my baby's father, and he's going to be a damn good one. The evidence of that was everywhere, I just was too judgemental to see it. The loyalty of his men speaks to it. The way he handled the teenager in the pool. The soccer kid in the elevator. The way he's supported and invested in all the businesses of his tenants.

And the most obvious—the way he treated me. Even as his prisoner, he treated me like gold. I was a pampered princess in that penthouse.

But that's not why I'm going back.

I miss Ravil. I miss his touch. I miss his affectionate smile. I want to know him better, without judging this time. I want to hear about his awful childhood and comfort him instead of setting off his defenses.

I want to give something back to him after all he's given to me.

I love him.

That's reason enough.

No, he may not be the partner I would've picked if I got to pick a man out of a catalogue, but he's perfect for me. I can't imagine a man any better.

And I'm going to go get him.

With my suitcase packed, I take a cab to the Kremlin. It's past nine and dark out, the city lights flashing on the windows as we drive by. I get out and pay the cab and walk into the lobby.

I don't recognize the guard at the door. He has tattoos on his forearms, and he looks scary as hell. I swallow and lift my chin.

"I'm going up to the penthouse," I tell him, trying to breeze past.

"Show me your keycard," he says in a thick Russian accent.

I stop. Dammit. The upper floors require keycard entry to access in the elevator. Of course, I don't have one. I lift my chin. "Tell Ravil I'm down here. Tell him I won't eat until he comes to get me."

The guy frowns. "Get out."

Okay, apparently, he doesn't know this baby is Ravil's.

I pull out my phone. Fine. I'll call Ravil myself. Not that I'm sure he'll even answer.

Crap.

He doesn't.

"Out," the guard repeats.

A heavy hand drops on my back. "Oh!" I startle and turn around. Oleg is standing there. He must've come in behind me. "Oleg! *Zdravstvuyte*," I say, as if by speaking Russian, I'll magically be able to communicate with him.

He picks up my suitcase and pushes gently on my back, directing me toward the elevator.

The guard says something to Oleg in Russian, and the giant nods without looking back, propelling me gently away from him. We get in the elevator, and I blink up at him.

"Thank you. *Blagodaryu vas*."

He doesn't nod or do anything but stare blankly back at me. If I didn't already trust the guy, I'd find being alone in an elevator with him extremely intimidating.

He opens the door to the penthouse.

Everything is as normal—Dima, Nikolai and Pavel lounge in the living room, the television on.

Except then I see Ravil standing at the bank of windows that overlook the water. Staring out at the blackness.

Pavel sees me first and lunges for the remote, turning the television off. “Did you go and get her?” he asks Oleg, as if in awe.

Ravil turns around. The moment his eyes land on me, he says, “leave us,” and everyone in the room evacuates.

His expression is dead. Blue eyes cold.

“Why are you here?” he demands.

Okay. So much for a warm welcome. He must be angry over the arrests, then.

Normally, I’d put a little more starch in my backbone to square off against my adversary. But I don’t want to be adversaries anymore. I want us to be lovers. Partners.

So I say, “I had a craving for perogies.”

It doesn’t soften him. “I’m sorry. I think we’re all out.”

My stomach twists, and Benjamin kicks back.

He walks slowly toward me, and as he does, I see his expression isn’t cold. It’s tortured. He has dark circles under his eyes, and he hasn’t shaved in a couple days, at least. “I let you go, Lucy. You shouldn’t have come back.”

I blink back tears. What is he saying? He doesn’t want me anymore? Actually, he’d never said he did—he’d just wanted the baby. But he’d acted like he did. Had I read it all wrong? “Maybe...” I struggle to control the wobble in my voice. “Maybe I didn’t want to be let go.”

He comes closer. His expression is shadowed with pain. “Don’t say it if it’s not true.”

“It’s true.”

He stops in front of me, taking in my suitcase, which Oleg left out here. He reaches out and brushes his knuckles across my cheekbone. “I won’t settle for partway. I want all of you.” Pain radiates from him.

I reach out and cup his cheek. “I’m here, Ravil. This is where I want to be. With you. Raising our son.”

Ravil lets out a wounded sound and attacks my mouth, his lips and teeth and tongue devouring me with a searing kiss. “Are you sure?” He scoops me up, honeymoon style, even though I’m way too big now.

“I need you,” I tell him.

His smile is feral. He carries me to his bedroom and kicks the door open. Deposits me on the bed.

“I missed you,” I tell him as I pull off my maternity top.

“I fucking died without you,” he swears, helping me slide off my yoga

pants.

“I love you, Ravil.” There. I told him. No more holding back. It’s long past the time for vulnerability.

He stops what he’s doing as if he’s listening to be sure he heard me right.

“I love you,” I repeat.

“*Ya lyublyu tebya*. I’m fucking crazy about you. I’ve been crazy about you since the moment I saw you in that red dress at Black Light. You know something?” He trails kisses up the outside of my arm.

“What?”

“I had a plan that night. I didn’t think you’d get paired with me by the roulette wheel because I don’t believe in luck.” He gives me a wicked grin. “I believe in plans. And my plan was to pay off the man lucky enough to be paired with you.”

“But I landed on you,” I say with a smile, remembering how horrified I’d been.

“Yes, my Lady Luck,” he says, referring to the name I’d taken for the night.

“You frightened me at first,” I admit. “Only because of the tattoos. But you knew how to handle my nerves. You were wonderful. Exactly what I needed.” I slide my hand over my baby bump.

He kisses it. “Exactly what we both needed.” He spreads my legs and drags his tongue through my folds. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to the ultrasound yesterday. I just didn’t think I could handle seeing you. I was too broken.”

I catch his head and massage his scalp.

“Was he perfect?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“I will come to the next one.”

“I’m having this baby at home. In the tub. With you.”

Ravil smiles. His face has transformed from the haunted mask in the living room. Now he appears almost boyish. “You don’t have to, *kotyonok*. I was never going to force it. I was pushing your boundaries, that’s all.”

It all settles in. Ravil’s grand bluff. I think some part of me knew it all along. It’s why I wasn’t scared of him. How I knew I was safe, and he’d take care of me. Why I didn’t rebel. He was toying with me. But my needs, my happiness were never at stake.

“I want to. I think it will be perfect.” I gasp and catch Ravil’s head again as he flicks his tongue rapidly over my clit.

“Anything you want,” he says. “I mean it. There’s nothing I wouldn’t give you.” He lifts his head. “Except for your freedom.” His blue eyes shine with wicked promise.

“How about perogies?”

“I’ll have them made for you by midnight.” He stands and reaches for his phone.

“No, no—wait. Sex first. Then food. They’re closely tied, but I need you first.”

His smile is so warm it heats my entire body from the inside out. “You need me?”

I nod. “Please. *Pozhaluysta.*”

He quickly strips out of his clothes, holding my gaze. “Well, since you asked so nicely.” He kneels on the bed behind me. “Hands and knees.” He gives my ass a swat.

Satisfaction ricochets through me. Like I’d forgotten in such a short time how much I liked his dominance, but my body hasn’t. It celebrates the spank. The heat and tingle of the print he surely left on my skin. The shock of sensation. The surrender, knowing he’s in charge now, and whatever he chooses will be amazing.

I climb onto my hands and knees, and he enters me from behind. He steadies me with one hand on my hip as he wraps the other around my long hair. “I never liked missionary, but I would’ve picked it this time if we could.” He tugs my hair back to lift my head. “After Benjamin comes, I will put you in every position possible,” he promises.

He pumps in and out, gathering steam, then rolls me to my side, catching my face between his fingers. “I need to see this beautiful face,” he says. “I want to watch you come, kitten.”

I grab his firm ass to help slam him in deeper, harder. My nails score his skin.

He snarls and leverages higher over me, pressing my top knee to my shoulder. It’s delicious. Deep and perfect. And then he starts rubbing my clit.

“*Pozhaluysta, pozhaluysta,*” I moan.

Ravil roars and slams in deep, rubbing faster against my clit with the tip of his finger. I come at once, waves of pleasure rolling over me, bathing me in love, in contentment, in warmth.

“I love you, Lucy. I love your adorable American accent. I love that you started learning Russian the day I moved you in here.” He nibbles my

shoulder. I turn my face up to pull his mouth down for a kiss. “I love your strength. Your perfectionism. Most of all, I love it when you submit.”

“I love it when you master me,” I whisper. Words I never thought I’d say. But so true. He’s the conquering Viking who carried me off. And I’m the heroine who let herself be claimed—but not without struggle. And in the end, like in any good Viking romance, I brought the bad-ass hero to his knees.

CHAPTER 21

*R*avil

“I TOLD YOU NO MORE HEELS.” I gently massage Lucy’s swollen feet. We’re on the sofa in the penthouse, her feet in my lap where I can rub them as she eats her bedtime snack of perogies and milk.

I’ve already fucked her thoroughly, both in the bed and in the shower afterwards, and her resulting glow makes me smug.

“They weren’t that high.” Lucy leans forward to feed me a bite of her meat pastry. She moved in with me but insisted on going back to work this week, her bedrest magically ending. “Will you hand me that pillow?” she points at one of the throw pillows, and when I hand it to her, she shoves it behind her lower back.

I shake my head. “I don’t like it, *kotyonok*. You work too hard. All for what—to prove yourself to a bunch of assholes who are idiots not to realize your true brilliance?”

“I’m thinking about quitting.” Her brown gaze skims over my face, as if she’s gauging my reaction.

“Yes,” I say immediately. “Quit. Rest. Swim. Enjoy the rest of your pregnancy.”

“I didn’t like being back,” she admits. “Everything felt wrong. The people, the environment. I don’t know—I just didn’t care as much about the things I used to.”

“Quit. Or work from home. Start your own business. Work part-time. You can do what you like, Lucy. Anything at all. When you’re my wife, you’ll be rich, *kotyonok*. You’ll own half of everything. So don’t let money factor into any choice in the matter.”

Her lids droop in the way I’ve grown addicted to seeing. The look when I can tell she feels loved. “I don’t recall you asking me to marry you.” A teasing smile curls her soft lips.

I tsk. “I told you I wouldn’t settle for partway. You’re marrying me, Lucy Lawrence. Don’t pretend you’re not.”

She laughs. “Is this your proposal?”

I shake my head. “No. The ring is still on order.”

I’m having a gorgeous ring custom made. It’s a trio of pink diamonds. Tasteful and elegant—like her. It’s supposed to be ready by next week. “But I’m warning you, it won’t be a proposal. What’s done is done. You’re already mine.”

“This is not very romantic, Ravil.”

“You never wanted romance, kitten. You wanted conquering.” I pick up her hand and kiss the back of it.

The lids droop again. “Only the way you conquer.”

My chest grows warm, and my dick gets hard, but before I can ravish my bride, the door bursts open and the guys all parade in, talking too loud and smelling of alcohol.

“Hi guys,” Lucy greets them.

“And if you want me to kick these bastards out, it’s done,” I say, jerking an irritated thumb their way.

“No way. I love communal living. It’s entertaining.” She grins. “Plus, we’ll have lots of nannies when Benjamin comes.”

Pavel groans. Dima looks like a deer in headlights. Oleg, of course, shows no—

“Oleg!” I exclaim. “Is that lipstick on your collar?”

“Yes,” Nikolai purrs. “We’ve been to see his girlfriend at her club.”

Oleg smacks him with the back of his hand, which isn’t meant to be hard, but makes Nikolai stumble back. He fake wheezes and hunches over like he can’t breathe. “Not so hard, asshole.”

Lucy sits up taller. “Oleg, you have a girlfriend?”

His expression grows thunderous.

I’m even more interested. It’s rare to see any reaction at all out of him.

“He hasn’t sealed the deal yet,” Dima confides to Lucy in a conspiratorial tone. “But if he would ask her out she would say yes, for sure. She literally crawls all over him during her show.”

Oleg glowers, and with a twist of my gut, I realize his dilemma. He asks for so little, we sometimes minimize his very real disability. With us, he can at least write or text if he needs to communicate something. But while he may understand it, he doesn’t write in English. Asking a girl out would be impossible.

“Well, why the fuck didn’t you help him with that?” I demand.

Dima appears surprised. He looks at Nikolai for support. “Because I didn’t want to get my skull smashed?”

Oleg nods in agreement, like he would’ve smashed skulls.

“I’ll go with you next time,” I promise Oleg, but he shakes his head.

“See?” Dima protests. “He doesn’t want help. I definitely would’ve worked it if he did.”

“Hmm.” I file that away. I’m definitely going with next time, so I can see what’s going on.

The door opens again, and Maxim enters with a redheaded woman.

“Maxim!” Lucy exclaims.

“I’m back,” Maxim says. He’s dressed in a suit, but it’s rumpled, and he appears tired. “With my reluctant bride. Meet Igor’s daughter, Sasha.”

Sasha tosses her red hair with a sniff. I’ve seen her before but only a couple times. The *mafija* princess is beautiful, but young. And judging by the grip Maxim has on her elbow, she’s a handful.

“*She* was his dying gift to you?” Nikolai scoffs, and Maxim shoots him a look that would kill as he leads her toward his bedroom.

“She doesn’t leave this penthouse,” Maxim says over his shoulder. “Not without escort.” They disappear into his room, and he shuts the door.

For a moment, we all stare at each other absorbing the arranged marriage situation that just dropped itself into our lives. Then I stand and help Lucy up off the couch.

“I’d love to conjecture with you, but *my* bride looks tired.” *And I’m ready for another round with her.*

“*Spokoynoy nochi,*” Lucy says, still practicing her Russian.

“Good night, Lucy,” Dima and Nikolai chorus.

“Good night,” Pavel calls toward our backs.

“Tell me that girl isn’t another prisoner,” Lucy says when we get into the

bedroom. I pull off her pajama top as I back her toward the bed.

“It would only be for her own safety,” I swear. “That would be the reason Igor pinned her to Maxim. It’s a brilliant match, really. He needed Maxim to take her out of Russia and away from the tigers vying for his power and her wealth.”

“What about love?” Lucy asks.

I catch the back of her head and kiss her before her knees hit the bed. “Conquering. Wasn’t that preferred? Maxim will conquer her. And she will conquer him. And then there will be love. Just like with us, no?”

Her lids droop.

I pull down the covers and lay her in the bed. “I love you, *kotyonok*. My fierce, wild lioness.” I climb in beside her.

“I love you, Ravil Baranov. And yes, I will marry you.”

I reach over to turn out the light. “I wasn’t asking.”

Her laugh is husky and full. “I know. You’re claiming.” She kisses my chest then lays her head on it. “You’ve already conquered.”

The End

TO READ Lucy and Ravil’s first meeting in DC, check out “Prelude” in the book *Black Light: Roulette War* (free in Kindle Unlimited).

Thank you for reading *The Director*. If you enjoyed it, I would so appreciate your review— they make a huge difference for indie authors like me.

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ABOUT RENEE ROSE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR RENEE ROSE loves a dominant, dirty-talking alpha hero! She's sold over a million copies of steamy romance with varying levels of kink. Her books have been featured in USA Today's *Happily Ever After* and *Popsugar*. Named Eroticon USA's Next Top Erotic Author in 2013, she has also won *Spunky and Sassy's* Favorite Sci-Fi and Anthology author, *The Romance Reviews* Best Historical Romance, and *has* hit the *USA Today* list seven times with her Wolf Ranch series and various anthologies.

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