



Tarnished

TYRANT

ZHUKOVA BRATVA BOOK ONE

NICOLE FOX

TARNISHED TYRANT

ZHUKOVA BRATVA

BOOK 1

NICOLE FOX

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CONTENTS

Mailing List

Also by Nicole Fox

Tarnished Tyrant

1. Belle
2. Belle
3. Nikolai
4. Nikolai
5. Belle
6. Belle
7. Nikolai
8. Belle
9. Nikolai
10. Nikolai
11. Nikolai
12. Belle
13. Nikolai
14. Belle
15. Nikolai
16. Belle
17. Nikolai
18. Belle
19. Nikolai
20. Nikolai
21. Belle
22. Belle
23. Nikolai
24. Nikolai
25. Belle
26. Nikolai
27. Belle
28. Nikolai
29. Belle
30. Belle
31. Nikolai
32. Belle
33. Nikolai
34. Belle
35. Nikolai

36. Belle
37. Nikolai
38. Belle
39. Nikolai
40. Belle
41. Belle
42. Nikolai
43. Belle
44. Nikolai
45. Nikolai
46. Belle
47. Belle
48. Nikolai
49. Belle
50. Nikolai

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TARNISHED TYRANT

ZHUKOVA BRATVA BOOK 1

**I got pregnant from a one-night-stand.
I wasn't going to tell the father...
Until I walked into the office and found out he's my new boss.**

Here's some advice: Don't sleep with your boss.

Here's some more: Don't sleep with your married boss.

And while I'm at it: Don't sleep with your married, dangerous, billionaire, completely-incapable-of-feeling boss, because all he's going to do is break your heart and your body and leave you to cry in the ashes.

But I've never been good at taking my own advice.

In my defense, I didn't know that Nikolai Zhukova was any of those things when we met.

I just thought he was the gray-eyed sinner in first class.

And when I started having a panic attack at the sudden turbulence, I thought he was the kind soul calming me down.

But Nikolai is the farthest thing from kind.

He's cruel, he's powerful, he's arrogant.

And now, according to the test in my hand...

He's the father of my baby.

Tarnished Tyrant is Book 1 of the Zhukova Bratva duet. The story continues in Book 2, Tarnished Queen.

BELLE

This airport is an insane asylum. Crazy idiots zooming in every direction with no regard for human life or social decency.

I squeeze my little sister's wrist even tighter as we navigate around a couple sharing a very public, very graphic goodbye kiss.

"You don't have to hold onto me," Elise complains, yanking her arm away.

"I just don't want us to get separated. Remember Silver Dollar City?"

"I was six," Elise groans.

"And on a leash," I remind her. "Yet you still escaped like fricking Houdini. I don't want a repeat of that. We're already running late."

I check the boarding pass for the millionth time. We have less than ninety minutes until our flight boards, and we haven't even been through security yet.

"We're not late. It's the Oklahoma City airport, Belle. Not Atlanta. We'll be fine."

"When have you ever been at the Atlanta airport?"

Elise rolls her eyes, the fourteen-year-old's Bat Signal for even the most minor inconvenience, slight, or annoyance. I've seen it countless times since she moved in with me two months ago, but I can't seem to build up any immunity. It irks me every time.

“You know about the Eiffel Tower and you’ve never been to Paris, right?” she snarks.

I let out an anguished sigh. “Just stick close to me, okay? I don’t have time to look for you. I have to keep an eye out for Roger.”

“Wait. What?”

I keep walking for a few seconds before I glance back and realize Elise isn’t with me anymore. She’s screeched to a halt in the middle of the airport, blocking a businessman in a suit and tie from getting by.

I whirl around and tug her out of the way, apologizing to the man as we go. He grumbles something bitter about “kids these days” and stomps past us.

“Maybe we should rethink that leash,” I mutter. “Come on, Elise. We just talked about—”

“We’re flying with Roger?” she asks, her top lip curling in disgust. “Roger, as in the guy who made you work late and then tried to slide his hand up your skirt?”

I inhale sharply. “How do you know—”

“The walls at your place are thin,” she says dismissively. “I heard you talking to Georgia.”

I drag a hand down my face. “I should have had coffee this morning.”

Flying makes me nervous, so I didn’t figure my body needed the extra caffeine-induced anxiety on top of the flying anxiety. But after a night of shitty sleep and now, the threat that my half-sister will say something damning in front of my admittedly super pervy boss... safe to say I need the world’s largest latte. Or maybe an IV of espresso, I’m not sure.

“I don’t want to travel with that creep,” she says with finality.

“Me neither. That’s why I’m being paid to do it.”

Elise’s eyes bug out of her head. “He’s paying you to travel with him?!”

“Yes. Because it’s my job. He’s my boss.”

"Oh. Right." Elise frowns and then shakes her head. "Still, I wouldn't have come with you if I knew he was going to be here. You should really report him to... someone. I don't know. That's sexual harassment."

I gawk at Elise, wondering when she got old enough to say things like "sexual harassment." When I left home, she was nine years old and into mermaids.

Lots has changed since then.

"You're coming with me because there's no way I'm leaving you alone in the apartment for a week," I tell her. "I'm pretty sure it's illegal."

"I can take care of myself!"

"Not according to the law. So you're coming with me and you're going to be nice to Roger and you're going to—"

"You're not my mom!"

Elise isn't quite yelling, but her voice is raised and people are taking notice. If I *was* her mom, I'd grab her hand and drag her after me, kicking and screaming. No one would give us a second look.

But she's right—I'm not her mom. I'm her sister. Yet I'm the one here dealing with her angst. As if I don't have enough of my own.

I take a deep breath and open my mouth, a whole host of regrettable things sitting on the tip of my tongue, when my phone rings.

I glance down and see Roger's stupid face smiling back at me. He looks so professional in his company headshot. Nothing like the red-faced mouth breather with tentacle-like arms that the rest of the women in the office have long since learned to avoid.

"Hey, Roger," I answer, turning away from Elise. "Sorry we're late. We aren't through security yet, but—"

"What?" he yells. There's aggressive music thumping in the background. It sounds like he's in some kind of club. "Sorry, I can't hear you. This club is really loud."

“Since when does the airport have a club?”

He laughs. “They don’t. I’m not at the airport. I’m in Aruba!”

“Aruba? What are you talking about?” I shake my head, trying to decide if I’m still sleeping. If so, this is a weird anxiety dream. “We’re leaving for New York in eighty minutes. Zhukova Incorporated? The audit?”

“I didn’t forget,” he says, way too cheekily. “You’re going on your own. You don’t need me, right? Isn’t that what you said?”

Memories of that traumatic late night at the office butt their way into my already-panicked thoughts.

“If you want to move up in this company, you’ll need a recommendation,” Roger had told me, his hand sliding up my thigh. *“I can be an asset for you.”*

I’d swiveled away from his touch. *“I don’t need you.”*

Those words are coming back to haunt me now.

“I’ve never done an audit on my own before,” I mumble.

I hate how inexperienced I sound. I’ve been a fighter my whole life. God knows I’ve overcome plenty. But this feels cruel and unusual.

Roger laughs cruelly. “First time for everything. Good luck!”

He hangs up. I stare at my phone, trying to decide if I should call back and beg him to come with me.

Then Elise sidles up next to me. “Was that Roger?”

I run through the facts in my head real quick.

I need this job.

I need to watch Elise.

Elise hates Roger.

Roger isn’t coming with us anymore.

In one way—at the very most—this is a blessing. Georgia is always telling

me I need to focus more on the positive. Maybe today is the day to start.

“Roger isn’t coming with us anymore. We’re on our own.” I pivot and start walking towards security. “Keep up.”



Today was the wrong day to start thinking positively. Because now, I’m positive this plane is going to crash.

I was sleeping. Or resting, at least. Trying to close my eyes and calm the twist of anxiety in my gut. It was almost working, too, which is obviously when the turbulence started.

Take-off and landings are always the worst part. Once the plane is in the air, I can usually relax. But now, the screen in front of me is flickering along with the cabin lights as the plane shakes and trembles.

“Of course, the one time I fly first class is the one that crashes,” I mutter to myself. Elise is in the row behind me, so there’s no hand to hold. I just white-knuckle the armrests and squeeze my eyes closed.

When we were boarding, the flight attendant saw Elise and I were about to be seated directly in the middle of a rowdy bachelor party and upgraded us to two empty seats in first class.

“Thanks so much,” I’d said, embarrassingly close to tears of gratitude. “I’m on a work trip and things aren’t going the way I thought they would. I just... I really needed this.”

Elise was so embarrassed by my emotions that she pretended she didn’t know me.

But the flight attendant patted my back and whispered in my ear, “Us ladies have to stick together.”

Everyone around me in first class looks like they belong. The woman next to me has on a velvet sweatsuit with a satin eye mask. Everything from her fur slippers to her noise-canceling headphones screams luxury.

The man sitting diagonally across the aisle is snarling something in Russian in flagrant disregard of the “*No cell phones*” rule the rest of us peasants have to obey. I don’t see anything beyond a broad shoulder and stubbled square jaw, but I’m glad I’m not in the shoes of whatever poor soul is on the other end of his rebuke.

If the plane splits apart *Lost*-style and the first two rows are forced to fend for ourselves on some desert island, then it’ll be Elise, me, Velvet Tracksuit Woman, and Russian Guy.

Suddenly, I’m not sure if the attendant did me a favor or not. Russian Guy doesn’t look like he plays well with others.

Just as the seatbelt light dings on, my stomach flips dangerously. I’m immediately positive I’m going to throw up.

My eyes fly open and I reach for a vomit bag, but there is nothing. The seat back in front of me is empty. No in-flight magazine, no blanket wrapped in plastic, and definitely no vomit bag.

Can I hold it in? *Mind over matter. Mind over matter.*

But then my stomach contracts and my mind is no longer first-in-command. It isn’t even second. My stomach is in charge and my feet are taking orders without question.

Before I can stop myself, I stand up and rush towards the bathroom.

“Miss, you have to sit down,” the flight attendant from before scolds. “The seatbelt light is on and—”

I ignore her and charge ahead. She undoes her seatbelt like she means to stand up and block me from getting into the bathroom.

So much for “us ladies need to stick together.”

I barrel into the bathroom, lock the door behind me, drop to my knees, and rip open the little plastic lid.

And as soon as I do, the feeling in my stomach fades away.

“What the hell?” I gasp, almost annoyed at myself for not throwing up.

There's a first time for everything, I suppose. Roger was right about that much.

There's a pounding on the bathroom door. "Miss, you cannot be in there. This door should have been locked. You need to come out."

The plane is still shaking, but not as badly as it was a few moments ago. My heart is pounding and there's sweat on the back of my neck... but no vomit.

I close the lid and stand up, then wash my hands before I finally open the door. The flight attendant is glaring at me.

"You need to sit down, ma'am. Now."

I nod pitifully and start picking my way down the aisle towards my seat. "I'm sorry. I'm a nervous flier and the turbulence and... I thought I was going to be sick."

"When the seatbelt light is on, you need to stay in your seat and—"

Before she can finish her scolding, another burst of turbulence knocks the plane sideways. The flight attendant goes one way, I go the other...

And I land right in the lap of Scary Russian Guy.

I yelp and try to right myself. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—The turbulence, I just—"

He grips my waist and lifts me up like I weigh nothing. "Breathe. It's okay."

His voice is deep and icy. I finally look up at his face and freeze.

Holy shit, this man is hot. Like, cover of a men's magazine, lead of a superhero movie franchise *hot*.

His eyes are a molten silver that churns with unreadable emotion. His jaw is clenched tight, hair tousled, fragrance seductive.

The flight attendant comes to try to reel me back to where I belong, but my legs are no longer functioning. I'm stuck, staring at the man, imagining all the dirty things that voice of his could whisper in my ear. Possibly in Russian.

My stomach is fluttering again, but for a very different reason. Then more turbulence shakes the plane, and the flight attendant has had enough.

“Sit!” she commands, pointing at the empty seat next to the man. “Now!”

“But... but that isn’t my—My seat is over—”

She shoves me towards the seat. The man gently grips my waist again, helping me past him and into the seat next to him.

As soon as she’s satisfied I’m strapped in and no longer a nuisance, the attendant huffs away. I’m left to look over at my new seatmate with a nervous smile.

“I’m sorry. I thought I was going to throw up.” My face flames with embarrassment. “I mean, I didn’t. Didn’t get sick, that is. I did think I would, but I didn’t. I’m a nervous flier. In case you couldn’t tell.”

The man watches me, his light gray eyes observant but distant. It’s truly hard to look at him. People shouldn’t be allowed to be this attractive. Or this cool under pressure. I thought I was going to die, and he looks as relaxed as ever. The worst turbulence I’ve ever felt, and yet this man’s heart rate didn’t even approach room temperature.

“Are you going to get sick now?” he asks. There’s no detectable accent. Russian must be his second language.

“No.” I shake my head and then wince. “I don’t think so, anyway.”

He reaches into a small compartment between the seats and removes a hospital blue waterproof bag. “Use this if you need to.”

I wince. “I didn’t even think to look there. I figured the bags would be in the back of the seats.”

“First time in first class?”

I might be offended by his assumption if it wasn’t so incredibly on point. I nod. “Yeah. I got bumped up. I think the attendant took pity on me. She probably won’t make that mistake again.”

“Why would she take pity on you?”

I hitch my thumb towards the back half of the plane. “There’s a bachelor party back there. They were being pretty loud, and I was going to be sitting smack dab in the middle of them.”

“Good call on her part,” he says, sitting back in his seat. “Sitting a pretty woman near a group of horny men is a recipe for disaster.”

He places his arm on the armrest, and even though there’s plenty of space for both of us, his warm skin brushes across mine. Goosebumps race down my spine.

As if his skin on mine isn’t enough to process, my brain snags on “pretty woman.” Like a dumb teenager talking to her crush, I wonder, *He thinks I’m pretty?*

“Oh, uh, well,” I stutter. My tongue feels like it’s twice the size it normally is. “I don’t know if that’s why. I have been stressed. I’m on a work trip and things have been a mess. I think she noticed that and wanted to help out.”

“Are you saying you don’t think you’re pretty?”

I suck in a surprised breath and turn to him. He’s looking at me again, his face still completely unreadable.

Not sure what to do, I laugh like a loon. “I don’t—I wasn’t saying—You can’t just ask people something like that.”

He shrugs. “Why not?”

“Because it’s... uncomfortable.”

“For who?” he asks. “I’m not uncomfortable. I called you beautiful, and you seemed to disagree. I want to know why.”

“Pretty.”

He frowns. “Excuse me?”

I swallow. “You said I was pretty, not beautiful.”

“My mistake,” he says coolly. “Beautiful. Final answer.”

My face is bright red now. I could hang over intersections and direct traffic.

I'm flaming with embarrassment and nerves. "Got it. Thanks."

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" he inquires.

"No." I shake my head. "Maybe... maybe 'uncomfortable' was the wrong word. You're making me nervous."

His mouth quirks up in a smirk. "Why?"

"As if you don't know," I snort.

That's not an exaggeration—I do actually snort. Like a legit pig. I duck my face, but the man reaches forward to tilt my chin up with one callused finger.

"I want to hear you say it."

I'm not sure if he actually doesn't know or if he just wants to hear me say he's the most handsome man I've ever seen.

"Well, for starters, you're the beautiful one," I say, gesturing to him with both hands like he's the grand prize on a game show. "You're quite handsome and clearly successful and very much in your element. Whereas I was just about to throw up in an airplane bathroom while a flight attendant beat on the door."

"I'm sure that was an anomaly," he suggests.

"Unfortunately, no." I shake my head. "My life is... It's a mess, to keep a long story short. So being around someone like you is a lot for me to handle. I'm worried I'm going to make a fool of myself. Even though I'm pretty sure I already have. And I still am. Like now. And now. And now."

He shakes his head. "You haven't made a fool of yourself."

"Oh God, you're nice, too," I groan. "You're clearly only saying that to spare my feelings."

"If you really feel like being down on yourself, I'll give you one thing: you aren't a very good judge of character."

"I'm not?"

"No," he says, leaning in close. His breath smells like peppermint. "Because I

am the farthest fucking thing from nice.”

The image of him barking something cruel in Russian into his phone rises up in my mind. I want to ask him what that was about. Maybe he’s having a bad day at work, too. Maybe we could bond over having shit-for-brain bosses.

But I doubt it.

Something tells me he’s the boss.

“You’ve been nice to me,” I counter lamely.

“Because you’re interesting,” he says. “You were right: I am successful. And I know I’m attractive.”

“Humble, too.”

“I don’t need to be. And neither do you.” He drags his fingers across my knuckles, and I clench my legs together. “I’m surrounded by people who know exactly how to act and always say the right thing. It’s boring. I much prefer a little... spontaneity.”

“Spontaneity?”

Not sure I’m his girl in that regard. Sure, I “spontaneously” stole my younger sister from our psycho mother and had her move in with me. But I doubt that “let a fourteen-year-old move into your crappy apartment” is the kind of spontaneity he’s talking about.

He nods. “I like to keep things exciting.”

His words feel like an invitation. One I feel powerless to turn down. I mean, fate got me bumped to first class and then plopped down in this seat next to him. Who am I to refuse destiny, right?

Just as I’m about to fumble my way through something resembling flirting, the plane lurches sideways yet again.

“Shit!” I yelp and clamp my hand down on the armrest.

Correction: arm, not armrest. Russian Guy’s arm, to be specific. There are fingernail indents in his skin by the time I peel my hand off, but I’m too far gone to even apologize. The fear is choking me out and I can’t stop it.

The pilot comes over the speakers to tell everyone to stay calm. But I barely hear him. We're dying. I'm sure of it. This is the end.

"Hey," Russian Man says in his unreasonably sexy voice. "Are you okay?"

I should nod or blink or say something. It doesn't even have to be cute or funny or charming. I should just say a single word, any single word, to let him know I'm not out of my mind.

But I can't make my body do anything. I'm in fight or flight... while on a flight.

That would be a great thing to say right now! A little quip to impress him. But instead, I shake my head as the plane shakes and rattles again.

Then I stand up and crawl over him. "I'm going to be sick. For sure this time."

The flight attendant doesn't even look surprised when she sees me hop up again. She just glares at me and shakes her head.

Once I get close enough, she wags a finger at me. "No, ma'am. You need to sit down right now. If you're feeling ill, grab the bag between the seats and —"

"I'm going to be sick," I gasp. It feels like my lungs are going to explode. "I need to—"

Get off this plane, I think. Though that isn't really an option.

"You need to sit down," she says again.

She glances down the aisle, and I'm sure she's looking at an air marshal coming to tie me up in duct tape. I wouldn't even blame them. I'm being a menace.

But my heart is racing, and—

"Why does this damn plane keep shaking?" I blurt a bit too loud.

The attendant stiffens. "You're causing a scene. You need to—"

"Let her by," a deep voice behind me says. I don't need to turn around to

know who it is.

Mortification ripples through me at the knowledge that Handsome Stranger—formerly known as Russian Guy—is witnessing this epic breakdown. But the plane lurches again and I stumble back.

Instantly, one of his strong arms wraps around my middle, holding me steady. I sink into his warmth and sigh without even realizing I’m doing it.

“Open the bathroom,” he orders. “Now.”

The attendant narrows her eyes on me, but even she isn’t immune to Handsome Stranger’s charms and/or implied threats. Her face softens and she spins on her heel, bathroom key in her hand.

She unlocks the door and holds it open. “I don’t want any more trouble. Get her relaxed and find your seats.”

He nods, pushes me into the small space, and pulls the door shut behind us.

I was consumed by fear and anxiety and panic out there, but the moment we’re in the small bathroom together, there is only him. He smells like peppermint and citrus, a bright scent that cuts through the antiseptic haze of the bathroom.

“Are you going to be sick?” he asks.

I blink up at him, shocked by how close he is to my face.

His hands smooth down my arms. “If you’re going to throw up, I’d like to know.”

“No,” I rasp, swallowing audibly. “I’m okay. I’m—”

“You’re having a panic attack,” he says. “You’re not fine.”

I sag in his grasp. “I hate flying.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because I need the money,” I say. “I’m headed to see a big client of my company. My boss abandoned me to handle this trip on my own, and the client is apparently a huge asshole, so I’m stressed and then this goddamn

plane keeps hitting goddamn turbulence, and I just need for my goddamn brain to be goddamn quiet. I need to figure out how to turn my thoughts off so I can—”

Suddenly, Handsome Stranger lifts me onto the sink, steps between my legs, and presses his lips to mine.

And my entire brain goes dead silent.

His mouth is soft and his body is hard, and I can’t think about anything except the fact that he is touching me. Kissing me.

Holy. Shit.

His tongue slides along my bottom lip, and I slowly open my mouth. His hands curve up my back, pulling me closer to him as his tongue probes into my mouth. I moan like—shit, what did that one boyfriend of Mom’s used to call it? Oh, yeah—like a bitch in heat.

The self-aware embarrassment cuts through everything and I jerk away from him. I clap my hand over my mouth and stare at him, eyes wide.

His eyes aren’t wide, though. They’re perfectly normal. Perfectly gray.

“What was that?” I gasp.

“Spontaneity,” he says. “Did it work?”

I don’t need to glance down to know my nipples are very much visible through my thin cotton shirt. And there’s moisture between my legs.

Did it work? he asked. Duh, it worked. It worked so well that I’m not sure any other man will ever get me to “work” ever again.

I swallow and nod. “Yeah... Um, thanks for that. I guess. I needed that. And a kiss is better than a slap, so—”

“Why would I slap you?” He tilts his head to the side. I wish I had run my hands through his hair while I had the chance. It’s golden brown and falls over his forehead like silk.

“I don’t know. Like in movies? To break me out of my panic?”

"Is that the only reason you think I kissed you?"

God, I hope not. But I can't say that. Can't admit to wanting this stranger. I barely even know him, for crying out loud.

My face is hot and flushed. He reaches out and swipes his thumb over my cheek. "Am I making you nervous again?"

"You can't just talk to people like that!"

"Like what?"

"Being so... honest." I realize how ridiculous it sounds as soon as the words are out of my mouth. "I mean, like, asking people these kinds of questions. I don't even know your name."

"Nikolai."

I shift in the sink, desperately aware that he is still standing between my thighs. "Oh. Um. Hi, Nikolai."

The mysterious Handsome Stranger has a mysterious, handsome name. I probably shouldn't be surprised.

He lowers his hand from my cheek and drops it on my thigh. His fingers burn my flesh through my jeans. "And yours?"

"Belle."

His eyebrows dance with a subtle smirk. "Then you should be used to people calling you beautiful. It's your name."

My heart is thundering again, panic rising up in me. I press my palms to my eyes.

"You don't have to stay with me. I'll be fine on my own," I mumble. "I know you only came in here because you feel responsible for me. Since I accidentally fell on your lap. But I absolve you of your chivalrous responsibilities." I wave him away without opening my eyes. "You can go on. I won't bother you anymore."

He doesn't say anything.

I crack an eye open. "Well?"

"I told you you were a bad judge of character," he drawls.

I frown, but before I can ask what he means, Nikolai slides his hand between our bodies, cupping my heat.

"I'm not fucking nice. And I'm definitely not fucking chivalrous," he growls.

Unable to stop myself, I roll my hips against the heel of his palm. I chase the pleasure that has been building low in my belly since the moment I looked into his eyes.

He slides his hand up and starts unbuttoning my jeans.

"Tell me to stop," he says. "Tell me you don't want this."

I do the exact opposite: I lift my hips and help him peel my jeans down my legs, my body moving like it's in a trance.

"Why?" I squeak.

Why on earth would I do that? Why would anyone feel this man's hands on their skin and tell him to stop? I can't imagine a straight woman alive who's foolish enough to turn this down.

He grips my panties and yanks them down, leaving me naked from the waist down on the small counter. But I'm so fixated watching him unzip his pants and pull out his gloriously thick cock that I can't find the energy to be embarrassed.

"Because if you don't," he says, gripping his length and pressing himself against my entrance, "I'm going to fuck you until you scream so loud that everyone on this plane can hear you."

I can't help gasping and sputtering like a fish on dry land. "I... I... I..."

Distantly, I can feel the plane still trembling. I know that all my problems will still exist when we're back on the ground.

But right now, I'm flying high.

And I want to make the most of it before I land.

I wrap my arms around his neck. "I want this."

In one thrust, Nikolai pushes inside of me. I tip my head back against the mirror and moan.

"I knew you'd be tight," Nikolai grits out.

"I knew you'd be big."

Nikolai pulls back and smiles down at me. "Maybe you do know all the right things to say, after all."

I smile, but then he slides out and thrusts back into me, and just like that, I can't smile anymore. Or talk. Or think.

His massive hands palm my thighs, hooking my legs around his waist as he fills me with one savage thrust after another. Then he slides his hand between us again, his thumb circling over my clit, and a jolt of electricity courses through me.

"Oh my God," I moan.

"You like that?" he asks, his voice rough.

I don't say anything. I'm too busy falling to pieces in his hand. So he asks again.

"Do you like that, Belle?"

The way he says my name, his tongue languishing over the double L... It's the sexiest thing I've ever heard.

"Tell me," he commands. "Tell me what you like. What you want."

"Yes," I gasp. "I like... all of it. You. I like it."

His thumb is moving over me faster now, flicking and massaging until I'm seeing stars.

"That's not good enough. You need to tell me exactly what you want."

The pressure is ratcheting up higher and higher, and all I want is... is...

"I want to come," I gasp.

He thrusts into me to the hilt. “Then do it. Come for me like a good girl.”

Oh, for the love of God.

I break.

My orgasm is like the sun coming through the clouds after a rainstorm. It happens suddenly and there’s no stopping it, no dimming it.

I moan, my muscles contracting and releasing. Cries of pleasure climb up my throat.

Nikolai clamps his hand over my mouth, swallowing my shouts until I’m limp against him. My body is spent, but when I look down, he’s still hard.

I frown. “It... it didn’t happen for you?”

“Don’t worry.” He brushes his thumb—the same thumb that sent me over the edge—across my lower lip. “It will.”

Then he tears me off the counter and spins me around so I’m facing the mirror, Nikolai floating like a golden angel over my shoulder. He grips my hips and slides into me again.

The angle is different and my mouth falls open. I lean forward, taking him deeper, wanting more and more and all of him.

Distantly, I’m aware of the plane’s vibrations, of the fact that dozens of passengers are sitting mere feet away with just a rickety plastic door between us. But the world has narrowed to encompass only this. Only this room. Only us.

My anxiety and fear are gone, pounded out of me by the man with the silver eyes.

“They’ll hear us,” I whimper.

“Let them.” Nikolai drives into me harder. “I want this whole plane to hear you come again.”

“It’s never happened for me twice.” I’m almost embarrassed to admit it. Then again, I’m bent over a sink in front of a stranger. Maybe nothing is embarrassing anymore.

Nikolai smirks in the mirror. “First time for everything.”

He wraps his hand around my leg and lifts my knee up to the corner of the sink. I’m still trying to get situated when he slides all the way out of me and then slams into the hilt.

“Oh my God,” I moan. “It’s so—”

“Deep,” he breathes.

With every thrust, he’s touching places inside of me that have never been touched. My thighs start to quiver and before I can properly prepare myself, another orgasm is rocketing through me.

This one is even more powerful than the last. My muscles contract, my body clamping down around Nikolai’s length.

And then I feel the handsome stranger pulsing into me.

He grunts as he drives all the way in. His sounds and his thrusts fade little by little until there’s just the white noise of the roaring engines and my own panting breath.

When we’re done, I hurry to put my leg down and stand up. Warning bells are going off in my head.

What have I done? *Who* have I done?

He could be married. Or a murderer. He could be a married murderer. Nikolai might not even be his real name!

The same panic that was just sexed out of me starts to creep back in, but I swallow it down.

I feel warmth flowing down the inside of my legs, the evidence of what we’ve done painted between my thighs.

Nikolai zips his pants and reaches for the door handle. “Get dressed and we’ll leave together.”

He stares at me while I wipe off my legs and tug on my jeans. Whatever boldness had briefly possessed me, it’s gone now. I’m a walking, talking blush.

“Okay,” I say softly once I’ve fixed my lipstick in the mirror and smoothed down my hair. “I’m ready.”

Nikolai opens the door without looking at me. The flight attendants are moving about the cabin now. At some point while we were in there, the seatbelt light turned off. An older woman with curly gray hair is waiting outside the bathroom door. If she overheard anything that happened inside, she doesn’t make it known.

I follow Nikolai down the center aisle. When he reaches his seat, I nearly follow him, before I remember where I’m supposed to sit.

I hesitate for a second, waiting to see if he’ll look up at me and offer a smile or a wave. Some kind of recognition for what we just did together in the bathroom.

But he doesn’t look up.

And as pathetic as I may be sometimes, I’m not desperate enough to embarrass myself by begging for his attention.

So I keep walking to my seat.

Before I sit, I glance at the row behind me where Elise is sitting. She has her legs curled up underneath her and her head resting on her folded-up sweatshirt. She’s fast asleep. Looks like she has been for a while.

“Figures,” I mumble. I shake my head and drop down into my chair.

I can still see Nikolai’s squared jaw from back here, but he looks farther away than ever. If it wasn’t for the ache between my legs, I could believe it was all a dream.

Maybe it would be better that way. For the Handsome Stranger to fade away like a dream you can barely remember after waking.

Maybe then everything that happened next wouldn’t have hurt so bad.

BELLE

If the plane ride was a dream, the hotel is a nightmare.

“You can’t expect me to sleep here.” Elise draws away from the bed like she’s afraid it’ll swallow her whole.

I don’t entirely blame her. The comforter is threadbare, the pattern faded. The thin carpet looks clean enough, but it feels sticky against my feet. And the porcelain in the bathroom is tinged yellow in a way that makes my skin crawl.

“It’s not that bad.”

Her eyes bug out. “Belle!”

“What?” I snap. “What do you want me to do about it? This is the place my company booked for us to stay.”

“You mean Roger.”

“Yes, Roger. My boss. He booked the rooms and this is where we’re staying.”

Elise crosses her arms. “I don’t know why I’m being punished, too. I’m not the one who turned him down.”

“I’m not being punished.”

That’s a lie. It is entirely like Roger to make my life at work hell because I

won't sleep with him. Elise is right—I should report him to HR or something.

But fuck, I need this job. I needed it before Elise lived with me, but now, I definitely can't be toeing the poverty line while I'm responsible for a teenager.

Elise deserves something resembling stability for once in her life. I have to be that something.

Which means I have to put up with handsy assholes in order to secure a paycheck. There are worse things in the world. I'm tough; I can survive. I've survived for a long time just to make it here.

Elise spins around and throws open the curtains to the only window. Immediately, we're greeted with a stunning view of... the graffitied, soot-stained brick building next door.

"You're right. This doesn't look like a prison cell at all," she drawls. "This place is great. Ten stars."

I groan and rummage through my suitcase. "I'd love it if you could at least pretend to have a good time while we're here."

Elise studies the bed for a moment before changing her mind and perching on the edge of the armchair in the corner. A puff of dust rises out of the cushions, swirling around in the dingy light coming through the window.

"But I'm *not* having a good time," she pouts.

"You've made that abundantly clear. That's why I said 'pretend.' I have to be here for work, so let's just get through this and then we can go home, okay?"

"To your apartment, you mean?"

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Teenagers are people, too. My sister has been through a hard time. It's not her fault. I need to cut her some slack.

Did I really expect her to be excited about having her own room and thank me every day for giving her a warm bed to sleep in? Well, maybe. But I'm wiser and less idealistic now.

I release the breath in a whistle between pursed lips. “Yes. To my apartment. Where you now live. We won’t be here long. Maybe a week.”

“A week?” Elise exclaims. “I thought it was only three days!”

“Oh, you don’t listen when I ask you how your day was, but you listen when I explain our travel itinerary?”

I slip out of my jeans—the jeans that still smell like Handsome Stranger—and pull on a pair of black, high-waisted slacks. If the clock above the television is right, I have twenty minutes to get across town to the offices of Zhukova Incorporated.

“Belle!” Elise cries out. “Answer me!”

I shrug on a pale pink blouse and button it. “Anyway—yes, a week. That original three-day plan was from before Roger bailed on me. Now, I’m doing this on my own. It’s for a big company, and things might take longer.”

“Call someone to come help,” she practically begs. “Like... like Georgia. She’s your friend.”

“She’s my coworker.” The admission feels embarrassing. I really need more friends. “And no. I’m doing this alone. Can I trust you to stay here while I’m gone?”

Elise huffs, pouting her lower lip out. She looks so much like our mom when she pouts, but with her dad’s reddish blonde hair and green eyes. It makes me shiver every time.

“What am I supposed to do for food?”

I pull a twenty out of my purse and leave it on the TV stand. “You can walk to the bodega on the corner and then back again. No further.”

She snatches the money off the table and shoves it in her back pocket.

“Understood?” I ask.

She tosses me a mock salute. “Sir, yes, sir.”

I hate leaving things like this. I hate that I have to play the role of her parent. That we can’t be normal sisters who fight over clothes and watch movies

together.

But there isn't time to sort through any of that. I'm already running late as it is.

"Good. I have to go."

I grab my purse and toss my phone, a water bottle, and my laptop inside. Then I hurry out the door.

Just before I close it, I pop my head back into the room. "I love you, E."

Elise sighs. "Love you, too, B."

For now, that will have to do.



I'm finally standing in front of the building that houses Zhukova Incorporated. Sweaty and panting, but here. No thanks to the New York City Transit Authority or the millions of yellow cabs that drove right past my waving arms.

My phone rings. I answer it in an exhausted daze.

"I can't talk right now, Georgia," I mutter, shoving the phone between my ear and shoulder as I dig through my purse for a napkin or scrap of paper to dab the sweat from my forehead.

"Then why did you answer?"

"Because I... shit, I don't know."

"Is it because you're having a heart attack?" she asks. "Are you delirious?"

I decide a panty liner is as good as anything and mop up my face. "I don't know how subways work. Or how to wave down a taxi."

"Roger has been to New York a million times. Why didn't you ask him for help?"

"Because I don't see how he'd be any help from Aruba." The words come out

exactly as bitterly as I feel.

The line goes silent, and I wait. Finally, Georgia hisses into the phone. “That asshole is in *Aruba*? What the fuck? He’s supposed to be on this trip with you!”

“I know. He called this morning and bailed right before I got on the plane.”

“Shit,” Georgia says. “So you’re handling this project alone?”

“Unless you want to hop on a plane and come help me?” I’m joking, but just barely. I’d love Georgia’s help.

I was being honest when I told Elise that Georgia is just a coworker. But she’s still the closest thing to a friend I have. I’ve only been in Oklahoma City for eight months, two of which revolved around getting Elise settled in my apartment. My social circle is less of a circle and more of a dot.

Georgia cackles. “I’ve done my time at Zhukova Inc., thank you very much. That’s probably why Roger bailed for an island vacation. The owner is a hardass.”

“I wish everyone would stop saying that.”

“It’s true. Most of these places want to butter up to the accountants, you know? They cater lunch and stop by to chat, show you pictures of their kids or whatever. But Zhukova is run like a military base.”

I look up at the silver building. It gleams like a bullet, disappearing into the bright blue sky above. “Have you met the owner?”

“No. When I was there two years ago, I spoke with the VP. The owner wouldn’t deign to see me. He just issues written memos from his office. Like he’s a villain in a Bond film or something, lurking in the shadows.”

“What kind of memos?”

“Mostly telling me to hurry up,” Georgia snorted. “Apparently, I wasn’t moving fast enough. He ended up sending down some of the in-house accountants to help out and rush me along.”

I frown. “That kind of ruins the integrity of the audit, doesn’t it?”

“When you get in there, you’ll understand. Whatever it takes to get done fast, do it. Then come back and tell me all about it. When you get home, we’ll go out for drinks, okay? You’ll need ‘em.”

“Yeah, definitely.” I smile and then hear the church a few blocks down chime the hour. “Shit. It’s three o’clock already. I’m so late. I have to go.”

“Good luck and godspeed,” Georgia says.

I hang up with her and hurry into the building. The first elevator is crammed full, so I wait three more minutes for an open one and then zip up to the thirty-fifth floor.

As soon as the doors open, I’m facing a rounded wooden desk with “Zhukova Incorporated” emblazoned on the side in gold letters. The woman behind the desk has sleek black hair and a long, narrow face with impossibly high cheekbones. She looks like she could have a second career in modeling.

“Appointment?” she asks in a flat voice.

“Oh, um... Yes. Well, no.” I smile awkwardly. “I’m here to do the audit. My boss, Roger, was supposed to be with me, but—”

“Belle Dowan,” she interrupts. “Follow me.”

She stands up, her fitted pencil skirt hugging her skinny waist and closely following the swell of her hips. The woman is stupid gorgeous. I have a hard time keeping up with her as she sashays down the hallway.

Finally, she stops outside of an office door and raps her knuckles against the wood. A second later, she opens the door.

“Arnold? Belle Dowan is here to see you for the audit.”

If someone told me the woman was a robot rigged with a library of pre-recorded messages, I’d believe them. She sounds lifeless.

An equally lifeless “Enter” sounds from inside the office. The woman waves me into the room and then closes the door behind me.

I have to blink against the sudden gloom. It’s like stepping into a dungeon.

“Sorry,” Arnold says. “I’m sensitive to light.”

I hear a chair spin and then I'm blinded a second time with piercing white light as he pulls the cord for his window shades.

"You're here for the audit, then," he remarks.

It's a statement, not a question. I stumble into the room, my eyes still trying to adjust.

"Yes." I grab the back of a leather chair and maneuver around it. "I'm Belle. A colleague, Roger, was supposed to be here with me, but due to... unforeseen circumstances, I'll be handling this audit alone."

"Is everything alright?"

Considering Roger is probably sipping on cocktails beachside right now, I'd say yeah, he's fine.

"He is." I force a smile. "Thanks for your concern."

Arnold clears his throat. "You won't suffer the same unforeseen circumstances?"

"I'm sorry?"

"We expect punctuality. Dependability. *Loyalty*." His eyes seem to glimmer on the last quality, lingering on me for a moment before he turns his attention to a stack of papers in sudden need of straightening on his desk.

I nod. "I understand. Absolutely. I know I'm running late today, but this is not standard for me. My flight got in this morning and then I couldn't get a taxi. I'll be better the rest of the week."

I can't tell whether Arnold is convinced or not, because he refuses to look at me. He grabs the stack from his desk and swivels around to tuck it in the filing cabinet behind him.

"You've worked on the audit prior to arriving here today, correct?"

I nod and then clear my throat. "Yes. I was one of... of many who participated in the early stages of the auditing process."

This isn't entirely true. Actually, it's not even a little bit true. Roger kept all of the files in his office. He let me work on some smaller clients, but he kept

Zhukova Incorporated for himself. Today will be my first time seeing any of the paperwork or numbers.

“Great.” He rifles through the folders in the file cabinet, pulling some out at random. “Then I’ll need the finishing touches on this nonsense completed in three days. No later.”

Thankfully, he is no longer looking at me because my jaw drops. “Three days?”

“That was the previously agreed-upon arrangement.”

“Yes,” I admit. “I know it was. But—”

“You’ve had six weeks prior to this with our documents,” Arnold continues. “Did you do your job or not? I was under the impression that the week spent here was just putting finishing touches on everything.”

“We did our job,” I rush to explain. “It’s just that... the timeline was set when my colleague was going to be here with me. Now, I’m working alone.”

Arnold turns around and glowers. “That does not change the parameters of the job we hired you to do. Three days. It’s not a negotiation.”

I feel overwhelmed tears burning the backs of my eyes, but I refuse to cry in front of this man. Not on my first day.

“Arnold—sir,” I correct, “I may have misspoken slightly. My colleague handled many of the documents related to this audit. I’ll need at least a day, maybe two, to review the information he has put together. To familiarize myself. Then I can begin the process.”

“And the ‘process’ will take you...?”

“Three or four days, at least.”

“I may not be some hoity-toity accountant like you,” he says sarcastically, “but I am the Vice President of Financing. And I’m fairly sure that the two days of familiarizing and three days of processing... Well, that adds up to five days. Is that correct?”

I grit my teeth. “Yes, it is.”

“Two days too many,” he snarls. “Three is what you get. Like I said, it’s not a negotiation.”

If I slap this smug man in his face, I’ll lose my job. Then again, maybe that isn’t such a bad thing.

But as soon as the thought flits through my mind, I see Elise’s face. And I take a deep breath.

“I understand you must have a schedule to keep,” I tell him, “and I’m sorry if my company is playing a part in making your life more difficult. That’s not our objective. But I simply can’t do my job properly in three days.”

Arnold leans back in his chair. The springs squeal. “Now, we reach the heart of the matter—your job. I’m sure you have your own idea of what that entails, but I think I have a solution that will see this job done in three days. Would you like to hear it?”

No. Double no. Triple no with a side of “*fuck you.*”

But I nod. “Of course.”

He smiles. “Our company does a lot of business. Money changes hands. It moves from one account to another. We gain it, we lose it. That’s business.”

“That’s all businesses, as far as I’ve been able to tell.”

Arnold’s smile sharpens. “Yes. Well, it’s understandable, then, that some of that money might... disappear.”

“Disappear?”

“Disappear,” he repeats. “Get lost in the shuffle of things. Do you understand?”

Holy shit. Yes, I understand. I understand perfectly.

This man is embezzling from Zhukova Incorporated.

My neck suddenly feels very hot.

Roger never trained me to handle something like this. These kinds of issues would normally be discovered while we’re still working on the audit from

our own offices. This isn't something that would be uncovered this late in the game.

But I haven't seen Zhukova's files yet. Roger has.

Suddenly, realization dawns. No wonder that asswipe is in Aruba.

He's a coward. *He knew.*

I paste on a thin smile. "Disappearances like that are the kinds of problems I'm supposed to find and account for. That's my job."

"Of course. You have your job, and I have mine. You're good at your job, I'm sure. And I'm good at mine. Would you agree?" Arnold asks.

I stiffen in the chair. The light from the windows seems like a spotlight now. Maybe that's why Arnold keeps his blinds pulled—so he can do his dirty deeds in the dark.

"That's what I'm going to find out during this audit," I say.

He laughs humorlessly. "Well, there's really no need for it. I'll tell you what I've told every auditor we've ever had: I'm a professional. Nothing happens in this company's accounts that I don't know about. So if you find unaccounted surpluses or losses, you can assume I already know. There's no reason to report any of it. Business can sometimes be messy, as I'm sure you know."

He gave this same speech to Roger? To Georgia?

And they *agreed*?

I study Arnold's face, trying to decide if this is some sort of test. He's just staring back at me, waiting.

"What you're asking me to do is illegal," I say flatly. "I'm going to do my job exactly as I've been trained. And if you've been doing yours, then there shouldn't be a problem."

He looks surprised I'm pushing back, but not rattled. I have a feeling it takes a lot to rattle a scumbag like this.

"You'll do as I say or you'll be replaced. I will send you home right now."

“You’re one of our biggest clients,” I blurt, even though I’m sure he already knows.

“And what do you think would happen, Miss Dowan, if you lost your company one of their biggest clients?”

I blink at him. “Are you blackmailing me?”

“No. I’m simply explaining a logical series of events,” he says. “You refuse to do what I say, I’ll cut ties with your company, and your company will fire you. You look quite young, and if your naked ring finger is any indication, you aren’t married. How much in savings do you have set aside?”

The blow lands exactly as Arnold hoped it would.

I bolt out of my chair. “I’d like to speak with your boss. Now.”

“This matter is beneath him.”

“You’re beneath everyone. But that’s beside the point. I want to see your boss.”

“He’s busy.”

“Then I’ll wait,” I grit out. “Maybe I will get fired. But if I lose my job, I’m taking you down with me.”

He chuckles. “You think you can get me fired?”

Well, I did... up until he said that with such a confident smile.

“If I tell your boss you are embezzling money, then yes, I think I can.”

“Okay.” Arnold stands up and walks around the desk. I flinch back, expecting him to attack me. Instead, he moves to the door and holds it open. “Come with me.”

Moving on shaky Bambi legs, I follow Arnold down the hallway to the corner office. The walls are glass, but all of the white curtains are pulled closed.

My stomach flips nervously. I technically don’t have proof that Arnold has done anything wrong yet. All I have is his strange request. But that will have

to be enough. Enough to get the owner to let me go forward with the audit as it should be done.

And even if I do get fired at the end of this, maybe I can use the evenings while I'm here to line up my next job.

Because I need a job. I need to take care of Elise.

She's all that matters.

Arnold raps his knuckles against the door. A muffled voice from the other side directs him to come in. Once the door is open, the voice becomes clearer.

"What is it, Arnold?" The deep, velvet tones are melodic.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," Arnold says. "But the auditor wished to speak to you."

"I asked you to handle that."

Something registers in the way back of my brain. A vague sense of déjà vu. Of familiarity. But I'm too nervous to think much on it.

"She insisted." Arnold steps aside and ushers me in. "I think you'll like meeting her."

I stare at him as I pass, unsure what he means by that. Is he being sarcastic? Or is he making some locker room-style suggestion because I'm a woman? Either way, I want to kick him in the balls.

But then the CEO speaks again. This time, there's no door or wall between us. I hear him clearly.

"You're right, Arnold," he says. "Matter of fact, we've already met."

It hits me all at once.

I remember that musical voice in my ear.

I remember the warmth of his breath on the back of my neck.

I know who I'll see sitting behind the desk before I even look, but I can't stop myself from whipping towards him. From confirming my own waking

nightmare.

Handsome Russian Stranger Man is sitting behind a massive desk in a seriously designer suit.

Nikolai's mouth twists into a devilish smile. "Hello, Belle."

If refusing to turn a blind eye to Arnold's embezzling doesn't get me fired, joining the Mile High Club with the CEO of Zhukova Incorporated will certainly do the trick.

Fuck me.

On second thought, don't.

That's what got me in this mess in the first place.

NIKOLAI

“You two know each other?” Arnold asks, looking from me to the auburn-haired beauty at his side.

Usually, I would have told Arnold to fuck off if he tried to bring an auditor in to see me. As if I have nothing better to do than oversee drudgework. But then I spotted Belle on the security cameras.

She’s changed since I saw her a few hours ago, dressed in a tight pair of cropped trousers and a loose blouse, but I recognized her instantly. So did my dick.

“Of course. I make it a point to know the people who work under me,” I say.

My double entendre isn’t lost on Belle. Her attention snaps to me.

“We met on the plane.” She grits out the explanation unwillingly, worried I’ll offer a more colorful one.

“Oh, yes. I’m well acquainted with Belle now.” *With every part of her.*

The memory of her bent over in front of me has been replaying in my mind all morning. Her ass, red from my hands. The way she bit her bottom lip and frowned as she came around my dick.

Turns out there are some benefits of flying first class occasionally instead of private.

“Then I guess introductions aren’t in order,” Arnold says.

“Actually, a refresher might be a good idea. We didn’t do much talking.” I stand up and hold out my hand in Belle’s direction. “I’m Nikolai. Nikolai Zhukova.”

Her nostrils flare, and I can tell Arnold is trying to suppress a laugh. Belle, however, looks pale. Worse than she did on the plane.

"You failed to mention your last name on the flight," she says icily.

She's doing her best to remain professional. It's admirable, really. The way she thinks she can control this interaction.

“It didn’t seem necessary. I assumed we were on a first-name basis considering we—”

“Did you know I was going to be the one doing your audit?” she interrupts. “When we met on the flight... did you know?”

Arnold is still watching our verbal volley with obvious joy. All he needs is a bucket of popcorn and he’d be set. But as much as I’d like to continue toying with Belle, I do need to talk to her.

“Leave us, Arnold,” I say, waving my hand lazily towards the door. “Ms. Dowan and I have unfinished business to discuss.”

He slumps with disappointment, but hurries out of the room. He knows all too well that I expect my orders to be obeyed without question.

The moment the door is closed, Belle steps closer to my desk. “What kind of sick game is this?” she hisses.

“Game?” I lean back in my chair, enjoying the view. The woman really is stunning. I’ve always admired pretty things.

“This,” she snaps. “This... place. First, your... your *henchman* asks me to lie to cover his embezzling ass, and now, you...”

She says “embezzling” like it’s a dirty word. It might be the worst crime she can imagine, given her profession.

She has no idea what she’s truly walked into.

Her voice trails off. I jump at the opportunity. “And now, I what?”

“You know.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.” I stand up and walk around the desk. I don’t miss the way Belle pulls back, trying to keep some distance between us. As if I haven’t already seen her lust. Heard it. Tasted it.

“This,” she says again, blushing. “You brought me here, and... This is a trick.”

“What’s a trick? Are you talking about how we fucked on a plane when you didn’t even know my last name?” I ponder. “Or that we fucked and you didn’t know where I worked? Or maybe you’re talking about when I made you come twice in an airplane bathroom, mere steps away from all the other passengers—including your sister. That was kind of a trick, I suppose. Were you talking about that?”

If Belle’s face was any redder, she could be mistaken for a stop sign. She’s breathing heavily, and with each inhale, I catch the faint outline of her peaked nipples.

“I’m talking about making a fool out of me in front of everyone,” she spits. “The trick where you get me to have sex with you and then blackmail me into... into whatever you have going on here.”

It isn’t often I get to play with my food before I eat it. Not these days, anyway.

I plan to make it last.

I lean back on the edge of my desk and cross my ankles. “So, let me get this straight: you think I learned who your company was sending to audit me, tracked your flight information, flew to the godforsaken shithole that is the Oklahoma City airport so I could catch the same early morning flight you were getting on, seduced you mid-flight by convincing the flight attendant to ‘accidentally’ shove you into my lap during turbulence—which I also must have arranged—and then fucked you silly in the bathroom... all so I could have leverage over you to force you not to report any discrepancies in our audit?” I tilt my head to the side. “Did I get all of that?”

She narrows her eyes to slits. “More or less.”

“That’s cute.”

“None of this is ‘cute,’” she snarls. “Blackmail isn’t ‘cute.’ White collar crime isn’t ‘cute.’”

I lean forward and pick a piece of lint off of her shoulder. Her entire body stiffens. I can practically see sparks shooting off of her from the pure chemistry flowing between us. When I lean back, her body naturally inclines towards me. Like a magnet helpless against the pull.

“No,” I agree, “it’s cute that you think I’d go to all that trouble for you. As if I couldn’t get my way regardless. As if you have any control over the outcome.”

Her face goes slack, hurt or shock or both flickering across her features. “You just admitted to all of it.”

“Did I?” I shake my head. “I don’t think so. That was a theory. Your theory.”

“Then what’s the truth?”

“Are you sure you’re ready for it?”

“I asked for it, didn’t I?”

I chuckle. “That’s just it. I’m not sure you’re ready to accept that that is exactly what happened.”

She shakes her head. “That *what* is what happened? I don’t... I don’t understand.”

“You asked for it,” I whisper, leaning forward. “I was a stranger on a flight. I had no fucking clue who you were until you fell in my lap. Then I followed you into the bathroom, and you begged me to fuck you. There was no trick. No ulterior motive. You wanted it, beautiful Belle. You craved it. You pleaded for it.”

We’re only inches apart. Her eyes flick from mine to my mouth and back again. I watch as the realization slowly settles over her.

She wanted me. She still wants me.

But then Belle jerks back, her top lip curled in distaste. “You... you... you

asshole!”

“You say that like I took something from you. I didn’t. You gave it to me. And then you whimpered for more.”

“Asshole,” she hisses again. “So you expect me to believe this is all just some random coincidence?”

“Yes. Because that’s what it is.”

She shakes her head. “No. You have a plan.”

“That’s truer than you realize,” I admit. “I always have a plan. You don’t become me by letting bullshit like fate and destiny determine things.”

“And who are you, exactly?”

The truth is sitting on the tip of my tongue. I could tell her. It’s not like she could do anything about it, anyway.

But I’m not here to traumatize the woman. I just need her to cooperate.

“I’m the CEO of Zhukova Incorporated,” I say simply. “And I’m willing to make this worth your time.”

She hesitates for a second, her gaze raking over me. Then she shakes her head. “No.”

But I saw the hesitation. The hunger in her eyes. I’ve seen it countless times before. People hungry for money, for power, for a favor. I’ve become adept at understanding what people need and making that happen for them...

For a price, of course.

“Cash.”

Her eyes flare again. “No.”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t have to play high and mighty. It’s just the two of us, beautiful Belle.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snaps.

“You don’t have to hide who you are from me,” I continue. “I already know

the filthy thoughts floating around in your head.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know how to make you feel good.” I move towards her, and she backs up, step for step. “I know that you worry yourself into knots—a knot that only I could untangle. Twice, actually.”

She lifts her chin, the green in her eyes flaring as she glares up at me. “I don’t want anything from you.”

I press my finger to the furious crease between her eyebrows. “Let me untangle this knot, too. What will it take to do the trick: ten thousand dollars?”

Air hisses out of her lungs.

I smile. “That’s nothing to me,” I tell her. “I’ve been paying off smug auditors like you for years.”

“Then you’ve been hiring a bunch of shady creeps with no moral compass.”

“You know where a moral compass takes you?” I ask. “A future without money in your pocket. A future where you don’t have a job. What’s the point of letting that pesky compass lead you to poverty?”

She puffs out her chest. Her breasts whisper across my skin. My body remembers the way she felt and the front of my pants are tight.

“Is that a threat?”

The fire in her eyes does something to me. Not many people are willing—or stupid enough—to stand up to me.

That’s probably what this is: a novelty. This woman has given me a hard-on twice in a handful of hours because she’s pushing back. And I don’t like it, but I respect it.

To a point.

“Not even close. Do you want to hear a threat?” I ask. I lean in close until her face fills my vision. “I told you on the plane that I’m not a nice man. But that doesn’t even begin to describe the darkness I can rain down on your life.

Accept my offer, and you'll walk out of here ten thousand dollars richer. But refuse, and I can dismantle you brick by brick until there's nothing left. And I can have it done before the elevator doors at the end of the hall open."

She swallows hard. Her lovely throat bobs nervously. I want to lick all the way up and down it, to taste the salty tang of her fear and the sweetness of her perfume.

"Who do you think you are? God?"

"In this city, I'm the closest thing to it."

She stares up at me, and I know she'll give in. Everyone does. Toss a threat and a little money their way and average people fold like cheap suits.

But Belle surprises me.

"My integrity isn't for sale," she says, punctuating the point by jabbing a finger into my chest. "Fuck off. And find a new auditor."

She yanks my office door open and spins out of the room.

Before she's even cleared the doorway, my phone is in my hand. As soon as the line connects, I give the order.

"Call me when it's done."

I hang up just in time to hear the chime of the elevator doors at the end of the hall.

I smirk. Belle Dowan has no idea the mistake she's just made.

NIKOLAI

It's been over ten years since I've had to worry about money, but old habits die hard.

The men around me fold fifties and hundreds into the dancers' g-strings. I sit with my arms crossed.

They throw wads of cash on the table, drunkenly announcing, "The next round is on me," before they pass out. I sip water from a glass bottle I carried in with me.

I'm struck by the waste of it all.

Arslan would tell me to loosen up. "You've earned this life. Might as well enjoy it," he always says.

But I know all too well how easily things can fall apart. And at the end of the day, I'd rather be me than any of the drunk fucks dancing around me. Because *I'm* the one with power.

"You should try the salmon," Giorgos proclaims.

I roll my eyes. "I'll pass."

"Lighten up, have fun!" Giorgos crows. "We're all friends here, Nikolai."

"You know as well as I do that nothing is settled until it's settled," I say. "I need to leave soon, anyway."

I don't really think Giorgos Simatou has the guts or motive to make an attempt on my life, but the Greek mafia is notoriously rash.

I mean, Giorgos wants me to marry his sister. The man's judgment cannot be trusted.

"You should really eat," Xena says, leaning across the table so I can see straight down her shirt. With tits like those, she could have any one of the horned-up twenty-year-olds in her brother's mafia at her beck and call. But her eyes have been locked on me for far too long. "Do I need to feed you?"

"Do I look like a fucking farm animal?" I ask, loudly enough that the attention of the entire table pivots toward us.

Her eyes widen. "No. No, I just... I was—"

"Unless you were going to finalize this deal, then I don't care." I turn to Giorgos. "Are we here to make an alliance or what?"

"We are. Which is why we are celebrating." Giorgos lifts a nearly empty glass of wine. "We always celebrate a new deal."

His men cheer loudly, toasting and drinking.

"You all celebrate anything," I mutter.

Giorgos stares at me for a moment, tension rippling between us, before he leans his head back and cackles. "Because there is much to celebrate, my friend!"

"Like lukewarm strip club salmon?" I drawl.

"Like being fucking Poseidon!" he shouts to the room. "I control the water—the ports and the cargo ships. Anything that comes in or out of this city comes through me."

He's exaggerating, but only just. His family started with one wooden boat and a dream. Now, there are cargo ships three football fields long with the Simatou name emblazoned on the side. Seeing shit like that day in and day out could give anyone a god complex.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I thought that was your sister."

Xena understands the barb immediately and inhales sharply, but it takes a second for Giorgos to catch on. When he does, he claps his sister on the back and grins. “My sister spreads her legs for the good of us all. And now, she’ll do it one last time for you. With our new deal, Nikolai Zhukova will be the last to have the lovely Xena.”

Xena slaps her brother's arm. “I’m not some bitch you’re giving to a stud, brother.”

“Of course not,” Giorgos says, though he’s still smiling. “You’re the princess of the Simatou mafia, and you’ve served us well.”

Xena rolls her eyes. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“For once, Xena and I agree on something,” I say.

“She’s impatient,” Giorgos says to me with a wink. “Are you impatient, too, Nikolai?”

I shake my head. “I’ve never had a need for impatience. I get what I want the second I want it.”

Giorgos’s brows rise. “Does that mean you don’t want my sister? She’s beautiful, is she not?”

I study Xena for a moment. She lifts her chin, doing her best to show off her delicate features. But looking at her is like looking at a marble statue—I can appreciate the beauty, but there’s an uncrossable distance between us.

I don’t want her. I wouldn’t follow her into an airplane bathroom, for instance, hoping to get rid of the ache in my balls caused by a simple conversation.

I push thoughts of Belle aside. Arslan already texted to tell me he took care of our little problem. I don’t need to think about her again.

Especially not when I’m in the middle of a deal.

“Your sister’s beauty has nothing to do with my interest in this partnership. It is your control of the ports, as you mentioned, that I’m interested in.”

“A business man through and through,” Giorgos says, looking far more

pleased about this fact than his sister does. “It’s that kind of focus that saw Zhukova Inc. triple their profit margins in the last two years alone. You have a true rags-to-riches story. It’s inspiring.”

If his intentions weren’t clear enough already, the smirk that spreads across Giorgos’s face makes them crystal clear.

“You want to talk about where I came from?” I ask dangerously.

The Greek’s expression pales. He waves a hand. “No, I only meant—”

“You meant to remind me where I’ve come from, as if I could forget the early years of my life,” I say. “As if the painstaking climb I made from poverty to prosperity might have somehow made me weak.”

He shakes his head. “No, Nikolai, I really didn’t intend to—”

“You didn’t intend to anger me, but few people ever intend that. Because the ones who do, don’t live to try it again.” The men around us are eerily silent, radiating a nervous energy that I feed on. The tang of fear never gets old. “If I’m an inspiration, it’s for fear. For respect. It’s the reason you’re selling your sister to me. So I can stand between you and the Battiato mafia.”

Giorgos’s smile slips away. “And you will share control of my ports, my brother-in-arms. Any good deal is mutually beneficial. I won’t have this made out as some kind of charity towards me.”

“And I’m not being sold,” Xena butts in.

I smirk. “Then take away the incentive and see if I still want to marry you.”

Her face flushes a hot, embarrassed red. I turn back to Giorgos. “You may know me best as CEO of Zhukova Incorporated, but that is only my mask. First and foremost, I am don of the Zhukova Bratva. And my path to the throne was paved with the broken bodies of those who thought they could intervene. I have no trouble adding a few more.”

Giorgos runs his tongue over his teeth a few times before he manages another smile. “Don’t forget we are allies, Don Zhukova. There’s no need for violence.”

“Then let’s make a fucking deal before I change my mind.”

“Our terms are already set,” Giorgos responds. “You will offer protection as we claim more territory inland, and I will give you access to my ports and cargo ships. Forget tripling—your profits will multiply by ten. It’s a very fair deal.”

Xena elbows Giorgos, and he clears his throat. “And you will marry my sister, of course. It will finalize the agreement and—”

“I understand how a symbolic marriage works,” I interrupt.

Giorgos nods. “Of course. Okay, so now we—”

“It isn’t symbolic,” Xena says, leaning forward. “It will be a real marriage.”

“No one is saying it won’t be real, sister.”

“The two of you just did!”

“Interrupting important meetings hopefully isn’t a habit of yours,” I drawl. Xena looks like she wants to say something, but her brother nudges her. “Legally, our marriage will be binding. That is what I agreed to and that is what you’ll get. My word is good.”

The tone in my voice is enough to bow Giorgos’s head. “No one is suggesting it isn’t. Xena knows you’re an honest man. As honest as any of us mafioso bastards can be, anyway,” he laughs.

But I’m not laughing.

“I know your word is good, Don Zhukova,” Xena says in a surprising show of submission. “Which is why I’d like your word that you’ll remain faithful during our marriage.”

Giorgos snaps his attention to his sister. “You mean physically?”

“This is between me and my future husband, brother. But yes, I’d like Don Zhukova to be physically and emotionally faithful to me. Marriage is sacred. I refuse to desecrate it.”

“Bullshit,” I snort. “You don’t think anything is sacred. You’d just be jealous. At least have the courage to be honest about that.”

Before this deal came along, I never once considered getting married.

Women are a distraction at best and a hindrance at worst. They want more than a man like me can give. The money and lifestyle isn't enough—they want love and attention. *Devotion.*

But those things don't come free. They come at the expense of everything else. And I'm not willing to throw away what I've earned for any woman.

Xena clenches her jaw so tightly I think her teeth might crack. "The two things are not mutually exclusive. Marriage is sacred, therefore I would be jealous if you slept with anyone else."

"So you want to put a noose around my cock?"

"More like a ring on your finger," she says with a sly smile. "Do you agree?"

I consider my options. I could refuse her offer and force her to accept the deal without my pledge. It would be easy enough. A little pressure, a threat, and boom, she'd break.

But...

"I won't make love to any other woman," I say.

She beams, oblivious to the distinction I've made. I have never and will never make love to a woman.

But I'll fuck whoever I damn well please.

Giorgos claps his hands and raises his glass again. "Then it looks like we are in business together, Nikolai. And now, we have a wedding to plan."



Arslan doubles over laughing when I tell him about the meeting.

"She heard the words 'make love' come out of your mouth and thought you were being serious?" he cackles.

"I'm surprised I didn't spontaneously combust."

"I think that's a myth, but it's still more likely to happen than you ever falling in love." He flops back in the chair in the corner of my office and mimes an

explosion, making rumbling noises through his laughter. “I can’t believe I missed it.”

“You had more important things to worry about.”

He sits up a bit straighter, turning serious the way he always does when we talk about work. Arslan may fuck around ninety-nine percent of the time, but he’s my righthand man for a reason.

“You took care of everything?”

“Don’t I always?” I stare at him, waiting for an actual confirmation. Eventually, he sighs. “Of course I did. Did you really think I’d let you down?”

“You know how I like verbal confirmation.”

“I know how you like to micromanage every single thing down to the smallest detail,” he counters. “Which is why I had to come meet you at your office. You know, just once, we could have a debrief at a bar over drinks. Or at your house with the game on.”

I frown. “What game?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. A game! Any game. You pick, I’ll watch. Anything to get you to relax.”

“My wife will probably want the same.”

Arslan shakes his head. “Fuck... I can’t believe Xena Simatou is going to be your wife.”

“In name only,” I remind him. *And myself.*

“You say that like it makes a huge difference,” Arslan scoffs. “Either way, you’re married. She’s going to live with you. You’ll wake up to—”

“An empty bed,” I say quickly. “She’ll have her own room. Maybe her own penthouse, even. If I’m lucky, I won’t have to see her much.”

“I wouldn’t count on that. You aren’t lucky.”

“Watch your mouth,” I snap.

“No, I’m serious,” he says. “Nothing you have come from luck, Nik. You worked for it. I know because I was there every step of the way.”

I wince. “You know what? You’re right. I’ve had to deal with you since I was seven. That’s bad luck if I’ve ever heard it.”

“Fuck you, *sobrat*.” He shoots me the double bird and chuckles. “But really, the two of us living next door to each other in the same shithole neighborhood isn’t luck. We made the best of a bad situation. We helped each other survive.”

“That’s what my marriage to Xena will be like. I’ll make the best of a bad situation.”

“Or you could... I don’t know,” Arslan shrugs. “You could call this whole thing off and marry someone you actually like.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Is Jessica turning you into a romantic?”

“Her name is Jennica,” he corrects. “And that woman’s pussy could turn even you into a simp.”

I make a mockery of clapping my hands to my cheeks. “Is that so? Call her up. Maybe I’ll give it a try.”

“You’re not funny.”

“Neither are you,” I say. “I don’t want to get married to Xena or anyone else. So I might as well get married to Xena and do something useful for the Bratva. Giorgos Simatou is an annoying fucker, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t a useful connection to have.”

“So join a bowling league with him. Start a poker night. Don’t marry his crazy sister.”

“Why do you care, anyway? This will make your life easier. No more bribing dockworkers to get our shit onto the boats. You’re welcome.”

“I don’t mind doing that extra work if it means you’re free, brother.”

I jab a finger into my chest. “I am always free. Whether it’s Xena Simatou or any other woman on the face of the planet... it doesn’t change shit.”

“I know, I know. Believe me, I’ve heard the speech plenty.” Arslan nods. “But you’ve spent your life overcoming your family ties to become who you are. I hate to see you tie yourself to someone else who isn’t worthy.”

I reach out and clap a hand on Arslan’s shoulder. “You’re a good friend. But shut up and let me make my own decisions.”

He laughs. “Fine. I’ll just do your dirty work and keep my mouth closed.”

“Great. Finally we have an understanding. It only took thirty-one years.” I lean back, smirking. “Speaking of dirty work, you have eyes on The Lion still?”

Arslan nods. “Always. He’s getting harder to follow, but I found him over—”

I hold up a hand to stop him. “I don’t need to know specifics. I just need to know he’s under watch.”

“He is,” Arslan assures me. “And I’ll add Xena to the watchlist if you want.”

“Why would I want that?”

“Because it’s a list of people who might fuck up your life. I figured you’d want to keep an eye on them.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks for your concern, but I’m the only person with the power to fuck up my life.”

Arslan sighs. “That is exactly what I’m worried about, friend.”

BELLE

The trip back to the hotel is no better than my morning commute. Mostly because I'm too trembly from actual rage to even think about catching a cab or figuring out how the subway system works.

Idle chit-chat with a driver would result in me spewing my guts about *everything* that has happened in the last twelve hours, which I'm not ready to process.

I'm not sure I'll ever be ready.

I was stressed about handling the Zhukova audit alone, then I unknowingly slept with the owner on a plane, and then that same owner tried to bribe me to commit fraud on his behalf. "Shitshow" doesn't even begin to cover it.

Plus, if I go back to the hotel now, Elise will have questions. Questions I can't answer.

I know I don't need to baby her. God knows she reminds me often enough that I'm not her mom. But damn it, the world can be a clusterfuck. I don't want to try and unpack the chaos with her. Not quite yet, anyway.

So I veer into a small coffee shop and wait in the too-long line. "A large coffee," I tell the barista when I finally reach the counter.

"Dark, medium, or light?"

I frown. "What?"

“What roast do you want?” she asks.

“Oh. Um.” I shrug. “Medium, I guess.”

She punches it into the register. “Milk?”

“Yes, please.”

“What kind?” she asks.

“I didn’t realize this was an interrogation.” I laugh. Oklahoma doesn’t usually require this much pre-caffeine decision-making.

The young barista looks annoyed with me. “Whole, two-percent, skim, oat, almond, cashew, soy, hemp...”

“Holy cow. That’s a lot of milk.” I sigh. “No pun intended. Jeez, that was awful. Sorry, I just wasn’t prepared. For this or anything else. It’s been *a day*.”

She looks past me to the line bobbing impatiently behind me.

“Right. I’m not your only customer,” I mumble. “Um... just make it whole milk. And give me two.”

“Two milks?” She frowns.

“Two coffees,” I clarify. “Both with whole milk.”

She punches it in and then I swipe my card. I give her a generous tip. Maybe she’s having *a day*, too.

Standing at the end of the coffee line, looking at the customers streaming in and out of the door, I realize how many people there are in the world. How many people with different jobs. Jobs that don’t force them to work for a scumbag like Roger. Jobs where they don’t have to help someone embezzle and cover it up.

Maybe losing my job wouldn’t be such a bad thing, after all.

The barista slides two coffee cups across the counter to me.

“Is this a good gig?” I blurt suddenly. “Being a barista?”

“It’s the singular joy of my life,” she drawls with withering sarcasm.

Okay. So that will be a “no” for being a barista. But why can’t I find another job? I used to have hopes and dreams. Used to think anything was possible.

The image of a well-worn sketchbook appears in my mind, scribbles and scratchings between the pages...

“Elise,” I mutter to myself as I walk down the street, the hot coffee burning my fingers through the thin paper cups. “Elise is why you’re doing this. Be practical.”

The past and the future mingle in my mind, the good, the bad, and the mortifying, as I make my way back to the hotel. By the time I climb the endless, dimly lit stairs to our floor, the coffees are lukewarm.

I kick the door. “It’s me. My hands are full.”

I wait, but there’s no movement inside. I kick the door again. “Elise, it’s me. Open up!”

I give it another fifteen seconds, but still nothing.

Grumbling, I set down the coffee and dig the room key out of my purse. “She’s probably wearing headphones and destroying her hearing. And if I say anything about it, I’m nagging. I can’t win.”

As soon as the door is open, I prop it with my foot and drag the rest of my stuff inside. “Sweet of you to help your sister out. What did you do all day? Did you ever go to the bodega to get—”

I stand up and turn around.

The room is empty.

Like, not just of people. But of everything.

The suitcases I set on the bed, the cash I placed on the TV stand, and the sister I left on the dingy chair by the window... all gone.

“Elise?” I call out even though I know she won’t answer.

She’s gone.

She's gone.

She's gone.

Panic thrums through me, vibrating until I'm sure I'll fall apart.

She ran away. I was afraid of it in Oklahoma City, but where was she going to go? She'd be easy to spot. But a fourteen-year-old loose in New York City?

"God, I'll never find her."

My stomach is bottoming out. I've only felt like this once before: the night I left Elise five years ago.

I can still see her small face in the front window, peeking through the blinds at me. She was supposed to be asleep, but she woke up when she heard the front door slam. When she heard Mom screeching at me to never come back.

I waved to her, and she just ducked back into the dark room and out of sight.

And now, she's gone again.

"Don't panic," I tell myself. Then an idea hits me all at once. "The front desk."

The man at the check-in desk was intently watching anime on his phone when we checked in this morning, but maybe he saw something. Maybe he'll know where she went.

I spin on my heel and reach for the door handle. But a glimmer catches my eye.

I drop my hand and stare straight ahead.

Wedged behind the plating of the peephole is a rectangular business card with gold embossing around the edges. It's blank.

Well, no, not quite blank.

Printed in the middle are two words that make my jaw clench tight enough to shatter teeth—the name of the devil himself.

Nikolai Zhukova.



“This is not a lizard-people-in-Congress, alien-abduction kind of conspiracy theory,” I yell, frustrated tears burning the backs of my eyes. “Officers, you just have to trust me. Nikolai Zhukova kidnapped my sister.”

The larger of the two cops, Officer Sweeney, smooths a hand down his beard. “Do you have proof your sister was kidnapped?”

“She’s missing from our hotel room.”

“She could have run away,” Officer Hedger suggests. He’s young and doing his best to keep me calm. It almost makes me hate him more.

“She didn’t run away,” I snap, even though I thought the same thing at first. “Nikolai left his business card in our hotel room.”

“But you said you are working for Mr. Zhukova, right?” Officer Sweeney says. “You were in his office just before you discovered your sister was missing? You could have accidentally brought it back with you.”

“We’ve already been through all of this.”

“Answer the question, please, ma’am,” he says.

I sigh. “Yes. I came here to do work for his company, and I was in his office. He wanted me to cover up whatever crimes he is committing and I refused. So he took my sister.”

Officer Hedger shakes his head. “I just don’t understand how he could have kidnapped your sister while you were with him.”

“He has henchmen!”

The two officers share a glance, and I know I chose the wrong word. It makes me sound deranged.

Hell, maybe I am deranged. Standing on the sidewalk in front of Zhukova Incorporated, I feel crazy.

But I know one thing for sure: these cops aren't going to do a damn thing unless I force them.

Before they can ask me any more questions, I turn around and march into the building. I hear them hustling after me, barking orders. But I keep going into the main lobby... where I'm immediately stopped by a security guard.

"The building is closed to all non-personnel for the evening," he grumbles. "Do you have permission to be here?"

"No, she does not," Officer Hedger says behind me. "Ma'am, I must ask you to step outside and—"

"I need to see Nikolai Zhukova," I tell the security guard. "Now."

The man's eyes bulge. I know he knows exactly who I'm talking about. This building is massive, filled top to bottom with dozens of companies and the people who work for them. But Nikolai is in with all the right contacts. And the guard who monitors the front doors is an important person to know.

"Call him," I continue. "Tell him I'm here. With the police. He'll let me up."

I don't actually know if this is true, but blind confidence is all I have right now. Nikolai has billions of dollars at his disposal. I have two police officers who think I'm insane and about seventy-five bucks in Chipotle gift cards. It isn't exactly a fair fight.

The guard looks to the cops for permission, and Officer Sweeney shrugs. "We've got nothing else going on, anyway."

New York City's finest, everyone.

The guard ducks behind his desk and grabs the phone. Then I hear him talking. "A woman is here to see you." He glances up at me. "Yeah, short little thing with reddish hair. Okay. Thank you, sir."

He gives me a thumbs up. "You're good to go. Mr. Zhukova will be waiting for you in his office."

My heart lurches, and I practically sprint to the elevators. The cops plod along behind me.

“You’ll see,” I say as the doors close and the elevator rises. “He did this. I’m not crazy.”

Neither officer says anything. I keep my eyes straight ahead. I have to focus on what I’ll say when I see Nikolai again. The last time, he caught me off guard. He ruffled my feathers too easily.

This time around, I have to be in control.

The moment the elevator opens, I step through, ready to march down the hallway like a Viking on a warpath—only to slide to a stop when I find Nikolai standing in the way.

“Good to see you again,” he greets, an easy smile on his face.

God, he’s handsome. Brooding or grinning ear to ear, it doesn’t matter. The man is perfectly proportioned and perfectly gorgeous.

He’s also a perfect fucking psychopath.

“Where’s my sister?” I snap. The way I see it, we’re well past pleasantries.

Nikolai frowns. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t play games with me. I know you know where she is.”

He shakes his head and looks past me. “Evening, officers. I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“Did you really think I’d let you take my sister and wouldn’t call the police?”

“I’m sorry. Your sister? I didn’t even know you had a sister,” he says.

I snort. “You know everything. You’re like God in this city, remember? So where is she?”

Officer Sweeney steps forward, angling himself slightly in front of me. “We’re sorry to bother you, Mr. Zhukova, but this woman seems to think you have her sister.”

“Against her will?” Nikolai asks, doing a marvelous job of looking shocked. “We’re talking about kidnapping? Do you really think I kidnapped someone, Frank?”

I spin towards Officer Sweeney. “Frank?”

He ignores me and gives Nikolai a small smile. “Of course not, Mr. Zhukova. We tried to escort this woman away from the building, actually, but she’s throwing a fit.”

“My name is Belle Dowan,” I remind him. “Not ‘*this woman.*’ And I’m not ‘throwing a fit,’ I’m trying to rescue my little sister!”

“We figured we’d come with her and ensure you knew about the threat,” Officer Hedger adds as if I’d never spoken.

My jaw nearly hits the floor. “Threat? You think *I’m* the threat here? Are you insane?”

They all ignore me.

“Thank you both,” Nikolai says sincerely. “We’ve been out together a few times, but I ended things recently. I take it Miss Dowan was unhappy with that choice.”

I gasp. “You... asshole!”

“Hey, Miss,” Officer Hedger interrupts. “There’s no need for—”

“He’s lying to you! Right to your faces!” I’m shaking all over. “He threatened me and he followed through. He kidnapped my sister!”

“You’re not even from New York City. Why would your sister be here with you?” Nikolai asks.

“Because I couldn’t leave her home alone,” I say. “I brought her with me on the trip.”

Nikolai rolls his eyes. “You know, gentlemen, I wouldn’t be surprised if she doesn’t even have a sister.”

“I do! And I’ll prove it!” I reach for my phone before I realize I don’t have any recent photos of Elise and myself. Grouchy fourteen-year-olds aren’t especially photogenic. So I pivot. “I’ll call the front desk at the hotel. They saw me check in. I said there would be two people in my room.”

I dial the number while Nikolai leans in to talk to the officers. “I’m sorry to

waste your time. I know you are very busy.”

I try to drown him out. The second the front desk picks up, I put my phone on speaker. “Hello, this is Belle Dowan from Room 307,” I say.

“Ms. Dowan, yes,” the man says, sounding oddly formal considering I watched him blow his nose in a receipt when we were checking in this morning. “How can I help you?”

“I’m calling to confirm that you saw me check in with another girl this morning? That my room is reserved for two people?”

I’m already smirking at Nikolai, so confident my story was about to be verified.

There’s a pause. “Um... no, I’m sorry. I don’t remember you being with anyone.”

“Wait, what?” I stammer.

“You were alone this morning,” he says. “And you reserved a room for one. A single room.”

The modern gray walls of the Zhukova Incorporated lobby spin around me. I’m feeling faint. Like the world is ripping itself out from under my feet.

Officer Sweeney sighs and turns to Nikolai. “Do you know if she has any other family we could call?”

“My sister,” I rasp deliriously. “My sister was with me. I—She was with me.”

“Sorry,” the clerk says awkwardly. “But if there’s anything else I can help you with—”

I hang up and turn my ire on Nikolai. “*You.*”

He meets my gaze, his steel gray eyes piercing and immovable. I know what happened here: he paid off the clerk.

“Miss,” Officer Sweeney warns, “we are really going to have to insist that you come with us. Mr. Zhukova has—”

“Has foiled my plan,” I finish, sagging dramatically. “He was right. I’m a crazy ex-girlfriend.”

Officer Hedger’s forehead wrinkles with suspicion. “Excuse me?”

“I just love him so much,” I say, choking back a fake sob. “I let my emotions get the best of me. I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

Everyone, including Nikolai, looks confused now.

I take the opportunity to throw myself at Nikolai. I jump, and he catches me as though it was rehearsed, dropping everything in his hands without a second thought. His arms hook under me as I curl my legs around his waist and fist his shirt in my hands.

Our faces are impossibly close, but I can’t let that rattle me. Not now.

“I’m sorry, Nicky,” I pout. “Forgive me?”

Nikolai arches a brow. There’s a challenge in his expression. And I meet it, biting my lower lip while I slide a little further down his chest. My hips roll against his crotch.

He wants to play dirty? Fine.

Let’s play dirty.

BELLE

Officers Sweeney and Hedger are tensed, ready to jump in and yank me away from Nikolai at the first sign of trouble. All they're waiting on is for Nikolai to give the word.

But I already know he won't.

He's staring into my eyes, his pants hardening noticeably between us. Then he smiles and looks around me at the police officers. "Sorry for the trouble, officers, but I can take care of this from here."

"Are you sure?" Officer Sweeney asks. "If you'd like to file a report, we can ___"

"No report. I'll handle it."

Sweeney sighs. "Yes, sir, Mr. Zhukova."

The two men turn as one and stomp into the waiting elevator. Just as the elevator doors are closing, I hear Officer Hedger snort, "He'll 'take care' of her alright."

Then Nikolai and I are alone.

The second the doors close with a ding, I shove him away from me. "Let go of me, you psychopath."

"You're the one who threw yourself at me," he remarks.

He fixes his cuffs, which did not need fixing, and plucks an imaginary piece of lint from his shoulder, which did not need plucking. The whole thing is an act, to show how in control he is. Truthfully, it's hard to imagine a single fiber of him ever being out of place.

Me, on the other hand? I feel beyond frazzled.

"Because it was the only way to avoid being dragged out of here by those two police officers you're obviously paying off."

"You'd know if I was paying those officers off."

"How?"

He gives me a lethal smirk. "You'd be dead."

A shiver moves down my spine, but I do my best to stand tall. "Just give my sister back to me and I'll leave."

"Now, why do you think I'd want you to leave?" he tuts.

"Gee, I dunno, maybe because you just threatened to kill me?"

I sound much braver than I feel. In my head, though, I'm acutely aware of how dark and how empty the hallway behind Nikolai is. No one else is here. We're completely alone.

"I don't make threats, little lamb. Only promises."

This time, I can't hide the icy chill that moves through me.

Nikolai notices and smirks. "What's the matter, *lapochka*? Scared?"

"As I should be," I snap. "You're insane."

He shakes his head. "No. Insane people don't know they're insane. They think they're perfectly normal. But I know I'm not normal."

"How comforting," I mutter as I creep closer to the exits. I glance to the side, eyeing the sign that marks the stairwell. Maybe I could race over and get down the stairs before Nikolai could stop me.

And maybe I'll also magically learn mixed martial arts or how to fly.

No, escape isn't an option.

"You know how I know that?" he whispers, drawing in even closer. "Because normal people don't have 'henchmen,' as you called them, who can kidnap fourteen-year-olds out of their hotel room, pay off the front desk worker, and hide them away in places where no one will ever find them."

I know Nikolai is guilty, but hearing him admit it so openly is still a shock. "Give her back," I spit past my suddenly numb lips.

"Agree to my terms for the audit and I will."

"Are you—Seriously?" I shake my head. "This is still about your fucking *audit*? I won't tell anyone if that's what you're worried about, okay? I'll walk away and never mention it to a soul. You don't have to worry about that."

"I'm not," he says.

"Then what?"

Nikolai studies me for a moment. My body flushes hot every place his eyes touch.

Then he releases a pent-up sigh and turns away from me. "Come back when you're ready to do as I ask," he says over his shoulder.

Before I can think about what I'm doing, I lunge forward and grab Nikolai's arm.

First, I'm struck by how muscular he is. His forearm feels like iron in my hand.

Second, I'm struck by how fast he is. Before I can even blink, Nikolai spins around and pins me against the receptionist's desk.

I gasp from both the shock and the way the desk jams into my spine, but the sound cuts off when he clamps his hand around my throat.

"You're alive because I want you to be alive, Miss Dowan," he hisses. "You're here right now because I want you to be here. And you slid yourself onto my cock in that airplane bathroom because I wanted you to. Don't you get it?"

I swallow. My throat bobs against his rough palm.

He leans in close, his breath hot against my cheek. My lips part on an inhale.

For a moment, I think he's going to kiss me.

And for a moment...

I want him to.

Then his eyes flick back to mine, and I realize I'm looking into the gaze of pure evil.

"I get what I want," he concludes, enunciating each word crisply. "You might as well save us both some time and go along with it."

He lifts his hand from my throat and cups my cheek, his thumb brushing over my lower lip. From violent to tender in the blink of an eye.

He's right—he's not normal in the slightest.

Then, all at once, Nikolai lets go of me and walks away. He turns into a silhouette, and then even that melts into the shadows of the dark hallway, and he's gone.

I'm left alone in the lobby, breathing heavily. Adrenaline and fear pump through me, but I have nowhere to put the energy.

Attacking Nikolai isn't a valid option. I understand that now. He's strong and fast and ruthless.

But I can't leave.

Not without my sister.

I'm frozen, stuck in a purgatory I never imagined. Elise has only lived with me for two weeks and she's already in danger.

What am I going to do? What am I going—

The silver keys on the floor catch my eye.

Nikolai dropped everything when I jumped into his arms... and he never picked it up. He left behind a set of keys. Car keys, by the looks of them.

I can't believe my luck. Mostly because I've never had such a thing before. But I decide not to look this gift horse in the mouth.

As quickly as I can, I punch the elevator door button, swoop down to snatch up the keys, and then step backwards through the doors.

I keep an eye down the hallway where Nikolai disappeared until the doors close. Then I hit "P" for Parking and pray my good luck continues.

That would be a first.

The parking garage is dimly lit and mostly empty. The yellowish glow from the lights makes it feel like I'm walking through an apocalyptic movie. Alone in a dying wasteland.

I hold up the sleek black key fob and press the unlock button. A seductive chime emanates from a car immediately to my left. It's the closest space to the door, with a bolded nameplate above it that reads "**MR. ZHUKOVA.**"

"Color me shocked," I mumble sarcastically.

I jump into the leather front seat and immediately lock the doors behind me. The car smells like him. That intoxicating allure of leather and spices and luxury.

I muddle through my lusty mental fog and start the engine. I'm not much of a gearhead. When the mechanic asks me what kind of car I have, I tell them "green."

But this car *purrs* under me.

It feels like a live beast at my fingertips, stretching and growling and warming up for the drive. Even his goddamn car is sexy.

As annoying as his opulence is, it's working in my favor. Because, just as I suspected, the car has more screens in it than an Apple store. I tap the center console and a menu pops up. I scroll down to the GPS and then fumble through various settings until I find what I'm looking for: the location history.

Instantly, a list of addresses and named businesses appears. I snap a picture of the screen with my phone. I'll drive to every single address on the list if I have to. Whatever it takes to find my sister.

I reach for the key to turn off the car, and then stop. A small smile spreads across my face.

“It’s only fair, right?” I mutter with a shrug. “He took something of mine, I take something of his.”

I reach for the joystick, but just as I move to shift the car into reverse, the engine dies.

“What the hell?”

Then the doors unlock.

“What the—”

Then the driver side door opens.

I scream just as Nikolai reaches into the car and yanks me out. He pins me back against the car with his hips.

“Going somewhere?” he growls.

Inside, even while he was threatening me, Nikolai looked like a businessman. Some part of me felt like I was safe. A businessman wouldn’t kill me in his office, right? A businessman wouldn’t get blood on his button-down, right?

But out here in the dark, cool air, Nikolai looks wild. He’s pure shadow and muscle tone.

I don’t stand a chance.

“How did you—”

He holds up a second set of keys. “I wanted to know exactly how far you planned to take this. All the way, apparently.”

His knee drives between my legs. I gasp involuntarily at the friction.

“Let me go!”

He clicks his tongue. “Not just yet, little lamb.”

His hand slides between us, and I stiffen. Heat trails behind his touch, warming me from the inside out.

I should be fighting harder than this. Somewhere in the back of my brain, the rational part of me is screaming for me to wake up.

Punch him in the dick, you sexed-up floozy! Fight! Scream! Run!

But there's moisture pooling between my thighs, and up close like this, Nikolai smells even better than the inside of his car.

Then he darts into my pocket and pulls out my phone. He grabs my wrist and plants my thumb on the fingerprint scanner, unlocking it before I can really even register what is going on.

He shakes his head as he looks down at the screen, which is still displaying the picture I just took of his location history. "What was your plan, Belle? Were you going to charge in and rescue your sister by yourself?"

"You say that like it's a bad plan."

He chuckles. "It's an idiotic plan. You wouldn't stand a chance."

"You underestimate me."

"Is that right?"

I nod. "Yes."

"Okay." He taps around on my phone for a second. When he looks up, he's smiling. "Then prove me wrong. Tell me you memorized even one of the addresses in my GPS history."

Shit. That would have been smart. He can delete a picture, but he can't delete my mind.

Actually, considering the resources at his disposal, I wouldn't be all that surprised if he had those kinds of capabilities.

"I didn't have enough time," I snap.

"Because instead of driving my car out of the parking garage and *then* looking at the GPS, you decided to do it right here in the lot. Steps away from my office. If anything, I *overestimated* you, Belle."

Embarrassment washes over me. "Sorry I'm not a professional thief like

you!”

“Is that what you think I am? A thief?” He snorts.

“Seeing as how you took my sister, I’d say you’re a people thief at the very least. And seeing as how you really want me to comply with your fraudulent, bullshit audit, I’d say you’re a regular old run-of-the-mill money thief, too.”

Nikolai stares at me for a moment. I can tell there’s something he wants to say. Something that’s waiting just behind his sinful lips, itching to come out and ruin my world forever.

But he doesn’t say it. Instead, he leans forward, his nose brushing the tip of mine, and whispers, “Leave now, and never touch what belongs to me again.”

All at once, he backs away. The loss of him makes me stumble forward, but he doesn’t hesitate. Nikolai walks past me and climbs into the driver’s seat of his car. Before I can say anything, he slams the door shut.

“No! Wait!”

The growl of the engine drowns out my shouts.

I can barely see Nikolai through the tinted windows, but I don’t have to see him to know what’s coming next. He’s going to reverse and leave, and when he does, I don’t have any way to find my sister.

Without him, I have nothing.

I hurl myself at the door, pounding on the window with both fists. “Hey! Wait!”

The window cracks open. I can see his eyes peeking out at me. “Yes?”

“I’ll do it.”

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. But even once I have a second to consider them, I can’t regret what I’ve said.

It’s my only option.

The window shifts down another couple inches. “Do what, exactly? Say it.”

His eyes drag up and down my body. I shiver.

“The audit. I’ll do the audit for you. I’ll do... whatever you want,” I gulp. “But you have to take me to my sister.”

The window slips all the way down, revealing Nikolai behind the frame, effortlessly cool, completely in his element.

Then his chin dips just a bit and everything about him shifts. It’s like he’s removed his public mask, revealing the darkness beneath. I recoil a half step back on pure instinct.

“If you’re lying to me to get to your sister, I’ll destroy you,” he warns. His voice is eerily flat.

I know he’s serious.

I meet his eyes. “I’m not a liar.”

He watches me for another second and then jerks his head to the adjacent seat. “Get in.”

Before I can start to wonder just how badly I’ve screwed myself, I hurry around to the passenger side door and climb inside.



As we drive, I stare out the window, expecting the city to fall away. Maybe Nikolai will drive me to a cement bunker buried out in the woods. I imagine armed guards and barbed wire and barking, snarling dogs.

But that never happens.

He pulls out of the parking garage and turns right. And for twenty-five minutes, we cruise, with the Hudson River on our left and a wall of glassy skyscrapers looming up on our right.

Finally, he stops in front of a tall, luxury hotel. The man behind the valet stand rushes towards the car as if his life depends on it.

“What are we doing here?” I ask. I unconsciously cling to my seatbelt like

I'm drowning and it's my life preserver.

Nikolai ignores me and opens the door. He nods at the terrified valet and tosses his keys over the roof of the car. It's disarming how casual he can look when he wants to. I'm not sure I ever would have passed by Nikolai on the street without noticing him, but I would have thought he was a typical man, at least.

Now, I know better.

He looks back through the driver's side window. "Are you coming or are you going to stay here?"

The valet is waiting on the curb to take the car, so I climb out reluctantly and follow Nikolai towards the front doors. "You said you'd take me to my sister. Where are we?"

"Look around."

"The Zinc?" I read, frowning up at the gold-plated sign above the revolving doors.

"Zhukova Inc," Nikolai explains impatiently. "Zinc. Do the math."

I groan. "You own this place, too? Maybe you are God in this city."

"And maybe you can be taught after all," he chuckles. He gestures for me to go first through the door.

I want to fire back with a barb of my own, but then I step into the building and lose the ability to speak.

The lobby is a mid-century modern slash Japandi dreamscape. The ceilings are cathedral-esque high, but the entire space features horizontal lines that make it feel earthy and cozy. There are low bamboo benches built into matching bamboo accent walls and forests of actual bamboo. The front desk is wide and sunken into the floor a few steps. A delicate paper screen separates the guest-facing front from a more secluded back office. And there's a small pond in the middle of the room with a smoothed marble walkway around it, fat koi fish swishing around just below the surface.

"Holy shit," I breathe. "This place is gorgeous."

Nikolai smiles. I feel myself softening towards him. It's my weak human desire to relate, to form some kind of connection to the being next to me.

But I have to resist it.

A man like him will take that connection and wrap it around my throat like a noose.

"What are we doing here?" I say, shifting tones.

He opens the elevator and steps in, but I stand on the other side, stubbornly refusing to move.

"I'm not going anywhere with you until I know where you're taking me."

"Worried I'll bind you up in my secret sex dungeon?"

Immediately, I'm on fire. The thought alone is enough to send even a strong woman into cardiac arrest. I'm sure I'm beet red, but I do my best to play it off.

"Don't toy with me."

"Of course not," he says. "Not here. I'll save that for the sex dungeon."

"Nikolai," I groan, "we made a deal."

The doors start to close and his hand flashes out, pushing them back. "And I'm upholding it," he says.

I frown. "My sister is *here*?"

He looks at me like I'm stupid. "Where did you think she was? Maybe in my ___"

"Do not say 'sex dungeon' again. Now or ever." I storm into the elevator and plaster myself against the furthest wall from him.

"I was going to say 'torture chamber' that time." He slides a key into a small door on the control panel and unlocks a separate button labeled "Penthouse Suite."

I shake my head. "Don't say stuff like that. People might not know you're

joking.”

Suddenly, I feel his body close to mine, his lips brushing across the shell of my ear. “Maybe I’m not.”

I suppress a shiver, swallow my response, and stare straight ahead. *Don’t give him the satisfaction of your fear.*

He steps back and regards me coolly. The elevator doors open thirty seconds later to a room very similar to the lobby. The hardwood floors are a warm, rich brown and a wall of unbroken window looks out over the Hudson.

It’s such a breathtaking view that I almost miss the lump of teenager sprawled out on the chaise lounge.

“Hey,” Elise drawls, raising her hand in a lazy wave.

I blink away from the view and stare at my sister. For the first time in my life, I’m having an out-of-body experience. My expectations and reality are so far removed from each other that for a few seconds, I can’t reconcile them.

Then...

“Hey?” I screech, my eyebrows raised so high I’m sure they’ll pop right off my face. “That’s what you have to say to me? After disappearing and scaring me to death, you say, ‘Hey’?!”

“Was I supposed to go with ‘Hello’?” Elise frowns. “Jeez, relax. What is your deal?”

I stomp across the room and kick her legs off the chaise lounge.

“Hey!” she cries out.

“Stop saying that,” I hiss. “What the hell, Elise? This is a little further than the bodega on the corner, don’t you think?”

She’s frowning now, glaring at me like I’m the bad guy. “You’re the one who sent that random guy to the motel to tell me we were getting an upgrade. Ever heard of a phone call? I thought I might be getting kidnapped or something.”

I hear Nikolai chuckle behind me, and I realize suddenly how misplaced all of my anger is. I spin around to face him. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing.” He leans around me and greets Elise with a head nod. “We’ve never met. I’m Nikolai Zhukova.”

“Oh, the asshole owner?” Elise asks at once.

“My reputation precedes me,” he chuckles. He glances over at me. If he was a normal person, I’d say he almost looks offended. “You must be the sister.”

“That’s me. My name is—”

“Enough.” I slash my arm through the air. “Don’t tell him anything. We’re leaving.”

“What? Why?”

“Get your stuff, Elise,” I growl.

She stomps her foot on the wood floor. “No.”

“Elise” Nikolai infers smugly. “Pretty name.”

I ignore him. “Elise, do as I say.”

“You’re not my mom.”

I sigh. That line is really getting old fast. “That may be true, but I’ve been working on my mom glare for moments such as this. Don’t make me turn around and use it. Especially since I’d have to turn my back on *Mr. Zhukova* here. And he might chloroform me if given the chance.”

Nikolai rolls his eyes, but doesn’t deny it.

“What?” Elise asks. “What is going on? I thought we were here for your work?”

“You are,” Nikolai answers. “You both are. And you’re not going anywhere.”

“We already have a hotel room, thank you very much,” I yell.

He laughs. “Is that what you call that rat-infested shithole?”

Elise laughs with him, and I hate that it's the first time I've heard her laugh since she came to live with me. More to the point, I hate that *he* is responsible for it.

“At least we were safe there!”

“Safe from what?” Nikolai scoffs. “A long, happy life? I’m surprised you checked in without getting mugged. You’re guaranteed a case of ringworm if you use the shower.”

“Spoken like a true rich snob,” I spit. “You’re so used to your ivory tower that you have no clue how the other half lives.”

Suddenly, the annoyance on his face shifts into something else. It’s the same shift I’ve seen several times now. It’s like a cloud moving over the sun. When the world changes colors and the temperature drops. Everything is the same, but completely different.

“You’re staying here now.” His voice is even, but there’s a barely restrained rage just under the surface. “I’ll send a car for you in the morning.”

“Thank God,” Elise says, padding back into the living room. “This place is heaven.”

I watch Nikolai walk onto the elevator and turn to face me. Our eyes lock as he leans forward to push the button.

He winks as the doors close, and I shiver.

“No,” I mutter. “This is hell.”

NIKOLAI

Arslan knocks once before letting himself into my office. "Hey, I wanted to ___"

"Lose a hand for barging into my office before I invited you in?" I interrupt.

He snorts. "Does Arnold let you talk to him like that? If so, he's even softer than I thought."

"Arnold understands his place."

"Arnold is boring," Arslan complains.

"Arnold is perfect for this front. People buy him as a VP."

"I know, I know, it's all about the outward image. Spare me the lecture," Arslan sighs. He holds up his hands so I can see the tattoos across his knuckles. "I don't look the part."

I shake my head. "That's what you get for tatting 'sandwich' across your knuckles."

"I was eighteen. And it's a good icebreaker." He clenches the 'wich' hand into a fist and smirks. "Good jawbreaker, too."

I hold out my hand, silently asking for the dossier he put together.

"There isn't as much out there about Belle Dowan as you'd think," he warns as he passes it to me. "She doesn't have any social media."

I drop the folder on my desk and flip it open. "If you rely on Instagram stories for your intel, you're fired."

"You can't fire me. I know too much."

"Then I'll kill you."

"Don't tease me with a good time, Nikolai." He perches on the arm of the leather chair across from my desk. "But of course I have other sources. I'm a professional."

"Then what did you find?" I ask, flipping the folder closed. "I want the elevator pitch version. I'm busy today."

"Why do I even put the dossier together if you aren't going to read it?" he grumbles.

"Because if you didn't, I'd fire you," I say. "And as you said, I can't fire you. So I'd have to kill you. Matter of fact, if your annoyance outweighs your usefulness at any point, I'll kill you. And if I'm just in a bad mood one day, I'll kill you. So I suggest you start talking. Before I kill you."

"Ever the charmer," he sighs mournfully. He starts to recite the facts. "Belle Marie Dowan. Born and raised in a trailer park outside of Omaha, Nebraska, but moved by herself to Oklahoma when she was eighteen. Her mom has a list of arrests longer than my arm, all of them for drug use and possession."

"Her mother is a junkie?" I wince. "That would explain why she's traveling with her younger sister. She's probably taking care of her."

"Maybe," Arslan says. "She studied accounting at University of Oklahoma and then took her current job with McCorman Partners Auditing. She's fresh out of college."

"Young," I say absentmindedly. "She looks older, though."

"Is that important?" Arslan asks.

"What?"

"That she looks older?"

I frown. "It doesn't matter what she looks like."

Arslan leans back, his arms crossed. He has a stupid expression on his face, and I know that any second now, he's going to make me regret not kicking him out of my office and reading the dossier myself.

"It matters if you like her."

I huff out a laugh. "'Like' her? Am I twelve?"

"No, you're thirty-eight, and I've never seen you show this much interest in a woman before. It's noteworthy."

"She's doing our audit and causing trouble. I have to show interest in her to make sure the police don't show an interest in us."

He narrows his eyes. "Maybe it's that... or maybe you want to fuck her."

"Or maybe I already have," I spit back.

A dopey smile spreads across Arslan's face. I hoped my confession would shut him up, but I should know my best friend better than that by now.

"Before or after you kidnapped her sister?"

"I didn't actually kidnap anyone," I say. "And it was before. Before I even knew she was going to be our auditor, actually."

He frowns. "You spend a lot of time I don't know about in Oklahoma?"

"We met on the plane."

"Oh." Arslan nods and then the realization settles in. His eyes widen. "You fucked her on the plane?"

"Yeah. Well, in the bathroom. I have some decency."

"Barely," he scoffs. "Holy shit. I can't believe the accountant had it in her."

Something about the way he says "accountant" feels like an insult. But Belle is different from the long string of interchangeable accountants who have audited us in the past. All of them were willing to roll over for far less than the ten grand I offered her, but Belle barely even flinched before refusing. Matter of fact, she pushed back. She brought the police to my office and tried to steal my car.

The girl has guts.

“That’s because you don’t know her yet.”

“And you do?”

I can tell by the look in Arslan’s eyes that he’s suggesting something. Something I don’t want to encourage.

“She’s a fighter. That’s all I meant.”

He wags his eyebrows. “She likes it rough, then?”

“Fuck off,” I growl.

Arslan laughs and holds up his hands in surrender. “Sorry, mate. I can see you’re feeling possessive. Don’t worry, the accountant is all yours.”

“She isn’t mine. The only thing I want from her is an audit free of discrepancies. As soon as I have that, she can leave.”

The sooner, the better.

Because she did bring the police into my office and nearly stole my fucking car. The woman is fiery. Between the two of us, things could be explosive. And I don’t have time for that.

“But you might as well enjoy her until then, right?” Arslan prods.

I roll my eyes, but somewhere in the back of my mind, the idea takes hold. The image of Belle pressed against my office door, skirt hiked up over her hips. Of her sprawled naked across the leather backseat of my car, the air heating with the steam of her breath.

After the tension between us last night, I went home and jerked off twice. Even now, my dick is hard at the simple thought of her. I feel like a teenager again.

“Shit, man,” Arslan chuckles. “You’re into her.”

“No, I’d like to be in her,” I clarify. “There’s a very big difference.”

But usually, being in her once would have been more than enough. My

brain's singular focus on the girl is a little outside the norm. But it's nothing to worry about. Nothing that can't be fixed with a round two, anyway.

I wave Arslan out of my office. "Go on. I have work to do."

"By 'work,' do you mean 'an accountant to do'?"

"Fuck off," I say again.

Arslan leaves, laughing all the way.



I avoid the conference room where Belle is working all day. Partly because I'm busy and partly because I like the idea of leaving her on the hook for a while.

I'm sure she expected me to be lording over her, watching her every move. I like the idea that she spent the day peeking over her shoulder like I'm the boogeyman hiding in the shadows.

But when I do finally round the corner to the glass-encased conference room in the middle of our floor, Belle isn't looking over her shoulder. She's talking on the phone.

I step into the doorway behind her and listen.

"... I'm managing fine on my own," she is saying. "It will take me a couple extra days to get through everything, but the owner is... well, he's very involved. It will all be fine."

"That's perfect," a male voice says. "That's why I hired you, you know? You looked... flexible."

I frown. The man's sleezy tone of voice alone is reason enough to file a sexual harassment claim. Who is this asshole?

"Thanks," Belle says softly.

"You're welcome," he says as if he did her a favor. "I am sorry you're stuck there by yourself, though. I wish you could have come to Aruba, too. You

deserve the break. A skimpy little bikini and a mai tai would do you some good.”

“I’m not much for tropical vacations,” Belle says.

“What a shame. You’d look great on a beach.” Suddenly, the man laughs. “Weirdly enough, I accidentally stumbled on a topless beach today. Quite the surprise. You should have been there.”

“Mhmm.” Belle is sketching something in an open notebook, barely paying attention to the phone call.

“It’s upscale, too,” he continues. “They only let in the best. Beautiful bodies everywhere. You’d fit right—”

“Hey, Roger?” Belle says suddenly. “I actually have to get going. I’m working late tonight and I have a lot to get through.”

“Yeah, sure. But while you’re working, just imagine you’re on the beach with me. That will make the time pass faster.”

Belle says a rushed goodbye and hangs up the phone.

“Not gonna happen, you nasty creep,” she mutters once the line disconnects.

I step into the conference room. “No office romance for you two, then?”

Belle nearly falls out of her chair in her hurry to spin around and see who is behind her. She clutches at her chest, and I can’t say I completely blame her boss for imagining her on a topless beach. I’m doing the same damn thing.

“Holy—Jeez. You scared me.”

“You were pretty wrapped up in your phone call. He a friend of yours?”

Maybe I’ll kidnap him, too. I could get Arslan to Aruba on the next flight out. Anyone who talks to their female employees like that deserves Arslan’s knuckles tattooed across their fucking face.

And anyone who talks to Belle like that deserves far, far worse.

She looks back over her shoulder, her auburn waves catching the fluorescents. “That was Roger.”

“Your boss.”

“The one and only.” She sighs. “He was checking in on how things are going.”

“By telling you about the topless beaches he went to?”

She shrugs. “That’s just Roger.”

I walk around the table. Belle doesn’t look at me, but I can tell she’s watching. “You should have told him to fuck himself.”

“He’d probably take that as an invitation to beat off on the phone.”

I snort, surprised by her quick response.

Belle looks surprised, too. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“Don’t apologize.”

“It’s inappropriate,” she says. “And I shouldn’t bad mouth my boss. He’s—”

“A pervert.”

She blushes. “Yeah. That. A sex freak.”

“Then again,” I say, “we don’t have much room to talk, you and I, do we?”

Her long lashes brush against her cheeks and her full lips pull into a nervous smile. The reminder of our airplane rendezvous doesn’t do my dick any favors. I’m already at half-mast.

“The difference is we *both* wanted what happened on that airplane,” I say. “You asked for it. Did you ask for Roger to talk dirty to you during work hours?”

“Technically, it’s after five.”

I shake my head. “You should tell him to choke on his own cock.”

“Ew.”

“Exactly,” I say. “You should make him as uncomfortable as he makes you.”

“That’s not possible. Because he has the power to make me homeless and

unemployable,” she says in a rush. “So I can’t say whatever I want to him. He’ll fire me.”

“You should face your problems head-on.”

She spins around to fully face me. “Like this?”

“Close. But you should pick a battle you can win.”

Belle rolls her eyes. “I forgot. I shouldn’t pick a fight with a god.”

“And thankfully, your boss isn’t anything of the sort. I should know.”

Belle’s eyes flash with panic. “You know Roger?”

Hearing another man’s name on her lips has my hackles rising. Especially because she looks guilty. Like she’s been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

“No, but I’ve seen him.”

She inhales sharply. “Where?”

“For a man who wants to get into bed with his employees, he doesn’t care much about personal grooming. He should look into professional headshots for the website. Or at least a picture where he isn’t actively sweating.”

“He doesn’t want to get into bed with his employees,” she says bitterly.

“He just wants to see them topless on the beach? You’re right, much better.”

She spins around to face me again. “I’d rather my boss want to sleep with me than kidnap my sister.”

“Maybe that’s why you roll over and take his bullshit,” I suggest icily. “Because deep down, you like it.”

Her face flushes an angry red, and I think I’ve cracked through her veneer. Tapped into the fiery woman beneath.

But then she takes a deep breath and turns back to the table, grabbing for the notebook she was drawing in before. “I need to get back to work.”

I look over her shoulder at the sketchy drawing in front of her. I can’t see

much of it, but I know it isn't work-related.

"Am I paying you to doodle now?" She tries to cover the page with her hand, but I reach around her and snatch the notebook away.

"Hey! That's mine!"

"While you're working here, you and everything you own belongs to me."

I hold the page up to the light. Her pencil lines are light, feathery gray against the lined page, but the vision is clear.

It's a tall, narrow house with a deep, shaded porch. The pitch of the roof is steep and there's a stained-glass rose window on the gable. Certain elements of the house are more detailed than others. For instance, the porch has intricately-crafted railings, the pencil marks darker in those areas. But the details around the roof are barely visible. Still in their first pass of design.

I look up at her. "You did this?"

She chews on her lower lip and nods. "It's just something I do when I get bored."

"If you can draw like this, why are you working for Roger?"

She seems surprised by the tucked-away compliment. To her credit, I don't give them out often. She pushes her hair away from her face and then lunges for the notebook once again.

I hold it out of her reach. "Are there nude drawings in here or something?"

"I work for Roger because some of us need guaranteed paths to financial stability," she snaps. "I didn't have the money to waste on an architecture degree."

Belle would probably love to know the similarities in our backgrounds. Maybe my "rags to riches" story, as Giorgos called it, really could be an inspiration to her.

But I'm not here to be anyone's fucking inspiration. And I don't need her to relate to me.

I need her to listen.

"Now, give it back to me, asshole," she spits again.

I fan through the pages, catching glimpses of other houses and buildings she's drawn. "Maybe there's a distinguished rendering of a particular man in a particular airplane bathroom in here you want to hide?"

"Or a composite sketch I can show the police."

I regard her over the sketchbook. "You already tried the law enforcement route. It didn't pan out."

"Because I had no proof." She slaps her hand on her laptop. "Now, I have plenty. Lots of discrepancies here."

The threat, however toothless, irks me. My life is filled with threats, but they're usually flung by men who have a leg to stand on.

Belle has nothing.

"If you never want to see your sister again, then sure, that sounds like a great plan."

She seems to notice the shift in my demeanor. Her brow furrows, hazel eyes assessing me. "You're not a murderer."

"I wouldn't be so sure. I know an airplane bathroom that can attest to your astounding lack of judgment."

She clenches her jaw and swipes out again for the notebook. This time, I let her grab it and yank it towards her, but I move with it, refusing to fully let go.

In an instant, I'm in her space. She tries to jerk back, but I lean down.

"You have no clue who I am or what I'm capable of." I rake my gaze over her heart-shaped face. "It's hard to know what a person is capable of. I never would have guessed you'd fuck your boss to keep your job."

"You weren't my boss," she grits out.

I shake my head. "I wasn't talking about me."

It takes a second for understanding to settle over her, but when it does, she jumps to her feet. "Are you serious? I never fucked Roger!"

I let go of the journal. It thumps on the table. “You’re pretty desperate to keep your job. And it’s obvious you have an... insatiable sexual appetite.”

I don’t really think she slept with her boss—I’m just trying to rev her up because I like how the little lamb looks when she’s flustered—but even the thought twists something inside of me. A man as foul as him should never get to touch something as flawless as her.

“You’re the one who followed me into that bathroom,” she cries. “You—you practically forced yourself on me!”

“*I want this,*” I say, slowly repeating her words that have been replaying in my mind since we met. “*I want to come.*’ Does that sound like someone who was forced?”

Even twisted in hate, her face is beautiful. The point of her chin, the fullness of her lips. She doesn’t have an ugly angle or emotion.

“I despise you.”

I step forward, pinning Belle between my body and the conference room table. “Don’t lie.”

“I’m not a liar,” she hisses, squaring off with me even though she’s a good six inches shorter. “About anything. I didn’t sleep with my boss. And I really do hate you.”

"You don't lie?"

"No."

"Okay." I raise my hand and cup her delicate jaw. I can feel her pulse fluttering against my fingertips. I drag my hand lower, down into the hollow beneath her collarbone. "Then answer this, princess: do I make you wet?"

She goes rigid under my touch and presses her thighs together like she's worried I'll reach down and check.

To be fair, I’m considering it.

"Not in your wildest fucking dreams."

I shake my head and drag my finger down, swirling around her clearly

pointed nipple. Her back arches into my touch and I chuckle.

"Liar."

"I'm not!"

"Wishing you weren't attracted to me doesn't mean you aren't."

Her cheeks are a beautiful rose pink and her lips are parted, panting, as her body responds to how close we are.

My body is responding, too. Belle glances down and notices. "You're attracted to me, too."

I nod. "Very."

She wasn't expecting the honesty, but I have nothing to hide.

"I don't make it a habit to fuck people I'm not attracted to," I continue. "But given your situation with Roger, maybe you don't understand what that's like."

Belle pounds a fist into my chest. "I'm not fucking him, asshole."

I grab her arm and twist it so her wrist is against my lips. She makes a halfhearted effort to pull her arm away, but her eyes are fixed on my mouth.

"Is that why you're doing all of this?" she whispers. "Because you... you like me?"

Arslan's words ring in my head, but I shove them away. I tell her the same thing I told him: "I'd like to be inside of you. There's a difference."

She wrinkles her nose. "You're disgusting."

"You'll be rid of me soon enough," I say, nibbling across the delicate blue vein in her wrist. "My infatuations don't last long."

She's trembling, her body vibrating with palpable desire. The effort it takes to not press her back onto the desk and give into what we both want is exhausting.

But some things are better when you work for them.

She lets out a soft groan of frustration. “What’s the matter—you can’t pleasure a woman long-term? Do they get bored with your little bag of tricks?”

I grip her wrist and wrap her arm around my neck, drawing us even closer together. Belle gasps, but our bodies are already molded, my mouth pressed to her ear.

“You came around my cock twice, in case you forgot. But if that’s not proof enough, I’ll give you a taste of next time.”

“There won’t be a next time,” she spits, even as she fists her hands in my shirt.

“There will be,” I assure her. “And just like the first time, you’ll ask for it. You’ll beg for me to make you feel good. And I will. First, with my hand. Then, when you’re still trembling from your release, I’ll use my mouth and lick you until you scream.”

She inhales sharply, but her hips grind against mine. Even as she denies it, Belle can’t stop herself from seeking me out.

I know I’ll be coming in my own hand again tonight, but it will be worth it when she breaks. When she finally submits to me.

This is my masterpiece in the making.

“And when that’s no longer enough, I’ll drive my cock into you until you can’t stand it. Until your body is too physically exhausted from pleasure to move. I’ll drive you mad for me, little lamb. I’ll make you erupt. I’ll ruin that pretty little face of yours with my cum. And then I’ll be done with you for good.”

I feel the wind go out of her sails. She sags against me, disappointment and hurt weighing on her. But before she can say a word, I step away and saunter out of the room.

BELLE

In the morning, my wrist is sore. And shame sits in my stomach like a block of lead.

Nikolai Zhukova is a monster. He's a criminal and a liar. A kidnapper and an embezzler. He's everything I should hate.

So why then, did I get home last night and spend an hour in the jacuzzi tub trying and failing to make myself come?

Forget twice in a row—I couldn't even get off once.

I wanted it... desperately. But the pleasure hovered just out of reach. I imagined Nikolai holding my orgasm in front of me, dangling it like a carrot as I moaned and panted after it. All I had to do was give in to him. If I let myself reimagine all the dirty words he'd whispered in my ear in the conference room, then I probably could have saved myself an achy wrist.

But I couldn't. I can't.

Nikolai is a cancer. If I let him in, he'll replicate, doubling and tripling and swallowing up all the Belle he can find until there's nothing left of me.

Elise is still asleep when I leave, sprawled across the king-sized bed with a silk eye mask pulled low over her eyes. There's no need to leave a twenty on the table for food, since Nikolai is giving us free unlimited room service.

God, I hate him for it.

And I hate that I can't hate him more.

When I get to Zhukova Incorporated, I head straight for the conference room and unpack my bags. No dawdling and no doodling today. I need to get through this fake-ass "audit" as quickly as possible and get the hell out of Dodge. The sooner I get home, the sooner I can start to purge Nikolai Zhukova from my memory.

"Although that might require a lobotomy," I mumble.

"I'm sorry?"

The female voice behind me makes me jump. I spin around and find the executive assistant from the front desk standing in the doorway. Today, she has on a tight white dress with a thigh slit more suited for a club night out with the girls than a day in the office. Her hair falls over her shoulders in glossy black waves, the kind that say *I woke up extra early just to make myself look perfect*.

"You scared me," I laugh nervously.

She does not return my smile. "Did you say something?"

"No," I say. "Well, yes, but I was... I was talking to myself. It's nothing."

Her perfect eyebrow arches. I feel like a bug under a microscope. "Right. Well, Mr. Zhukova wants to see you."

"Me?" I feel stupid as soon as I say it. Of course, she means me. "Why?"

"Because he would like to see you."

I bite back a groan. She sounds like her boss.

Question: *Why?*

Answer: *Because I said so.*

I close my laptop and follow her out of the room.

Her long strides have her half a hallway in front of me, and she makes no effort to slow down or wait for me. So I hustle after her, half-jogging to keep up.

“Have you worked for Niko—Mr. Zhukova for very long?” I ask.

She lifts her chin and looks back over her shoulder at me. “Only a few months. I’m a new hire. But Mr. Zhukova offered me the job himself.”

Yeah, that makes sense. The woman is a bombshell. And Nikolai said his attention span is short. I’d imagine the interview process was... unorthodox.

But as soon as that thought crosses my mind—and as soon as the so-obvious-I-should’ve-seen-it-coming heat flashes between my thighs—I repress it.

It doesn’t matter. None of this does.

“High turnover rate?” I ask.

“Mr. Zhukova doesn’t stand for incompetence.”

Wow. Didn’t realize Nikolai had his own spin team working at the front desk. I want to ask if all the previous receptionists were also former or future models, but I think I already know the answer.

My jaw aches. I realize I’m clenching my teeth. As the receptionist knocks on Nikolai’s door, I force myself to take a deep breath.

Relax. A few more days and this will be over.

For two glorious seconds, that thought reassures me. But when the door opens, the tension is back with a vengeance.

“Hey,” the receptionist purrs through the crack in the door, her voice infinite degrees warmer than it ever was with me. “I got her for you.”

She makes it sound like I’m a bone she was sent to fetch.

“You can let her in, Bridget,” Nikolai says. He doesn’t match her warmth, but then again, of course he doesn’t. He doesn’t need to.

She will fawn all over him, and all he has to do is exist. He’ll smile, fuck her until she’s broken the way I am, dependent on him for release... then send her back out into the wild.

Bridget steps back, her expression smug. “Let me know if you need anything else, Mr. Zhukova.”

Like a quickie before lunch, seems to be right on the tip of her tongue.

I hurry past the receptionist and shut the door on her stupid, perfect face.

“You wanted to see me?” I ask, turning to face him without quite meeting his eyes. Reason being that, if I look into his eyes, I’ll recall what he said to me last night while pressed against the conference room table. I’ll lose what little bit of dignity I’ve managed to scrape up.

“I do want to see you,” he says. “But I also want to talk to you.”

My eyes snap up to his before I can stop myself. “How cute,” I say sarcastically.

“Not cute. Just honest. Same as I was last night.”

My heart is pounding in my chest, and I’m sure he can hear it. “I have a lot to do today. What do you want from me?”

He stands up, devastating in tailored navy blue suit pants and a pale blue button down. The material hugs his biceps and the flat plane of his abs. I want to scrape my teeth over his muscles and eat him like a buffet.

“I don’t think we have time to get into everything I want from you, Belle.”

My list is short: I want to kill him.

“But,” he continues, walking around his desk and leaning on the front edge, “I’d like to know that you understand what is at stake here.”

I roll my eyes. “Your criminal record?”

His nose twitches in an unamused smile. “Not what’s at stake for me. I stand to lose very little if you gather up evidence to use against me. I’m not as easy to take down as you might think. No, I want to make sure you understand what’s at stake for you. Because last night—”

“You’ve already threatened me, Nikolai. I understand—”

“I wasn’t finished,” he barks.

His pupils are blown wide, black eating away the gray. I feel energy rippling off of him. My confidence wilts in the face of his genuine anger.

He clears his throat and relaxes again. “Last night, you threatened me.”

“I wasn’t serious,” I say quickly. “Check my notebook if you want to. I don’t really have a sketch of you in there.”

“For your sake, I hope you don’t. Because as I said last night, I have plans for the two of us, Belle. But if you’re going to betray me, those plans can change.”

A future filled with multiple orgasms flashes in my mind. I gulp and swallow them back.

“The only plans I have are to finish this audit and leave. Nothing else.”

Nikolai smirks. “You don’t want to stay and play?”

“I want to do my job and leave.”

He pushes himself off the desk and circles around me like a shark circling a diver. Except I don’t have the luxury of a protective cage. “Be more specific.”

I sigh. “I want to complete the audit, get on a plane with my sister, and fly home to Oklahoma City.”

“But are you going to do the audit *your* way?” he asks, pausing just out of sight behind me. “Or my way?”

“I’ve already told you. I’m going to do my job and—”

Suddenly, Nikolai is pressed against my back. He flattens his hand against my stomach. “What is your job, Belle?”

My heart is lodged in my throat and I have to swallow hard to find my voice. “I’m an accountant. I’m here to complete the audit and write up the final report for—”

“No.” His hand moves slowly down, sending swarms of butterflies fluttering through me. “Who are you here to please, Belle?”

“I’m not—I don’t know what you mean.” Like a coward, I squeeze my eyes closed. I should shove him away, should sprint out of this room... but I want his hand to move lower. I want the release I couldn’t find last night.

God help me, I want *him*.

With a simple flick of the fingers, he unbuttons my pants. “Are you going to obey me, *lapochka*?”

Leaning against him feels like being in a dream. The warmth and the smell and the sensation of his fingers sneaking down and down and down...

“Yes,” I gasp.

He slides over my slit, parting me open before delving a finger inside. I whimper and bite down on my lip.

“Do you remember when I was inside of you?” he rasps in my ear. “Remember when I filled you from behind?”

I rest my head back on his shoulder, eyes closed. He’s stroking me slowly. Torturously.

“I thought about it last night,” I admit, speaking so softly I can barely hear myself.

Nikolai slides a second finger into me. “You did? Good girl.”

I nod, still keeping my eyes clamped close. “I touched myself after I left. I... I needed this. Release.”

“Did you find it?” he asks as his thumb reaches up to circle over my clit.

“Oh God,” I groan. I feel too good to be embarrassed. To be ashamed. To feel anything other than pleasure and sweet, sweet relief.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” he asks again.

I shake my head. “I couldn’t turn my brain off.”

“The way you did in the airplane bathroom,” he whispers. “Remember that? How I made you forget? It didn’t matter that it was against the rules or that people could hear us. You just enjoyed yourself. What a concept.”

I grind shamelessly against his hand. With every brush of his fingers, he’s driving me closer and closer to the edge, and I’m ready to *Thelma & Louise* right off the side. I might combust before it’s over, but at least the ache inside

of me will be gone.

“That’s all life is,” he continues. “It’s about what makes you feel good. What benefits you. Fuck everything and everyone else.”

Somewhere in the back of my head, I feel a tickle of unease. A small alarm bell struggling to be heard over the thrum of blood in my veins, most of which is rushing straight between my legs.

Nikolai is working his fingers in what feels like an impossible rhythm, pumping into me while working my clit. I’m putty in his hands, limp and needy.

And then I feel the orgasm coming. My body is tightening, preparing for the release.

Maybe Nikolai is right. Life is just about what makes you feel good. What else is there? You could offer me a billion dollars right now and I couldn’t for the life of me give you any other answer.

“I’m going to come,” I grit out, rocking my hips on his hand. I’m seconds away. Just a few more pulses and—

“Come for me,” he hisses against my neck. “Be bad with me, beautiful Belle. Submit and I’ll give you what you can’t give yourself.”

I feel that tickle again, and all at once, it hits me: it’s my conscience. My body tenses, but not with an orgasm.

With panic.

Somehow, I manage to break through the spell he wove around me. I grab Nikolai’s wrist and yank him out of my pants. Then I spin around, desperate to get much needed space from him. “Don’t touch me.”

“It’s a little late for that.” He holds up his hand, still glistening with my juices. Then he slowly slides his fingers in his mouth.

How fucked up am I that it turns me on like nothing before? The shameless whore between my legs clenches, a pitiful cry for me to get off my moral high horse and let this gorgeous man finger me to ecstasy.

“No,” I say, jabbing a finger in his direction. “I’m not doing that again. It doesn’t matter that you’re attractive and good at slipping past all of my defenses—”

“Well, thank you.”

I narrow my eyes. “It’s not a compliment. None of that matters because you’re still a criminal. And I’m not going to let you turn me into you.”

Nikolai shrugs. “I wouldn’t be so sure. I think, given what I’m holding over you, I can get you to do or be whatever I like.”

“You aren’t a murderer,” I say, repeating what I told him last night. “You won’t hurt Elise.”

“Maybe you’re right, maybe you’re wrong.” He shrugs. “With this video, it doesn’t matter. I won’t have to kill anyone.”

“What? What video?”

My chest tightens, my heart skipping beat after beat until I have to press a hand to my chest to be sure I’m not going into cardiac arrest.

He points to the upper corner of the room and then waggles his still-wet fingers. “Wave to the camera, Belle. You’re a star.”

I follow his point and see a tiny red dot I missed before.

My body goes numb.

“You... you recorded us?”

He grins. “And it was so much easier than I thought it would be. Thanks for your cooperation.”

The smile on his face is so completely opposite to the horror and confusion pulsing through me that I launch myself at him. I swing my arm back, ready to slap him. But before I can even get close to him, Nikolai snatches my arm out of the air and yanks me against his body.

“I didn’t force you to open your legs, Belle. You chose that on your own. Don’t be mad at me.”

“I hate you,” I spit. “I hate you so fucking much.”

He arches my back, bending himself over me so I’m forced to look up into his eyes. “Fine. Then hate me. But unless you want our little tape getting out, you’ll do as I say.”

Fear curdles my stomach. “You can’t blackmail me into having sex with you.”

“And clearly, I don’t have to,” he snorts. “The collateral isn’t for sex. It’s for the audit. You said your threats last night were idle, but you don’t become as powerful as I am by taking any chances. You left me no choice.”

He tightens his hold around the wrist I hurt last night. The one that’s sore from touching myself while thinking about him.

It feels poetic, in a way, to have him gripping it now. A reminder of the dangerous hold he has on me. The hold I need to do my best to break.

Finally, he lets go. “Whether you and I get along... whether I need to release this collateral or not... it’s all in your hands now, Belle. Choose wisely.”

NIKOLAI

“Your girlfriend is very focused on her work,” Arslan says as he saunters into my office.

“Then I envy her.”

He laughs and drops down into the leather chair. “If you don’t like my visits, then take away my clearance. Did you know Stan on security doesn’t even check my ID anymore? He just lets me up.”

“He’s probably annoyed with you, too. Maybe for both our sakes, I’ll bar you from the building.”

Arslan just laughs again. He knows I won’t do it. More to the point, I can’t. He’s my best friend and right-hand man, and he’s been both those things for as long as I can remember.

Also, my biggest pain in the ass.

Though Belle comes in a close second.

He leans forward eagerly. “What are you working on? Let me help.”

“You must be bored.”

“There hasn’t been anything to do since you made nice with the Greeks.”

“You should be thanking me,” I tell him. “Fewer people for you to kill.”

“Well, what if I liked the killing?”

“Then get off your ass and figure out how to take out the Battiato mafia.”

He scoffs. “Like it’s that easy.”

“Exactly,” I say. “Which is why I need you to go do your job and let me do mine.”

“What are you doing again?”

I flip Belle’s dossier closed. “I was going over the information you gave me yesterday.”

And looking into her scumbag “boss.” If Belle isn’t going to stand up for herself, then maybe it’s time someone does it for her. But I decide not to mention that part to Arslan. He’d only give me shit about it, and I’m not in the mood.

He smirks. “Studying up on her and wishing I’d included full-color pictures?”

I grimace. Turns out, he’ll give me shit no matter what.

“She’s right down the hall, *mudak*. What kind of pathetic sucker would I be sitting here looking at pictures when I could go walk twenty yards and have the real thing?”

Truth be told, I’ve been fighting the urge to drop in on Belle all morning. Ever since our little discussion in my office this morning. But I want to give her plenty of time to think. Time to make the right choice.

Time to grasp that what I say goes.

“That wasn’t a denial,” Arslan remarks.

“Because I know you too well. I don’t want to waste my breath.”

“Two-plus decades of friendship is a long time.” He casts a sidelong glance at me. “Long enough that I know when you’re hung up on a broad.”

“For fuck’s sake, Arslan—”

“Listen to me,” he says more soberly than before. “Obviously, I’m giving you shit. It’s my favorite pastime. But I’m serious about this, too.”

“You’re never serious.”

He gives me his best approximation of a stern face. “Which is why you should listen to me now.”

I sigh and wave him on. “Fine. Say your piece.”

“I’ve been with you since almost the beginning, brother,” he says. “I was there when you were just a scrappy little punk without a dime. But you’ve always had drive. Focus. Your family lost everything to the Battatios, and you were determined to crawl your way back to the top and make them pay.”

I cross my arms. “Are you saying I’ve lost my focus?”

“No.” He waves me off. “But—”

“‘But’ implies you think I’ve lost focus,” I growl.

“You promised Simatou that you’d be exclusive with his crazy-ass sister.”

“I told him I wouldn’t make love with anyone else,” I remind him.

“Oh, you clever boy, have a cookie. C’mon, Nikolai—you and I both know that shit won’t hold up.”

“Xena isn’t my wife yet.”

Arslan laughs. “I’d love to hear you explain to that insane bitch how finger-fucking your accountant doesn’t constitute cheating. Right after you explain the difference between ‘fucking’ and ‘making love.’ You won’t get two words out before she shanks you in the throat, and you’ll deserve it.”

My eyes widen. “How did you know we—goddammit, Arslan, are you spying on me?”

“No. And now I don’t need to,” Arslan says, looking far too pleased with getting me to rat on myself. “Bridget told me Belle was in your office. She looked pissed about it. I assumed something happened, so I bluffed. And I nailed it. Fuckin’ bingo!”

“Bridget needs to keep her damn mouth shut,” I grumble.

“Maybe she would if you were fucking her instead of the numbers nerd,”

Arslan says.

I throw up my hands. “Are you trying to stop me from cheating on Xena or encourage it? Make up your damn mind.”

“I’m not telling you to do anything. We both know it wouldn’t do any good.”

“That’s true.”

Arslan rolls his eyes. “I’m just saying... you’ve worked a long time to get to where you are. And now, you’re poised on the edge of something big. I don’t want anything—or anyone—to distract you from it.”

I purse my lips. “It would take a lot more than a redhead with a nice ass to distract me from my goals.”

“Good. Great. Wonderful,” Arslan says. “Then I’m off my soapbox and back to my regularly scheduled bullshit, okay?”

“Or we could skip the bullshit and—”

“But is there a tape of your little finger puppet show this morning?” he taunts. “Please tell me there’s a video. I wanna watch. The free shit on the internet doesn’t do it for me anymore.”

I point to the door. “Get the fuck out.”

“I was kidding,” he laughs. Then he shrugs. “Okay, I wasn’t. But I knew you’d say no. You did record it, though, right?”

“Obviously.”

Arslan sighs. “Your job is so much better than mine. I mean, I spend my days gathering information and tracking old drunks around the city. And you’re in your office having sex with chicks for collateral.”

“If the promise of sex will get you out of this room, then go,” I say. “I’ll pay someone to have sex with you; just go find the unlucky lady and ask her to name her price. But right now, for the love of God, just leave.”

“Maybe I’ll double down on the accountant,” he says, wagging his brows. “I can drop into the conference room on my way out. No such thing as too much collateral, right?”

Something sharp pierces through me. “Don’t you even fucking look at her,” I bark before I can control it.

Arslan’s mouth turns up in a grin. “Message received, capitán.”

“I don’t like to share,” I growl. “And I’m not done with her yet.”

That’s all it is. I’ve promised Belle toe-curling orgasms. We have a “next time” to look forward to. And I don’t take Arslan’s sloppy seconds. I don’t take *anyone’s* sloppy seconds.

“I was kidding, anyway,” he says. “I’m not into being watched and she has a kid in there with her.”

“A kid?”

“Her sister, Elise.” He points to the folder in front of me. “She’s fourteen, a C-student, and she has a secret Instagram account her sister doesn’t know about.”

“Good to know.”

“And that is why you put up with my shit,” Arslan says, turning to head out the door. “Because I’m the best in the business.”

I roll my eyes. But he isn’t wrong.

As soon as Arslan leaves, I get up and head down the hall. This is an office, not a daycare. I’m not giving up the penthouse in the Zinc for Elise to lounge around my office all day.

As soon as I turn the corner, I see Belle and Elise through the glass. Elise is pacing around like a caged animal while Belle talks calmly to her.

I edge down the hallway and stop in front of the propped-open door.

“You can’t leave the hotel room without telling me,” Belle is saying.

“I texted you!”

“And I’m working,” Belle argues. “You gave me four minutes to respond before you left. The only reason I know where you’re at right now is because the driver—”

“Is a liar,” Elise finishes. “I gave him the address and he brought me here instead. He said it was on Mr. Zhukova’s orders.”

“Thank God for that.”

I smirk. I’m surprised Belle can say it without combusting.

I knew it would take more than unlimited room service and endless hours of TV to keep a fourteen-year-old locked up in New York City. So I asked my driver, Gora, to agree to take Elise wherever she wanted to go, and then drop her off at Zhukova Incorporated instead.

“I would have been fine,” Elise says. “I *will* be fine. Zach is really nice.”

Belle snorts. “And you know this because you’ve spent an hour with him?”

“Two hours,” she argues. “I sat with him while he cleaned.”

I frown. Zach. Do I know a Zach?

Belle shakes her head. “Of course. Just my luck. We’re in a hotel that hires twenty-year-old men as maids.”

Shit. Zach is a new hire. A cousin of one of the dishwashers in the kitchen. I don’t usually keep up with the hiring process, but the General Manager called me herself to ask what to do. They hired Zach as a busboy, but he was inappropriate with the customers. I told her to put him on maid duty.

“He’ll quit within the week,” I’d told her.

Apparently, the motherfucker had a little more staying power than that. Not for much longer, though.

“He’s a good guy!” Elise argues.

“He’s way too old for you,” Belle takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I know you like him, but he shouldn’t even be talking to you.”

“He’s the only one who will talk to me!”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re never around,” Elise snaps. “You’re always working.”

Belle's shoulders sag. "Look, E, this is a big project. I'm already behind schedule, and—"

"Not just here. At home, too. You wake up early and you get back late. Sue me for trying to find some human companionship."

Belle turns her head to the side. I catch a glimpse of her jawline. Of the tension she's holding, her teeth clenched together.

Then, with a concerted effort, she lets it all go.

"I know I'm not around a lot recently, and I'm sorry," she says. "I'm so glad you're living with me, but it costs money. I have to work overtime when I can get it to pay for everything. Hopefully, things will calm down soon. But until then, I need you to—"

"Be quiet and stay out of your way?"

"That's not what I said."

"It's what you meant," she says.

Belle reaches towards her, but Elise pulls away. She sighs and lets her hand fall. "I want you here with me, Elise. I do. I wouldn't have brought you to live with me if I didn't. But it's going to take some adjustment. I just need you to cooperate with me until I can figure it all out, okay?"

Belle and Elise aren't like any sisters I've ever seen. Belle is almost maternal with Elise. And I guess that makes sense. Their mother is a fucking mess, so unless Belle wants Elise to grow up with a narcissistic junkie for a role model, she has no choice but to play Mom.

Still, it's impressive. Maybe Elise can't see exactly how impressive it is, but I can.

It takes a lot for a kid to break the cycle of addiction. And Belle is trying to save Elise from herself.

"Come on," Belle says, saving Elise from having to come up with a response. "Let's go grab some lunch and then I'll take you back to the penthouse."

I turn and walk away before they can see me.

Some things ought to be left alone.

NIKOLAI

It's late when I hear footsteps in the hallway.

The afternoon got away from me the way it often does. There's always something to be done. Arslan says I'm a workaholic, but even he doesn't understand the pressure. He sees the back half of my work. The underground half.

But Zhukova Incorporated, as much as it's a cover for the Bratva, is a business in and of itself. I have two sprawling organizations to run, not to mention the hotel and the bars and restaurants I've invested in. There's no shortage of shit to do.

Heavy lies the head, as they say, or whatever the fuck.

When I look up, my eyes have to adjust. I haven't needed to see any further than my desk for hours. The doorway is blurry for a second. But then I blink and it comes into focus.

She comes into focus.

Belle is standing in the doorway, her chest heaving. She's still in the dress pants and button-down shirt she was in this morning, though they look more disheveled now.

And her eyes are filled with terror.

"She's gone," she rasps, clutching both sides of the doorway.

Her cheeks are flushed. She's clearly upset and even though now is not the time to think about what she would feel like, warm and breathing heavily beneath me, the thought crosses my mind anyway.

"Who is gone?" I ask.

"Elise," she whimpers. "I went back to the hotel, but she isn't there."

"For fuck's sake. Didn't you escort her back to the penthouse at—" I glance at the clock. "Eight hours ago."

Damn. It's been even longer than I thought.

She frowns. "How did you know about that?"

"I know everything."

"Then tell me how to get her back!" she cries out.

"I don't know where she is. Unlike last time, I'm not responsible for your sister's disappearance."

The line between her eyes eases and she chews on her lower lip. "I know. Shit, I know. I'm not here because—damn it! Why did she do this?"

She's angry, but not with me. She's angry with Elise. And with herself.

The only reason she's here is because...

"You think I can help." It isn't really a question, because I already know the answer.

"Don't be smug about it," she grumbles.

I smirk anyway. "Do you have any idea where she may have gone?"

She holds up a piece of paper with the words "Ruby Room—BBL" scribbled in the center. Elise signed her name at the bottom.

"Okay," I say, arching a brow. "Then I'm not sure why you need my help. Just go get her."

"I tried," she grits out. "I went to the nightclub, but they wouldn't let me in. They let in a fourteen-year-old, which I loudly announced to everyone

waiting outside, but they refused to let me in.”

“Well, that was your first mistake.”

“What?” she frowns.

“Shouting that they were breaking the law. They could lose their liquor license or worse if the authorities found out they weren’t carding girls.”

“Of course you’re taking their side. Bad guys stick together.”

I roll my eyes. “Do you want my help or not?”

She presses her pink lips together in a frustrated pout and nods. “Yes.”

“Okay. Then take off your clothes.”

Belle’s eyes fly open. “What? Are you—What? No! I’m not sleeping with you for your help! For fuck’s sake, you’re disgusting. Repulsive. You’re—”

I stop listening. While Belle continues her rant against me, I spin around and open the cabinet behind me. On the bottom shelf is a shallow, rectangular box wrapped in a black satin bow. I pull it out and drop it on my desk with a soft thump.

Belle jerks back. “What is that?”

“Open it and find out.”

Her eyes are still narrowed in suspicion at me, but she opens the lid like she expects a snake to pop out at her.

When she sees what’s inside, she sucks in a surprised breath.

“Where did you get this dress?”

“Something I had lying around.”

It’s not a lie. It’s just not the entire truth.

I pull the forest green material out and drape it over my arm. “Put it on.”

She takes it from my hands like it’s priceless, which is actually not too far off. “Why?”

“Because reason number two why the bouncer wouldn’t let you in is your clothes.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” She twists each of her legs in turn like she’s inspecting her wool pants for rips or stains.

“You’re covered from your ankle to your neck.” I reach over and pull the collar of her shirt apart slightly. It’s enough to reveal the tiniest hint of cleavage. “Show a little skin and you’d have gotten in easily.”

She jerks away from me and frowns. “I’m not sure if I’m offended or flattered.”

“The little I know of you so far, it’s both,” I say. “Now, change and we’ll go get your sister.”

“Turn around.”

I scoff. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve seen you, in case you forgot. *All* of you. I don’t think there’s much mystery between us.”

“It’s not about mystery. It’s about decency,” she snaps. “Which you have none of.”

“Correct.”

Belle stares at me for a long second, but when I cross my arms and resume my staring, she squares her shoulders. “Fine.”

She then proceeds to pull the silk dress on over her clothes.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I was a lifeguard three summers in a row,” she says as she reaches underneath the dress and starts unbuttoning her shirt. “I could get in and out of a wet swimsuit without a changing room.”

“I’d pay to see that,” I chuckle, though my cock stiffens at the thought of Belle, dripping wet with ocean water.

She pulls one sleeve and then the other off before sliding the shirt out from under the dress and dropping it on the floor. “It would be a waste of money because there’d be nothing to see.”

I watch as she unzips and removes her pants and slides off her white lacy bra without showing even the smallest glimpse of skin. Finally, she zips the dress up and looks down at herself.

“It’s a little small,” she says, adjusting her chest and tugging the material down around her hips. “But you did okay finding my size.”

“Okay” is an understatement. I couldn’t have picked better even if it had been her I was buying it for.

She’s right—the dress is a little tight. But that just makes it all the better. The material stretches and tugs deliciously on every single one of her curves. And where the hemline is intended to whisper across her knee, it’s closer to mid-thigh. The discrete slit is spread wide, giving a scintillating view of her long, lean thigh.

Fuck me.

Xena Simatou would look like the off-brand option in this dress. I can’t believe I almost gave it to her instead.

This dress was made for Belle.

And she was made for me.

“Well?” Belle asks, throwing her arms out wide. “Do I look okay? Are we ready?”

“Fine,” I growl. “You look fine.”

Fine like wine. Fine like art. Fine like I want to inspect every inch of her with my fingers and my tongue.

I grab my keys and walk past her into the hallway. “Let’s go.”

NIKOLAI

Belle's hand is tucked in mine as we walk past the line of people waiting outside of The Ruby Room.

"I already tried this," she hisses, tugging awkwardly at the dress as it rides up even higher around her thighs.

A man with a shaved head and a silver chain around his neck stares at her hungrily. I pull her closer and glare over her head at him until he backs down.

"No, you didn't," I tell her. "You didn't have me last time."

"And what are you going to do?"

I gesture to the dress. "I've done most of the work by putting you in this. Every man in this line wants to fuck you."

She looks around nervously. "Ew."

"So now, all you have to do is act like you've seduced a man even once in your life, and we're in."

"I seduced you, didn't I?"

"How could I forget?" I drawl sarcastically. "The way you nearly projectile vomited in that plane stole my breath away."

Her face flushes, and she tugs on the dress again, trying to cover more of herself. I grab her hands and fold them in mine.

"Stop fidgeting and stand tall. Act like your body is a gift, not a burden."

She huffs and straightens her shoulders. Immediately, her chest looks fuller and her waist looks smaller. Carrying herself with a little confidence makes a huge difference.

"Now, smile."

Her frown deepens. "I'm not your show pony."

I stop, turn, and get in her face. "Do you want to get through that door and find your sister?" I growl.

She glares for a second and then her face splits into a wide, glittering smile. I know it's fake, but that doesn't lessen the impact. The woman is gorgeous.

"Good girl."

"Fuck off," she says, the smile still plastered on her face.

I bury a smirk. Then I grab her hand and lead her towards the door.

The bouncer is a massive wall of a man with a bald head and a braided gray beard that hangs to the middle of his chest. He has one beefy hand on the velvet rope. "Sorry, sir. There's a private party here tonight. We're at capacity. You'll have to wait your turn in line."

Belle sashays around me and bats her long lashes at the man. Even though his expression doesn't change, I watch his eyes sweep over her. He's obviously appreciating the view.

I fight the urge to move in front of her like a shield. Also, the urge to break his fucking neck.

"We promise not to cause any trouble," she says in a delicate, flirty voice I've never heard from her before. She bites her lower lip and smiles. "Well, not unless you ask nicely."

The man's pierced eyebrow jumps. "You're causing enough trouble as it is in that dress."

Belle giggles and lifts my arm up to spin herself in a circle. "He gave it to me. You like?"

“I like.” The bouncer glances up at me while he talks to Belle. “Is he your boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Then I think we have room inside for one more,” the bouncer says. He leans over the rope. “And my shift ends in an hour. What if you and I—”

“What if I let you keep your eyes in your fucking head?” I growl.

He stands tall again. “I thought you weren’t her boyfriend.”

Belle laughs and presses her back against my front, draping my arm over her shoulder. “He’s protective, that’s all. All bark, no bite.”

I hold back a smile. Belle has no idea just how wrong that is.

“Well, we don’t want any trouble inside,” the bouncer says. “If you want to go in alone, honey, you can. But your not-a-boyfriend has to stay out here.”

I feel Belle pull away from me slightly, but I tighten my arm around her and hug her against my chest. She gave it her best effort, and I applaud her for that.

But I’ll take things from here.

“If you don’t want any trouble, then I suggest you let me inside.”

“Alright, man. It’s time for you to go,” the bouncer says. “I hear more than enough threats from guys looking to play tough, and—”

“I don’t make threats,” I say. “I make promises. And if you don’t let us inside, I promise you won’t be alive to see your shift end in an hour.”

Fear flickers across the man’s features. He opens his mouth to respond, but Belle whines. She pets my hand, wrapping her hand around each of my fingers in turn and pulling. Between that and her ass fitted against me, I’m struggling to stay focused.

The bouncer is watching her motions, too.

“No killing anyone tonight,” she tuts. “You promised.”

Belle is playing a part, but she has no clue how close to the truth she is.

“You promised we’d have a nice night,” she continues. “Just pay him, Niki.”

She slides her hand between our bodies and reaches into my pocket. I feel my wallet slide out, but I let Belle take the lead. Mostly because the bouncer is watching her with a fair amount of curiosity. If nothing else, we are making his night more interesting.

She opens my wallet and pulls out a stack of cash. She fans it in front of the bouncer. “Please take the money and let him in. You seem nice. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Jealousy twists in my stomach, but then Belle rolls her hips against me again. I’m not sure if she’s doing it on purpose to keep me calm, but either way, it’s working. Somehow.

The man’s eyes flit from the money to Belle and back again. Finally, he snatches the money out of her hand and lifts the rope. “Don’t cause any trouble, alright?”

Belle grabs my hand this time and I let her lead me inside.

The music thrums through the building the moment we’re through the doors. The bass pulses through the floors like a heartbeat. Belle eases closer to me as the crowd tightens around us.

“There are so many people.” She has to turn towards me to be heard, forcing our bodies even closer together.

I wrap a hand around her waist. “If Elise is here, I’ll find her.”

The club is designed with an oval-shaped bar in the center and a ring of tables around it. The back of the space is open for dancing. A DJ booth looms on a raised platform along the back wall. And, like the name of the venue suggests, the entire space is painted a deep ruby red.

I tug her closer to me and whisper in her ear. “I’ll get us some drinks.”

She shakes her head, her loose auburn hair brushing over my skin. “I just want to find my sister.”

“There’s no reason you can’t have a little fun, too.”

She looks back over her shoulder at me, the lights above the bar catching the flecks of green in her eyes. Someone squeezes behind her, and she steps closer to me, our bodies fitting together effortlessly.

It's easy, touching her. Being next to her.

And, like a drug, every hit of her I get only makes me want more.

“I think I need to be careful about having fun with you,” Belle says, barely loud enough for me to hear.

“I promise not to pull you over to the dark side. Unless you ask nicely,” I say, repeating her line from out front.

She bites back a smile and then leans her head towards the back of the club. “Let’s keep looking.”

I pull on her hand. “I have a better idea.”

Before Belle can ask what I mean, I grab her around the waist and lift her up. She yelps before she realizes what I’m doing and plants her feet on the nearest table.

“Do you see her?”

Belle squints into the flashing lights, her eyes scanning over the crowd. From this angle, her dress is even more devastating. Her legs are on full display and the swell of her ass is visible just beneath the material. I want to lick her skin like an ice cream cone.

“There’s too many people. I can’t pick her out.”

Behind me, I hear someone wolf whistle. When I turn around, the man with the buzzed head and the silver chain from the line outside is standing a few feet away. His gaze is hungry as he takes Belle in.

“You gonna give us a show, sweetheart?” he yells, whistling again.

Belle tosses him a dirty look and holds out her hands for me to help her down. But just as I move to help her, the man jumps forward and cups her ass.

“Here. Let me help,” he says with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Hey!” Belle jumps off the table and spins around. “What the fuck is—”

But I don’t even let her get the words out before I round the table and punch the asshole in the jaw.

My fist connects hard with his face. Something breaks beneath my knuckles, and he spins away from the force of it. The crowd around us gasps and parts, but Belle moves in to grab my arm.

“Nikolai! Don’t!”

I shake her off. Just as the man is turning to face me, I hit him again. It’s almost not fun to beat up such a poor, outmatched son of a bitch.

But the feeling thrumming through me isn’t one I can control. It’s untameable rage, hot and pure.

“Don’t fucking put your hands on her,” I grit out. I charge forward to grab the man by the front of his shirt. His stupid chain gets caught around my hand. I wind my fingers in it and pull it tight like a noose. The man starts to sputter and turn blue.

Belle grabs my arm and tries to pull me away. “Nikolai, stop! He isn’t worth it.”

I can hear what she’s saying, but the words don’t penetrate. All I can focus on is making the man who put his hands on her pay.

The man claws at my hands as his face shifts through every color of the rainbow. I’d happily stand here and watch him die. Except suddenly, Belle spins around and is in front of me.

She plants her hands on either side of my face and forces my eyes to hers. “Nikolai.”

I blink and slowly, she comes into focus. Her hazel eyes, her full lips. “Let’s walk away. Forget this guy and let’s walk away, okay?”

I loosen my hold on the man’s chain, and he gasps to suck in desperate breaths.

Belle pulls the necklace out of my hand and squeezes my fingers. “He’s not our priority. Elise is. Come on.”

I let my fists fall to my side and unclench. “Are you okay?” I growl.

Belle swallows nervously and nods. “I’m fine. Completely fine. The guy barely touched me.”

“He shouldn’t have touched you at all.”

She pulls me away and then flattens her palm against my chest. A crease forms between her brows. “How is your heart so steady after that?” She leans forward and presses her ear to my chest. “You must have a resting heart rate of zero if this is how you respond to almost killing a man for touching me. Who are you?”

The question reverberates through my mind. It’s a good reminder.

Who am I? There are always two answers.

But tonight, I’m not Nikolai Zhukova, Bratva don and violent beast.

Tonight, I’m Nikolai Zhukova, CEO of Zhukova Incorporated and billionaire playboy.

I can’t strangle a man for touching Belle. Not in front of her, anyway. I have to stay in control.

“Come on,” I say, grabbing her hand and pulling her deeper into the crowd. “Let’s find your sister.”

We move away from the bar and into the throng of dancers. People are jumping and gyrating, and Belle presses close to me so we don’t get separated. We move around the floor once and then again, weaving our way between couples while looking for Elise.

“Where is she?” Belle complains, pressing up onto her toes and looking around.

I move up behind her and settle against her back. “The problem is we keep moving. We need to stay still and wait for her to come to us.”

She frowns. “That’s a terrible idea.”

“Because you think we won’t find your sister?” I ask, sliding an arm around her and grinding my hips against her ass. “Or because you’re worried what will happen if we dance?”

I smooth my hand down her stomach much the same way I did this morning, and she leans her head back on my shoulder. “Both.”

“Trust me,” I whisper. Then I grip her hip and spin her around to face me.

Belle yelps, but the moment our bodies are pressed together, she melts against me. She has a body that was made to be held. Her waist fits perfectly in my hand and every part of her is soft and inviting.

Her softness is in juxtaposition to the growing hardness between us. With every brush of her hips against mine, I’m in delicious pain.

“I can’t trust you,” she murmurs. “But...”

“But?”

Her eyes are round and sincere when she looks up at me. “I can’t trust you, but I feel safe with you.”

I snort. “Not sure if you just saw, but I almost strangled a man back there.”

“You did that to protect me.” She draws closer to me, if that’s even possible. We’re touching everywhere, sealed together in every way possible, but it still isn’t enough.

Fuck, I want all of this woman.

“No one has ever looked out for me like that,” she admits. “No one has ever fought for me.”

With every roll of her hips, her dress is riding higher and higher. I grip her bare thigh. “I’m not thinking about protecting you right now.”

“What are you thinking about?” she breathes.

I lean forward and press my lips to her ear. “Ripping that dress up and fucking you in front of all these people until you scream.”

When I pull back, Belle looks up at me. The look on her face isn’t what I

expect. It isn't horror or revulsion. It isn't fear.

It's heat. Lust in its purest form. And I know without a doubt that she's going to agree. That she's going to let me have my way with her right here in the middle of this crowd.

But then I glance over her shoulder.

"There," I hiss.

"What?" Belle blinks like she's coming out of a trance. "What is it?"

I press my forehead to hers, wishing for the one and only time in my life that I was less observant. "I found your sister."

Belle jerks away from me and spins in a circle. "Where?"

"There." I point to a break in the crowd. Elise is standing just in front of the speakers, her arms thrown over her head as she dances.

Belle sprints towards her. I follow behind at a predatory pace.

I watch as Belle grabs her sister and jerks her around to face her. They're yelling back and forth, but I'm too far away to hear much of anything. As I approach, though, I can tell Elise is having a hard time staying on her feet.

"Are you drunk?" Belle screams. "Who served you? You don't even have a driver's license!"

"I d-didn't drink any... anything," Elise slurs.

"Oh my God. Are you on drugs?" Belle turns back and looks at me, her eyes wide and terrified. And I want nothing more than to solve this for her.

I turn around and immediately spot the man responsible. He's blonde and muscled, but in a way that says he spends all of his free time in the gym. His bulk is for aesthetics, not functionality. And he's watching Belle and Elise with horror on his face.

I wave him over. He obeys, albeit reluctantly.

"What's up, man?" he says, bobbing along with the music.

“You know this girl?”

He looks at Elise and shrugs.

“What the hell kind of answer is that?” I ask. “Do you know her or not?”

“I know her, but I just met her. She showed up here.”

“How did she get in?”

He shrugs again, and I’ve never wanted to deck someone more in my life. But that would be counterproductive.

For now.

I smile pleasantly and lean in. “They’re sisters, did you know that? Good genes.”

“Very good. I wouldn’t mind taking a dive in that pool, if you know what I mean.” He cackles at his own joke.

I clench my fist behind my back so he can’t see it. “I’ll buy the first round of drinks and you can get the second.”

“Not necessary, man,” he says, wagging his brows at me. “The younger one is already plowed. She’s a lightweight.”

“That saves you some money, then.”

“And time,” he chuckles. “If you know what I mean.”

I taste blood from clamping down so hard on my tongue. Everyone knows what this fucker means.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I say.

Then I turn back to Belle and Elise. In the minute I’ve been gone, Elise has lost even more coherence. Belle is practically holding her upright.

“She’s on something,” Belle cries, tears burning in her eyes. “I have to get her out of here.”

I nod. “Meet me out front. Stand by the bouncer until I get there.”

Belle looks like she wants to argue, but Elise is going to collapse soon. She knows she's running out of time. So she wraps both arms around her sister and starts escorting her toward the doors. I head back to Zach.

"They're going to meet us in a private room," I tell him. "Come with me."

His eyes widen. "This place has private rooms?"

I nod and wave for him to follow me.

I follow the path Belle made through the crowd until we're halfway across the club, then I take a sharp left towards a dark hallway. I don't need to turn around to make sure Zach is following me. I know he is. He sets traps for unsuspecting teenagers, but he doesn't have the sense to know when one is being set for him.

I duck into the hallway and turn left, clearing the opening. And the moment Zach appears there, I grab him by the front of his shirt and yank him into the darkness with me.

"What the fuck?" he screams, wrapping his hands around my wrists. "Whoa, man. What the hell is—"

I slam him against the wall, knocking the wind out of him.

"You think it's cool to give fourteen-year-olds drugs, asshole?"

"Fourteen? What? I didn't know she was—"

I stun him with a right hook to his jaw. "Don't fucking lie to me."

It's dark, but I can see light reflecting off the growing pool of tears in his eyes. "I'm not lying. I didn't know—"

"You came into my hotel," I say, hitting him a second time. "And targeted an underage guest." I hit him again. "And drugged her."

By the last hit, he's starting to sag against the wall. For a second, I think he might be unconscious. But then he spits blood on the floor and looks up at me.

"Wait... are you..." He frowns up at me. "Are you Mr. Zhukova?"

“Bingo, *mudak*.” I grab his shirt and lift him up so his feet are dangling just above the floor. “But if you ever pull shit like this again, I’m your worst fucking nightmare.”

All at once, I let go, and he crumples to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

I step over him and then melt back into the crowd.

Belle is waiting outside by a new bouncer. Apparently, shift change happened while we were inside. Elise is sagged against her, drooling on her shoulder.

When Belle sees me, she looks relieved. “What happened?”

“I found Zach,” I explain. “The situation has been handled. He won’t be bothering you again.”

Her mouth forms a worried “o” and I want to press my lips to it. “Did you—”

“Everything is fine,” I interrupt. “Let’s get Elise in the car.”

I move to walk past her, but she grabs my arm. “You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

Belle isn’t looking at my knuckles, but if she was, she’d see they’re split and bloodied. I pull my hand away and shove it into my pocket. “I fired him. But he’s fine.”

“Okay. Good.” She exhales.

I bend and scoop Elise out of her arms, cradling the girl in my arms away from my chest. She’s out of it, but still conscious. Barely.

“Who are you?” she mumbles to me. “P-put me the fuck down, fucker.”

I snort. Belle touches my shoulder. “Thank you, Nikolai. For... for everything. You didn’t have to do this. But... thank you.”

She’s right. I didn’t have to do this. So why did I?

Probably the same reason I punched the asshole with the silver chain and beat my own employee to within an inch of his life.

Because Belle Dowan does things to me that I can't explain.

And she makes me do things that I could never explain to her.

It will be better for both of us if this doesn't go any further. I try to find the words to say just that, but they won't come.

So I just turn and walk away.

BELLE

“I’m not a fucking child. I’m a grown up. I’m...” Elise’s voice wavers and fades. Then she lunges for the empty Big Gulp cup and gets sick.

I pat her back. “Get it all out.”

Nikolai doesn’t say anything, but he rolls down the windows. The fresh air disperses the thick smell of vomit, which I’m grateful for.

When Elise is finished, she plunks the cup in the cup holder and continues her rant. “I was completely fine! Zach was looking out for me, and I was having fun.”

“Zach pumped you full of alcohol and drugs,” I snap.

“He had plans to pump her full of something else, too,” Nikolai mutters.

Elise doesn’t hear him, but I catch his dark gray eyes in the rear view mirror. A shiver races through me at the thought of what could have happened if he hadn’t helped me get inside that club.

And what could have happened if he hadn’t spotted Elise. Not just to Elise—but also between us. For a second, I’m back on the dance floor, his body rock-hard against mine, the music pumping around us and drowning out the rest of the world.

I felt blissfully free. And I was ready to do anything with him, for him.

“I make my own choices,” Elise blubbers, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Her anger has turned to tears now. “You’re not my mom.”

“I’ve only known you a couple days and you’ve made that crystal fucking clear, kid,” Nikolai says.

He hasn’t said much of anything the whole drive, so I’m surprised to hear him speak up. It’s also nice to have someone else to defend me. Not just from the verbal attacks from my barely-teenaged sister, but also in the club.

I’ve never been attracted to the “macho” guys. To men who liked to pound their chests and face off with other men to see who was dominant. But watching Nikolai take down that chain-wearing pervert for grabbing me? Someone hand me a paper fan and let me swoon.

The effect isn’t lost when he’s standing up to my baby sister on my behalf, either. My face feels flushed, and I purposely avoid looking in the rearview mirror lest he see the obvious lusty thoughts in my eyes.

Elise seems confused for a second that there’s anyone else in the car. But then she sees Nikolai and leans forward, straining her seatbelt. “What was that, fucking—fucking Bruce Wayne?”

“Watch your mouth,” I warn her.

She hisses at me, “Oh, I get it. You’re pretending to be my mom and this billionaire asshole is going to be my new dad?”

“That billionaire asshole is the reason you weren’t raped tonight, Elise!” I squeeze my eyes closed and take a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t... You just scared me tonight.”

If Elise has any understanding of the danger she was in, she isn’t showing it. She ignores me and turns back to Nikolai. “I thought you were her boss.”

“Client,” I correct her. “I work for Roger.”

She snorts. “Okay, so is that why you’re trying to fuck my sister?”

“Elise!” I gasp.

“Why else do you think he helped you, Belle?” My sister looks at me like I’m stupid, her eyes bloodshot and heavily lidded. “He came in and scooped me

up like a toddler because he thinks you'll fu—"

I slap a hand over her mouth. "Don't you dare finish that sentence."

I wait a few seconds before pulling my hand away.

"—ck him," she says quickly, narrowing her eyes at me in a challenge.

I groan and drag both hands down my face, but I hear Nikolai chuckle from the front seat. I snap my attention to him. "What on Earth is funny about this?"

"I've scared people a lot tougher than your sister by just looking at them sideways, but she isn't scared at all. It's impressive."

"It's embarrassing," I correct, glaring at Elise, who is once again holding onto the Big Gulp like she might be ready for round two. I reach over and twist her hair back away from her face. "It's embarrassing for both of us."

Elise doesn't get sick, but the nausea keeps her quiet until we make it back to the Zinc, thankfully.

Nikolai parks at the back of the building. "There's a back entrance we can use so we don't have to carry her through the lobby."

"I'm sure that wouldn't look great, you carrying a drunk teenager into your business," I say.

Nikolai shrugs. "My reputation has handled worse."

I'm not sure what that means, and I don't think I want to ask.

Nikolai gets out and comes around to the backseat. And even though Elise can barely form a sentence, she reaches over and locks the door. "No!"

"Elise," I argue, grabbing her arm and unlocking the door, "he's going to help you get up to bed. You need to sleep this off."

"I can walk," she insists.

Nikolai is outside the door ready to grab her, but she is flailing like a drunk baby giraffe.

“Fine!” I snap, practically shoving her out of the car. “Try walking and see how far you get. Go!”

Elise scrambles out of the car and Nikolai steps back gracefully, watching our family drama play out in front of him. So much for maintaining some level of professionalism in front of my client.

Though I think the ship has long since sailed on that one.

Elise is still gripping the door when I slide out behind her, and I peel her hands away from the car. “Go on. Walk inside. Impress me.”

The back entrance to the hotel is only ten feet away, but the moment Elise takes a step, her entire body dips sideways.

I lunge for her, but Nikolai gets there first. He scoops her up into his arms. “Better leave the walking to the people who didn’t make stupid choices tonight.”

Elise grumbles something unintelligible, but doesn’t argue anymore.

I follow Nikolai through the back door and to a service elevator. It takes us to the level just below the penthouse, and then we have to switch to a separate one to get up to the final floor.

The moment the doors open to our suite, Elise claws at Nikolai. “Put me down. We’re inside. I won’t *embarrass* anyone anymore.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Nikolai drawls.

“Come on, E,” I say as gently as I can. “You don’t want to say anything you’ll regret. Remember, Nikolai got us out of that gross motel room we were in. You like it here.”

The only thing I’ve really learned about parenting in the last two months is that orders don’t work. It’s better to remind Elise that she doesn’t want to do something.

You don’t want to fail out of your math class this far into the semester.

You don’t want to hide out in your room all summer.

But hell if I know what she actually wants. A fact that is proven every single

day of our lives together.

Nikolai waves me away. “I can handle it.”

Elise takes that as a challenge, her mouth turning up in a cruel smile. “The only reason you’re here is because you have a small dick.”

It’s as childish an insult as I’ve ever heard, but my mouth still falls open at the sheer audacity of my sister. But Nikolai just tips his head back and laughs.

Elise isn’t done, either. “You stuck us in this penthouse and ran around town like a superhero helping my sister because you have to make up for the fact that you suck in bed.”

I grab my sister by the collar. “Enough, Elise! That’s...” *Incorrect*, as I can thoroughly attest. “That’s disgusting. Don’t be crass.”

“God, B, you try to come off like you’re so perfect all the time,” she hisses. “You’re always putting on this show, acting like you’re better than me. Better than everyone. But we both came from the same place. Don’t be mad at me because I don’t pretend.”

Nikolai sighs. “You’re the one who fucked up tonight, kid. Don’t take it out on your sister.”

“Don’t call me kid! I’m not a kid. I’ve dealt with more shit than you could even imagine, rich boy.”

Nikolai’s dark brow arches. “The fact that you think you have a monopoly on piece-of-shit parents is more than enough proof that you’re an immature child. Now, let your sister put you to sleep.”

Elise’s eyes widen. I feel an epic meltdown coming on. As if tonight hasn’t been bad enough already.

“Come on, Elise,” I say, trying to push her back towards the bedroom. “Let’s get you to—”

“Don’t say a word about my mother. You don’t know my family! Or my life!” she screams over my shoulder at Nikolai. Then she slaps my hands away. “Get off, Belle. You’re not my—”

I know what she's going to say. I've heard it a million times the last two months, and right now, I'm at my breaking point.

"I fucking know I'm not your mother, Elise!" I shout in her face. She's so shocked she stumbles back a step. A sick part of me finds enjoyment in her surprise. "Because I take care of you. I make sure you're fed and clothed. I care whether you get an education and grow up to be a decent human being. And our mom doesn't do any of that shit. So if you're so unhappy here, why don't you go back and live with her?"

The unloading feels amazing. Like dropping a massive weight I've been carrying for eight weeks.

But the moment the weight is gone, I realize I haven't just dropped it on the ground. I've hung it around the neck of my baby sister.

Elise sags. Her lower lip trembles, and just like that, my heart cracks.

I reach for her. "Shit, Elise. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—"

Just as a tear rolls down her cheek, Elise spins around and storms into her room. Before I can even consider following her, she bolts the door closed.

"Fuck," I groan.

"She was being a brat."

I glance at Nikolai. "Welcome to the teen years."

"She can't expect you to just take that shit," he says. "At work, it's Roger—"

"And you," I add.

"That's different and you know it," he says. "Roger harasses you at work. Then you come home to her talking to you like that. You have to stand up for yourself, Belle."

I sigh. "There's a difference between standing up for myself and being cruel. I... I shouldn't have said that stuff about our mom."

"Was it true?"

I hesitate. Nikolai steps around me, catching my gaze. "Was everything you

said true?”

“That doesn’t mean it’s okay for me to say it,” I answer. “Elise has gone through a lot with our mom. I shouldn’t have poked her wounds like that.”

The light that was coming out from under her door is already off. I want to knock and talk this out, but I have to work on Elise’s timeline. Which usually involves at least twenty-four hours to pout and then another twenty-four hours to be shitty to me before she’s ready to make amends.

Nikolai’s thumb brushes the soft skin behind my ear. “What about your wounds?”

“I’m fine,” I say, a bit too quickly to be convincing.

He arches a brow. “You’re a really shitty liar.”

His words are as rough as ever, but he’s touching me like I’m breakable. I should hate it. I’ve never wanted to be a victim. Yet another poor soul suffering in the cycle of toxic parenting and drug addiction.

But the way Nikolai is looking at me? It makes me want to fall into his arms and hide. I want him to hold me and tell me everything will be okay.

Which is absolutely, completely *not* okay.

Not only because I’ll be back home in less than a week, hundreds of miles from Nikolai. But because if life has taught me anything, it’s that no one is going to cuddle me close and solve my problems.

I have to solve them myself.

So I do the impossible—I pull away from him and walk into the kitchenette for a drink of water. “Are you thirsty?”

He shakes his head, so I pour myself a glass and chug the entire thing. When I turn back, he is standing on the other side of the island with a cell phone in his hand.

“I grabbed this from Elise’s pocket as we were coming inside.”

“Her phone?” I ask, even though I can see the familiar hot pink sticker peeling off of the back.

"I can have some tracking software put in if you're worried about her," he offers. "She'd never know it was there. And that way, you'd know where she was. Here or back home."

"Oh. Umm... hmm." I twist my lips to the side, weighing the many pros against the single con. "It would make my life so much simpler. But Elise would never forgive me if she found out."

"She won't find out."

I smile. "You're always so certain of yourself."

"I have a good track record."

I snort. "Well, I have a shit track record. So I'll stick with building trust over a long period of time of being there for her. And hopefully, that will start paying dividends sooner rather than later."

Nikolai slides the phone to the center of the island and then walks around to my side, slowly drawing closer. "Sounds like hard work."

"It is. Very hard."

He nods. "I bet you could use a break from all that hard work. Maybe a distraction. A way to... turn your brain off."

His words are like a soft caress, a stroke sending shocks of awareness straight between my legs. I press my thighs together.

"Everyone needs a break," he continues. "I could give you one. Or two, or three."

The promise he whispered in my ear last night comes back to me. And the way he touched me this morning.

I'll drive you mad for me, beautiful Belle.

A moan slips from between my lips.

Nikolai jerks me against him, and I feel his hard length against my thigh. I slide against him, and a groan rumbles through his chest.

"I would've fucked you in the middle of that dance floor," he whispers. The

stubble along his cheek brushes against my skin.

I slide my hand between us and cup the front of his pants. "I would have let you."

He bites his lip in the sexiest smile I've ever seen and then leans forward. I let my eyes flutter closed and press into my tip toes, ready to close the gap between us...

When an alarm slices through the air and severs the moment.

NIKOLAI

I assigned Giorgos Simatou a short, shrill, irritating ringtone. It reminds me of Xena, for obvious reasons. So I know exactly who is cock-blocking me when my phone starts to ring in my pocket.

Belle pulls back, her lips still puckered but her eyes open. “What is it?”

“A call,” I grit out.

I’m hard. Painfully hard. This woman has been driving me to the edge all fucking night, and I need this release like I need my next breath.

“Do you have to get it?”

Beneath her breathy question, I hear what she’s actually saying.

Stay. Ignore it. Fuck me.

And damn it, I want to do all of those things.

But maybe this is for the best. My priority is to make sure Belle completes the audit and leaves without saying a word to anyone else. Not to babysit her little sister and wipe away her tears.

The deeper I get in with her, the messier this gets.

For all of us.

I grab my phone and see Giorgos’s name on the screen. “Yeah, I need to take this. I’m going to go.”

“Go? Like, leave? You can stay. Take the call here. I’ll...” Her eyes dart to the other bedroom door. *I’ll wait in the bedroom*, is what she wants to say. But Belle can’t quite bring herself to say what it is she wants.

Maybe her little sister was onto something: Belle likes to put up a front. She wants to be professional and respectable and decent. With that in mind, admitting how badly she wants to sleep with me isn’t exactly a good look.

Her dress is rucked up around her thighs. She bats her hazel eyes at me, silently pleading. But I turn and head for the elevator. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I don’t turn to see if she’s disappointed—I know she is. But my life doesn’t allow for reflection or regrets. I made my decision, and now, we both have to live with it.

As soon as the doors are closed, I answer the call.

“Hello,” Giorgos says, heaps of false geniality in his voice. “How are you, Nikolai?”

I sigh. “What do you want, Giorgos? It’s late.”

“It is indeed late. Which is why I was surprised to hear you were out clubbing.” He clicks his tongue. “For a man of your age to be out at the clubs in the middle of the week? Unusual, I’d say.”

I stiffen. “Are you tracking me?”

I had Arslan keeping an eye on Giorgos and Xena for months before we set our current deal in motion. There’s no such thing as being too cautious when forming an alliance.

But that was before. Now, we are meant to be partners. There’s no room left for distrust.

“No. Of course not,” he says. He sounds offended that I’d even suggest it. “But I have contacts everywhere. And you aren’t exactly lowkey, my friend. You beat a man senseless within minutes of being inside. That kind of thing attracts attention.”

Bullshit. Liar. Giorgos doesn’t have nearly as many contacts as he’d like me

to believe he does. But he did have a man tailing me, I'm sure of that now.

"I hit the bastard because he deserved it. I always make sure people get what they deserve."

It's a warning as much as an explanation. Giorgos understands implicitly.

"No need for threats, Nikolai. Fight as much as you want. Blow off steam. All that means nothing to me," he says. "My real issue is with your companion."

I get off the elevator in the lobby. "What companion?" I lie.

"We came to an understanding, I thought. About your... loyalty to my sister."

"I don't owe your sister shit."

"You owe her your respect!" he snarls. It's a moment of unhinged anger, but then he transitions to soft laughter and composes himself once more. "Forgive me, Nikolai. I'm fond of my sister, and I don't like seeing her emotions toyed with."

There are rumors about Giorgos and the Greeks. Rumors about what really happened to his parents. After all, he claimed his role as leader at such a young age, and so abruptly. The official story is an assassination, but the only person I know who would want his parents dead was Giorgos himself. He's the only one who stood to gain anything.

For so long, I couldn't see it. But now, here it is. Beneath the smiling, bumbling fool I had dinner with the other night is a crazed bastard capable of killing his own family.

Ruthless, power-hungry, violent men I can handle. I can intimidate and crush them into submission as easily as anyone else.

But crazy? Crazy is another ball game entirely. Crazy men aren't rational and they aren't predictable.

I'm not afraid of Giorgos Simatou. But I'd be foolish not to be prepared for whatever he may do next.

"And I don't like being accused of things I did not do," I counter in an icy

growl. “I told your sister I wouldn’t make love to another woman, and I didn’t. Whoever you had following me in that club—”

“No one was following you,” he interrupts. “You aren’t being tracked.”

“Whoever you had following me in that club,” I repeat pointedly, “wasn’t doing their job. And if I ever spot someone following me, I’ll kill them on sight.”

He sighs. “Now, now, Nikolai, that’s certainly not necessary.”

“If you really aren’t having me tracked, then you have nothing to worry about,” I say. “And if you are, then you won’t have to worry about me violating our deal. Because I’ll end it myself.”

Arslan would be having conniptions if he could hear me right now. We’ve been hashing out the details of this deal for months, and now, I’m threatening to blow the entire thing up. And for what?

For Belle, Arslan would argue. You’re obsessing. You’re fixated.

But he’d be wrong. This isn’t about a woman—this is about respect. Not for Xena Simatou, who should be lucky I’ve agreed to marry her at all.

But for myself.

“Don’t be hasty,” Giorgos protests.

“You want to talk about respect?” I continue acidly. “I won’t be disrespected by being tracked in my own goddamn city. You’ve been warned. If I find out it’s happening again, your sister will be the lone Simatou leading the family. And you’ll be cooling off in a fucking morgue.”

I hang up the phone just as I step outside.

The evening is humid, the alleyway devoid of any cross-breeze or relief. I slide into the driver’s seat of my car and crank the air conditioner on high.

And I’m hit with the smell of vomit coming from the backseat. I turn and find the Big Gulp full of vile sludge sitting in the cupholder.

I grab it and chuck it out the window, letting it splatter against the pavement and the side of the building.

Fuck this night.

My phone rings again. It's Giorgos. No doubt calling to try and get the last word. But I'm done talking to him.

It's like I told Belle: the next move is in his hands now. He should choose wisely.

BELLE

Elise's door is still closed when I get ready to leave in the morning, though I can hear her moving around behind it.

"I'm going to work," I yell through the door. "I'll be back by five and we can get dinner, okay?"

She doesn't answer. Not that I expected her to. We're only a few hours into the silent treatment period. Long way yet to go.

I sigh and head downstairs. As soon as I step onto the sidewalk, there's a car and a personal driver waiting for me. Part of me expected to find the curb empty when I came outside. After the way Nikolai bailed last night like the penthouse was on fire, I wasn't sure what to expect.

He's not your boyfriend, I think. He doesn't owe you anything.

And thank goodness for that, is what I tell myself. The man is a criminal. In the harsh light of day, I see his behavior at the club last night in a whole new light.

He is violent and rash and worst of all, unpredictable. One minute he's burning hot, the next he's Arctic cold.

"Do your job and leave," I mumble to myself as I climb into the backseat. "Just do your job and leave."

And by the time I walk into the lobby of Zhukova Incorporated, that's exactly what I'm determined to do. I'm going to keep my head down and do as I'm

asked.

Then I'm going to put this chapter of my life to a close.

But as I'm walking to the conference room, I hear footsteps behind me. I turn around just as a broad-shouldered man covered in tattoos passes me.

"Ma'am," he says, a sly smile tilting the corner of his mouth as he struts past.

For reasons I can't explain, a shiver moves through me.

I watch him go. The man continues down the hallway, his hands clenching and unclenching as he moves towards Nikolai's office door. From behind, I can see tattoos peeking out from the collar of his dark t-shirt.

He's clearly not a businessman. I should go into the conference room and ignore him. Ignore whatever Nikolai is doing.

But I'm frozen in place.

The man stops at the end of the hall and knocks at Nikolai's door. I don't hear what Nikolai says, but the man answers loudly, his voice booming like he wants everyone on the floor to hear him.

"Giorgos Simatou here to see Mr. Zhukova." He snorts, like the title is some kind of joke. "Your receptionist let me in."

A second later, the door is wrenched open and Giorgos walks inside. Then it slams closed behind him.

"What the hell was that?" I whisper.

Indecision has me shifting on my feet, torn between walking down the hall to understand what is happening or going into the conference room and burying my head in the sand.

Then Bridget comes up behind me in the hall, moving quickly. Her sculpted face is twisted into a panic as she hurries down the hall. And just like that, my decision is made.

I snag her elbow. "Mr. Zhukova wanted you to run out for breakfast," I say to her.

She skids to a halt in her towering heels and turns to me with a scowl. "Excuse me?"

"I was just in his office," I lie. "When Mr. Simatou arrived, he asked me to send you out for some pastries and coffee."

"Pastries and coffee?" she asks dubiously. "For Giorgos?"

I shrug. "It seemed strange to me, too. I offered, but he said he only trusted you."

It's a cheap ploy, but I can tell by the small smile that settles on her face that Bridget is flattered. The woman has got it bad for Nikolai. Poor thing.

"Did he say where to get them from?"

I shake my head. "He said you know what he likes."

I'm worried I'm taking it too far, but then Bridget's smile dials up to a full-wattage grin. "Okay."

Without hesitating, she turns around and hurries back down the hallway, a little extra pep in her step. The moment she disappears around the corner, I slip down to Nikolai's office.

The door is solid and heavy, and I wouldn't be surprised if there's extra soundproofing in the walls because I can hardly hear a damn thing. I can only make out muffled male voices. It doesn't help that anytime I hear a noise anywhere else in the building, I jerk away from the door in a panic and try to look casual. But it's almost like everyone who works here has been trained to avoid Nikolai's office. They don't disturb him or even look his way most of the time.

Which makes it even more strange that someone so rough around the edges would waltz into Nikolai's office first thing in the morning without an appointment.

I'm still outside the door, my ear pressed to the wood, when their voices get louder.

"You can't just show up here unannounced," Nikolai is snarling. "Or at all. It looks bad."

“I had no choice. You wouldn’t take my call.”

“I took your first call and said what I needed to say,” Nikolai retorts. “You shouldn’t have kept trying.”

Is that the call Nikolai took last night? When his phone rang, he seemed upset about it. But it was enough for him to walk away from me.

My face flushes with shame at how stupid I was. He did one nice thing for me, and I let myself forget everything else. All it takes is a pretty face and one little favor and I’ll hop right into a bad man’s bed, apparently.

“You struck a deal with me, Nikolai,” the man responds. “I won’t take kindly to you breaking it.”

More angry barbs fly back and forth. I don’t catch most of them, so I listen harder. I don’t realize just how exposed I am until I hear the handle move.

Horried, I jump back and paste myself to the wall next to the door. It’s a godawful hiding spot, but thankfully, the man storms out of the door and down the hall without looking back. I don’t think he sees me. If he does, he doesn’t seem to care.

I sigh in relief, but it’s short-lived. A moment later, Nikolai appears in the doorway.

I turn and see his gray eyes skewering me.

“Inside,” he says darkly. “Now.”

I look down the hallway as if there might be a magic portal there I can escape through, but Nikolai makes a low noise in the back of his throat.

“You’re working down the hall, Belle. You’re staying in my hotel. You can’t run. I’ll find you.”

I frown and walk past him. “You don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I do, actually. You’re rather easy to read.”

He closes the door. It feels oddly like being sealed into a rocket ship out in space. Like the world beyond is far away and there’s only us.

Immediately, I feel myself being drawn to him. It's a magnetic pull, a tingle in my body that seems to know where he is at all times.

I feel him standing behind me. Moving closer. When he whispers in my ear, I don't even jump. I already know he's there.

"Eavesdropping, are we?"

I shake my head. "I was coming to see you."

"About what?"

"About..." I open my mouth, but the lie refuses to come. I have no excuse.

He clicks his tongue. "You'll have to lie better than that if you want anyone to believe you."

Suddenly, it comes to me. "About last night. About... what happened between us."

He circles around me and leans back on his desk. It's criminal how good he looks perched there. His muscular legs straining against the material of his dark gray pants, his fitted button-down tight across his chest. There's some gray dusting the dark hair at his temples and every single goddamn inch of him is a work of art.

"Nothing happened between us," he says.

"I know." I ignore the pang of longing that comes from the traitor between my legs. "You seemed... upset when you left. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

He snorts. "You are here to check on me?"

"I was," I snap, hoping the lie is convincing. "Until I saw some skeezy guy walk in here."

"I wouldn't have suspected you to be so judgmental, Belle. A few tattoos and you assume someone is a criminal?"

He says it in a lilting, singsong kind of way. I know he's toying with me. This is fun for him, watching me squirm. Watching me try and fail to tease out the dark truths hidden beneath his shiny lies.

“No, I assumed he was a criminal when you told him it was suspicious for him to be seen here.”

Nikolai’s smile slips. I know I’ve hit on something.

“It’s not usually suspicious for you to do legitimate business at your place of work, is it?” I challenge. “Unless, of course, the business you’re conducting isn’t official. Unless it’s illegal.”

“We already talked about this. Several times.” He lifts his hand, and I can’t help but remember that those same fingers were inside of me yesterday—which is obviously his intention. “If you need a refresher of why you’re going to do exactly what I say, I’m all too happy to give it... and I know you’re all too happy to receive.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“Only for you, Miss Dowan.” He winks. It’s way more devastating than it should be. “Now, get back to work. You’re on a deadline.”

He walks around his desk like I’ve been dismissed. I’m tempted to flee. This is my opportunity to get out of here, to untangle myself from this man.

But it’s a trick. He teases me, embarrasses me, and then trusts that I’ll run off and do as I’m told.

So far, it’s worked way too well.

Not this time.

“It sounds to me like you might be the one on the deadline,” I say. My voice is shaky, but I press on. “What’s the matter? Is the boss putting the pressure on you?”

Nikolai whips around, his gray eyes hard as steel. “Excuse me?”

“If you’re in trouble, I can help,” I say softly. “I thought you were embezzling money for yourself, lining your own pockets. But if this man—Giorgio or George or whatever... if he’s laundering money through your business or forcing you to do anything, I can help. I’m trained to report this kind of thing to the authorities. I can vouch for you.”

I'm not even finished speaking yet when Nikolai tips his head back and laughs.

It's a deep, obnoxious laugh. Like I've just told the world's funniest joke.

I roll my eyes. "I'm serious."

"Which is what makes this so funny. You actually think you can save me."

"If you're in trouble, yeah, I—"

"You can't save me, because I'm not in trouble."

I sigh. "I know it might be embarrassing to admit you're in over your head. But you can turn it around. We can get you out of this."

Nikolai whips around the desk so fast that I don't even have time to step back before he's in front of me. I have to crane my neck back to look at his face.

"I'm not part of anything I don't want to be a part of," he growls. "If I were you, *accountant*, I'd suggest you keep your mouth shut about what you don't know. Which as far as I can tell, is most things."

Asshole. How does he make "accountant" sound like a slur?

I take a deep breath and steel myself, even though all I want to do is curl up in a little ball. "At least I'm not afraid to stand up to the people who want to control me," I say, jabbing a finger into his chest. "If you think I'm going to sit idly by and let you turn me into an accessory for your crimes, you're insane. You may be afraid of this Giorgos guy, but I'm not."

"For fuck's sake," he hisses. "Ya ne boyus' etogo zhalkogo podrazhatelya mafioznogo bossa. On boit'sya menya."

I'm less surprised Nikolai has slipped seamlessly into Russian and more surprised by how much of it I understand.

I was almost fluent at one point, but my understanding started slipping as soon as my dad died. I buried that with him when I was too young to know any better.

Still, I understand enough.

“I’m not afraid of that pathetic wannabe mafia boss. He is afraid of me.”

Mafia? Did I hear that right? Images of old school gangsters with comically large guns and fedoras flood my mind.

What the hell is Nikolai tangled up in?

What the hell am *I* tangled up in?

Suddenly, Nikolai tips his head to the side and arches a brow, suspicious.

I almost answer in kind before I decide to lie. The less he knows I know, the better. “You’ll have to speak in English if you want me to understand you.”

I do my best to look annoyed even as my heart is thundering in my chest. This is so much worse than a simple case of embezzlement. If Nikolai is involved in some crime syndicate or the mafia, I could be in serious danger.

So could Elise.

“I took two semesters of Spanish in high school,” I add, “so if I’m ever lost in Mexico and looking for a bathroom, I’m set. Beyond that, it’s all a mystery to me.”

Nikolai frowns as he pushes his hair away from his forehead. A gold watch on his wrist catches the light. Underneath it, I see the edges of a tattoo peeking out.

I don’t know if Nikolai is a rich businessman trying to play with the bad boys or if he’s a crime boss in his own right.

But I don’t want to find out.

NIKOLAI

“A formal invitation *and* pastries?” Arslan says gleefully, settling into the seat across from me and grabbing an apple fritter from the box on my desk. “How rare. I’m honored.”

“Don’t thank me. Bridget bought them.”

Bridget showed up with the pastries about ten minutes after Belle left. “The accountant told me you wanted them,” she said when I looked at her blankly. “She said you trusted my taste. Do you not like these? I just thought...”

I almost laughed. Belle read Bridget like a book. The woman has been throwing herself at me since I hired her. I wondered why she wasn’t breaking my door down to apologize for letting Giorgos in to see me, and now, I have my answer: because Belle diverted her attention.

Smart girl.

“Well, I already had one asshole in my office today,” I tell Arslan. “Why not add another?”

Arslan frowns, his temperament shifting in an instant. “Who?”

“Who do you think?”

He sighs. “What is Giorgos thinking? The man is going to get himself killed one of these days.”

“I told him as much when he called me last night.”

Arslan tosses me a worried look, just as I knew he would. “I’m all ears as soon as you’re ready to elaborate.”

“He as good as told me he’s having me followed,” I explain. “I told him that if I catch any of his men tailing me, I’ll kill them. And him along with them. He should feel grateful I gave him a warning.”

“Fuck. But the deal is still on?”

“As long as Xena isn’t too upset about me being out with Belle last night.”

Arslan blinks a few times before slowly dragging a hand down his face. “I take one night off and the shit hits the fan. What were you doing out with the accountant last night?”

“Believe it or not, my intentions were pure.”

He snorts. “Of all the lies you’ve ever told, that might be the least believable.”

“Her sister got involved with some shithead punk I hired at the hotel. It was my duty to make it right.”

“Oh yeah, totally. Because you’re so well-known for righting your wrongs.”

I arch a brow. “I’m all ears as soon as you’re ready to elaborate,” I drawl.

“I’m saying you don’t do a damn thing that doesn’t benefit you or the Bratva. And we love you for it,” he adds hastily. “It’s how you rebuilt your family name from the ground up. It’s why you’re the big man now. So color me shocked to hear you were out doing acts of service last night.”

He isn’t wrong. If anyone asks me for a favor, I quote them a price. But with Belle, I didn’t even hesitate to step in.

“She has our books. If I want her to help cover our tracks, I can’t let her sister get date raped by someone with my signature on their paychecks. It doesn’t exactly foster feelings of goodwill.”

“That’s what fucking her is for,” he retorts. “That fosters a lot of goodwill.”

“And that’s why you’re single.”

He presses his hands to his chest like he's wounded, but Arslan has made it more than clear that he has no intentions of settling down. I'm not sure what kind of woman could handle him, anyway.

"So did anything happen between the two of you that Xena needs to be worried about?"

I shake my head. "Almost. But Giorgos called and interrupted. That's how I knew he was tailing me. He claimed someone happened to see me and Belle in the club and informed him, but—"

"The man doesn't have that kind of network. Not in this neck of the woods."

"Exactly," I say. "And I made it clear I didn't buy his lie for a second. But he showed up here today to make sure Belle wouldn't be a problem."

"And what did you say?"

"Do you want the full story or the summary?" I ask. "Actually, they're both the same: I told him to go fuck himself."

Arslan laughs. "And he took that well, I'm sure."

"I don't care how he takes it. I'm not going to be intimidated by him and his sister. I'll fuck whoever I want."

"Meaning Belle," Arslan suggests.

"Meaning whoever I want," I repeat.

Arslan smirks. "So, Belle."

"I'm not some schoolkid with a crush," I snap. "Plus, she's turning out to be more trouble than she's worth. She was standing outside my door while Giorgos was here."

"Shit. What did she hear?"

"Not nearly enough, since she came in after the meeting convinced that I needed to be saved from Giorgos."

"You're kidding." Arslan chuckles in disbelief.

“I wish I was.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. The room still smells like her. Like floral shampoo and clean skin. It’s like she came in and marked me with her scent. “She would not give it up, either. She was convinced I was afraid of that ridiculous little imp.”

“That ‘little imp’ is the one who is afraid. It’s why he showed up here,” Arslan offers. “He wouldn’t have come if he wasn’t worried the deal was falling apart. He has more to lose than we do.”

“I know it. That’s what I told her.”

“What does that mean? How much have you told her?” It’s not like Arslan to worry, but there is genuine concern on his face.

“I said it in Russian,” I explain. “She pissed me off. I didn’t think she’d understand, but... I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what?” he presses.

“She looked like she understood. Her face shifted after I said it. She looked... scared.”

The sight of Belle pale and shocked... it made something in my chest twitch. At least, until I understood what it truly meant. I stood there and watched her disappear into her own thoughts, like she was trying to process what I’d said.

"Maybe she was surprised," he suggests. "Or scared because you were shouting in another language. Russian isn't exactly the language of love, you know? She was probably intimidated. I caught another glimpse of her on my way in here, by the way. She's a small little thing. Fun size."

"I didn't call you in for an office tour," I snap. The thought of Arslan looking at Belle makes my blood boil. "Did you talk to her?"

He holds up both hands. "Simply making an observation, boss. You've laid claim to her. I won't touch."

“I haven’t—” I wave him away. “It doesn’t matter. The point is, I know what it looks like when someone doesn’t understand what I’m saying. Belle didn’t look like that.”

“So what are you going to do, then?”

I lean back in my chair. "I'm going to kill two birds with one stone."

Arslan screws his face up. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're on call tonight," I tell him. "Be ready for anything."



Belle climbs into the back, closes the door, and digs through her purse for some chapstick before she looks up and realizes I'm sitting in the driver's seat of the car that was supposed to ferry her back to the Zinc.

"What the—Where's the driver?" she asks.

"At your service."

She inhales sharply and then lunges for the back door. When she pulls on the handle, nothing happens.

"Child locks, Nikolai? Really?" she snaps.

I shrug. "You should always check who's driving before you climb into a car. It's a big city. You can't afford to be so careless."

"Let me out." Her jaw clenches. "I have to get home to Elise."

"I sent her dinner already. She's fine."

"You what? How did you..." She sighs. "Did you talk to her?"

"The maids said she has been in her room all day. I doubt she's ready to talk to you, anyway. You might as well come with me."

"I'd rather sit alone and eat room service than go anywhere with you."

"Liar."

Her hazel eyes narrow to slits. "You don't know a thing about the truth. You wouldn't know the truth if it slapped you in the face."

"And you'll never know the truth with that attitude."

Her jaw works back and forth. She doesn't want to ask. It's obvious she wants

to ignore me. But she just can't fight her curiosity. "What does that mean?"

"It means I've always preferred to have important conversations over dinner."

Belle leans forward, carrying her floral scent with her. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Whatever you want to ask," I answer calmly. We're only a few inches apart now, her pouty lips pursed in indecision.

"You'll answer my questions?"

I nod.

"Why?"

I shake my head. "No more answers until you agree."

She stares at me for a few seconds. Then she lets loose a long sigh and crawls forward between the front seats.

Once she's settled in the passenger seat, her seatbelt strapped over her chest, she folds her hands in her lap and nods.

"Fine. Dinner. I'm ready."

I laugh. She may think she is, but she has no fucking idea what's coming.

BELLE

Nikolai escorts me through the rather understated front doors of the restaurant he chose, but the moment the doors open, I try to skid to a halt.

“I’m not ready,” I say, trying to backpedal out of the room.

“Don’t be so dramatic. You’re fine.”

“No, this place is ‘fine,’” I argue in a whisper. “Look around! It’s a wonderland and I’m wearing business casual. I’m not ready for this.”

That is an understatement. I never could have been ready for *this*.

I feel like they’re going to charge me just for looking. The main dining area is a massive glass cube framed in black iron. The walls are Art Deco style mirrors designed to look like sun rays. At the far end of the room is a glass tree with glass lanterns hanging from the fragile branches, and in front of us is a crystal, life-size bear juggling mirrored globes. Every inch of the space is colored and reflective and dripping in details that make the design lover in me want to cry in joy.

But all I can muster is a dumb point-and-grunt at the nearest statue. “Bear.”

“Astute observation, Miss Dowan,” Nikolai drawls.

My eyes snap to him, but he’s not looking at me. He’s smiling easily at the hostess as she approaches.

“Good to see you, Mr. Zhukova,” she says. “I have your usual table ready.”

“Your usual table?” I bleat. “You *usually* come here? How often is usual?”

He places a hand on the small of my back, leading me down a series of small steps into the sunken dining space. Red velvet booths line the walls and circular tables are arranged in a line in the center of the room.

The hostess directs us to a booth in the back corner. Just above the booth is a glass-enclosed shelf of Fabergé eggs and just below that is a shelf of intricately painted Russian nesting dolls.

I frown and turn to Nikolai. “This place is Russian.”

He arches a brow and looks at the hostess. “*Nichto ne prokhodit mimo neye.*”

Nothing gets past her, he said. The woman laughs at his joke and smiles a bit too warmly at him. But Nikolai’s eyes are on me.

I don’t like being the butt of their joke, but I can’t say anything without revealing I know exactly what he said, and this feels like one of those lies that there’s no coming back from. It’s either double down or die.

So I squash down the jealousy twisting inside of me and move to slide into the booth.

Just before I do, Nikolai grabs my hand and helps me down. “Thank you,” I say grudgingly.

The hostess leaves a pitcher of water and two glasses on the table and gives us a minute to peruse the menu.

“Why are we here?” I ask.

“We’re having dinner. And they serve food here.”

“I don’t think anything is ever that simple with you,” I mutter.

“*Eto potomu, chto ty nichego ne znayesh’*,” he sighs.

That’s because you know nothing.

He’s testing me. Trying to frustrate me into cracking. Why he’s playing these mind games with me, I have no idea. Honestly, I’m starting to think he just likes it.

“If you want to have a conversation with me, you’ll have to speak English.”

“What if I don’t want to have a conversation?”

“Then you’re a liar,” I snap. “I came here because you promised me answers.”

“Then ask a question.”

My heart leaps. I’d be wise to keep my mouth shut and not ask a single thing. Ignorance is bliss, right? But Nikolai Zhukova is too enticing. I want to know all there is to know about him.

“Okay. Who is the man who was in your office today?”

“An annoyance,” Nikolai grimaces.

“Does the annoyance have a name?”

“His name is Giorgos Simatou. He is a Greek businessman.”

“What was he doing there?”

“Business.”

“What kind of business?” I grit out, already tired of this back and forth.

He smirks. “Are there different kinds? We are pooling our resources to make more money. That’s business, in a nutshell.”

“What kind of resources?”

“You’ve seen my hotel and my offices,” Nikolai says. “When it comes to resources, I have all of them.”

I groan. “Are you going to tell me a single useful thing?”

“Not if I can help it.”

I throw my hands up in disgust and flop back in my seat just as a waitress approaches. She gives me a wary look like she thinks I don’t belong here—*duh; that makes two of us, babe*—but quickly slides a pleasant smile into place.

“What can I start you off with, Mr. Zhukova?” she asks.

Nikolai doesn't hesitate. “We'll start with the *khinkali*. Make it two orders. For the entree, I'll have the *boeuf à la stroganoff* and she will have the *kulebyaka*. Do you like caviar, Belle?” he asks as he folds his menu and hands it to the waitress. He doesn't wait for my response as he adds, “We'll do the vodka and caviar tasting, as well.”

Without so much as another glance in my direction, the waitress nods and goes to submit our order.

“I could have ordered for myself,” I say when she's gone.

“Could you?” he asks. “The menu is in Russian.”

I roll my eyes. “What is *kulebyaka*, anyway?”

“Salmon wrapped in pastry.”

“I don't even like fish,” I snap.

“That's because you've never had good fish. You're from the center of the country. Jell-O molds and potatoes with lots of ketchup is more your speed.”

“You're a know-it-all, you know that?”

“Is that an official question?” he smirks. “Either way, the answer is ‘yes.’ But only because I do know everything.”

I shake my head. “You don't know everything. I bet you thought I would show up to work for you and roll over the way everyone else did.”

“That might be true. But I much prefer the way you chose to roll over.”

Even though I should throw my water in his face and storm out, my stomach actually flips at the memory of what we've done. What I've let him do to me.

What I'd let him do to me again, if I'm being brutally honest.

"Is that why you followed me into that bathroom?" I ask. "Because you know everything? Did you look at me and think, 'That woman is desperate enough to fuck a stranger in a plane'? That's probably the main way you score, right?"

"You did look desperate," he remarks.

"Screw you," I retort.

He laughs and continues. "Desperate for a little fun. Desperate for a moment's respite from the storm in your head. Desperate for a breath you couldn't catch, no matter how hard you tried."

True on all accounts—shockingly true—though I'll never admit it.

"And you thought you could help?" I say instead.

"I did, didn't I?"

"I thought I was the one asking questions."

Nikolai considers it for a moment and then shakes his head. "I want to learn about you, too."

"Why?"

He arches a brow. "Do you really have such a low opinion of yourself?"

"Of course not. What does that even mean?"

"You're the one asking why I'd want to learn more about you," he says.

I frown. "I didn't mean it like that."

But now that he says it... that's exactly how I meant it. I didn't believe Nikolai would actually want to know anything about me. Why would he? He's rich and successful. He has an exciting life, even if it is criminal. What would he want with a poor accountant from a broken family in a shithole town with a bratty teenager in tow?

"You apparently haven't had many men interested in getting to know you, I'd guess."

"Because I've been busy," I snap. "Taking care of my sister is a lot of work. You've met her; you know. I don't have time for anything else."

"You don't have time for a life, you mean."

"You're twisting my words."

“I’m reading between the lines, saying what you’re too afraid to,” he says. “But if I’m wrong, please tell me about all the men you’ve dated in the last... oh, let’s be generous and say five years.”

I give him a tight-lipped grimace. “‘Generous’ is the last word anyone would use to describe you.”

“Don’t get distracted, beautiful Belle. We’re talking about you.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“But it’s your name.” He winks at me and it feels like a checkmate. Whatever game we’re playing, I just lost.

I try to formulate a response, but I can’t think of one before two orders of what look like soup dumplings are delivered to our table.

“Dumplings?” I ask, eyebrows raised. “I thought this was a Russian restaurant.”

“Georgian dumplings,” he clarifies. “They’re filled with spiced beef and broth. You’ll love them.” He scoops one of the dumplings out with a spoon and holds it out for me to eat. “Here.”

“Are you feeding me?”

“Consider it your lucky day,” he says.

I want to refuse, but the food actually smells incredible. So I lean forward and wrap my mouth around the spoon. As soon as I take a bite, the dumpling bursts in my mouth and I moan. The broth and the meat and the spices... it’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted, no contest.

I glance over at Nikolai. His eyes have darkened and his lips are parted. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he’s as affected by this whole situation as I am.

“That was incredible,” I murmur, dabbing the cloth napkin on the corners of my mouth.

“It certainly was,” he agrees. “And I learned something new about you.”

“Which is?”

“You’re single by choice.”

I snort. “And you can tell that because I ate a dumpling?”

“I can tell that because if you can make eating a dumpling look sexy, you are more than capable of getting any man you want.”

I’m shocked by his candor. Between his surprising warmth and the delicious food, I feel my guard lowering despite my better instincts.

“You’d be surprised how many men are turned off by emotional baggage.” I scoop another dumpling off the plate and eat it. My eyes flutter closed as I savor it.

When I open them, Nikolai is watching me. “*Trakhni menya,*” he growls under his breath.

Fuck me.

This time, it’s difficult not to smile. I solve the problem by eating another dumpling.

“I see,” Nikolai says. “We’re learning so much about each other.”

“Yes, we are. Like how I learned that you kidnap your employees and bring them here to seduce them into compliance. How many other unsuspecting women have you brought here?”

“None.”

I nearly choke on my bite. “None? That’s a lie.”

“I don’t go on dates.”

I shake my head. “What does that mean? Everybody dates. Unless... oh God. Are you married?” The question bursts out of me before I can stop it. “No, wait. I don’t want to know. Don’t tell me. Just... I’d rather not—”

“Relax. I’m not married.”

I catch my breath. “Really?”

He holds up his ringless left hand. “Still waiting for ‘the one,’” he jokes.

The relief that floods me is almost overwhelming. I don't want to stop and question why that is.

“You make that sound silly.”

“Because it is,” he says with absolute certainty. “Have you ever noticed that most people find ‘the one’ within a fifteen-mile radius of where they live? Convenient, isn’t it?”

“Long distance is hard.”

I’ve never dated anyone long distance, but living away from Elise during college was torture. I tried to keep in touch and know what was going on in her life, but it was different when I couldn’t be there with her. When I couldn’t see her face when she came home from school or hold her tightly when Mom was high and passed out on the couch.

“And thank goodness fate takes that into consideration by assigning everyone a soulmate within walking distance.”

“Wow. Okay. I just learned something else about you. You’re a cynic.”

“I’m a realist,” he says. “Most successful people are.”

“There’s more than one way to be successful.”

Nikolai laughs. “Spoken like a person who grew up poor. Don’t take offense—I only know because I grew up poor, too.”

It’s hard to imagine Nikolai ever not being in control. It’s difficult to imagine there being a time when he couldn’t have whoever or whatever he wanted.

“What were your parents like?”

“When is the last time you had sex?” he asks instead of answering.

My cheeks go scarlet. “I asked my question first.”

He shrugs. “I don’t care.”

I’m more than aware there is no point arguing with him. Plus, this answer is easy. “On the plane here.”

“Before me,” he amends.

“I’m not telling.”

“Why not?” he asks. “*Ty slishkom zastenchiv?*”

“I’m not—” I start to say, responding to his question before I realize he said it in Russian.

Are you too shy?

“—telling you about my sex life.”

I shove the last dumpling in my mouth to avoid saying anything else stupid.

Nikolai’s gaze on me sharpens. I feel his eyes scraping over my skin like he’s peeling me open layer by layer.

Luckily, the waitress comes with the next course just then, saving me from the inquisition.

For now.

As the dinner continues, the conversation ebbs and flows. There are stretches of quiet as I dive into the pastry-wrapped salmon Nikolai ordered, trying to hide exactly how much I’m enjoying it. The man’s ego is big enough as it is. We talk easily about the decor and the other patrons.

But the undercurrent of tension remains.

“The couple in the corner comes here twice a week,” Nikolai says, pointing to an elderly couple across from us. They’re leaned in close together, sharing bites of food and laughing. “They escaped the Eastern Bloc together and came to America. They’ve been married for fifty years.”

“Soulmates,” I say, giving him a smug look.

He shakes his head. “Two people who have similar experiences that helped them bond and have stayed together because it makes life easier than if they were separated. It’s a business deal, nothing more.”

I look over at the couple. The way their eyes warm when they connect, the way the man has his hand on the woman’s knee under the table.

“No, it’s love. Destiny. I can tell.”

“What would you know about any of that?” he asks. “You haven’t had sex in years.”

“Just because I haven’t been sleeping around doesn’t mean—” My eyes widen. “You tricked me!”

Nikolai takes a bite of his stew and shrugs. “It was so easy it almost wasn’t fun.”

My face is beet red, I’m sure. I stare down at my plate, shoving my food around with my fork. “I’m sure that’s what you said about me after I gave it up in the bathroom.”

“That was easy,” he agrees. “But it was plenty fun.”

I glance up, and he’s smiling at me. It’s almost warm enough to be genuine, and for the briefest of seconds, I let myself imagine what it might be like to be with Nikolai. To be the woman he fawned over and took care of. To see that smile every day.

I got a glimpse of it in the club last night, in the way he protected me from creepy men and held me close. Standing next to him, I felt treasured, taken care of.

It was... nice.

My mouth quirks up in a smile now as I give in to the fantasy for a moment.

Then Nikolai looks away. His gaze lands somewhere over my shoulder.

And cold, hard reality settles over me.

This week, whatever may happen, is nothing more than a peek behind the curtain. A look into an alternate reality where I don't scrape to get by at a shitty job with an even shittier boss. A look into feeling wanted and desired instead of forgotten and discarded.

But at the end of this week, I’ll be on a flight back home.

And I’ll never see Nikolai Zhukova again.

“Keep eating. I’ll be back,” he says, dropping his napkin on the table and standing up.

I wave him away, trying to push away the disappointment gnawing at my insides. “Yeah, yeah. I’m used to eating alone, anyway.”

Nikolai’s usually graceful gait falters as he walks away from the table. Quickly, he recovers and heads towards the kitchen.

And as the kitchen door swings closed, I realize why.

He'd spoken to me in Russian.

And I responded.

NIKOLAI

I saw the dark-clad man through the restaurant's front window.

And just like that, I remembered why I'm here.

It's been too easy to be distracted by her. By how careless she is with the private details of her life, letting juicy little tidbits slip past her perfect lips before she even realizes what she's confessing.

Like the fact that I'm the first man to fuck her in years.

That shouldn't make a difference to me. I'm not some vampire on the prowl for virgins. But knowing that I'm the only one in recent history to make her feel that way... it does something to me.

The problem is, I told Arslan I'd take out two birds with one stone.

And the other bird just appeared outside.

Not only is Giorgos's spy wearing dark clothes, he's also wearing a hood despite the fact it's a balmy evening. Either his boss didn't pass on my warning that I'd kill the next spy I saw, or this idiot has a death wish.

One I'm happy to oblige.

"Prodolzhay yest'. Ya vernus'." I growl, standing up and moving around the table.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm used to eating alone, anyway," Belle replies.

There's a half-second delay between her response and my realization.

She answered me. *She answered me.*

It could be a coincidence. I'm clearly leaving the table, and she doesn't need to know Russian to jump to the logical conclusion that I said I'll be back.

But I'm not stupid enough to believe that.

I just want to hear it from her directly. By any means necessary. Hell, I'd take pleasure in wringing the truth out of her with my own two hands. Maybe I'll pull the same trick I did on the plane and follow her into the bathroom. I'll press her against the wall and fuck her until she is half-mad, muttering filthy promises in Russian in her ear all the while. I'll take her to the edge of release and then make her beg for it in my native tongue, simply for the sheer thrill of hearing words meant for me and me alone. The last words she'll ever say.

I'll do what it takes to get the answers out of her—eventually.

But I made Giorgos a promise, and right now, I have to keep it.

I sweep into the kitchen and nod at the head chef. Oleg and I have an understanding. I don't kill him for overcharging me from time to time, and he keeps his mouth shut about the business I conduct here.

I wasn't lying when I told Belle I never bring women to this place. It's purely for business. She is the lone exception.

I weave through the busy kitchen and walk down the narrow corridor that leads to the back door. On my way, I pull out my phone and send a text to Arslan.

Be ready. I'm at The Russian Room.

He'll know what it means. Be close, but don't be seen. Be prepared for anything. I'm sure he's already lurking nearby somewhere.

I step through the back door, the humid evening washing over me, and am about to head down the alley until I see a figure leaning against the brick wall having a smoke.

It's the man. The spy.

Sitting fucking duck.

I back into the hallway again, quietly pulling the door closed as I plan. The man can't be allowed to see me coming. He'll make a scene. Scream, yell, beg for his life. If I want this to be clean, I can't be spotted—

“Nikolai?”

Fuck me.

I spin around and find Belle standing behind me. Her hazel eyes are wide and worried. “What are you doing?”

“What are *you* doing?” I counter. “I told you to stay at the table.”

“You said something in Russian,” she says, chewing on her lower lip. “I didn't understand you.”

If I wasn't in the middle of something, I'd applaud her performance. Truly, it's Oscar-worthy.

But if she came all the way back here to try to prove to me that she had no clue what I meant when I left the table, then she's not quite a genius.

“Well, now, I'm speaking English,” I bark. “And you need to get the fuck out of here.”

The meek expression on her face shifts at once into indignation. She crosses her arms. “Forgive me if I sound too much like my sister, but you aren't the fucking boss of me.”

I grind my teeth just as my phone buzzes with a text from Arslan.

Greek saw me and ducked into the alley behind. Back door.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“What?” Belle asks. “What is going—”

I have seconds. Maybe less. There's no time to explain. There's barely time to think.

I grab Belle and force her into the storage closet just behind her. She shrieks,

but the kitchen is loud and bustling. No one pays her any mind.

“Nikolai!” she fights, swatting at my hands. “What are you—”

I slam the door closed and hold it with my foot as I grab a dining chair with a busted leg from the pile next to the trash can. I wedge it tightly under the door handle.

There’s no time to be sure the makeshift lock will hold. The moment the chair is in place, I spin and step into the alley.

Just like Arslan said, the man is heading my way.

When the heavy metal door opens, he stumbles away from it. “Whoa. Watch out—”

I jab him in the jaw before he can finish.

He curses and stumbles back, but stays on his feet. He’s too far away to land a punch, so I kick his knee in.

The kick isn’t solid, so the bone doesn’t snap, but he still screams.

A firetruck is wailing down the street behind us, so it’s possible no one heard him. But I’m going to make damn sure he never makes another sound.

I slide my knife out of my pocket, extend the blade, and plunge it into the man’s neck.

He opens his mouth to scream, but it’s too late. I drag the blade through his throat, severing tendons and arteries in one jagged swoop. His vocal chords are shredded. By the time I pull my knife free, he’s already going limp.

Thirty seconds later, he’s quiet and still on the pavement.

“Well, that was a fucking mess,” a familiar voice says. I turn and see Arslan stomping towards me. “You could have given me a heads up about the body. I almost brought my motorcycle.”

“You could have sat him in your lap. It would’ve been cute,” I say.

He narrows his eyes. “You can joke because you don’t have to dispose of a body tonight. Christ, I’m gonna be up forever digging a grave for this sorry

bastard.”

“I thought you lived for this shit.”

“I said I liked the killing,” he clarifies. “The clean-up sucks.”

“I would’ve asked Misha to deal with it, but you were right there in my office. Seemed more convenient.”

He scoffs. “This is punishment for visiting my best friend at work?”

“I told you to stop dropping in unannounced. Serves you right.”

“You’re a cruel man, Nikolai Zhukova,” he sighs.

He tosses me a towel and I wipe my hands off. The man was angled so most of his blood spray washed up on the wall instead of my clothes, but there’s no way to avoid getting your hands dirty when you’re dealing with a fountain of a neck wound.

“Where am I burying him?”

“Dumping him on Giorgos’s doorstep ought to do,” I say. “Saves you the digging.”

Arslan sighs. “That’s poetic, but a bit risky. You have a plan to get me out of prison when I get caught hand-delivering a body?”

“You never get caught.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll handle it. And you better get back to your date.”

“Fuck.” I glance back and am almost surprised Belle isn’t standing in the doorway. The woman has a sneaky way of slipping under my defenses, in more ways than one.

“Uh-oh. Date not going well?”

“Not a date,” I snap. “And considering she’s trapped in a closet right now, I’d say it isn’t going super well, no.”

“Trapped in a—?” Arslan holds up his hands and shakes his head. “You

know what? I don't have time for this. I have a body to transport."

"Good. I don't have time to explain," I say. I wave him off and turn back towards the door.

Just as I pull it open, Arslan calls out to me. "If anyone can lock a woman in a closet and still end the night getting laid, it's you," he calls.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Go get her, buddy."

I shake my head and step inside.

BELLE

I'm falling to pieces.

I can practically feel the memory of Elise pressed against my side, her small body shaking. It's like I'm thirteen again.

"Who was that man?"

"Mom's friend," I gritted out, trying my best to sound normal. "He'll leave soon."

"And then we'll get out of here?" she asked.

I looked around the small, dark room. It smelled like foot sweat and dust. The only light came through the crack at the bottom of the door. Sometimes, Mom slid a towel in front of it to muffle our voices so her friends wouldn't hear us scream. But she left it uncovered today. She was in a hurry.

"Yeah, we'll get out," I tell her. "We always do. We just have to wait."

Wait and stay quiet. Not usually a four-year-old's strengths, but Elise tried her best. She was too young to face the punishment for being too loud, for interrupting Mom's "personal time." But I was in the closet alone night after night before Elise was born. I sat in the dark by myself while Mom jabbed herself with needles, inhaled from glass pipes, and danced to too-loud music until the radio went off-air.

At least Elise had me to teach her right from wrong.

I had to learn the rules the hard way.

Now, trapped once again in the dark, I don't even have the comfort of Elise's small body beside mine. The shadows press in on all sides, consuming and oppressive.

"I'm in a restaurant in New York City," I whisper to myself, my voice wavering as the panic grabs hold. "I'm not in the trailer. I'm not a frightened child. I'm an adult."

The calmly spoken facts are a shitty defense against the countless hours I spent sitting in a dark closet with my little sister's tears soaking into my shirt. It happened several times a week when things were bad. Less often when Mom made one of her half-hearted attempts to clean up.

But none of those ever lasted long.

She would shut us away before her dealer showed up, afraid we'd bring down her high, I guess. Or, more likely, so she could sleep with her dealer to make up for what she couldn't pay in cash.

Elise would cry, and I'd shush her, reminding her of the punishment for making too much noise.

No food. No going outside. A coat-hanger spanking, if we really ruined things.

Be quiet. Be good. That ingrained training is the only reason I didn't scream at the top of my lungs the moment Nikolai slammed the door shut. It's the reason I'm now curled in the fetal position on a dirty floor, breathing through the pent-up trauma that's trying to drown me.

"I'm okay," I murmur to myself. "I'll get out of here. The door will open. I'll be fine."

I don't know if any of this is true. I don't know why Nikolai locked me in here in the first place. All I know is that I'm far from home and not a soul on earth who cares knows where I am.

A sob lodges in my throat just as I hear a bang on the other side of the door. A moment later, it opens.

Harsh light slices across the narrow space, and all I can make out is his silhouette. But that's enough.

"You asshole!" I launch myself towards the door, but Nikolai flips a switch, blinding me further.

I clamp my hands over my eyes, hissing like a movie vampire doused with holy water.

"I told you to wait at the table," he says simply.

My eyes are damp, and I try to convince myself it's just because of the bright light. But I know the truth: I'm relieved.

Nikolai is the one who locked me in here, and yet I'm bizarrely happy to see him again. Grateful to be out of the dark.

I shove past him into the hallway. When I'm out, I take a deep breath of the fresh air and a bit more of the unease slips away from me. Anger flows through in its place.

"I can't believe you did that."

"Really?" he asks, eyebrow raised. "You can't believe it?"

"You're right—I should've seen this coming. I guess I'm just the idiot who tries to see the best in people."

He nods. "There's your mistake."

I glare at him, wishing his gorgeous outsides would match his nasty, twisted insides. I want him to look as cruel and despicable as he truly is.

But Nikolai turns towards the kitchen, checking to see if we're being watched, and he's as chiseled and flawless as ever. Except...

"Is that blood?" I reach towards a speck of something on his collar. It's a little rust-red stain I don't remember seeing before. But before I can touch it, Nikolai twists away from me.

"It's wine." He tugs at his collar, adjusting it so the stain is less visible.

Then I notice his knuckles. They're bruised and there's something red dried

into the creases.

He follows my gaze to his fingers and then shoves his hand in his pocket. "Let's go."

"Hell no," I hiss. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Don't make a scene."

I gasp. "You're telling *me* not to make a scene? You just locked me in the closet in the middle of our—"

I stop, swallowing the word. But Nikolai is too observant to miss my almost-slip. "Our what?"

"Our dinner," I finish.

He steps closer, looking down his nose at me. "If this was a date, you'd know it, Belle."

My stomach flutters nervously, but I crush those butterflies before they can take flight. "I don't want to date you. I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to be anywhere near you."

"That's not what you said when my fingers were inside of you."

My face flushes, but I cross my arms. "Fuck this. I'm leaving."

I move to walk down the hallway, but Nikolai grabs my arm. "Yes, you are. But I'll call for a car."

"I already said I'm not going anywhere with you!"

"Which is why I'm calling you a driver," he snaps. "Just because you're naive enough to storm away from me and put yourself in danger by walking home alone doesn't mean I'm going to sit by and let you."

"I'm a big girl. I can handle myself."

"Clearly not," he says, gesturing to me as if my existence alone is proof of what he's saying. "There are bad people out there."

Are you one of them? The question is on the tip of my tongue, but I don't

voice it.

“Why do you even care?” I say instead. “It seems like it would be one less thing for you to worry about if I disappeared.”

“The police would come knocking if one of my employees didn’t show up for work.”

“I am not your employee,” I say, jabbing a finger in his direction.

He arches a dark brow dangerously. “Even worse. I can’t forge documents claiming you quit suddenly and joined the circus.”

I frown. “You sound familiar with the process.”

“I’m a man of many talents,” he says with a smirk I don’t quite understand.

The stain on his collar suddenly takes on a more menacing undertone. I shudder. The sooner I can get away from him, the better.

“Fine. Call a car.”

“You act like you had a choice in the matter,” he says, pointing for me to walk ahead of him back through the kitchen. “I already did.”

We’re walking through the dining room towards the front doors when our waitress stops us. “Is something wrong with your meal, Mr. Zhukova?”

“Everything was perfect,” Nikolai says easily. He reaches into his wallet and pulls out a thick stack of bills. The waitress doesn’t hesitate as she takes them from him. He really must be a regular here. “But we’re leaving early.”

“But... but...” The waitress shakes her head. “The vodka and caviar tasting is very expensive. Are you sure—”

“Send it to the Schneiders,” he says, gesturing to the old couple in the corner. “My treat. Or throw it all away—I don’t give a damn.”

The waitress looks at Nikolai like he’s God’s gift to Earth. If she would even spare me a passing glance, I’d disabuse her of that notion. But she keeps her eyes fixed on him as we navigate through the elaborately decorated dining room and out of the gilded front doors.

Just like Nikolai said, an unmarked black car is waiting at the curb. He opens the back door for me, tosses me in, and then leans in to speak to the driver.

“Take her straight back to the hotel. Nowhere else.”

“I’m not your prisoner,” I argue. “You can’t control where I—”

Before I can finish, Nikolai shuts the back door and steps away from the curb.

I glare at him through the tinted glass. “Asshole.”

He just stands like a statue on the curb as the car pulls away.

I’m livid for a while. But by the time the driver drops me off at the hotel, the adrenaline has worn off, and I’m starting to panic.

Nikolai trapped me in a closet and then reappeared with a bloodstain on his collar and bruises on his knuckles. Did he get in a fight? I saw it happen at the club the other night. It wouldn’t be so surprising. But then why lock me away so I couldn’t see?

The obvious answer: because I would have been a witness.

A witness to what, I don’t know. But I know it’s not good.

“I can’t stay here,” I whisper to myself as I step through the lobby doors. “We have to go.”

I’m halfway across the lobby and already determined to pack up our things and get myself and Elise out of New York City tonight... when I remember I left my laptop in the conference room at Zhukova Incorporated.

“Shit,” I hiss.

If I lose it, the money for a replacement will come out of my paycheck. Roger already made that clear before I left for the trip, and I can’t afford that.

I’m frozen on the wooden floor, my mind spinning as I try to figure out what to do next.

“Miss?”

I turn and see the night concierge smiling back at me over the desk. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, I just—” I approach the counter. “Could you call a car for me?”

“On Mr. Zhukova’s account?” she asks quietly, almost like it’s a secret.

I smile. “Yes. That would be great.”

If I’m going to leave the city, I may as well squeeze Nikolai for every dime I can.



Back at Zhukova Incorporated, it feels like I’m stumbling through the longest day in recorded history.

My feet ache from my supposedly sensible heels, and my stomach keeps growling. I never finished my dinner and I’m hungry. Maybe I’ll make use of the unlimited room service one more time before Elise and I get the hell out of Dodge.

I step into the lobby and turn towards the security desk, but the light is off and Stan isn’t sitting there.

“Fine with me,” I mutter. I don’t mind letting myself up.

But when I walk to the elevator and press the button, nothing happens. It doesn’t even look like the elevator is working. What the—

“You need permission to use the lobby elevator this late,” a voice behind me says.

I turn and see a middle-aged man leaning against a broom. A pile of dust and small trash is gathered at his feet.

“Stan isn’t at his desk,” I explain. “But I need to get upstairs and—”

“Call someone from your company to let you up.”

I give him a patient smile. “No one else is up there.”

“That makes sense. It’s late,” he deadpans. His eyes are bloodshot. It looks like it’s pretty late for him, too.

“I know. I forgot my laptop, so I really need to get up there and—”

“Stan left for the night,” he interrupts. “Access is closed unless someone can let you up.”

“There’s no one.”

He shrugs. “Too bad.” He could not sound less sympathetic if he tried.

“How do you get around?” I ask. “You have to clean all the other floors, right?”

He pats his hip with a wrinkled, calloused hand. “Keys. I take the stairs.”

“Where are the stairs? I’ll take—”

“You need the keys.”

I stare at him for a few seconds, blinking slowly. “Which you have.”

“I do.”

“So... you could unlock the door for me?”

He shakes his head again. “I’m not authorized to let anyone into the building. The only reason you got through the front door is because I forgot to lock it after my smoke break. I could get in trouble by you just being in here.”

I huff out a small sigh. “Listen, sir, I—”

“Sir?” He guffaws. “That’s nice.”

“Listen, sir,” I repeat. “I am leaving tomorrow morning for a very early flight, and I left my laptop upstairs. If I don’t get it back, I’ll be in serious trouble. Could you please help me out?”

He looks me up and down, but not in a suggestive way. Rather, I get the sense he is a man with very little power who is suddenly getting a taste of what it feels like to hold all the cards.

And he likes it.

“Sorry,” he says with a shrug and a shake of his head. “No can do. You’re out of luck, Miss.”

I sag. “I’ll only be up there a minute. I just need to run up and—”

He turns towards the entrance. “I’ll show you out and lock up behind you. Good luck with everything.”

For half a second, I consider following behind him and quietly leaving the building.

I’ve always been a rule follower. A “nice girl.” I don’t push back or make waves. I don’t complain when I get the wrong order in a restaurant. When someone cuts me off in traffic, I slow down to give them more space.

But right now, I’m done being pushed around.

“Listen,” I bark, all politeness gone from my voice, “tonight alone, my ride home was hijacked by a CEO on a power trip and I was locked in a closet.”

The janitor’s eyes widen. “What—”

“The only reason I’m still even in this godforsaken city is because my boss bailed on the work trip to go to Aruba. If he hadn’t done that, I’d be done by now. I’d be back home, safe and sound, back to my regularly scheduled programming. But no—instead, I’m here, dealing with yet another asshole chauvinist on yet another power trip.”

“Hey!” he barks, having the audacity to look offended. “You can’t say that to me!”

“So here’s what’s going to happen,” I tell him, still riding the high from my rant. “You are going to give me the keys hanging from your belt, and I’m going to go upstairs and get my laptop. If not, I’ll be sure to report to your supervisor that you’re taking smoke breaks in the middle of your shift.”

His face is creased and angry. “I’m allowed one smoke break every hour.”

“One *cigarette* break,” I clarify. “Right? I’m sure your boss would have something to say if they knew you were lighting up joints at work.”

It was a guess based on the faint scent and his red eyes, but the way he

presses his lips together tells me I hit the nail on the head. “You don’t have any proof of anything.”

“I can smell it from here,” I snap. “But give me the keys and this will stay between us.”

The man stares at me for a moment, weighing his options.

In the end, he decides I’m not worth the trouble.

“I’ll unlock the door for you,” he grumbles, stomping down a hallway that runs behind the bank of elevators. “You’ll be able to access the elevators or the stairs on your way down. Get in, do your business, and get out. I don’t wanna see you again after that.”

He slides a silver key into a solid metal door with a rectangular pane of glass in it. As soon as it’s open, I step inside before he can change his mind.

“Thank you kindly,” I mutter, already heading up the stairs.

The janitor grumbles behind me. “Crazy fuckin’ snitch.”

It’s a long trek up to the thirty-fifth floor, a fact I realize only ten flights into my climb. My chest is tight and my legs are burning, so I duck into a random floor and take the elevator up to the thirty-fourth. Then I take the stairs up one more level so the ding of the elevator won’t bring me any unwanted attention.

Bridget’s empty desk in the lobby of Zhukova Incorporated is illuminated by a single fluorescent panel above her desk, but the rest of the lobby is dark. I don’t hear any voices or see any movement. Still, I plan to take the janitor’s advice: get in, do my business, and get out.

The hallway is lit by every third light. The alternating brights and shadows give off an eerie, otherworldly glow. I feel like I’m on a movie set rather than in real life.

So when I hear low, angry voices coming from the end of the hall, I’m not even that surprised.

The scene is set. All it needed was the action.

“Get in, get out,” I say softly. “Get in, get out. Don’t linger.”

But even as I say the words, I’m tiptoeing past the conference room towards the voices. Towards Nikolai’s office.

Call it a death wish. An instinct for self-destruction. More likely than not, I got it from my mama.

The closer I get, the clearer the voices are. But I still can’t understand them. Because they’re speaking Russian, I realize all at once.

As soon as that clicks into place, the right filter flicks on and bits and pieces start making it through to me.

“... *The man was a no one,*” an unfamiliar voice says. *“I don’t give a fuck about him, but I was almost caught.”*

“But you weren’t.”

Nikolai. I know that’s him. No matter the language, his voice is rich and laconic.

“I’m your second. You should have warned me this was coming. I could have prepared better.”

“I didn’t know it was going to happen,” Nikolai replies.

“Bullshit! You know everything, you arrogant ass.”

I’m shocked that anyone could speak to Nikolai like that and get away with it, but somehow, the man doesn’t make the insult sound like an insult. It sounds like an endearment. I get the sense Nikolai and this guy are close.

“I had to show Giorgos that I’m not fucking around,” Nikolai says. *“I made a threat, and I had to follow it through.”*

“Even if killing that asshole ruined your date?”

Suddenly, the hallway feels like it is closing in on me. Nikolai *killed* someone? Tonight? During dinner?

I saw the speck of blood on his collar and the crusted blood on his knuckles. Clear proof that I chose to ignore. Because it was too messy? Because I was

afraid? All of the above, probably.

But I can't ignore it anymore.

"It wasn't a date," Nikolai barks. "I was there to gather information. Belle knows too much."

Danger. Danger. Danger.

The word flashes in my head, a neon warning sign telling me to turn and run.

"I have to get out of here," I gasp, trying to convince my legs to get with the program.

My body feels off balance. Panic constricts my lungs, and I feel like I'm running in a nightmare, my feet trudging through quicksand.

The conference room is straight ahead. I need to hold my shit together until I can grab my laptop and then I can get out of here. Away from the murderous businessman.

Fuck, how did I not see it sooner? He kidnapped Elise. He told me he is God in this city. Why didn't I listen?

He said I know too much. Does that mean he plans to shut me up? How far will he follow me? What will he do when he catches us?

A fresh wave of panic washes over me, and I reach out to steady myself against the wall.

And as I do, I hit a light switch.

The lights above me flicker on.

Then, my worst nightmare, the entire hallway buzzes to life, the fluorescents cranking on to full brightness and droning like a swarm of bees.

"Fuck."

NIKOLAI

“Who the hell did that?” Arslan asks.

The lights in the hallway just flashed on and then off again. We’re supposed to be the only two people on the entire floor. Two of the only people in the building.

I stand up and stomp across my office. “I don’t know. But I think I have a pretty good fucking guess.”

I step into the hallway and look both ways. It’s seemingly empty, but I can feel we aren’t alone.

The tingling in my chest is a sensor drawing me closer and closer. *To her.*

Because of course it is her. It is always her. Listening when she shouldn’t be, lurking outside of my office, stealing my car, following me through the restaurant kitchen while I’m trying to commit a murder.

Belle Dowan does not know when to give it a goddamn rest.

“Come out, Belle,” I call, my voice echoing down the long hallway. “You don’t have to hide.”

“Belle?” Arslan hisses behind me. “I don’t know, man. This could be Giorgos. Any of the Greeks. We just left a dead man on his doorstep, so—”

“Enough,” I hiss. Arslan shifted into Russian, but I have a feeling that doesn’t matter with Belle.

The little *kiska* knows more than she's let on.

We both stop moving and hold our breath. The silence around us seems to amplify. Every creak of the building, every buzzing electronic, every thump of my heart. It all feels impossibly loud.

And then a door squeaks.

I spin around. Belle's frightened face stares at me through the gap. As soon as our eyes meet, she takes off running.

"Belle!" I roar after her, but she doesn't slow down.

She's heading for the staircase. I give chase.

"I'll cut her off," Arslan yells, heading the other direction. No matter what happens, she won't get out of this building. Not until I'm ready for her to leave.

That is, if I let her leave at all.

Belle rips open the door to the stairwell and disappears. I lower my head and book it.

As soon as I'm in the stairwell, I can hear her footfalls on the steps. Frantic, fearful. I'm only half a floor behind her now. Every time I round a turn, I see her auburn hair dancing behind her.

Then I hear a shriek, followed by low thumps and grunts.

"Fuck," I hiss. "Belle?"

I round the next corner and see her sprawled out at the base of the stairs. Her hair is fanned out like flames, her right leg bent awkwardly beneath her.

I take the stairs two at a time and drop down next to her. "What hurts?"

"Everything," she growls. "Don't fucking touch me."

I roll my eyes. "Still too stubborn for your own good. I guess that means it isn't a head injury."

"Let me go," she says again, trying to crawl away from me. Her ankle is

already starting to swell and purple. “I didn’t hear anything.”

I snort. That guarantees she definitely did hear something. “Come with me.”

I reach for her arm, but Belle swings at me. Her fist barely misses my nose.

“You lost, Belle. Give it up.”

I grab her around the waist, pinning her right arm to her side, and I realize she’s trembling. Her entire body, head to toe, is shaking uncontrollably.

She may act tough, but she’s terrified.

“You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

“I should,” I admit. “You’ve been a real pain in the ass.”

Suddenly, I hear a door further down the stairwell open. “All good?” Arslan calls up.

“Yeah, all good,” I say.

“Okay, I’ll meet you back in your—”

“Actually,” I interrupt, “go home for tonight. I’ve got it from here.”

Belle snaps her attention to me. Her hazel eyes are wide, searching. She’s trying to guess what’s coming next. But it’s an impossible task.

Because even I don’t know what’s going to happen.

“Uh, roger,” Arslan says. “Hasta mañana.”

I wait silently. A door swings open, clangs shut.

We’re alone.

Once Arslan is gone, I hitch Belle up and over my shoulder while she struggles the entire way.

“I can walk,” she argues, slapping my back. “Put me down.”

“So you can fall all the way down the stairs?” I ask. “No thanks. I can’t interrogate a dead woman.”

“You’re going to... interrogate me? About what?”

I pat her ass, earning another slap to my back that only makes me chuckle. “Come on now, Miss Dowan. Let’s not ruin the surprise.”



Tying Belle up is more fun than it should be. The rough rope looks so coarse against her smooth skin, a delicious juxtaposition. I find myself staring at the way it tugs across her wrists rather than finishing up my knots.

She tries to fight, but she never stood a chance. As soon as her arms are strapped to the chair, there isn't much she can do. She thrashes side to side, wobbling the chair onto two legs.

“You’re going to tip over,” I warn, “and when you do, I won’t help you up.”

She huffs and sinks down into the cushion. She knows I’m right. “Why do you even have ropes in here?”

“Don't ask questions you already know the answer to.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know the answer. I don’t know anything about you.”

“And don’t lie to me,” I growl. “Don’t you ever fucking lie to me.”

My voice is vicious enough that she jolts. I’m used to having attention on me, but something about her eyes pinned on me is extraordinarily intoxicating.

I back away and pace slowly across the room. “I think it’s time for the two of us to be honest with each other.”

“I have been honest.”

“That’s a lie,” I snap. “I just warned you not to do that.”

“I *have* been honest,” she insists. “When did I lie?”

“When you told me you didn’t want me. When you said you didn’t want to fuck me.”

Her cheeks flame. “I don’t want to want you. I wish I didn’t. That’s the truth.”

Her honesty is surprising, but it’s not the revelation I’m here for. “You told me you didn’t understand Russian.”

Her frown shifts. She blinks. I can see the fear in her eyes. I’ve seen that emotion on enough faces to be intimately familiar with all its many forms.

“I don’t.”

“*Izhets*,” I hiss. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying.” Her voice cracks. She’s near tears now, straining against the ropes around her wrists. “Whatever you think I know, I don’t. I didn’t hear anything. I don’t know anything.”

I stroke my chin. “You’re a smart girl, Belle. That’s why you’re playing dumb. That’s why you’re pretending you don’t know that Giorgos Simatou is a mafia boss.”

Her eyes flare wide. “Stop it!”

“Stop what?” I ask with a smirk. “Stop telling you that I’m not *just* a businessman?”

Belle whimpers. Her wrists are straining so hard against the ropes that her fingers are turning white. She wants to plug her ears, to bury her head in the sand. “Nikolai, please. Don’t tell me anything else.”

“I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.” I pace in front of her. “How much have you figured out on your own?”

“Just let me go home.”

“You mean back to the hotel I own?” I ask. “Or to your two-bedroom apartment in Oklahoma City? The one on Lincoln Boulevard with the glamorous parking lot view?”

She gasps. “How do you—”

“I know *everything*.” I lean forward, studying the dark wave of her hair over her shoulders, the way her lower lip is jutting out, puckering as she fights

back tears. Her scent floats at the edge of my perception, intoxicating. “And I know you understand me when I speak Russian.”

She shakes her head. “No. I don’t. I don’t know—”

“I’m the leader of a Bratva,” I say, whispering the words in Russian in her ear.

Her entire body goes rigid.

“And I killed a man with my bare hands at the restaurant tonight.”

She flinches.

I smile.

“I knew it, beautiful Belle. You can’t hide anything from me.”

The clock on the wall tolls out the seconds one by one. “Why are you doing this?” she whimpers.

“Because you lied and now, I can’t trust you.”

“Okay, but... if you can’t trust me, why are you telling me all of this? Don’t drag it out. Don’t torture me. If you’re going to kill me, just kill me.”

I curl my fingers around her delicate wrists and bend down so my face is only inches away, forcing her to look me in the eyes. “I don’t kill people for no reason.”

“You killed that man tonight,” she says. “In the middle of our dinner.”

“Then I must’ve had a reason.”

She scoffs. “How could you have had a reason? We were talking, having a good time, and then you got up and left. You were only gone a few minutes when I followed. What could have happened in a few minutes to be worthy of death?”

“He was spying on us. On me,” I say. “After I warned his boss what would happen if I caught his men doing exactly that. The bastard was asking for it.”

Her brow furrows. “And Giorgos Simatou is the man’s boss?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know anything.”

She glares up at me. “Consider it my last wish.”

I bite back a smile. She was begging me to send her home, and now, she’s asking for more information. Curiosity really might kill this cat.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” My eyes dart down to her cleavage, where the skin is flushed with anger and fear.

Her glare crystallizes. “I’m sure.”

I chuckle. “Yes, Giorgos is the man’s boss. He and I are working together, but it seems he doesn’t trust me. He’s been having me followed to make sure I’m not breaking our arrangement. But I don’t much care for surveillance.”

“So you killed him?”

“After a warning.”

“That doesn’t make it okay,” she bites out. “Your life isn’t worth more than his.”

“Depends who you ask. To me, my life is much more important.”

"Being rich and powerful doesn't make you more important!"

"Maybe not, but unfortunately for the deceased, being rich and powerful allows me to call the shots. And I decided he needed to die. Therefore, he’s dead."

Belle squeezes her eyes closed, taking deep breaths. When she finally looks up at me again, her eyes are glassy. “How are you going to do it?”

I smooth my thumbs over the soft skin on the inside of her arms. “Do what?”

“Kill me,” she rasps, barely able to get the words out. “How are you going to kill me?”

I lean forward, my voice low. “Now, *lapochka*, why would I ever want to kill you?”

“Because you just confessed everything to me.”

“So?”

“So... I’m a loose end, aren’t I?”

“It’s your word against mine,” I say with a shrug.

“No, I have proof.”

I snort. “Are you trying to convince me to kill you? Because I wasn’t planning on it, but if you’d like to make an argument, then—”

“No! No. But—I don’t—why would you tell me all of this if you aren’t planning to kill me?” she whimpers. “I don’t understand.”

I smile and lean even closer. “Because there is no one in the world you can tell who will believe you. The police already think you’re a problem, and half of them are on my payroll. I know where your sister is right this second. Plus, I have our little home movie as a backup plan to keep you quiet.”

She narrows her eyes into furious slits. “That video isn’t proof of anything.”

“It’s proof that you willingly submitted to me,” I tell her. “It’s proof that you’re in this with me. That you and I are working together. Or, at the very least, you knew more than you let on.”

More to the point, it’s proof that she feels this animal thing between us, too. She just can’t fight it off as well as I can.

“It would be easier to kill me,” she whispers.

Her breath is warm on my face. “Maybe. But it would be much less fun.”

Belle licks her bottom lip, and I want to take it in my mouth. I want to taste every part of this confounding woman.

And based on the way her eyes are taking me in, I think she feels the same way.

Suddenly, she exhales sharply and pulls back. As far as she can while still being restrained, anyway. But when she jerks away, I notice her wince.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, stepping back to assess her.

She shakes her head. “It’s just my ankle.”

I look down at her leg. It’s obviously injured. The swelling I noticed in the stairwell has doubled since I tied her up and her ankle is pressing tightly against the ropes.

I grab my knife off my desk—the same one I plunged into a man’s neck not even an hour ago—and cut the ties around her right leg. As soon as she’s free, Belle straightens and bends her knee. Then she tries to roll her ankle, but winces again.

“Stop moving,” I bark.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Just let me go.”

I ignore her and turn to my minibar. It looks like a normal wooden cabinet, but the bottom drawer is a freezer and the top drawer is a refrigerated liquor cabinet. I reach into the freezer and pull out a handful of ice.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m not making you a drink, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I wouldn’t accept it anyway,” she hisses. “Might be poisoned.”

“There are much more interesting ways to kill you if I chose.”

I drop the ice on my desk and start unbuttoning my shirt with damp fingers.

“What are you doing now?” she asks again with even more urgency in her voice.

“Why?” I taunt. “Interested in filming a sequel?”

Her top lip curls in disgust. “You’re a pig.”

I peel my shirt off, not missing the way Belle’s eyes trail over my chest and abs. Then I tie off the end of my shirt sleeve and drop the ice into it.

When I turn back with the makeshift ice pack and kneel in front of her, Belle presses her knees together.

The urge to part her legs and make her feel better in an entirely different way

is almost overpowering. But I resist the desire and press the ice pack against her ankle instead.

She winces but lifts her foot slightly as I secure my shirt around her leg, one of my hands gripping her lean, smooth calf. Her skin is warm against my fingers, her muscles trembling.

“You can stop shaking. I’m not going to kill you, Belle.”

She forces her body to still. “I know. I’m not scared of you.”

“I didn’t say that.”

She looks down at me, her brows pinched together. “Huh?”

“I said I won’t kill you. I didn’t say you shouldn’t be afraid of me.”

She gulps. “But I’m not,” she croaks eventually.

“Then I take it back,” I say, dragging my finger over her other knee and down her shin. Goosebumps blossom in the wake of my touch. “Maybe you aren’t a smart girl. Because when it comes to me, you should be very, very afraid.”

I move up to untie her wrists, but she doesn’t loosen her hold on the arms of the chair. Her knuckles are white. “If you aren’t going to kill me, why should I be afraid?”

I draw dangerously close to her mouth as I loosen the ropes and let them fall to the floor. Unconsciously, she angles her face up towards mine, her lips parting on a soft sigh.

“Because, beautiful Belle, there are worse things than death,” I whisper. “And I’m well-versed in all of them.”

Just before our lips touch, I pull away and leave her alone in my office.

NIKOLAI

I'm on my phone, rewatching the security footage of Belle limping out of my office.

I grimace. I should have escorted her back to the hotel. I wasn't lying when I said her dying could be a problem for me, and I sure as hell don't need the police sniffing around anymore than normal.

At least, that's the reason I tell myself.

The truth is that I despise seeing her injured. Seeing her alone.

A wadded-up cocktail napkin lands on my screen. I look up to see Arslan staring at me around the stripper straddling his lap. "You look like you're at a fuckin' funeral, man," he yells over the music.

"Given what happened tonight, I'd say the mood is appropriate."

Arslan glances at the bottle-dyed blonde grinding against him, but she's not paying attention to what we're saying. She's getting paid good money to dance on his cock, so that's what she's doing.

The rest of the dancers are congregated around our table, all of the women smiling in my direction and batting their lashes in hopes of an invitation. They know Arslan is throwing around cash like it's going out of style, and they're wondering if I'll follow suit.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Tonight was a success," Arslan says. "You set out to get two birds with one stone, right? And as I see it, we

did that. So you might as well celebrate by getting your stones off with one of these beautiful birds now.”

I roll my eyes. “Your metaphors need work.”

He flips me off. “Maybe a dance will make you feel better. Pick your poison. My treat.”

I scrub my hand down my face. Maybe a dance is exactly what I need to get her off my mind.

I peruse the half circle of women around our table. They’re all in various stages of undress. One woman has on a lacy black bra with a leather mini skirt and fishnets. Another has a cropped white t-shirt on, but I can see her nipples through her shirt and she ditched her skirt in favor of a vibrant red thong.

I shrug and wave a hand. All of the women move forward, but one pulls away from the crowd. She is in a skintight dress with a zipper up the front. The zip is pulled down low enough to reveal her lacy bra and ample cleavage.

“Do you need something, Mr. Zhukova?” she asks with a breathy voice.

“A dance!” Arslan answers for me. “Give him a dance, honey. He’s stressed.”

The woman smiles seductively and walks closer, her hips swaying with every step. “Do you need a break, Mr. Zhukova?”

My cock is hard between my legs, but it has nothing to do with this woman. It’s been that way since I walked out of my office an hour ago.

The stripper doesn’t bother waiting for an answer. She climbs on top of me and unzips her dress all the way so she can spread her thighs and straddle me. As soon as she does, she drags her pussy over the front of my pants, massaging my hard length through the material.

“Oh,” she giggles. “Seems like someone has had a really *hard* day.”

“Don’t talk,” I growl.

Her smile is still in place, but it’s a bit more strained. “Whatever you like,

Mr. Zhukova. I can help you turn it all off.”

I should be fully focused on the woman actively grinding against my dick, but all I can think about is Belle.

Belle panicked on the plane, her face pale and terrified.

Belle flushed and breathing heavily in the bathroom, her legs spread so I could ram into her from behind.

Belle moaning, “I want it. I want to come.”

I helped her turn it all off. I helped her forget.

And now, I can’t get the woman out of my fucking head.

The dancer is arching her back, shoving her tits in my face. And it isn’t doing a damn thing for me. I grab her around the waist and toss her off. Her eyes snap open and she scrambles to her feet.

“Is everything—Is something wrong?” she asks.

I wave her away. “Don’t worry. You’re still getting paid.”

“The fuck she is,” Arslan protests. “That was my treat, remember? And you didn’t get treated. What’s wrong?”

“You had the right idea,” I mutter. “But the wrong woman.”

He pushes the dancer on his lap aside, not worrying at all when she nearly lands on her ass on the floor. “Is this about Belle?”

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, a loud bang cuts through the din of music and voices.

Arslan and I look at each other, and we both instantly know what it is.

A gunshot.

“Get down!” Arslan yells to the girls as more shots and screams cut through the noise.

It’s dark in here. I don’t see where the shots are coming from. The dancers who were around our table are scattering, screaming and tripping over their

heels. But Arslan and I stay ducked behind the booth.

I grab for the gun concealed inside my jacket. When I look over, Arslan has his at the ready, too. And a big, goofy grin on his face.

“It would be great if you didn’t look so happy about this,” I snap as two more shots ring out.

One of the bullets clips the top of the booth and takes a chunk out of the wood. Splinters and padding rain down over me.

“Sorry, brother,” Arslan says. “But this is what I live for. On the count of three?”

I nod.

“One, two, three—”

We each take off in opposite directions. Arslan moves towards the bar, and I sprint towards the bathrooms.

Colored lights are still strobing in front of the DJ booth, reflecting off the haze in the air and making it impossible to see anything. I look over and can’t even see Arslan through the gloom.

“Arslan?”

As soon as I yell, there’s another shot. It ricochets off the pole behind me, and I duck behind a booth for a little extra coverage.

Then I hear Arslan shout from the other side of the club and more shots ring out.

“He’s running!” Arslan roars.

I jump to my feet and we both take off towards the front door, sprinting past people sprawled on their bellies on the ground. We burst out into the chaotic night.

Out on the sidewalk, people have scattered and there are sirens off in the distance, but no sign of the shooter.

“I couldn’t see shit in there,” I growl. “Did you see who it was?”

He shakes his head. "They were in dark clothes and it was too smoky."

"Fuck." Arslan spins around like a dog eagerly searching for his tail. "Do we split up and search or—"

"No need." I holster my gun and march towards my car. "I know just where to look."



Giorgos is holding court at his usual table in the back corner of the Greek restaurant, perched where he can see everyone and everything coming.

Before Arslan and I even make it through the front doors of the restaurant, the hostess is moving towards us.

"Mr. Simatou is entertaining another guest," she says the moment we're through the front doors. "He asks that you wait here and—"

"Fuck off," I spit.

She opens her mouth like she's going to say something else, but Arslan warns her off as I keep striding past her. "Not a good idea to get between a lion and its supper, sweetheart. I promise you aren't being paid enough to deal with this."

The woman looks conflicted, but she decides to stand back.

Good decision.

I march across the restaurant towards Giorgos. I see him trying to quickly dismiss the two other men sitting at his table, but he isn't fast enough.

"I fucking warned you, Simatou," I growl, slamming my fist on the table hard enough to tip over a half-full glass of red wine. It soaks into the table linen like blood.

He smiles at the now-nervous men with him. "Sorry about this, gentlemen. We'll reconvene later."

"If I let you walk out of here," I snarl.

Giorgos laughs like it's a joke, but I can see the unease in his brow. As soon as his guests are gone, he drops the smile and lowers his chin. "What the fuck, Nikolai?"

"What the—You're asking him 'what the fuck?'" Arslan stammers in disbelief. "No, he's asking you 'what the fuck?' I am, too. So... what the fuck?"

"What the fuck?" I repeat. "Shooting up an entire club to take me out? That's sloppy, friend. Very fucking sloppy."

"And whoever you sent has shit aim," Arslan adds. "He never even got close. Though I guess I should thank you for that."

Giorgos holds up a hand to stop us. "Friends, please. You were shot at? That is disturbing news."

I exhale angrily. "Don't waste my time by acting like you don't know. You were pissed because I killed your spy and thought you'd retaliate."

At that, his eyes bulge. "What? You killed one of my men?"

Arslan makes a low, anxious sound in the back of his throat. "Maybe he really doesn't know, boss."

I have to admit, this would be a pretty convincing display, especially for Giorgos. Acting is not one of his strengths.

"Cut the shit and tell me what you know, Giorgos."

"I know nothing, apparently," he spits. "I came here for dinner and drinks. I've been here for hours. I haven't heard anything about the man you—who did you kill?"

"Whoever you sent to watch me at The Russian Room. I slit their throat."

He whistles. "Well, it sounds like they deserved it, then. I warned my men to end surveillance."

I arch a brow. "So you're saying one of your men decided to spend his evening watching me and my... my accountant for fun? Under threat of death?"

"My men are loyal, but I never claimed they were bright," he says with a shrug. "Besides, I stand to lose a lot if you're dead, Nikolai. We're allies."

"Tenuously," I remind him. "Things can change."

"But some things don't," he says. "Which is how I know this was the work of the Battiato mafia."

"How the hell do you know that?" Arslan asks.

"Who else has more motive to decimate the Zhukova Bratva? They did it once before."

"And then I brought my family's legacy back from the brink," I growl. "I've been the king of this city for years now. This deal would carve that in stone. So the timing of this attack is a little convenient, wouldn't you say?"

Giorgos nods. "I agree. They try to kill you just as you and I are finalizing our agreement."

I feel Arslan look at me. Giorgos is making a good point.

"They want to destroy the deal and keep us both from gaining more influence," I say, talking through the theory.

"It makes sense," Giorgos says eagerly, relieved to no longer be the prime suspect. "They want to be the top dogs. And you don't have an heir."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Neither do you."

He holds up his hands. "That wasn't a threat. If you recall, our deal provides you with the means to continue your family line."

Arslan snorts. "Talk about your sister that way in front of her, and she'll gut you. The bitch is crazy."

"Crazy, maybe," Giorgos agrees. "But she's strong, too. And beautiful. And she comes from a powerful family. If you don't want to make an alliance with us, someone else will."

I step forward, my fingers drumming on the table near a glistening steak knife. "Are you threatening to align with the Battiatos behind my back?"

Giorgos eyes the knife and then looks back up at me, a nervous smile on his face. "I want to work with you, Nikolai. I have no plans to break our deal. But if you don't respect the agreement... well, you'd do the same thing in my position."

He's not wrong.

But that doesn't mean I have to like it.

The thought of Giorgos and the Battiatos coming together against me... fuck that. I was born in the dirt, and I fought and clawed my way up from obscurity. I'll die for what I've built.

More to the point, I'll kill for it.

"Your family has a rich history," Giorgos continues. "And I, for one, have always liked an underdog. I would choose you over the Battiatos any day. I did choose you. As a partner for me... and my sister."

There's no misunderstanding him now.

"You want me to swear loyalty to your sister."

He shrugs. "She's a proud woman. She won't marry you if there are any other women in your life. And if she doesn't marry you, the deal falls apart. I'm sorry, Nikolai. But I know you understand."

Arslan is looking back and forth between the two of us like he's at a tennis match, waiting to see who will score.

I clench my teeth in irritation. The Battiatos have thrown a massive fucking wrench in the works, and I have no choice. It's either lose Belle and marry Xena, or risk those fucks coming for what's mine.

I know the priorities in my life.

The Bratva always comes first.

"Our deal stands," I say simply. "You hold up your end, I'll hold up mine."

Giorgos relaxes. "You're a good man, Nikolai."

"No, I'm not," I say. "That's why you're in business with me."

Giorgos tips his head back and laughs, but I just wave Arslan towards the door. I don't find any of this shit funny.

BELLE

I'm tied to the chair in Nikolai's office again. But the ropes are soft as silk, whispering like a breeze across my heated skin.

"You can have anything," Nikolai whispers in my ear. "Beautiful Belle, just name it and it's yours."

He says my name like a prayer, like it's something sacred and precious. His sinful lips glide up my throat to kiss the tender skin beneath my ear.

I close my eyes and try to contain the fire raging inside of me.

If I don't, we'll both burn.

"I shouldn't," I whisper. "I'm here to work. I need to... to work."

"I'll put you to work," Nikolai says.

I smile. "That's not what I mean."

Nikolai kneels down in front of me, one dark brow arched. "But it's what you want."

He pushes my legs apart, and I realize the ties are suddenly gone. So is his office. Instead, we're now in a dark room, and I'm sitting on the edge of an endless bed. Nikolai presses a firm hand to the center of my chest and pushes me back into the plush mattress.

"What are you—"

Then his hands are behind my knees. He lifts them over his shoulders, and I feel his warm breath between my thighs.

I'm naked. I don't remember when I took my clothes off, and I don't care. I can't remember a single reason why I would deny myself this. Why I would refuse this man.

I ache for him, the blood in my veins thrumming out his name, pulsing for him.

"I can make you forget," he breathes. He drags a finger down my slit, and I tremble.

"Make me forget what?"

He parts me with his finger, and I can tell by the cool air washing over me that I'm wet and ready for him. He's barely touched me and I'm already on the edge.

"That I'm the leader of a Bratva," he snarls in Russian. "And I killed a man with my bare hands."

When I open my eyes, I'm alone and staring up at the ceiling of my hotel room. But my legs are spread and my hand is inside my panties.

Quickly, I yank my hand away and sit up, trying to shake off the dream.

Or... nightmare. It was a nightmare. Wasn't it?

"Fuck me," I groan.

I hear Nikolai's deep dream voice in my head. That's what you want, isn't it? For me to fuck you.

I'd say no, but he warned me not to lie.

*I throw back the blankets and slide out of bed. My ankle stings when I put weight on it, but it's already feeling a lot better. Nikolai's makeshift bandage brought down the swelling, and I took an anti-inflammatory when I got home. Or, back to the hotel, anyway—which, I remind myself firmly, is *not* home.*

But that was hours ago, and I'm sure I'm overdue for a second dose.

The living room is dark when I pad into the generous kitchenette. I open the pill bottle and pop two more, washing them down with water from the sink. Then I grab my phone off the counter and see there's a text from Georgia.

GEORGIA: *When are you coming back? The office is boring without you.*

She sent it only a few minutes ago. She's always one of the first people in the office, up and at 'em by five-thirty in the morning. I'm barely even conscious before seven.

I fire off a response. *Got hung up. Blame Roger. Hopefully just a few more days.*

It's strange to imagine going back to Oklahoma City now. Back to my apartment and my office. After what has happened here, I can't imagine life ever being normal again.

But of course it will be. Men like Nikolai lose interest quickly. He'll forget about me the moment I'm out of his sight for too long.

I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed by that.

Georgia texts back immediately. *I'm sure you're ready to be home. Zhukova is the worst.*

BELLE: *Do you mean the company or the CEO?*

BOTH!! she responds.

I type out a message and delete it. How do I ask Georgia what the hell is going on at Zhukova Incorporated without setting off alarm bells? Nikolai said he didn't plan to kill me, but I know he's capable of it. He whispered the truth in my ear.

And then you had a sex dream about him, the judgy voice in the back of my head hisses.

Finally, I type out a message and hit send.

BELLE: *Did anything specific happen to you when you worked on the Zhukova account?*

For all I know, Nikolai is monitoring my phone. He might be monitoring me

right now. I look around the room, checking to see if there are any telltale glowing red lights in the corners of the room.

Interested in filming a sequel? Even now, the memory of his taunting question makes me feel hot. I was bound in his office, the threat of death looming before me, and I still almost said yes.

When my phone dings with a notification, I startle.

GEORGIA: *They were pushy and acted like I was a nuisance. They didn't trust me to do my job. Basic patriarchal bullshit. Is that what you mean?*

"No," I mutter aloud, my thumbs hovering over the keyboard. "It's not."

But I can't exactly ask Georgia if Nikolai ever finger-banged her in his office or tied her to a chair and whispered filthy promises in her ear. So I set my phone on the counter face down and drop my face into my arms.

"You're going to be a wreck today."

I jump again and turn around to see Elise standing in her doorway. She has a comforter pulled around her shoulders and her hair is mussed from sleep.

"You're up early."

"Late, actually," she says. "I haven't gone to bed yet."

"But the sun is coming up!"

"That's the beauty of not working," she says with a shrug. "But you have to work, and I know you got in late last night. I heard you."

Thank God she didn't come out of her room to talk to me. I wouldn't have been able to explain the business casual ice pack around my ankle.

"I had, uh, dinner with some people from the office," I say, navigating carefully around the whole truth. "Then I realized I left my laptop at the office, and I had to go pick it up. It was a whole thing."

Elise shuffles past me into the kitchen and gets a bottle of water out of the mini fridge. She slides it across the counter to me. "You should drink this. You look like shit."

And that right there is Elise's way of mending the broken fence between us. She's shown a modicum of care about my physical being. She may as well have thrown her arms around me and wept into my shoulder.

"Thanks a million," I drone. Though I do twist the cap off and take a long drink. "What are you going to do today?"

"Sleep."

"That's it?" I ask. "Nikolai gave you access to a driver. You could drive around the city. Visit a museum or something."

Elise points towards the door. Her black Vans are laying in a heap by the door. "I tore through the sole of my shoe the other day."

"What? When?"

"They were already duct taped together," she says. "But I took the stairs from the lobby to the penthouse the other day and they fell apart. I'm not fit for a walking tour."

I chew on my lower lip. I know exactly how much money is in my bank account: barely enough to get us back home. Definitely not enough to get us home *and* buy her a new pair of shoes.

Especially if I refuse to go back to Zhukova Incorporated and get fired.

Elise must see the concern on my face because she waves a hand dismissively. "It's fine. I'll steal one of these bathrobes and sell it online. Have you felt them? They're like clouds."

I laugh, but we both know it's not a joke. If Elise wants a new pair of shoes, that's the kind of shenanigans we'll have to stoop to.

Unless I go back to Zhukova Incorporated, finish my work, and keep my job.

In the end, it's not a hard choice.

I can't run away from this. Not unless I want to take my little sister down with me.



Walking through the hallways of Zhukova Incorporated has always been uncomfortable, but now, it's on another level entirely.

I study each face as I pass—Bridget at reception, Arnold tapping away in his dark dungeon of an office, all the people tucked away and quietly lying for Nikolai day in and day out.

How many of them know what is going on here? Are they part of the Bratva or are they as unaware as I was when I accidentally stumbled into this snake pit?

I try to keep my head down and my mind on the task ahead of me, but then I catch movement from the corner of my eye. Three people are in the conference room down the hall from where I'm working.

One of them is Nikolai. His back is to me, but I recognize the sharp cut of his suit jacket, the silky wave of his dark hair.

The other is Giorgos Simatou.

I should keep moving, but I freeze in place. Giorgos is wearing a suit today, most of his tattoos hidden beneath the tailored material. He looks almost presentable. If I didn't know who he was, I wouldn't question a thing.

Though the woman next to Giorgos would have sparked more than a few questions.

She's long and lean. An off-the-shoulder sweater hangs down dangerously low over her chest, revealing an unbusinesslike amount of cleavage. And she's looking at Nikolai with stars in her eyes.

Someone should tell her who she's looking at. Someone should tell her what he's done. Then maybe she wouldn't be making "fuck me" eyes in his direction.

Far beneath all the jealousy boiling inside of me is a little voice wondering why I care so much. But it's obvious: I may wish I didn't want Nikolai as much as I do, but I know all too well that wishes rarely come true.

Before I can gather myself and move on, Giorgos looks over at me. His mouth twists into a curious smile that makes my skin crawl.

A moment later, Nikolai turns around, too.

His expression is unreadable as his pale gray eyes land on me. And I realize that, yet again, I'm lurking, eavesdropping on the exact kind of heinous shit I'm supposed to be steering clear of. I lower my head and practically sprint into the conference room down the hall.

My heart is racing, far too much adrenaline flooding my system, when I hear a soft chuckle.

"About time you showed up," a familiar voice says.

I jolt away from the door and see my boss sitting at the head of the conference room table.

He's wearing a ridiculous floral button-down and a vicious sunburn. "Roger?" I gasp, rubbing my eyes just in case I'm hallucinating. "Where did you—why—what are you doing here?"

"I came to surprise you." He holds out his arms and waggles his fingers like tentacles. "Surprise!"

"Surprise," I mumble back, too stunned to say anything else. Then I shake my head. "Did Nikolai call you?"

Roger's face twists in confusion. "Mr. Zhukova? No, he didn't call me. Never met the guy, actually. After our call the other night, though, I decided you needed my company."

"You left Aruba to come help me?"

He smiles like a hero coming to claim his reward. "I kind of threw you to the sharks having you handle this one alone. Plus, Aruba was making me wish I had some company of my own."

Aaand, there it is: he wished he had someone to fuck. It doesn't take a genius to puzzle that one out.

Still, Roger being here is some level of protection, right? When drowning, you don't refuse a piece of driftwood in hopes of finding a dinghy. You take whatever help you can get.

Roger, for better or worse, is help.

“Wow,” I say, trying to paint a smile on my face. “That’s great. It will be really nice to have your expertise. I’m... Well, I’m in over my head here.”

Roger steps closer and lays a hand on my shoulder. His thumb circles lightly over my collarbone. “I knew you’d be happy to see me.”

I’m about to pull away when I see a shadow near the door. Without looking, I know it’s Nikolai. And without thinking, I step forward and throw my arms around Roger’s neck.

He smells like sweat and mildew, like he left his shirt in the washer too long before drying it. But I hold the hug, even as he wraps his arms around me, his hands inching dangerously low on my back.

But just before he reaches the waistband of my pants, I back away. “Okay. We should probably get to work.”

Roger turns towards the table. I turn towards the door just in time to see Nikolai walking briskly down the hallway.

BELLE

“Wow, you really were in over your head,” Roger says for at least the fifth time. “You’re lucky I came to help. You would have been here forever.”

“It already feels like I’ve been here forever,” I mumble.

The week has dragged on, but I’m talking specifically about today. It’s well past eight and the rest of the office is empty. But Roger doesn’t show any signs of wanting to call it a day.

“We have a lot of ground to make up.” He points to the hamburger sitting in front of me. “You should eat. This could be a while.”

I bite back a groan. I already texted Elise to warn her I’d be late again. I did not mention Roger was here. Her mind would jump to the worst possible conclusion if I told her I was working late with Roger.

I’m having a hard enough time not letting my mind wander there myself. But thankfully, he’s been hands-off all day since our hug.

“I’m sorry I got so far behind,” I say. “I just wasn’t sure what to do with all of the discrepancies.”

I’ve mentioned all of the errors in Zhukova Incorporated’s books several times today, and each time, Roger has had the same response.

“Not many companies handle their charity this way, so it’s complicated. I should have warned you.”

I truly can't tell if Roger believes what he's saying or if he's trying to cover for Nikolai. At this point, I don't want to ask—I know far too much as it is. As much as I dislike Roger, I don't want to bring him into this tangled web. Innocence is bliss, right?

"I should have come with you, actually," he says, turning to face me.

I shrug. "It's fine."

"No, it's not." Roger wheels his rolling chair closer to me. His knee brushes against mine, and I pull back. But he follows, maintaining contact. "I told you that you could handle this account on your own, but I knew it wasn't true. The truth is, I didn't think I'd be able to handle sitting in this small room with you day after day."

Oh no. Danger. Red flag. Every alarm system in my body is going off, but I try to quiet the noise.

I take a deep breath and laugh. "Hey, no worries. If you don't have an annoying coworker then that coworker is probably you, right?"

Roger licks his dry lips and shakes his head. "It's not because you're annoying, Belle."

I grab my hamburger and take a large, disgusting bite. Ketchup drips down my chin as I chew, but Roger is undeterred. He reaches out and swipes the drippage away with his finger.

Then he *licks his finger*.

I struggle not to look as disgusted as I feel.

"It's because you are absolutely delicious." He's clearly pleased with his sweet talk, but I feel like I'm going to barf.

"We should work," I say while chewing. "There's a lot to do."

"I'd say we both deserve a break, wouldn't you?"

Why did I wear a skirt today? I should have worn pants. A parka. A space suit. I want at least five more layers of material between my skin and Roger's fingers.

“We’ll switch!” I offer, standing up to walk around the table. “You take a break, and I’ll input the data for a while. Take a load off and—”

Roger grabs my hand, holding my wrist tightly so I can’t walk away. “Belle, you don’t have to deny yourself any longer.”

“I need this job,” I whisper.

I’m saying it for my own benefit as much as Roger’s. Trying to remind myself why I’m still here, why I put up with this shit.

Elise’s torn shoes. Our too-expensive apartment. Fucking *groceries*.

I have bills to pay, and I need this job.

Roger nods and pats my arm with his other hand. “I know. Which is why this can stay between us. Nothing will change.”

His hand slides up my forearm and then higher. He brushes across the sleeve of my shirt and then hooks his fingers around my shoulder to pull me closer to him. I try to resist, but underneath his ill-fitting clothes, Roger is surprisingly strong.

“Everything will change,” I protest. “We can’t. We shouldn’t.”

Also, *I don’t want to*. I’d rather chew off my own arm.

“We’re both adults,” Roger whispers, leaning close. I can smell the onion on his breath. “Workplace romances happen all the time, Belle. And I traveled a long way to be here.”

“For the company.”

He shakes his head. “For *you*. I left Aruba to be here with *you*.”

Then Roger is leaning towards me, eyes closing, dry lips puckering. And for a horrifying moment, I don’t know what to do.

I can’t afford to lose this job. Maybe one kiss will pacify him. Maybe if I hold still, he’ll get bored and move on to tormenting someone else. Resisting only makes him want me more.

But I hear Nikolai’s voice in the back of my head. *Stand up for yourself,*

Belle. Don't let him walk all over you. Fight back.

Quickly, I slam my palm against Roger's chest. Air whooshes out of his lungs, and he stumbles back a half step. His face creases in a frown.

"Don't worry," he croons again like he's placating a wild animal. "No one will know. We're alone."

We're alone. Is that a statement or a threat?

It works in both ways. Because he's right: there's no one to save me. No one to hear me scream. I have to play this right or it could get dangerous.

"But *I* would know," I growl ferally. "I know myself, Roger. I wouldn't be able to work for you anymore if our relationship progressed beyond coworkers. Beyond boss and employee. I would have to quit. But I already told you I need this job. So... I can't."

He deserves a half-eaten hamburger to the face and a milkshake down his pants, but I offer him my kind explanation anyway. For a few stunned seconds, Roger weighs it.

Then his face twists into a hideous scowl.

"You fucking tease."

I try to pull away from him, but he grips my wrist even tighter. "Roger," I say, "I'm sorry, but—"

"I'm sorry but I'm just going to throw myself at you and then yank it away at the last minute," he says in a nasty imitation of my voice. *"I'm going to throw my arms around your neck and press my tits against your chest, but when you try to make good on it, I'm going to back away and play prude."*

"I'm not a prude!" I snap. "And I gave you a hug. Not a lap dance."

"In a skirt like that, there's hardly a difference," he scoffs.

The look in his eyes is hungry like a feral predator on the prowl. I have the feeling that he's looking me over, deciding where he'd like to bite first.

"Look, let's call it a day, okay? It's late. We can come back tomorrow and start fresh."

I try again to pull away, but Roger shakes his head. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. I think we should hash this out now.”

“We both need some time and space.”

“I don’t need either one,” he says huskily. “I’m ready.”

I frown, trying to understand what he means. Then I look down.

The front of his pants are tented, and Roger is grinning.

“Plus, there will be too many people here in the morning,” he says. “It can’t be a dirty little secret if everyone knows. And where’s the fun in that?”

“Roger, no,” I plead, hating the weakness in my voice. “You don’t want to do this.”

Roger spins me towards the table and slams my back against the edge of it. I cry out, a shooting pain lancing up my spine, but he ignores me.

“I’ve wanted to do this since the moment you trotted your tight little ass into my office,” he rasps, forcing my thighs apart with his knee. “You tease and you flirt, but you young bitches don’t know what you want. Men like me have to show you.”

I try to claw at him, but Roger pins my arms to the table. “Just lie still, Belle. I’ll take care of you.”

He wedges himself between my thighs so I can’t reach to kick him, and he holds both of my arms in one hand. I’m spread in front of him, served up like a pig on a fucking platter, and there’s nothing I can do.

“Please,” I cry, hot tears burning my eyes and rolling down my cheeks. “Please don’t do this. Please.”

Roger’s eyes are completely black now. He licks his lips. “You’re probably already wet. You want it. I know you do.”

He’s delusional. Actually insane.

His fingers find the buttons of my blouse. He undoes one, which makes me shiver. He notices and smirks. “You can’t help yourself, you little slut. You like when I touch you.”

I'm suddenly at a loss for words. I want to scream, but no sound is coming out. Another button pops free.

"You don't have to lie with me," he coos. "I know the truth. I know what you want. Let me give it to you."

Another button.

Another.

Why can't I fucking scream?

Another button.

Cool air rushes over my skin, but I feel it in a far away kind of way. Like when you spend too long in the snow and your toes go numb. I know Roger is touching me, but I can't feel it.

"Fucking perfect," he growls, his eyes locked on my breasts. "You wear this lacy little number for me, didja?"

He leans close and his tongue darts out to moisten his lips. That, weirdly, is what breaks my spell. The sight of that foul, disgusting tongue flickering out. It's so corporeal, so real and nauseating, that my body is moving before I can even process what my intentions are.

The heel of my hand smashes up into his nose.

He reels backwards. With enough room now to kick, I swing my foot up into his crotch. Something soft gives way.

I don't stop to find out what.

I just tear past him and run.

My legs feel like rubber. Every step is shaky, and I can already hear Roger rallying behind me. "You fucking bitch!" he roars. His scream echoes around the empty office building.

I can see the elevator straight ahead, but there isn't time. He'll catch up to me before the doors even open. But the stairs don't feel like an option, either. My ankle is still sore from my last tumble down the stairs. I can barely support my own weight.

The office is empty, I can't escape, and Roger is coming after me.

His footsteps are thundering down the hallway. I dive for the next door I pass. I yank it open and find a storage closet. There are shelves of paper and pens and computer cords and chargers. Stacks of calculators and rulers. Extra chairs.

I duck inside and catch a glimpse of Roger through the crack just as the door closes. I pull the handle shut and then grab the chair next to me. I slide the metal leg through the curved door handle and twist, locking it into place just as Roger shakes the handle on the other side.

"Come out, you cunt!" he roars, pounding on the door. "You can't hide forever."

I hold the chair firmly in place, praying he's wrong.

Because hiding is the only option I have left.

NIKOLAI

“When is the wedding?” Florian asks, stretching his measuring tape down the outside of my leg. He’s an older man with a balding head and the latest in a never-ending rotation of immaculate suits. He’s been my tailor for years. The first thousand dollars I ever made on my own went right into his pocket in exchange for a custom suit of my own.

“Soon,” I grunt.

Xena and Giorgos are both eager to make the arrangements official. I told them this morning that they could proceed. I’m not planning a fucking wedding, but I’ll show up when I need to.

Still, arranged wedding or not, I’m not showing up in an off-the-rack suit.

“I planned to have three more months with this piece,” he sighs.

“I’ll make sure you’re compensated if it’s a rush job. I always do.”

He nods politely. “Yes, Mr. Zhukova.”

That’s my favorite thing about Florian. No bullshit and very little chit-chat. If he knows what I do for a living, he doesn’t make it obvious. He just does his job and doesn’t ask questions. Something I wish more people were capable of.

People like Belle in particular.

My body clenches like I’m guarding myself against even the thought of her.

And in some ways, I do need to guard myself. =

I've spent my entire life focused on my Bratva. On rebuilding the empire that was stolen from my grandfather. On dismantling the Battiato mafia and owning every inch of this city.

No woman is worth throwing all of that away.

Suddenly, Florian squeezes my shoulders. "Relax, Mr. Zhukova."

I drop my shoulders and roll my head from side to side.

"Nervous?" he asks brusquely.

"Hardly."

"So you really love her, then?"

"Love who?" I snort. I can't remember the last time Florian had so much to say.

"Your fiancée," he says. "But since I had to remind you, maybe you're thinking of someone else."

"I'm not thinking of anyone."

Now, it's his turn to snort. "I've tailored too many grooms to count. I can tell when the man is distracted. When there is someone else."

Is that who Belle is—*someone else*? If anything, Xena feels like the other woman.

"Why the fuck do you even care?"

He stretches the tape across my back and then down my arms, mumbling numbers under his breath. Finally, he looks over my shoulder and catches my eyes in the mirror. "Because if you back out of the wedding, I might not get paid."

I smirk. "You always have the bottom line in mind, don't you?"

"That's how I've been in business so long," he says. "Is this other woman going to be a problem?"

“So far, she’s been nothing but,” I mutter.

Belle shouldn’t even be on my radar. She should have been just another cog in my machine, doing her part and then leaving.

But things went too far. A mess I need to clean up.

Florian squints. “What did you say?”

I sigh. “No, she won’t be a problem. She’ll be gone soon enough.”

Especially now that fucking Roger showed up to help her. The man is as gullible as he is repulsive. Seeing her wrap her arms around him, hugging him like he was some kind of savior... As if that sorry sack of shit could defend her from me. As if she needs defending from me at all.

I should have peeled his grimy hands away from her. Belle may be innocent, but Roger isn’t. The look in his eyes when he touched her made me see red. Motherfucker is lucky he’s still breathing.

Florian turns away from me to jot down measurements on a piece of paper. I reach for my phone. I told myself when I left the office that I wouldn’t check the cameras. Belle and Roger were still in the conference room, hunched over a single laptop, sitting way too close together.

But still, I find myself opening the app and pulling up the feed of security footage. I scroll through to Conference Room #3 and click the livestream.

The room is empty. For a moment, I let that calm me.

Then I notice Belle’s purse sitting on the table, her laptop open, papers strewn around. The room is empty, but she isn’t gone. She’s in the building somewhere.

Quickly, I flick through all of the streams, looking in on empty hallways and offices, checking in on the dark break rooms and my office.

But it’s the last camera that shows me what I’m looking for.

The lobby camera shows Bridget’s desk and a portion of the main hallway. And Roger is standing just at the top of the screen.

No, he isn’t standing. He’s leaning into a door, ramming all of his weight

against it again and again.

And he looks pissed.

I switch to the recorded tape and scroll back five minutes. Just far enough back to see Belle run down the hallway and duck into the storage closet, Roger hot on her tail. Her shirt was open at the collar, her bra exposed.

“I have to go, Florian,” I snarl, stepping off the raised platform.

“I’m not done, sir. You have to—”

“Go,” I finish for him, switching back to the livestream on my way out the door. Roger still isn’t in the closet yet. For his sake, he better hope he never breaks in. “I’ll bring the suit back.”

“In one piece, please,” he begs.

I don’t bother answering. He’s seen enough of my ruined suits to know that’s a promise I can’t keep.

With the security footage still flickering on my phone screen, I step outside and break into a run. I’m two blocks down from the building. It will be faster to run than to drive.

And the faster I get into Zhukova Incorporated, the sooner I can tear Roger limb from useless limb.



“Is everything okay, Mr. Zhukova?” the security guard asks when I burst into the building. “Do you need any assistance?”

I could ask him to come help me dispose of Roger. It would be easier that way. But part of me is looking forward to taking care of the bastard myself.

“I haven’t needed assistance since the day I was born, Stan.”

The elevator doors close on his frowning face.

The ride up is agonizingly slow. I bounce from foot to foot, trembling with pent-up energy. My cell service cuts out in the elevator, but thus far, Roger

still hasn't made it into the storage closet.

The familiar pulse of adrenaline moves through me. It's always the same before a fight.

As soon as the doors open, I launch forward into mayhem.

"Open the fucking door, you bitch!"

Roger is yelling so loudly he didn't hear the elevator ding when it arrived. He certainly doesn't hear me coming.

Which makes the thud of his forehead bouncing off the solid wooden door even more satisfying.

I'm palming the back of his head, holding it like a coconut I'd like to crack. And fuck, I'd like to do exactly that. Break him open, spill his insides until there is nothing left.

"What the—" he moans.

Before he can finish, I bash his head against the door again.

I release him and step back, watching as he staggers away from the door, blood streaming down his face. His eyes are glazed over, unseeing. He swipes out at me with both arms, but misses horribly.

In different circumstances, I'd revel in pounding Roger into mincemeat. I'd beat him bloody and then beat him some more.

But not when Belle is trapped in a closet, terrified.

Roger stumbles against the wall. I punch him again. His head snaps to the side and he drops to his knees.

"Why are you—" His lip is split, blood dribbling down his chin. "Why?"

He doesn't deserve an explanation.

"No more questions, motherfucker," I hiss, just before I drive my knee into his chin.

He's unconscious before his body hits the floor.

I step over him and reach for the door, but before I can grab the handle, the door flings open. Then Belle is lunging out at me, an industrial-sized hole punch wielded high above her head.

“Get away from me, you perverted—”

I see the moment it hits her. The moment she recognizes me, the moment she realizes Roger is incapacitated and I’m the one on the other side of the door. Her eyes widen in shock and horror, but she’s already bringing the metal hole punch down towards my face.

And she can’t stop it.

I duck down and dodge to the right, but the heavy piece of metal catches my shoulder. Pain radiates down my arm like lightning.

Belle drops the hole punch, which lands on Roger’s limp leg, and stumbles against the wall. She catches herself with her palms and looks back over her shoulder at me.

Immediately, an image appears to me. *Belle pressed against a wall. Her head tucked against my neck as I drive into her.* My pants tighten instantly, the adrenaline I feel from stopping Roger channeling into a different emotion altogether.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

I shake my head, clearing the vision. “I think I should be the one asking you that. What the hell happened?”

She glances down at Roger. Another ripple of fear moves through her. It makes me want to finish what I started.

“He... he came onto me.” Her face flushes like she’s embarrassed. As if she has anything to be embarrassed about. “I tried to turn him down, but he attacked me.”

She grabs her torn shirt and holds it closed over her chest.

Rage burns red behind my eyes, making it hard to think straight. I clench my jaw. “Did he hurt you?”

“I got away. I ran,” she mumbles through thick lips. “Into there. I’d just decided to try and fight me way out when you got here.”

“You would’ve succeeded, too. That thing is heavy.”

She looks down at where the hole punch leans against his leg, a small smile playing on her lips. “I hope it leaves a huge bruise.”

“He deserves worse for what he tried to do. I’ll see that he gets it.”

The reminder of how bad things could have turned out steals her smile away. Her hands start to shake, and I can see realization washing over her. She stumbles back into the wall, legs shaking.

“I’m here,” I say as I reach out and grab her arm to stabilize her. “You’re safe.”

“But I need this job,” she says in a sob. “Oh, fuck. Fuck! What have I—Is he going to be okay?”

Belle bends down like she’s going to tend to Roger, but I haul her back up.

“Hey,” she protests. “I need to—”

“Get the fuck away from this rapist pig,” I finish. “I’ll deal with Roger. And then I’ll deal with you. Everything will be fine.”

I can see in her face that she doesn’t believe me, but she’s too tired to fight. She lets me lead her down the hall towards my office. On the way, I message down to the security desk.

“What will happen to him?” she whispers.

“Stan will pick him up,” I tell her, unlocking my office and showing her inside. “It’s security’s job to deal with intruders.”

“But you hired him.”

“And now, he’s been fired. Here, sit.” I push her down into the leather chair and grab a bottle of water from the mini fridge. I press it into her hand. “Drink.”

She does, her hands still shaking. She wipes her mouth and looks up at me.

Her hazel eyes are shimmering with unshed tears. “How did you know to come?”

“I checked the security cameras,” I explain. “I don’t trust Roger. I was checking to make sure you left the building alone and intact. I saw him pounding on the storage closet door. It didn’t take a huge logical leap to figure out what happened.”

Her lower lip trembles. “I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t shown up, Nikolai. I... I was so scared.”

“I should kill him.” My fists tighten at my side in preparation.

Her eyes go wide. “No! No, it’s bad enough as it is. He’s never going to give me a recommendation now. I’ll be fired, and I’ll be blacklisted. Do you think he can do that? Blacklist me? Is that a thing?”

Panic is rising in her, and I can see it getting out of control.

“I’ll take care of everything, Belle. I told you that already.”

She shakes her head. “What are you going to do? I’m leaving town. Immediately, now that you are firing Roger. I have to go back home, but I don’t have a job. Or money. I can’t even buy my sister a pair of shoes, but you’re here in... is that a tux?”

Her eyes rove over me appreciatively before she descends back into her freakout. “I have to figure this out myself, but I don’t know—”

With only the briefest of thoughts for Xena Simatou, I reach out and grab Belle’s face in my hands. She goes quiet, her eyes focusing on mine for a fleeting second before I lean forward and kiss her.

Her body goes slack. The tension dissipates. She may not know what’s going on in her life at the moment, but her body knows exactly what to do.

She’s kissing me back at once. Hungrily. Desperately.

Belle drags her tongue across my top lip and then sucks on my bottom one. She looks like this prim, timid woman to the passing eye, but underneath it all, she’s a firecracker begging to be set aflame.

And I just struck the match.

I bend down and scoop her up, then carry her to my desk and sit her on the edge of it. When I reach for her waistband, she breaks the kiss and lifts her hips, letting me drag her skirt down her legs.

As soon as it's out of the way, she wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me closer. Her warm center grinds against the front of my pants, and I hiss. Belle smiles and unzips my tuxedo, shoving my pants and my boxers down my thighs. My cock springs free.

I can try to spin this however I want. I'm not married to Xena Simatou yet. Technically, it isn't cheating until we're married.

But I'm letting Belle palm my throbbing length while the tuxedo pants I plan to wear to my wedding with another woman are around my ankles.

This is fucked-up in the best possible way.

And I have no plans to stop it.

"Yesterday, you had me tied up to a chair," Belle whispers. Her hands stroke my thickness.

"Do you want me to tie you up again? I can."

"Maybe it's my turn to do the tying."

I smooth my hands up her silky thighs and then push her back on my desk. "I think I've made it perfectly clear: tonight, I'm taking care of you. Now, close your mouth and spread your legs."

Belle listens without comment. That might be a first, I think.

But then I drag my finger across her seam and every thought is driven out of my head by the wetness I find there.

I lean down and slick my tongue over the path I just made with my finger, enjoying the taste of her and the way she trembles. Belle curls her fingers through my hair, trying to hold me in place.

But I don't take orders from anyone.

I pull back and then lift her off the desk. She frowns. “But I thought we—”

I shake my head and spin her around by her hips. “Shut up and put your hands on the desk.”

She cries out, a delicious little whimper, as I take each of her hands in mine and plant them on the surface of my desk. Her back arches, and I almost groan at the sight of it. Rarely do my fantasies come true quite so quickly.

I rip open the rest of her tattered shirt, slide my hands under her bra, and cup her perfect breasts. They fill my hands like they were made for me.

Belle presses her ass towards me, teasing the tip of my cock. Without asking, she reaches around and positions me at her opening.

I fill her up in one hot thrust.

She stifles a moan, a sound so intoxicating that I slide out of her and do it again.

With every thrust, I squeeze her breasts and pull her body against mine. But soon, Belle is doing it on her own. She meets my every movement with an eager one of her own until our bodies are slapping together so loud it echoes.

“Oh my God,” she moans. “This is—You feel—”

I let my hand fall between her legs and circle my finger over her swollen clit.

“Magic,” she finally spits out.

I use my free hand to grip her hip, angling her body just how I want it. When I drive into her next, I know my aim was perfect.

“More. God, more, please.”

I thrust again and again, hitting her g-spot as I circle my finger over her clit. I feel the moment her body bends and breaks. She clamps around me, pulsing out the rhythm of her pleasure.

The second she’s done, she goes limp. I slide out of her and flip her onto her back. Then I find my way inside her again.

The desk shakes and groans with each thrust. I move faster and faster. Any

bit of self-control I have left fades away as my climax comes closer.

Finally, the tightness in me loosens and I erupt into her.

I move in slow, lazy strokes until I'm pumped dry. When it's over, my body is sated in a way I haven't known since we were in the airplane bathroom.

I slide out of her and realize there is no justification for this. No way to spin the truth.

I cheated on my future wife with Belle.

And if I have my way—which I always do—I'll fucking do it again.

NIKOLAI

“You fucked her in your office?” Arslan snickers. “After you tied her up to a chair?”

“Tying her up was two nights ago. I fucked her last night. Against a wall.”

He whistles. “Only you can get away with that kind of kinky foreplay. If I tried something like that, women would call the cops on me.”

“Actually, Belle called the cops on me the day we met.”

Arslan snaps his fingers. “That’s right. I almost forgot about that. Gawdamn, she has got to be an amazing fuck.”

Even the possibility of Arslan imagining sex with Belle has me on edge. “You better make peace with never finding out. Unless you want me to castrate you.”

“I don’t need to find out; I already know.” He sees the murderous look on my face and holds up his hands in surrender, fighting back a laugh. “I know because you wouldn’t put up with all of the bullshit she’s hurled your way if it wasn’t worth it. Not to mention the risk she poses to your deal with the Greeks. Any other woman would be long gone by now. But you’re keeping her around. There has to be a reason.”

Arslan isn’t wrong. Part of the reason I’ve kept Belle around is curiosity. I’ve always liked mixed messages, unexpected outcomes. And this petite young woman from the Plains begging me to fuck her ten thousand feet in the air

was certainly unexpected.

But there remains the possibility that other reasons exist.

“Well, now, I’m keeping her around because her boss attacked her. She needs a job and money. I can’t just dump her out the door.”

“And why the hell not?” Arslan asks. “You can do anything you want.”

I nod. “You’re right. And right now, I want to break your teeth with a fucking bat.”

Arslan tips his head back and laughs. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

I’m mostly kidding. Though my best friend is edging too close to an uncomfortable reality: I’m risking my Bratva for a woman. After I swore that is exactly what I wouldn’t do.

And I’m not entirely sure why.

The driver pulls into the parking garage beneath Zhukova Incorporated.

Then, as soon as we park, three anonymous black cars reverse out of nearby spaces and block us in. Armed men climb out of each one.

“Heads up,” Arslan warns, reaching into his waistband for a gun.

I pop open a compartment in the door and retrieve my own weapon.

“Three cars, six men,” he counts, all playfulness gone from his face. “They blocked us in because... fuck, I should have been paying attention.”

“No one would be stupid enough to take us out here,” I tell him. “There are cameras everywhere.”

“Then who is it?”

“I have my suspicions.” I grab the handle and gesture for him to fall in line. “Follow my lead.”

I step out of the car, but the row of angry men surrounding our car doesn’t move. I expected nothing less.

“Where is he?” I snarl.

Arslan is tense at my side, poised to dive in front of me if he needs to. It wouldn't be the first time.

The suited men shift slightly and the car door behind them opens. Then Giorgos Simatou steps out, smiling from ear to ear.

"For fuck's sake," Arslan hisses, relaxing ever so slightly. "You aren't the goddamned Pope, Giorgos."

I nod in agreement. "This is quite the unnecessary show. A dangerous one, too. I could've put a bullet between the eyes of every single one of your men before you revealed yourself."

"You're smarter than that," Giorgos says. "Or I thought so, anyway."

Arslan snorts. "What the hell does that mean?"

Giorgos smiles at me like I'm a child. "Would you like to share your indiscretion, Nikolai? Or should I?"

Between one blink and the next, I lunge forward and press my gun to the man's temple.

His men close around me, but it's too late. Their boss will have a hole in his head before they can do a damn thing about it.

I hear Arslan laugh. "I'll kill every single one of you sons of bitches before you can even unholster your weapons. I'd think twice about making a move for my boss."

"Don't," Giorgos repeats to them, swallowing nervously. "Stand down. This is between myself and Don Zhukova."

His men shift back warily.

"If you ever talk to me like a child again," I hiss, "the only thing between you and me will be six feet of dirt."

Arslan chuckles in the background, but Giorgos Simatou isn't laughing. He just nods solemnly.

“I hear you, Nikolai. I do. But you went against our deal. On the same day we sat down together, no less.” The frustration is clear in his voice now, but he’s still trying to restrain himself. I still have a gun in my hand, after all. “You disrespected me. You disrespected your wife.”

“She isn’t my wife yet, Giorgos.”

“My sister won’t see how that makes any difference. Xena is prideful. You know this.”

“Don’t tell me what I do and don’t know,” I warn him icily.

“Fine. Then I’ll tell you what *I* know,” he says. “If this deal between us can’t work, then I’ll have no choice but to align with someone else.”

“Come on now, Giorgos,” Arslan calls over. “Be specific. Say it out loud.”

I bite back a smile. Arslan has always had a world-class bullshit detector. He knows as well as I do what Giorgos is saying. The man is just too much of a coward to say it himself.

He sighs. “The Battiato mafia is interested in a partnership. I may not have another choice.”

The name alone has my hackles rising. *Fucking Battiatos*. “Are they holding a gun to your head, too?” I seethe.

“I’d take a bullet to the head over my sister’s wrath anyday,” Giorgos says with a dark chuckle. “She won’t like that you’ve set your sights on another woman.”

“You don’t know what I’ve set my sights on.”

“I know that woman you were with before—Belle Dowan—was seen leaving Zhukova Incorporated late last night. It’s not difficult to assume what you were doing.”

I ignore that Giorgos was watching my movements again even after I warned him to stop. Mostly because I went back on my word, as well.

But I can’t forgive being shackled like an animal to his sister for the sake of a business deal.

“Your sister is the one who introduced the marriage terms. You have the power to take it away. So do it,” I tell him. “I want to work with you, not your sister.”

“How will I know our union is lasting without the marriage contract?”

I shrug. “You could take comfort in the fact that I’m not spilling your brains on the cement for spying on me again. That’s a mercy I wouldn’t extend to most people.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t. This means too much to my sister. And if marriage means nothing to you, then why not go through with it? Is this girl really so special?”

“This has nothing to do with her,” I snap, loudly enough so Arslan can hear me as well. “This isn’t about a woman; it’s about me. I am not interested in monogamy. Not with your sister or anyone else.”

“I already announced the engagement.”

“So unannounce it,” I snap.

“My sister wouldn’t take the embarrassment well. Actually, she wouldn’t take it all. She’d be on the warpath.”

“Good thing you’re the boss then, right?”

Giorgos smiles, but there’s no humor behind it. “So it would seem.”

“I don’t know many men who are afraid of their sisters,” I remark.

“That’s because you don’t know many Greek women.” Giorgos scrubs a hand down his face and sighs. “Listen, Nikolai, kill me if you have to, but I’m going to be honest with you.”

“Careful with what you say next, Simatou,” Arslan warns. “Step over the line and I’ll kill you myself.”

I wave Arslan off. “No one is dying today. You have my word. Yet another mercy I’m offering.”

“I’ll remember the kindness,” Giorgos says with a small bow. “I can’t renegotiate this deal, and I can’t back out. Not without blood being shed. Not

without retribution.”

“Retribution? For what?” I bark. “I don’t owe you shit. This deal is being made on the promise of future profits. I’m not in debt.”

Giorgos shakes his head. “Not to me. But you are to my sister. Regardless of how you feel, you’re as good as married. ‘Til death do you part and all that. But it is more likely death will part you and your little Belle if—”

I jam my gun against Giorgos’s temple yet again. “Watch your fucking mouth.”

He releases a shuddering breath. “I hope you are a man of your word, Nikolai. I hope you won’t kill me after you swore you wouldn’t. But whether you do or you don’t, too many things have been set in motion. I’m not making a threat. Merely offering a warning.”

My finger itches to pull the trigger. Maybe killing Giorgos now would put an end to the whole thing.

Or maybe it would start a war and see me fighting on two fronts.

I lower my gun and step back. “To offer a warning of my own: next time you threaten me, I’ll blow your fucking brains out.”

Giorgos is still shaking when Arslan and I turn and walk away.

BELLE

When I show up for work, I'm not even sure I have a job.

Nikolai fired Roger after he attacked me, and I work for Roger. *Worked* for Roger, anyway. So that means I no longer have any business at Zhukova Incorporated. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

And any chance of Nikolai taking me seriously and setting me up with a new job probably went out the window around the same time he fucked me against his office wall.

But I couldn't tell Elise any of that.

How was I supposed to phrase it? *Sorry, Baby Sister. Duct tape your shoes again. Big Sis just lost her job and whored away her chance at another one.*

No chance.

So I made coffee, ate some toast, and left for work like it was any other day. Maybe if I go through the motions and drum up enough denial, I'll still receive a paycheck at the end of the week.

But the moment I step into the lobby of Zhukova Incorporated, Bridget stands up from behind the front desk.

"Excuse me," she calls, waving me down. "Hello?"

She sounds as snotty as she looks, her voice clipped and short. I'm sure she's thrilled to be able to kick me out of the building. She'll call up Stan or

whoever the daytime security officer is to escort me out, waving all the while like a princess in a parade.

“Yes?” I smile back broadly. Not even perfect, modelesque, flirty Bridget can break through the fortress of denial I’ve built around myself.

“Mr. Zhukova told me to inform you that a car is waiting for you downstairs.” Her lip is curled as if the news she is delivering is especially distasteful.

I don’t understand why, though. If anything, she should be thrilled that Nikolai is sending me back to the airport. I’m sure I have the next flight out to Oklahoma City.

“A car?”

She barely resists an eye roll. “That’s right. A car. Like, the kind with four wheels.”

“I should go now?”

She stares at me like I’m stupid. “Ya. You should.”

I hesitate, waffling back and forth between sprinting down the hallway and barricading myself in the conference room or going downstairs to see where Nikolai plans to send me.

I decide on the latter.

“Okay. Thanks,” I mumble.

“Wait,” Bridget calls out reluctantly. She wheels a suitcase out from behind her desk. “This is for you, too.”

I shake my head. “That’s not mine.”

“I didn’t say it was yours,” she snaps. “I said it is for you. Nikolai called it... a ‘gift.’”

It takes actual effort for Bridget to grit out the last two words. The woman is head over heels for her boss. If she didn’t hate me so much, I’d almost feel bad for her.

I reach for the suitcase. It feels heavy. I have no clue what's inside, but knowing Nikolai, it might be a body. Or a bomb.

Either way, I wheel it behind me onto the elevator and head back downstairs to the main lobby.

Just like Bridget said, there's a black car waiting for me in front of the building. Through the tinted back windows, I see someone moving. I assume it's Nikolai.

But when the door opens, a young girl slides out.

"Elise?" I blink, not computing what's happening. "You were... I just left you at the hotel half an hour ago."

She shrugs. "Two minutes after you left, someone knocked on the door."

Looking at her, I can tell she didn't have time to brush her hair. She's still in her lounge pants and soft sleep shirt.

"What is going on?" I whisper.

"Isn't this for work?" Elise asks, suddenly looking nervous. "I just thought, I don't know. I thought this was Nikolai again. Isn't it? Or—"

"It's fine," I tell her quickly. "You know, he told me yesterday that, uh—that I'd be doing something different today. But he wasn't clear. So, yeah, everything is fine."

Denial is my friend. Denial will keep us safe.

Right now, it's also my only option. Because I can't tell my sister what happened last night. I can't tell her that I have no idea what we're going to do in the next few minutes, let alone in the next few weeks and months.

I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. For right now, I'm taking whatever path is in front of me.

"Come on," I say, urging her back into the car. "We better get going."

"Going where?"

I shrug. "We'll find out together. It will be... exciting."

If free-falling without a parachute can be called exciting.



“What in the hell is going on?” Elise whispers.

She’s staring out the window, awestruck by the sight in front of us: a private jet looming large on a private airstrip. A set of metal stairs lead into the belly of the plane and a snazzily dressed flight attendant is visible just inside the door.

To be fair, I’m a little awestruck, too.

“Are we going somewhere?” she asks.

I want to come up with some kind of explanation, but I can’t come up with anything. Not a single plausible story. Instead, I hold up a finger. “Give me a second.”

Then I climb out of the car and walk towards the plane. Maybe the flight attendant will know something.

But before I can even make it to the stairs, I hear someone call my name.

“Belle.”

I turn and find Nikolai moving towards me, dripping with his usual ease and confidence. He’s in a pair of dark green chinos and a plain white pocket tee. Somehow, he looks better in this casual outfit than even the tux he was wearing last night. It makes him seem so... normal. But in the best, most unattainable way.

He moves towards me. I don’t move a muscle. I’m sure he’s about to fire me, and I have no interest in walking to my own execution. So I wait for him to stop in front of me.

“I was expecting a call from the driver that you were resisting,” he says with no small amount of amusement.

"Would he have forced me into the car if I'd refused?"

Nikolai shrugs. "Once you saw Elise was in the backseat, I assume that wouldn't be necessary."

"Which reminds me," I snap, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Stop kidnapping my sister "

"It's hard to call it kidnapping when she comes so willingly. If you're worried about me taking her, maybe you should tell her who I am. What I do."

"Is this a trap? You trying to trick me into spilling your secrets so you can kill me for talking?"

He smirks. "I guess you'll have to wait and find out."

The sight of his mouth tipped up at the corner, his eyes shimmering with dirty promises, is enough to make my face flush. No wonder Nikolai is some world-class criminal. The man could steal your wallet and then convince you with a smile that you gave it to him willingly.

He's dangerous.

"I probably won't have to wait long," I say, gesturing at the plane.

"Why is that?"

I raise my brows. "Um... because you're sending me home, right? I mean, you fired Roger. And I worked for Roger, so—"

"I told you I'd take care of you."

"And you did." I give him a sarcastic clap. "You were great last night. Thanks for saving me from Roger and, you know, yeah, thank you. But now —"

The car door slams closed behind me. I turn around as Elise pads towards us. For the first time, I notice she's wearing a new pair of white sneakers.

I frown. "Where did you get those?"

"You left them for me on the counter, didn't you?" she asks.

No. No, I definitely did not. Where would I have found the time or money to go pick up a pair of white leather sneakers?

I'm about to say as much when Elise turns to Nikolai, offering up a surprisingly warm smile. "What are we doing here?"

Suddenly, panic flares in my chest. I should have told her the truth. It would have been less embarrassing to explain all of this in the car instead of in front of Nikolai.

Nikolai opens his mouth to say something, but I lunge forward and cut him off.

"I'm done working here," I blurt out. "I... I finished up last night. So we're done."

Elise frowns. "You said you had a few more days of work left."

"I was wrong. I'm done. So now, we're going—"

"To Iceland," Nikolai interrupts. "In fifteen minutes. We should board."

I spin around, my mouth hanging open. "To *where*?"

"I told you I'd give you the details once we got here," he says.

"You did?"

Maybe Roger got in a good swing yesterday without me realizing. A concussion would explain why I can't seem to make heads or tails of this situation.

He nods. "I said I'd take care of you. That's what I'm doing. We've got work to do."

"In Iceland?" Elise asks.

"I'm building a new hotel there," Nikolai explains. "A five-star hotel and resort. I need to oversee things."

Elise spins towards me. "But what about Roger?"

"Roger is—"

"Not important." I sense a tinge of fury in Nikolai's voice. "He isn't her boss anymore. I am."

I do my best not to gasp, disguising the sound in a cough. But Elise spins to face me. “What?”

“What what?” I ask innocently.

She narrows her eyes. “You lost your job?”

“Your sister quit,” Nikolai says. “I offered her a job. She works for me now.”

I can tell Elise senses something is amiss. She’s looking from me to Nikolai and back again, trying to make sense of it. I’d like to join her in that endeavor.

What the McFuck is happening?

“Yep,” I say with a pained smile. “And now, we’re going to Iceland, so... go get your suitcase.”

Elise hesitates for only a second before she walks back to the car. The moment she’s out of earshot, I spin around to Nikolai.

“What the hell?”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re wel—?” I huff in frustration. “You never offered me a job.”

“I said I’d take care of you.”

“I thought you meant sexually!”

He gives me a devilish smile. “Is that all I am to you? A sex toy?”

I close my eyes in anguish. “We never discussed this.”

“You needed a job. Now, you have one. So again—you’re welcome.”

“I don’t *want* this one!”

He shrugs. “Okay. Then walk into the airport and buy two tickets for Oklahoma City.”

Heat rolls down my back. “I can’t.”

“Oh, right. I’m sure your company paid your way down here, didn’t they? Do

you think Roger is still feeling generous after I beat him to shit on your behalf last night?”

I grit my teeth. “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“No, but without me, Roger would have taken what he wanted from you and you’d still probably be in the same position today,” he says. “But instead of feeling ‘sexually taken care of,’ you’d be—”

“I know what he planned to do to me,” I snap. “I don’t need the visual.”

“Do you? Because you don’t seem especially grateful for what I’m offering right now.”

“And what are you offering, Nikolai? I don’t understand what is happening.”

He grabs my shoulders and pulls me close to him. I find my head tipping back, my lips parting. Despite everything, I want to kiss him right now. If he bent down to press his lips against mine, I’d let him.

Something is seriously wrong with me.

“You said you needed a job,” he says quietly. “So I’m giving you one. You said your sister needed shoes. I gave her some.”

“You gave her the shoes?”

He continues as if I haven’t spoken. “What is happening is that I’m giving you what you need.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” Nikolai asks, as though this is a perfectly normal thing for him to do.

I can hear Elise rummaging through the trunk behind me. I don’t have much time to sort this out. I drag a hand down my face.

“For all I know, you’re taking me to Iceland so you can push me off a glacier or something.”

“I can’t imagine why I would do that.”

“Because I know your secrets,” I hiss. “Because I could turn you in and—”

“And what? Ruin me?”

I shrug. “Yeah.”

He chuckles. “You don’t have as much control as you think you do, beautiful Belle.”

“Stop calling me that,” I snap, even as my stomach flutters.

“I am not worried about what you might tell someone. And I’m not worried about the consequences.”

“Then why did you record that... that video?” My voice trails off. I can’t bring myself to call it a “sex tape,” even though that’s exactly what it is.

Nikolai’s eyes darken with something awfully close to desire. It’s strange that he would look at me like that. Especially since I’m certain he can have any woman he wants.

“Clearly, you were worried about what I might say if you recorded that,” I continue. “It was collateral, right?”

“I like to cover all my bases. But have you ever considered, *lapochka*, that the video was for me?”

My entire body quivers. Nikolai leans closer, his minty breath washing over my face.

“Just like you did in my office: give in, Belle,” he whispers. “I’ll take care of you. I’ll take care of everything.”

Suddenly, Elise is next to me, a new suitcase I’ve never seen at her side. “Well? What are we doing?” she asks.

I glance at Nikolai. He’s staring down at me, waiting for me to decide.

But there isn’t much of a choice.

I don’t have a job. I don’t have money to get home. If I walk away from Nikolai now, I’m not sure how I’ll take care of myself and my sister.

But here he is, willing to help us. Maybe he really will throw me off a glacier. At this point, that's a risk I'm willing to take.

"We're boarding a plane," I say, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. "Iceland, here we come."

Even Elise looks excited.



An hour into the flight, Elise has locked herself in the private bedroom at the back of the plane and Nikolai and I are alone in our seats.

I'm a nervous flier under the best circumstances, but something about the private jet seems even more dangerous. Who is the pilot? I haven't seen them. And where did the flight attendant get to? I need a drink. Or twelve.

"I'm having flashbacks," Nikolai says suddenly.

His head is resting back on his seat and his eyes are closed, but I still have the sense he's watching me. I wouldn't be surprised to find out the man has eyes on the side of his head. How else does he seem to know and be in control of everything?

"You've taken a lot of random women to Iceland before?"

He cracks one eye open and peeks over at me. "No, but this is the second time I've sat on a plane next to you. And you were just as nervous the first time."

I force my knee to stop bouncing and take a deep breath. "Is your pilot licensed?"

"You think I'd get in a plane like this with an amateur?"

"Probably not."

"Definitely not," he snaps. "I have enough money to ensure the best. I don't settle for less."

The knot in my chest eases slightly, but I'll feel better once we're on the

ground.

Except then I'll be in a foreign country and I have no idea what my job is even going to be.

"What are my responsibilities going to be once we land?" I ask. "I'm obviously trained as an accountant, but I'm willing to—"

"Later."

I frown at the side of his face. His eyes are closed again. How can he be so goddamned relaxed all the time?

"I don't want to talk about it later. I want to talk about it now."

"And I think you have more than enough to worry about without adding shit that doesn't matter to the list."

"My job matters to me."

"You don't even know what your job is."

"Exactly! So enlighten me. What do you want?"

At that, Nikolai turns to face me. His smile is lethal, and I groan in bone-deep, panty-dampening frustration.

"Don't," I warn. "Do not."

"You're the one who asked."

"You know what I meant."

"Do I?" He slides out of his seat so he's kneeling on the floor.

On instinct, I press my knees together so tightly I'm sure I'll have bruises. "Yes."

"I'm not sure I do," he says, his hands sliding up my shins. "Be explicit. Tell me."

My heart is pounding in my chest, and my voice comes out breathy and uneven. "I was talking about work. About what you want me to do for—"

“Relax,” he breathes, pressing his lips to each of my knees. “I want you to relax.”

“How am I supposed to relax when you’re kneeling in front of me like that?” I don’t mean to lay my thoughts out there so bare, but I can’t help it. The man short-circuits my brain like no other.

He quirks an eyebrow. “If this isn’t helping, I have an idea of something that might.”

“You’re my boss. Aren’t I supposed to be ‘helping’ you?”

“Is that what you want?” he snarls suddenly. “For me to be like fucking Roger? Because I can corner you in the bathroom if you want. Force you to —”

“No, that’s not what I want.”

“Then shut up and spread your legs,” he orders. “But do it because you want to, not because someone is making you.”

His voice is icy, but his hands are like brands on my skin. I feel the path he’s making over my body, and I’m electrified. All of my anxiety about the flight is gone as Nikolai pushes my legs apart and slides my skirt up my thighs.

“Are you wet already?” He smooths his tongue across the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

I want to lie, but he’ll know the truth soon enough anyway. Because I already know I’m going to let him do whatever he wants to me.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“You resisted this even while you were sitting here getting wet for me,” he whispers in amazement against my skin. “Why do you always fight what you want?”

“Because I’ve never been able to have what I want.”

My list isn’t long. *A father who isn’t dead. A mother to take care of me. A life where I don’t have to scrape by for every single thing.*

I can’t have any of it, so there’s no sense dreaming about it. Nikolai is the

first time I've let myself enjoy something that definitely won't last.

"You can have whatever you want right now. All you have to do is ask."

He parts my legs further, his fingers digging into the soft skin of my thighs. My entire body is trembling with desire.

Then Nikolai leans forward and drags his tongue over my seam. Suddenly, nothing about this is funny. The desire in me is serious. And it needs to be met.

"Touch me," I beg. I should be ashamed of myself, but I can't find the energy. Not when so much energy is being devoted to not combusting on the spot. "Taste me."

The flight attendant could come back at any minute. Elise could decide to come out of her private room and join us. Anything could happen.

But, God help me, I need this.

"What do we say when we want something, beautiful Belle?" Nikolai teases.

I curl my fingers through his dark hair and drag him to my center. "Please."

Nikolai shoves my panties aside. His breath is warm and when his tongue makes direct contact with my flushed skin, I hiss.

He slides my hips to the edge of the seat and splays me open. He nips at my center with his teeth and then soothes away the pain with his tongue.

The few times I dated someone willing to go down on me, I tipped my head back and closed my eyes. Mostly to hide the fact that it felt like I was receiving a gynecological exam.

But with Nikolai, I can't look away.

Soon, he's flicking his tongue over my clit and driving me towards an orgasm that is coming way too fast.

"Wait," I breathe, tightening my hold on his hair. "Wait, I'm going to—"

"That's the point, Belle," he whispers right into my pussy. "Come. Come for me. Let me hear you come apart."

He sucks hard on my sensitive skin, and I fall to pieces. My legs clench around his head, and I grind myself against his sinful mouth, chasing the pleasure pouring through me.

Only when I'm limp in my seat does Nikolai pull my skirt back into place and stand up. With a smug smile, he drops back down next to me, licks his lips, and winks.

Asshole.

Beautiful, beautiful asshole.

NIKOLAI

“Oh my God, Nikolai,” Belle moans, clinging to the railing. “This is... It feels amazing right here. And it’s so... wow.”

“I take it you like the view?” I drawl in amusement.

She gestures out across the sprawling Icelandic landscape as if that is answer enough. “It’s the most magical place I’ve ever seen. And the air is so crisp. It’s incredible. I think I can breathe better here.”

This is the first time I’ve seen Belle like this, so free and unencumbered. Excluding the times where I fucked her worries away, of course.

Part of me is jealous that a landscape can trigger the same response in her as I can. But then I remember I brought her here. This is still my doing.

“You can take a dip in the blue lagoon later. The silica is supposed to be healing,” I say.

“I can swim?”

“Of course. Why not?”

“Because...” She glances around like the other shoe is going to literally drop on her any second. “Because I’m working, right? I didn’t think—”

“No, *I*’m working,” I tell her. “I’m here to make sure the hotel and resort has a successful opening week. Your job is to enjoy yourself and take notes.”

And to show Giorgos Simatou that he doesn't have control over me. He thinks he can threaten me into doing whatever he asks? Think again, asshole. Not only will I fuck whoever I want, I'll do it wherever and whenever I'd like.

"Can I leave the resort?" she asks.

"You're not a prisoner here. Go where you please."

She frowns. "Who wouldn't want to go explore? I mean, look at this place."

I follow her gaze and look out over the lava field in front of us. Vibrant green grass has grown over the craters and valleys, and pockets of water run over the land to cerulean ponds dotted across the property.

"It's beautiful," Belle breathes. "I've never seen anything like it. And, I mean, imagine... lava created all of this. It's magnificent, isn't it?"

"I should have you write the brochure," I chuckle.

She snorts. "Do I give you that impression of someone well-traveled enough to write brochures? Do I seem worldly?"

"Not so much."

"Correct," she says, snapping her fingers. "I haven't been anywhere."

"You went on that trip to Washington, D.C.," Elise says. I almost forgot she was standing with us. She watched nonstop movies on the flight and didn't sleep, so she's been dragging ass since we stepped off the plane. "You've been somewhere."

Belle rolls her eyes and looks at me. "Our paternal grandma paid for the trip and took me with her. I was twelve, and I spent the entire day in the halls of Congress. It was... educational. As all good vacations are."

Elise doesn't find it funny. "My grandma never took me anywhere."

"Yeah, but Shari didn't abandon you. My grandma bailed after my dad died. You aren't missing anything."

"I take it you two are half-sisters?" I ask.

Belle nods. “Same mom, different dads.”

“Lucky us,” Elise grumbles.

I can tell Belle wants to say something—maybe warn her sister to be on her best behavior—but she swallows the words. Instead, she takes a deep breath and pastes on a smile. “Let’s explore more. Maybe we can—”

“I’m tired,” Elise interrupts. “I’m going to go to the room and take a nap.”

“But we need to beat the jet lag. You should stay awake and—”

Elise walks away before Belle can finish.

As soon as she rounds the corner, Belle closes her eyes and sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. I don’t care whether she has a good time or not.”

Belle studies me for a moment, then smiles shyly. “What about me?”

“What about you?”

“Do you care if I have a good time?”

I step closer to her, backing here against the railing. She tips her head back to look at me, and for a second, I consider walking her back to my suite and saying fuck the landscape of Iceland, all I want to explore is the landscape of *her*.

Fuck everything else—I want to know every rise and fall of her body, every noise she makes when I touch her.

But there’s time for that later. Right now, there are only a few hours left in the day.

And I have other plans.

“Meet me in the lobby in twenty minutes,” I say. “I have something to show you.”



“Keep up,” I call back. “We’re almost there.”

“You said that thirty minutes ago,” Belle huffs. “I’m too clumsy for this. I was pigeon-toed as a kid, you know.”

I snort. “You were what?”

“It means my feet pointed in at each other. I tripped over them a lot when I was little.”

“You’re kidding.”

She frowns feistily. “It’s not funny! I had to wear braces and insoles for a while. I’m all straightened out now, but I’m not the most coordinated.”

I reach back and offer her my arm to save her from face-planting in a crater. “Don’t worry. I’ll catch you if you fall.”

“Yeah, right,” she mumbles. “This is probably where you plan to throw me over the side.”

“Keep saying that and I might decide you’re right. Throwing you off a glacier would be a lot less work than dragging your ass up a mountain.”

She bites back a smile. Then it sharpens, turning into something dark. “Maybe that would be easier for me, too. Better than muddling along like I have.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“How do you know?” she snaps.

“Because I wasn’t always powerful,” I murmur.

Belle hesitates before she responds. “I forgot you said that before. To Elise. You grew up poor?”

I pause for a long moment before sighing. The last thing I want to do right now is tap into my fucked-up childhood and family. That shit is dirty fuel. It burns hot, but it leaves behind a nasty wake.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say finally. “The point is, life can be like... well, like these lava fields. Like what you said earlier. Sometimes, devastation is what

it takes to make beauty.”

Belle stops walking, and I turn around to find her staring at me.

“What?”

“That was poetic.”

I smirk. “Surprised?”

“Completely,” she admits. “Maybe you’re a bit more like these lava fields than you want to let on, too.”

I wave her on and continue towards the precipice. We’re close. Just a few more yards until the grand reveal.

“If you’re looking for some redeeming quality in me, I’d stop. You’ll just be disappointed.”

“Oh, I don’t know—” Belle starts to say, then her voice cuts off. She tilts her head to the side. “What is that?”

I smile and step up the last foot. Suddenly, like a curtain being yanked away to display a masterpiece, the lava field falls away and we’re standing on the edge of a cliff. Opposite is another cliff covered in luscious trees with a chasm between. On the opposing cliff, water is pouring over the side in at least fifty different rivulets, collecting in a stream far below.

Belle gasps. “What is this?”

“Hvatvíslegur Falls,” I tell her. “It means ‘precipitous.’”

“Checks out. We are so high up.” She peeks over the side and then takes a nervous step back. “Where is the water coming from?”

“Snow melt and rain running over the lava fields. It all moves over the land and makes its way here.”

“It’s incredible,” she breathes, shaking her head like she can’t believe it.

“You like it?”

“I love it,” she whispers sincerely. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Of course. I chose a beautiful place for you to die.”

It takes her a second, but then Belle’s eyes widen in horror as she processes what I said. “That—that isn’t funny.”

I smirk. “It’s a little funny.”

She rolls her eyes and looks out over the waterfall. “What comes next, Nikolai?”

“We hike back.”

She shakes her head. “No. I mean... what am I doing here?”

“You’re here because I said I’d take care of you.”

“There’s more to it.” She turns to face me. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

I laugh again. I’m doing a lot of that today. Strange. “There are a million things I’m not telling you.”

“Then tell me one of them.”

She thinks she wants to know, but she has no idea. The Greeks and Xena Simatou and the Battiato mafia and my family’s tragedy and on and on. It’s a tangled web, and Belle should be grateful she isn’t more enmeshed in it.

I should probably let her escape before she’s in too deep.

But there’s not a chance in hell I’m doing that.

“We’d have to make a lot more of those tapes for me to be willing to tell you everything, beautiful Belle.”

She flushes a deep red and takes a step away from me. “Stop calling me—”

But before she can get the word out, her foot slips. In an instant, she hits the ground hard. It’s slick, so she starts sliding downhill...

Right towards the chasm.

She scrabbles for purchase on the bumpy ground, but she can’t seem to get a good hold. “Nikolai!” she shrieks.

The way she calls my name does something to me. A panic I don't recognize comes to life, and I sprint after her. There's no concern for my own safety, no concern for whether I fall over the edge with her.

I just know I can't stand by and watch her die.

I dive onto the hard rock and throw an arm out. My fingers brush across a strap on her windbreaker. I latch onto it, my knuckles turning white with the strain, but I can already feel the fabric giving away.

"Belle, climb up and grab my hand," I say, trying to keep my voice even.

She's one foot from the sheer drop. If I let go of her, I know she'll fall. Her hazel eyes are as green as the moss growing over the stony ground.

And they're as terrified as I've ever seen them.

"Nikolai," she whimpers. "I can't."

"You can. You have to crawl to me. If I move forward, you'll get closer to the edge."

And I'd lose the toehold I currently have, my boot wedged into a narrow space between two rocks.

"You can do it," I say. "Come on, Belle."

She takes a deep breath and then throws her arm up, grabbing onto my elbow. Bit by bit, she crawls her way up my body, using me as a human rope. And when she's close enough that I can wrap my arms around her waist, I hug her and roll her over my body.

She lands on my legs, scraping my knees even harder against the jagged lava rock.

But I don't give a fuck. She isn't dead. That's what matters.

Now that she's safe, I inch my way away from the ledge and then rise to my knees once I'm on solid earth. Belle is lying flat on her back nearby, her eyes staring up at the blue sky. Her chest is rising and falling rapidly.

"Holy shit."

“I should have believed you when you said you were clumsy,” I mutter.

She snorts, a mixture of amusement and sheer relief. “And I should have believed you when you said you weren’t going to kill me.”

In any other case, I’d make sure to remind someone that I could kill them at any moment. That I’m unpredictable, undependable. I feed off the fear that inspires.

But something about the way Belle is looking at me right now is better than that.

It looks an awful lot like trust.

BELLE

Nikolai coaxes me onto the couch. “You need to warm up. You’re still shivering.”

I look down at my hands. He’s right—my fingers are trembling. I barely noticed, but I’m not surprised he did.

“It’s just adrenaline,” I mumble. “Near-death experiences do that to a girl.”

Another shiver moves through me as the reality of what could have happened plays out. I was half-dangling over the edge of a fall that I absolutely would not have come back from. At least it would’ve been a pretty place to die, right?

Then I think of Elise left all alone in the world and I shiver again.

“You need a drink,” he says definitively. He grabs a bottle of scotch and a glass from the nearby liquor cabinet.

“Do you know how to make hot chocolate?” I ask.

Nikolai looks back over his shoulder, eyebrow raised. “Huh?”

“Please tell me you know what hot chocolate is.” Given how different our lives are, I can’t assume anything. I wonder idly if Nikolai knows how to operate a toaster oven or a washing machine.

“Of course I do. I just haven’t had it since the age of six.”

"Then you're missing out."

Nikolai chuckles and pours me an alarmingly large glass of scotch before he moves back to the pantry. "All that's here is the powdered shit. If you want proper hot chocolate, I can order room service."

"Powdered is fine," I tell him. "It's all I've ever had, actually."

More like it's all I've ever known. We never had anything extra in the house. No soda, no candy, no nothing other than chips and Top Ramen. Whatever leftover money we had went to Mom's drugs.

Pilfering money out of her purse was the only reason Elise and I had money for groceries some weeks. But once, I went to a slumber party when I was eleven and had a hot chocolate with an actual cinnamon stick to swirl in. It tasted like magic to me. I drank four mugs and felt sick all night.

Worth it, both at the time and in retrospect.

Nikolai shuts the cabinet and picks up his phone. "Then that settles it. I'm calling room service."

He's being so sweet to me that I hate to ask for anything more, but I clear my throat. "Maybe some sandwiches, too? Elise hasn't eaten, and—"

"She ordered room service right after we left," he says, holding the phone to his ear.

"How do you know that?"

He taps his phone, and I'm not sure what he means until he starts talking. "Send up a couple sandwiches—chef's choice—and a hot chocolate." He hangs up and drops his phone on the counter. "I got a text from the front desk letting me know someone made a charge to my account. She ordered a ribeye and mac and cheese."

"She sure isn't shy about taking charity, is she?" I shake my head. "Sorry about that. I'll talk to her."

"She shouldn't be shy. This isn't charity," Nikolai snaps.

I shrug. "You don't have to lie to me. You feel bad about all the crap that's

been going on, so you brought me here and—”

Nikolai stalks across the room and stops behind the couch where I’m sitting. His fingers dig into the plush white cushion until the knuckles go white. “I don’t act out of guilt. You aren’t here because I feel I owe you something.”

He seems genuine enough, but I can’t quite buy it. “I just...”

“Do I look like a fucking saint?”

I press my lips together. I know a trap when I see one. I’m not answering that.

There’s also the inconvenient fact that, standing over me, the light from the kitchen silhouetting him, Nikolai could pass for any saint, god, or angel I’ve ever seen. He’s tall and broad with perfect golden skin and a jawline that makes marble look a little JellO-y.

I’ve seen enough of his dark side to know he isn’t heavenly, not by a long shot. But he’s something not of this world nonetheless.

“You’re here because I want you here,” he continues, his voice a low growl. “That’s all you need to worry about. That’s the only truth that counts.”

It sounds nice. I wish I could take it at face value. But his words bounce off of me, unable to penetrate the walls I’ve been constructing for years and years.

“I don’t think you do anything simply because you want to,” I tell him. “You could... but you don’t. You have too many responsibilities. Everything serves a purpose.”

“And how would you know?”

“Takes one to know one,” I tell him with a shrug.

“Hm. I suppose you’re not wrong.”

“Called it.”

“You are here because I want you here,” he says, turning to lean against the sofa. “But you’re also here because someone else doesn’t want you here. And I don’t take orders from anyone.”

I blink. Now, that is surprising. I wasn't expecting that.

"Who doesn't want me here?"

Before Nikolai can answer, there's a knock on the door. He turns and answers it, accepting our food from one of his staff. And even though he pays their salaries, he slips the man a cash tip large enough that the man actually bows in gratitude.

Nikolai comes back in and arranges the food on the coffee table in front of us. He hands me a toasted bacon and arugula sandwich with burrata cheese and honey, all of which I know only because there's a handwritten note pinned to the serving tray.

Then he pours me a mug of hot chocolate from a stainless steel thermos. The liquid comes out a thick, milk chocolate brown. It looks nothing like the watery crap I'm used to.

I take a sip and bite back a groan. "Holy shit."

"Good?" he asks, chuckling.

"Beyond," I say, taking another sip. "I feel like I'm drinking from Willy Wonka's chocolate river."

He blinks as my words fail to land.

"Don't tell me you've never seen that movie."

Nikolai shrugs. "Then I won't tell you that."

"You're an alien," I mutter. "Absolute freaking alien."

He shrugs again. "I didn't have much time for stuff like that."

"Too busy playing war?"

"Too busy surviving," he bites back.

"Maybe we have more in common than I thought."

Nikolai takes a bite of his sandwich and then pushes mine towards me with his pinky, silently encouraging me to eat. I listen, grabbing the sandwich with

both hands and taking a bite. As expected, it's insanely delicious.

"Elise made it sound like the two of you didn't exactly have a family from a Norman Rockwell painting," he remarks.

I'm impressed. Pretty diplomatic phrasing for a man who doesn't usually mince words.

"To say the least," I agree bitterly. "The very least." I sigh and lean back on the couch. "I tried to make things better for her. I'm so much older. And I at least had some idea of what a good parent could be. I mean, I had..."

My voice fades away, the words lost to the emotion constricting my throat.

"Had what?" Nikolai prods.

"My dad," I finally manage, blinking back tears. "I had my dad. For a little while, anyway."

"What happened to him?"

When most people realize my dad is dead, they fall all over themselves apologizing. For bringing him up, for my sadness, for the awkward situation they've caused or I've caused or both. But Nikolai doesn't do any of that. He opens the floor for me to talk about him, free of judgment and pity alike. Talking about him... that's something I haven't done in years.

"There was an... accident," I start hesitantly. "It was Christmastime and we were at the mall. I don't remember what we were doing there. We didn't go very often because we didn't exactly have the money. But I found a huge dollhouse." I smile just thinking about it. It's so clear in my head. "It was in a store window. It had a steep roof with dormer windows, a wraparound porch, tiny rocking chairs, and little people that could live inside. It was the prettiest house I'd ever seen. I wanted it so much."

"He bought it for you?"

I shake my head. "No. We didn't have the money for that, not even then. But he promised Santa would bring it for Christmas. He swore. '*Cross my heart and hope to die, Bellie. Santa won't let you down.*' And I believed him. Even though I didn't believe in Santa, even though I knew it cost too much

money... I believed him. And then he died."

I swallow. Nikolai waits in patient silence for me to go on or stop, whichever I decide. I feel his openness like aloe on a sunburn. Soothing something that's hurt me for a long, long time.

"A car crash. It was on the way home. An icy overpass." I squeeze my eyes closed. "I still remember every detail. The way the car spun. My dad threw his arm out in front of me, like he wanted to hold me in my seat. But I was wearing my seatbelt. He wasn't. He was ejected and flew over the railing."

"Fuck," Nikolai mutters.

He adds nothing else. That's fine with me—I've had a lifetime's worth of well wishes that don't change a damn thing. No amount of sympathy will bring my dad back.

I nod. "Yeah. My mom fell apart after that. She got remarried, but the guy was a waste of space. He got her pregnant and bailed. Mom started doing drugs right after she had Elise. I'm the one who changed Elise's diapers and gave her bottles. I'm the one who took care of her. I've always taken care of her."

"That's a lot to take on."

"Someone had to."

My voice is venomous. Probably because, right now, I'm not talking to Nikolai—I'm talking to my mom. To Elise's dad. To all the people who should have stepped up to take care of her, but didn't.

"Loving kids is a sacrifice," I continue. "That's what my dad taught me. It's why I know he was going to do whatever it took to get me that dollhouse. It's why he worked late and woke up early." I feel tears burning the backs of my eyes, but I blink them away. "So I vowed to be that person for Elise. To sacrifice everything for her, no matter what."

"Not everything, I hope."

Nikolai's eyes are burning bright in the dim light. It feels like I'm naked and he's seeing every part of me. I have the sudden urge to throw a blanket over

my head and hide. It should be illegal for a man to look at you that way. It's too much. Way too much.

"What?" I ask.

"You shouldn't sacrifice everything."

"Well, I didn't mean—not everything," I stammer.

Nikolai doesn't look like he's buying it. "If you sacrifice everything, then there's nothing of you left for her. And I think she'd rather have you than whatever bullshit you might buy her."

"It's not all about stuff," I argue. "I don't care about that."

"But you were willing to work for a scumbag like Roger to make sure she had shoes."

I narrow my eyes. "It's not that simple."

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't," he says. "But you shouldn't sacrifice what you want or need for anyone. Not your sister, not your boss. No one."

"Easy for you to say."

I feel Nikolai turn to face me, but I ignore it. Instead, I take a bite of the sandwich and chew slowly, hoping he'll somehow forget I'm here. That he'll move on and we won't have to unpack my big, fat mouth.

But when I look over, he's still watching me.

I sigh. "You have the world on a string, Nikolai. Maybe you don't know what it's like to—"

"It wasn't always like this."

There's real emotion in his voice. Whole sentences, chapters, novels written between the lines. But they're written in a language I can't understand.

"Then what was it like?"

He drops his sandwich and pushes the plate away slowly. Every movement is controlled, practiced, even now. I don't think I've ever seen Nikolai lose

control.

He's quiet for a long time. Then he says, "Not like this."

It's clear that's all he plans to say. I go back to eating. But every bite is like sawdust in my mouth now. So after a few more bites, I push my plate away, too.

"Thanks for dinner," I say softly.

Nikolai nods without looking at me. His eyes stay locked on the fire in front of us. I can feel the heat radiating, but I can also feel the coolness of the rest of the room pressed against my back. It's a strange thing, being caught on the edge of two realities. Like I'm being given a choice: retreat into the cold loneliness I know or venture deeper into the heat of whatever this thing between us is.

It's not hard to decide what to do.

"Thanks for... for everything," I add. "For bringing me and Elise here. For taking me on that hike."

"Even though you almost died?" he asks.

I nod. "Even though I almost died. Which, by the way, thanks for saving my life."

"Twice."

I pretend to pout. "I thought you said I could have taken Roger."

"With that hole punch, I think you could have taken on anyone," he says. "That fucker was heavy."

I scoot closer to him. The move isn't exactly subtle, and Nikolai notices everything. I know he saw.

"And I already thanked you for helping me with Roger."

"You did?"

I nod and lick my lips. "That night. In your office."

Now, Nikolai turns to me. His attention is even more scalding than the fire.
“Ah. So that’s what that was.”

“I think it’s a fair exchange for my life. Don’t you?”

Before I can even finish the question, Nikolai grabs my arm and yanks me onto his lap. My knees are anchored on either side of his hips as he grips my waist.

“Stop talking about sacrificing yourself.”

I frown. “I wasn’t—”

“Nothing is a ‘fair exchange’ for you,” he growls. “You’re worth more than anything on offer.”

He sounds angry, but I think he’s being... sweet? Is that possible? Can Nikolai Zhukova be sweet?

“So are you saying you don’t want to—”

“I’m saying that what’s important is what *you* want,” he says fiercely enough to frighten me a little. “We should only do this if you want to. Not because you feel like you have to. So what do you want, *lapochka*?”

My heart is thundering in my chest. I’ve never had a man sound so concerned for me. Be so gentle.

And the fact that this is the same man who tied me to a chair in his office, who recorded us almost having sex in his office for blackmail? Insanity.

The only way I can make sense of any of this is that Nikolai thinks I’m pathetic. He’s made that clear from the moment he heard me on the phone with Roger that night in the conference room.

This isn’t affection for me as much as it is a disdain for weakness. He’s trying to teach me how to take what I want, how to fight for myself. Probably so he won’t have to save my miserable life again.

The teacher/student dynamic is more embarrassing than it is hot, but straddling him right now, I know what I want.

“Kiss me, please.”

Nikolai's hands tighten on my waist as he tilts my chin up and kisses me. His lips are warm and soft, and each one blooms open more than the last.

As the kiss deepens, he grips my hips and rocks me against his growing erection. I'm a puppet, letting him move me, letting him take us both higher with every stroke.

"How are you in control even when I'm the one on top of you?" I whisper when the kiss breaks.

He stands me up and yanks my pants down. I kick them off just as he pulls me back onto his lap.

"I'm always in control," he says, right as he curls his hand around my hip and drives his palm against my center. The friction is devastating. "Get used to it."

Well, I can certainly try.

His hand slides into my panties. I whimper when he circles his calloused finger over my clit. Then he slips his finger into me and massages me with his thumb.

Every move is graceful and heartstopping. All I can do is hold still and take it.

"You shouldn't go years without being touched like this," he growls, driving another finger into me. "Your body was made for touching. You're beautiful when you come. Do you know that, beautiful Belle? You look so good when you're falling apart for me."

I bite down on his shoulder and try to ride the wave.

But Nikolai is having none of that. He means what he says—he wants to see me fall to pieces.

"Come for me, little lamb," he commands, fucking me with his fingers while I writhe on his lap. "Let yourself have it. Want it. Take it. *Come.*"

Finally, I can't hold out any more. I tip my head back and cry out as wave after wave of a drooling orgasm rushes through me.

It's swift and vicious. And as soon as it's let go of me, I grab the hem of my shirt and lift it over my head. Before the material even hits the floor, I'm unhooking my bra.

"You aren't spent yet?" Nikolai asks smugly. "We've had a big day."

I thrust my hand between us and palm his hard length. "Not even close."

When I take him in my hand, I watch his eyes dilate. His pupils eat away at the gray of his irises, but his expression remains the same. Fixed.

On *me*.

When he reaches to touch my chest, I slide off of his lap and kneel between his legs. Surprise flickers over his face, but it's gone in the next instant.

I almost laugh out loud. Composed, unflappable Nikolai. Even now. Even like this.

But, fuck—I want to be the one to make him lose control.

I lean down and take him in my mouth in one hot stroke. My eyes burn as I move him deeper and deeper into my throat, but I resist my body's urge to push him back out again when I hear him hiss.

That's something. A response. I want more of that.

I drag my tongue along the underside of him and circle around his tip before taking him again. Nikolai cups the back of my head, holding me lightly in place. His fingers curl in my hair, and I let him thrust gently into my mouth.

"Fuck," he groans, tipping his head back on the couch.

Eventually, his thighs are clenching, and I know I could get him off like this. But my pussy is throbbing again. I have needs, too.

And like Nikolai said, I shouldn't sacrifice anything for anyone, right?

So I slide him out of my mouth, gasping, and then crawl back onto his lap. His neck is flushed and there's a new determination on his face. A focus I recognize well.

I lift myself high on his lap and press a nipple to his lips. He opens

immediately, sucking me into his warm mouth. When I slide down onto his length, he nips at me, and I grab his chin.

He lets me direct his mouth to my other nipple and then to my lips. I kiss him in long, easy strokes, matching the way I ride on his hard cock.

I can feel his frustration growing. The way he grips my hips, trying to move me faster. The way he's urging me on.

But I keep it deliberately slow. I'm addicted to the play of emotion on his chiseled face.

"Are you trying to drive me mad?" he finally asks through gritted teeth.

"Are you mad?" I tease. I slip all the way off of him and then inch ever so slowly back on. My legs are trembling from the effort it takes to resist my own climax. "If you're mad, show me. Punish me."

He grips the end of my hair and forces my head back. My back arches and his mouth lands on my breast, his tongue flicking over my nipple until I'm panting.

"You can't handle my punishment," he says when he finally breaks off.

"Try me, tough guy."

He growls, but doesn't move. So I lean down and press my lips to his ear. "Fuck me like you mean it."

"You're trying to get a rise out of me."

"I already got a rise out of you," I taunt, eyeing his hard cock between us. "So why don't you stop sacrificing yourself on the altar of your pride and fuck me the way we both know you want to?"

"And how is that?"

I lean in and slowly drag my tongue along the rim of his ear. Then I whisper one word.

"Hard."

In an instant, Nikolai lifts us both off the couch and tosses me back on the

carpet in front of the fireplace. The look on his face is animal. Predatory. He slams back into me, filling me in one thrust.

“F-fuck,” I sputter.

Looks like I’m getting a little more than I bargained for.

I reach to grip his hip and keep him buried in me, but Nikolai catches my hand in midair and lays it on my stomach. “Touch yourself,” he orders.

I’ve never done this with anyone else watching, but I don’t even hesitate. I circle my finger over my clit and moan.

“I’m already so close,” I whisper in a strained voice.

He shoves his hands under my body and lifts me at an angle, hooking me around his waist so he can thrust into me again and again. Our bodies slap together violently. I’m helpless to resist him or meet him halfway or do anything at all.

All I can do is take it.

But the position gives me the chance to watch him. I see the furrow in his brows as he works. I see the grimace as he fights off the inevitable, dragging out this torturous pleasure for as long as possible.

And finally, I see the moment he breaks.

The tightest clench yet—and then his face relaxes and relief washes over him. He closes his eyes, and I feel him twitch inside of me. Releasing.

And that is all it takes to send me over the edge again.

“Nikolai,” I cry out. I squeeze his waist with my thighs and hold us together until my muscles fail me.

Then Nikolai lowers me gently to the floor and kisses his way up my stomach and across my chest. When he reaches my mouth, he’s wearing a sexy smirk.

“Was that hard enough for you?”

All I can do is lift my hand and weakly flip him off.

He laughs and then sucks my middle finger into his mouth for a second. “We already played the ‘fuck you’ game, Belle. What’s next?”

I close my eyes and feign sleep to avoid answering. Because, for a moment, I thought I was in control. I thought I knew what I was doing.

But now, I realize the truth.

I have no fucking idea...

And I love it.

NIKOLAI

I'm in the dining room with a black coffee and a plate of toast when Belle walks in.

She slept in her own room last night. I didn't invite her to mine, and she didn't ask. When she looks up at me now, it's almost like she's surprised to see me here.

"Good morning." I gesture to the table. "Hungry?"

"I actually ordered breakfast this morning and ate it in bed," she says guiltily. "I was starving. Sorry."

"I know you did."

"Of course you do," she snorts.

She's dressed for the day and has a black notebook under her arm. It's the same one she had that night in the conference room at Zhukova Incorporated.

"It's my job to know what happens here. But the kitchen just told me you ordered food. I don't know what you ate."

"Am I on a diet?" she smirks, eyeing my plate. "Because I didn't order buttered toast like you did, I can tell you that."

"I like a light breakfast."

"And I like waffles with peanut butter and syrup." She frowns. "But they

didn't have peanut butter in the kitchen. They gave me some chocolate spread instead. Did you know they don't have peanut butter?"

"Peanut butter is mostly an American delicacy."

"These folks don't know what they're missing," she says. "Have you ever had peanut butter on your waffles?"

"No. Because I'm an adult."

She mock-gasps. "What is it with you and food shaming? First, you judged me for wanting hot chocolate, then you judged me for liking powdered hot chocolate, and now, this. We may have come from similar circumstances, but you're snooty now."

"Having good taste doesn't make me snooty." I narrow my eyes at her and she stares right back.

Finally, she grins. "When we're back in America, I'll make you a waffle the right way. Peanut butter included. You'll never look back."

When we're back in America. Maybe she's just talking, saying things without thinking them through. But that sounds an awful lot like Belle has plans for the two of us.

"Someone's in a hurry to get back," I observe.

Her smile falters. "Not especially. I... I left things kind of a mess. But I guess my life hasn't exactly been tidy for a few months now. Since Elise came along."

"How long has she been living with you?"

"A few months." Belle presses on her forehead like she has a headache. "It may not look like it, but she wanted to live with me."

"And your mom was fine with that?"

Belle winces. "No. Not even a little bit."

"I'm sensing a story."

"I guess so," she chuckles. "It was a little *Mission Impossible*-esque."

“I have a hard time believing you’re capable of something like that. Considering how many times I’ve caught you eavesdropping on me and trying to steal my car, but—”

“That was all under duress!” she argues. “I didn’t have time to plan.”

“Then tell me the story. Impress me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, now, you’ve built it up to be this big thing that it wasn’t. It’s just that my mom hasn’t wanted Elise to have any contact with me since I left for college. Unless, of course, my mom wanted to pump me for money.”

I shake my head. “Fucking leech.”

“Nailed it. She liked to give me sob stories about needing clothes for Elise or money for food, but it all went to getting her high. I knew her tricks, and I cut her off. But I found ways to get Elise what she needed from time to time. Money sharing apps, giftcards, that sort of thing. But it couldn’t be anything my mom would notice—no clothes, no devices—or she’d shut it down. So mostly just some money for her to buy hot lunch at school and get basic necessities, the kind of stuff she could plausibly pick up from a shelter or a free clinic somewhere. Deodorant, tampons, laundry soap.”

“Things were that bad? You had to send her money for tampons?”

Belle nods, but I can tell she’s ashamed. I have no idea what she has to be ashamed of—she isn’t the one who refused to take care of her own child. If anything, she stepped up and did what no one else would do.

It’s admirable. She should be holding her head high.

But before I can say any of that, Belle continues. “Six months ago, Mom went on a bender. A bad one. She’d just gotten out of forced treatment and swore she’d be clean again, but less than a week later, her dealer was at the house. This time, he hit on Elise.”

I find my hands clenching under the table. “Did he—”

“No,” she says quickly. “No, Elise got out before anything happened. I warned her about him. I told her to stay out of sight whenever he was around.

The guy is a creep. He never touched me or anything, but... I was just a kid, barely thirteen, when he started sniffing around. One night, I overheard him offer my mom a trade. Me, in exchange for some product.”

If the man was in front of me right now, I’d kill him without blinking. Without hesitating. I’d rip his useless head from his useless shoulders and laugh at his blood.

“A man like that doesn’t deserve breath,” I snarl.

Belle’s eyes widen at the fury in my voice. “My mom didn’t take him up on it, for the record. She said no, but... I didn’t know if she’d always say no. As soon as I could, I got out of there. I hated leaving Elise, but—”

“You were a kid yourself. You couldn’t take her with you.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I do. I just don’t know if Elise understands that yet. But I always made sure she could get in touch with me, and a few months ago, she did. She called and we made a plan. I drove to Omaha, she slipped out of her window in the middle of the night, and we left.”

“Your mom isn’t looking for her?”

“She doesn’t have the money to chase us down,” she says. “She has no idea where I’m living, and she won’t call the police. They wouldn’t listen to her anyway.”

Maybe I could get a security detail on Belle. Or spies on her mom. Make sure she’s staying right where she’s supposed to be. Though I don’t know why the fuck it matters to me.

I grab my phone to text Arslan, but before I can, my screen lights up with a call from the man himself.

“Excuse me,” I tell Belle. I stand up and walk into the living room before answering. “I was just about to text you. Isn’t it the middle of the night in New York?”

“It is, so why would you be trying to text me and wake me up? Also, you’re welcome for being so dedicated,” he says.

I snort. “You’re always on call.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” he grumbles. “Anyhow, I’ve been up all night because Giorgos is up to some bullshit.”

“What is it?”

“Last night, I stopped by the Greek restaurant where he likes to hold court. I just wanted to peek in and make sure it was business as usual, but he wasn’t there. I tracked him down and realized he was across town at Toxic Kate’s.”

“The Battiato hangout,” I growl. “What was he doing there?”

“I couldn’t get inside—no one ever forgets a face this good-looking—but I sent a few of our newer recruits in. I figured they wouldn’t be recognized. They said Giorgos looked pretty chummy with everyone there.”

I tighten my fists at my side. “Bastard.”

“He did say he’d partner with them if you didn’t get rid of Belle,” Arslan reminds me.

“Tell me you’re not defending that motherfucker.”

“Of course not. I’m just saying, he warned us.”

“And I warned him,” I snap back. “Maybe he needs a refresher of what he stands to lose if he takes up arms against me.”

My hands are already itching for revenge. Partnering with the Battiatos is a threat. Giorgos understands that.

And no one threatens what I’ve built without consequences.

“What do you have in mind?” Arslan asks.

“What *don’t* I have in mind?” I retort. “The bastard deserves his fat head stuck on a spike. He wants to let his sister try to yank me around by the balls? Let’s see how Giorgos lives without his.”

Arslan whistles. “Brutal. Unnecessarily visual, but brutal. You planning to come back and deal with it, then?”

I’m about to say yes when I hear Belle clear her throat absent-mindedly from the other room.

I turn back to look at her. She's stooped over her black notebook, her pencil scratching furiously across the page. Even from here, I can tell she isn't paying me any attention. She's wholly focused on what she's doing. Absorbed in the task at hand.

Her hair is tucked back behind her ear, her tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth. She's relaxed here.

And I am, too.

"No," I say, deciding all at once. "You can handle it. I trust you."

Arslan almost chokes. "You're going to let me handle this?"

"Isn't that what you're always begging me for? To let you have more fun?"

There's a brief pause before I hear my second-in-command chuckling darkly. "Fuck. Yes. This will be fun."

"Remember, you're giving him a warning," I remind him. "Don't make me regret this."

"A warning shot. Yeah, yeah. I know. Nothing a little fire can't solve."

"You pyromaniac," I laugh. "If you have to incinerate something, make it one of his businesses."

"You want to cripple him financially? That feels like more than a warning shot."

"It's a reminder," I say. "He'll remember how much he needs me as soon as one of his streams of income is cut off. And if he's smart, Giorgos will also remember how little I need him."

I hang up, feeling mostly confident that Arslan will stay within the bounds of reason, and pad back into the dining room.

Belle is so focused on what she's doing that she doesn't even notice me walk up behind her.

"What's that?"

She jolts and then flings her arms over her notebook. "Nothing!"

“Very inconspicuous.”

She narrows her eyes at me and tries to casually close the cover. “You just surprised me.”

“Then you won’t mind if I take a look.” I snatch the notebook out of her hand and hold it above my head.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

“Technically, this is my suite. And my hotel. I’d say everything here is mine.”

“Just because something is under your roof doesn’t mean you own it,” she hisses. “You don’t own me!”

Our eyes meet, and I know she’s thinking the same thing I am: how good it could be, for both of us, if she was mine.

My cock stands to attention at the thought, at the memory of her riding me last night. The way I fucked her on the rug in the firelight. I have half a mind to toss her notebook aside and spread her out on the table.

But then Belle looks away, her cheeks flushed. And my blood starts pumping upward again, helping me think with my upstairs brain.

“I own anything I want,” I repeat with finality.

I flick the notebook open. I expect to find a half-finished sketch, but it’s immediately obvious Belle has been working on this drawing for a while.

It’s a house. A fantastical one. A small bungalow-style home with a covered porch and dormer windows that branches out into a gothic cathedral with a medieval-style turret. There’s a stone spire covered in vines and delicate flowers. It could easily be silly or cartoonish, but Belle has drawn it all with serious, loving detail.

“Where’d you learn how to do this?” I ask.

“I didn’t. I taught myself. Can I have it back now?”

I shake my head and turn away from her. “You taught yourself how to do this?”

“It’s just a drawing.”

“But you came up with all of this,” I say. “You dreamt it up and made it real on paper. That’s a talent. A gift.”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Because you’re an accountant,” I snort.

Belle looks rightfully offended, but I don’t apologize. She crosses her arms. “I wasn’t always.”

She shrugs and lifts her chin, making it clear she won’t say anymore. But I want to know more. About Belle, about her life.

“I’ll give your book back if you tell me the story.”

Her jaw clenches. “Really?”

I nod. “Really.”

She sighs, and I can tell it’s taking a lot to drag this tidbit out of her. “I initially went to college to be an architect. I’ve always loved houses and design—”

“The dollhouse,” I infer. “The one your father promised you.” The pieces are starting to click.

She gives me a sad smile. “Yeah, the dollhouse. So I wanted to study to be able to give people that feeling. To make them feel safe and protected and loved. To make them feel comfortable. But... it didn’t work out.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t have the money,” she says. “I had a scholarship offer waiting for me if I went for an accounting degree. But the one for architecture... well, there was a panel of professors who decided which new applicants would receive the money. And I didn’t get in.”

“They denied you?”

She nods, but I can see in her face that there’s something else. Something she isn’t saying.

So when she reaches for the notebook, I pull it back again. “I want the whole story, *lapochka*.”

“It doesn’t even matter,” she mumbles. “It was so long ago. A dead dream.”

I tap the notebook. “It doesn’t seem dead.”

“Well, it is,” she snaps. “One of the professors on the board wanted me to sleep with him in exchange for the scholarship, and I refused. So it was over before it even began. It’s fine.”

My chest tightens with rage. “Fuck that. It’s not fine at all.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear self-consciously. “It is. I’m over it.”

“Well, I’m not. Who was the man?”

Her eyes widen. “I’m not telling you his name.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll kill him!” she blurts. “Or... I don’t know. But it won’t be good. And there’s no point. I got a different degree, a different job. It’s fine.”

“There’s always time to start over.”

“Starting over takes more than time,” she says. “I have Elise to think about now. I can’t waste my life living in a daydream, pretending that I have a picture-perfect family that lives in a picture-perfect house. I have to live in the real world. And in the real world, I need money. So in the real world, I’m an accountant.”

“Is that why you wanted your dad to buy you that dollhouse? So you could pretend it was where you all lived?”

Her hazel eyes are glassy now. Without meaning to, I stepped into a touchy subject.

She holds out her hand. “You said you’d give it back.”

“You’re right. I did.”

She steps forward, reaching for the notebook. But just before she can grab it,

I yank it away and tear out her latest drawing.

“Hey!” she shouts. “That’s mine!”

“It’s mine now.”

“You said you’d give it back.”

I hold out the black notebook. “I said I’d give the notebook back. And I am. But the drawing is mine.”

She’s twitching angrily for a second. Then, with a scowl, Belle snatches her notebook back and spins on her heel.

“Where are you going?”

“To see if Elise wants breakfast,” she says. “Because I have responsibilities, remember? Dependents. I can’t sit around playing house with you all day.”

She grumbles something else I can’t hear, then a door slams closed.

I fold the sketch and slide it into my back pocket. My cock is hard and my hands are trembling.

But just as I turn to head towards the small office off the living room, I hear Belle scream.

“Nikolai!”

My heart lurches into my throat. I sprint across the suite and throw open the door to Elise’s room to find Belle standing next to the empty bed. Her eyes are wide, all signs of anger replaced with pure terror.

“She’s gone.”

“Did you check everywhere?”

“Shower, closet, her bed, the balcony.” Belle bites back a sob. “She’s gone. She took her room key, her phone. And her shoes are gone...”

“I’ll call the front desk to see if anyone saw her. It will be fine.”

Belle stays in Elise’s room while I step out and call down to the front desk. Within five minutes, I have all of the security footage from the hallway in

front of our suite and of the parking garage sitting in my email inbox.

When I pull up the footage on my laptop, Belle is standing over my shoulder. “This is going to take hours,” she moans. “We don’t have time.”

“There’s motion detection,” I tell her. “All I have to do is click through every instance of movement and—”

Onscreen, the door to the suite opens and Elise steps into the hallway. The timestamp shows it’s barely even six AM.

Belle inhales sharply. “She left hours ago. And what’s she holding?”

I grimace. “Fuck.”

“What? What is it?” Belle asks, leaning over my shoulder to get a better look. She smells like vanilla and roses.

“Those are my car keys.”

I switch over to the parking garage footage. I scroll to around the same time on that footage, and sure enough, we see her walk quickly across the parking garage, unlock my car, and hop inside. A minute later, she reverses jerkily out of the space and speeds out of the garage.

“Oh God, oh God. Oh my God!” Belle says, getting angrier each time. Then her face crumples and tears gather in her eyes. “Oh my God. She could be anywhere. She could be on the side of the road in a ditch. She could be—”

“Perfectly fine,” I finish for her. “She could be safe. She could be just a dumb kid who went out for a joyride.”

Belle looks at me, and I can tell she wants to believe me, but it’s hard.

I understand. Elise isn’t even my blood, and I feel... something. Belle loves her so much that it’s hard not to feel protective of her myself.

I close the laptop and reach for Belle’s hand. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“I’m scared...” she whispers.

But she’s already sliding her hand into mine.

BELLE

“Your car has a tracking device?” I ask, staring down at the phone in my hands and the tiny red dot flickering on the screen.

He nods in the driver’s seat of the car we’re “borrowing” from the hotel’s general manager, who just about fell over himself in his rush to fork over his keys to Nikolai. “It activates if I say the car has been stolen. Now, we just have to follow it.”

“Easy enough, since it isn’t moving.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, my stomach drops. “Shit—the dot isn’t moving. What if she—”

He peeks over at me out of the corner of his eye. “Do you always assume the worst is going to happen?”

“It’s habit. I mean, look at my life this last week.”

“Explain.”

He says it with zero expectation that I might refuse him. Nikolai asks, Nikolai receives.

“Well,” I begin, “the man I slept with on a plane turned out to be my company’s biggest client. Then he *also* turned out to be some kind of mafia don—”

“Bratva.”

I turn to him. “What?”

“It’s a Bratva,” he says. “Not a mafia.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, whatever. Then my boss tried to assault me and I lost my job. Is that enough reason to assume the worst?”

“I think you’re skipping some highlights.”

“Like what?”

“Well, the airplane bathroom, for one. Then my office, the private plane we took here, the living room last night...”

“You’re disgusting,” I say, even as my face flushes.

I will never admit to him that those were highlights this last week. Because it doesn’t matter how earth-shatteringly good this man is in bed—my life has been chaos ever since he stepped into it.

I have to focus on Elise right now. She is my priority. She’s always my priority.

I look back down at the phone and curse. “Fuck, that was the turn!”

Nikolai slams on the brakes, throwing us both forward in our seats, and then swings the wheel hard to the left. The tires squeal and the car groans, but Nikolai makes the turn. As soon as the tires are straightened out, he sits back in his seat as if nothing happened.

I take a deep breath. “Are you trying to kill us?”

“Did you want me to get to your sister as fast as possible or not?”

I know he’s right, so I just slouch down in my seat and stare at the phone. As we get closer to the red dot, my stomach starts to twist into knots.

“If she’s hurt, I’ll never forgive myself,” I say softly.

I expect Nikolai to tell me to stop being such a worrywart, but instead, he reaches over and wraps his hand around my thigh. It’s more comfort than any words could ever be.

Which in and of itself is far too scary to think about right now.

The road climbs into a steep incline, nothing but the sky visible ahead of us. But as soon as we're at the top, heading downhill again, I look down and see the black spot of Nikolai's car up ahead.

On the side of the road.

Halfway through a wooden fence.

"Drive, drive," I gasp, already unbuckling my seatbelt. "She crashed. Oh, fuck. What are we going to—Should I call someone? What if she's—What is the number for 911 in Iceland?"

Nikolai parks and gets out of the car without another word. I scramble out after him, my heart lodged in my throat.

Gruesome images flash through my head. Elise injured or dying or... worse. A kind of fear I've never experienced before washes over me, and suddenly, I can't bring myself to take another step.

If she's—oh God, I can't even bring myself to say the words.

I stop in the middle of the road, my shoes practically glued to the pavement. I watch in horror as Nikolai approaches the driver's side door and then leans down to look through the window.

"Is she okay?" I call out, my voice trembling.

Nikolai stands up, half-smirking. "Unfortunately, this little debacle hasn't changed her. She just flipped me off."

Oh, thank God, is my first thought. Elise is fine. Elise is safe. Elise is okay.

My second thought is, *I'm gonna kill her*.

I stomp towards the ditch she ended up in. "Elise Margaret Rowan, get your ass out of that car. Now!"

Slowly, the door opens and Elise steps out. She has the audacity to look bored. "Relax, Belle. You're not my—"

"Shut up," I hiss. "You don't get to say anything right now. You don't get to talk back. You don't get to tell me I'm not your mom. Because I'm the closest thing you have to it. And all you get to do is sit there and let me yell

at you. Because—because—”

I look at the scratched paint and crunched hood and try not to imagine how much the car will cost to fix. More than I have. More than I may ever have. But I can’t think about that now.

Elise pouts and crosses her arms. “This is so stupid. I just wanted to go sightseeing. But that car is fast. I lost control down the hill, and—”

I hold up a hand to stop her. “I don’t want to hear how you almost crashed and died. You could have gone sightseeing with us!”

“And be a third wheel to your dates?” she scoffs. “No thanks.”

Nikolai, the intelligent man that he is, chooses that moment to slip away from the bickering Rowan women and start the trek up the road towards a tall, two-level farmhouse at the end of a long drive. I’m guessing it belongs to the owners of the property that Elise just violated.

“These aren’t ‘dates.’ I’m working for Nikolai,” I snap.

I’m hoping Elise is more convinced by my lie than I am. Nikolai said I was here to work for him, to help him with his hotel. But nothing I’ve done so far even kind of resembles work. It’s just been a really lovely vacation.

Or at least, it was. Until Elise disappeared this morning.

I should have seen her escape coming, honestly. I can always count on cold, hard reality to give me a kick in the ass whenever I start to think things could be looking up for me.

“Speaking of which, Nikolai has taken care of us this last week and you decided to repay him by crashing his car?”

For the first time, Elise has the decency to look guilty.

“You shouldn’t be driving in the first place!” I pile on. “You don’t even have a learner’s permit.”

“I’ve been driving for years,” she snaps. “How else do you think I got groceries from the store? You think *Mom* drove me there? C’mon, Belle, don’t be stupid.”

The admission catches me off guard. I hesitate.

Elise fills the silence. “I used to pull my wagon the ten blocks there and back, but driving was easier. I could fit more in the trunk and I didn’t have to go as often.”

And just like that, my anger dissipates. The image of my baby sister buying groceries and hauling them home in her little red wagon... It’s too much. I want to break down.

So much was taken away from her, and she doesn’t even realize what she’s missing. It’s just normal for her.

God, that’s wrong.

I drag a hand down my face and try to keep it together. “You shouldn’t have stolen the car, Elise. You should have asked us about sightseeing. If you don’t want to go with us, Nikolai could have found you a tour guide.”

“That’s right,” she snarls. “I forgot I can just ask Nikolai for whatever I need. He’s the one actually taking care of me. Should I start calling him Daddy now?”

Elise may as well have slapped me across the face. I stare at her, a rage I don’t recognize rising up inside of me. Before I can do anything I’ll likely regret, I turn away.

Breathe. Breathe. I murmur the word under my breath again and again until each inhalation doesn’t feel quite so much like I’m sucking down battery acid.

Nikolai chooses that moment to come walking back down the road.

“Well,” he says when he’s close enough for us to hear him, “the owner was willing to make a deal. You work off the damage to the fence and he’ll call it even.”

“Me?” Elise asks, blinking.

“It sure as hell isn’t going to be either of us,” I mutter at her.

She turns her glare on me. “I’m not working for some stranger! He can call

the police for all I care. I'm not even legal. What are they going to do to me?"

"Take you away?" I suggest, leaning forward until I'm only inches away from her face. "You'll be ID'd as a runaway. They'll take you back to Omaha. Back to Mom. Is that what you want?"

Elise doesn't avert her gaze, but I can see the flicker of uncertainty behind her eyes. The fear that lives there even if she refuses to let it out.

I hate that I'm doing this to her. But I need her to see—to truly *see* and understand—exactly what's at stake here.

"You must want to be there because you don't want to be with me," I continue with a shrug. "I'm doing my best, but you make it so damn hard sometimes, Elise. Maybe working will be good for you. Maybe it will make you realize that life isn't a fucking fairytale. It's not easy. You have to work for it."

"Oh yeah, because my life has been a real fairytale before this! Fuck you, Belle!"

Nikolai snorts softly behind me. "Birds of a feather," he mutters.

I resist the urge to turn around and give him the finger. Maybe I'm more like Elise than I'm willing to admit sometimes.

Instead, I look over my shoulder at him. "When does she start?"

"In the morning," he says. "Sunrise."

"Great. Then we'll go to the hotel now, but be back tomorrow—"

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Elise argues. "I'd rather stay here and work."

I fling my arm towards the farmhouse. "Then get going! No one is stopping you!"

Her nostrils flare. Then, in a huff, Elise spins on her heel and starts marching up the driveway towards the house.

As soon as she's out of earshot, I turn to Nikolai. "Did this guy seem okay? Do you know him? What if he's some kind of murderer or—"

“We’ll stick close by,” he says.

I nod, momentarily relieved. Then the guilt starts to set in. “But you’re here to work, not babysit. You probably have stuff to do. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean —”

“Stop fucking apologizing.”

I blink, my mouth still hanging open with more words sitting unsaid on my tongue.

“You didn’t do this,” he continues. “Elise did. And if I needed to be somewhere else, I would be. I’m not here because you’re forcing me. I’m here because I want to be. Got it?”

The tone of voice is harsh and jagged, but the words are so soothing I don’t know what to do with them.

In the end, I just nod. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he says. “Now, do you want to ride a horse or not?”

BELLE

Three hours into our horse ride, I'm finally starting to relax. Nikolai has been trotting along next to me like he's been doing this his whole damn life. The man looks effortless doing anything at all—behind the wheel of a sports car, on a private plane, on top of a horse. It's not fair.

"I think you're finally ready to gallop," he says.

I smooth my hand down the mare's neck. "Yeah, I don't think so. My legs are already going to be so sore."

"From what?"

"From what? From riding a horse for three hours! Not all of us are muscled demigods. Some of us are working with feeble human parts, okay?"

My thighs really do hurt. But there's also something to this horse therapy. Sitting on top of this massive animal, it's hard to imagine there's anything I can't conquer. Anything I can't accomplish. I'm not ready to get rid of that feeling.

Especially since I know what's waiting for me when I get off.

"There's a lot of land here," Nikolai says. "We're free to explore."

The land stretches out in gentle dips and hills, a ring of glaciers along the horizon. It's green and lush and beautiful. Romantic, some might even say.

"Feels dangerous," I say softly.

He laughs. "It won't be like yesterday. No cliffs."

But that's not the kind of danger I was referring to.

Nikolai hops off his horse with ease and walks over to me. He grips my thigh with one hand and offers me his other, helping me down.

In his hands, I'm more at risk than ever of falling into a fantasy. Of forgetting what my real life looks like.

That's the real danger.

"Thanks," I mumble.

The moment my feet are on the ground, I take off walking. As if I can outrun this strange feeling in my chest.

Nikolai catches up to me quickly. "Where are you going?"

"Exploring. Like you said."

"Do you have any clue where you're headed?"

I stop and look around. As far as I can tell, aside from the few buildings on the farm, there are no other landmarks. Just wild countryside.

"Isn't that the point of exploring? Wandering with no destination in mind?"

"If you want to fall off another cliff, then sure."

"I'm not blind, you know."

"No, but you are distracted," he says. "And that's almost the same thing. You need to relax."

"I am relaxed!" I lie.

Nikolai turns to me and reaches out. With him coming towards me and no idea what he has planned, I freeze. Then his hands land on my shoulders. Slowly, he pushes them down from around my ears.

At once, I feel my body unclench. A pressure inside of me releases slightly.

"This," he says, "is not relaxed. You're tense."

“I know,” I sigh. “I keep thinking about Elise. About what happened this morning. She’s my responsibility, you know? And I’m... I’m failing her.”

I glance up at Nikolai and then away, too nervous to see the way he might be looking at me.

“I know—it’s pathetic. You don’t fail at anything. I probably sound ridiculous to you. But—”

“I understand loyalty.”

Nikolai’s voice is serious. When I look up, his expression matches. His brows are pulled together, his jaw clenched.

“I understand the importance of taking care of family. I know the pressure you’re under.”

His hands are still on my shoulders, and suddenly, I want to step into the warmth of his body. I want his strong arms around me. His deep voice in my ear.

Pure, unadulterated lust zips through me like a lightning bolt, and I jerk away from him like I was shocked.

“We should go,” I stammer. “Where should we—Do you have something in mind?”

Nikolai smirks. I’m sure he sees right through me. But for a change, he’s benevolent enough to let it go.

“Yeah, I have something in mind,” he says. “Follow me.”

He grabs my hand and tows me after him. We walk around the back of the stables, and, for the first time, I notice a stone path. It curves away from the stable and disappears behind a hill. I clench my hands tightly at my sides and follow him.

Suddenly, the path opens into a patio of sorts with a circular pool in the center. The water is pale blue and steam rolls off the surface.

Nikolai turns to me with a smile and grabs the bottom of his shirt. In one move, he pulls it over his head, and I have to fight to keep my tongue in my

mouth.

Holy shit, he's gorgeous. Broad shoulders, a cut waist, and abs I want to bite into.

"It's a natural hot spring," he says, already unbuttoning his pants. "You're not the only person who gets sore after riding. A soak comes with the territory."

"But you're not sore," I say dumbly.

"No. But I have some stiffness."

Then he pulls his pants down, and I see exactly how stiff he is.

To my surprise, though, Nikolai doesn't flaunt his erection. He leaves his boxers on and slips down into the hot spring. Once he's settled, he extends his arms out along the lip and leans back.

"It feels amazing. You should get in."

It looks amazing. And I really am sore. But if I get in that water, I can't be held responsible for what comes next.

"It's kind of cold out for a swim."

"That's why it's a *hot* spring," Nikolai chuckles. He pauses and surveys me. "Am I making you nervous, Belle?"

Rather than admit that yes, I am incredibly nervous, I respond by yanking my shirt off. I throw it into the pile with Nikolai's clothes and then wiggle out of my jeans.

I feel his eyes on me, watching as I dip a toe into the water and then slide in. But as the warm water envelops me, I forget everything else and sigh.

"Nice, isn't it?"

"Incredible," I agree. "I want to live in here."

It's secluded and quiet and warm. Part of me wants to sink into the moment, allow myself to imagine my problems are a million miles away.

But they aren't. My problem is close. Somewhere nearby, probably scowling and cursing as she toils on a busted fence or whatever.

And just like that, I feel my shoulders creeping back up towards my ears.

"Belle."

I look at Nikolai and blink. "Huh?"

He arches an amused eyebrow. "Turn off your brain."

"As if it's that easy," I say.

"Sure it is," he replies. "Take a deep breath, in and out. We're in a hot spring in Iceland. Release your muscles. Release your worries."

I do what he says, but when I finish, I'm wound even more tightly. I groan. "Now, I'm stressed because I'm not good at destressing."

"Stop thinking."

I narrow my eyes. "Stop saying that like my thoughts are a switch. They don't work that way."

"You did it before."

"Yeah, but only because we—" I stop myself, biting the words back.

Nikolai is watching me with a feral kind of intensity. "We what?"

We had wild sex in an airplane bathroom, I think. But I can't bring myself to say it.

Instead, I shake my head. "You're dangerous."

If he's surprised by my topic change, he doesn't show it. "Am I?"

"Very," I insist. "I can't get tangled up in anything risky. Not when I have Elise to think about. I should be looking for a stable job, planning what my next move will be when we get home."

"Should, shouldn't. Can't, won't." Nikolai shrugs. "It sounds like a lot of overanalyzing when what you should be thinking is, *What would make me happy?*"

I stay silent, blinking as he wades closer to me. His chin dips below the water like a predator circling prey.

“What do you want, Belle?” he says softly.

I feel his fingers brush across my ankle under the water, but instead of pulling away, I shift closer.

Just like with everything else, Nikolai notices.

“You know what you want,” he says. “And I know what you need.”

“And what is that?” I ask quietly.

His fingers hook under my thighs and pull my legs apart. A second later, he’s between them, his chest pressed to mine.

“A distraction.”

When our lips meet, it feels like I’ve been underwater and he’s my first breath of fresh air in far too long. My lungs burn and my chest heaves as I wrap my legs around his waist.

Nikolai grips the back of my neck, holding me close. He parts my lips with his tongue and slips inside.

It feels easy, natural. Kissing him, tasting him. It feels like I've been doing it forever and also like it's somehow brand new. Every second is exciting. The way our bodies brush under the water, the way his hands stroke down my spine and grip my waist.

When Nikolai pulls me against him, rocking my aching center against his cock, I can't wait another second.

"I want you inside of me," I gasp, shoving my hands inside his boxers.

He kicks the material off and then shoves my panties to the side. In one swift thrust, he's in me to the hilt. I lean my head back against the stone sides of the hot spring, my mind blissfully blank at last.

How can anything else matter when this feels so good?

"Finally," Nikolai breathes, sliding slowly in and out of me. "Now, you're

starting to relax."

"Apparently, this is what it takes."

He kisses my neck as he thrusts shallow and fast. "A sacrifice I'm willing to make."

I grab his stubbly face and pull his lips back to mine. I kiss him with everything I have, letting the last of my stress melt away in the water.

"But relaxation is a low bar, don't you think?" Nikolai is watching me with dark, seductive eyes. He starts stroking my clit with his thumb. "We can do better than that."

"What did you have in mind?"

His answer is a single breath: "Ecstasy."

Oh, for God's sake.

I tangle my fingers in the hair at the base of his neck. I can't get close enough, so I settle for driving myself onto him harder, riding him faster. I roll my hips again and again beneath the water until we're both panting.

Nikolai presses the flat of his tongue to my nipple, and I arch into his mouth as I fall onto his hardness again and again. It's a symphony of chaos and pleasure, and I don't want this to end.

But it will.

It's about to.

"I'm going to come," I gasp, gripping his head and holding him to my chest. "I'm going to—"

"Come," he commands, flicking his finger over my clit.

I do. Hard. I moan and jolt as wave after wave rolls through me, milking Nikolai until I feel pulsing in rhythm with me. He holds me against him as he spills into me.

And for as long as that lasts, I'm not thinking. I'm not stressing.

I'm free.

NIKOLAI

This woman does things to me.

Even now, as we walk down the worn dirt trail towards the farmhouse, still steaming from the hot tub, I'm tempted to lay her down on the ground and fill her again. There are places I still haven't tasted. Positions yet to try.

But her mind is elsewhere. On her wayward sister, I'm sure.

"She'll be fine," I tell her.

"She's fourteen."

I shrug. "When I was fourteen, I was already living on my own."

She turns to me, eyes wide. "You lived on your own at *fourteen*?"

"It was my choice."

I don't add that it was only that way because the other choice was to live with my useless father. It was easier to take care of myself than it was to take care of myself and his drugged-up ass at the same time.

She forces a breath between her teeth. "I shielded Elise from a lot... maybe too much. And now, I don't know if this was a good idea. Making her work for some farmer in another country? It sounds like something a wicked stepmother in a gothic novel would do, doesn't it?"

"I wouldn't know much about wicked stepmothers," I say. "But concerned

older sisters who are doing their best? I have some experience there.”

“And what’s your opinion?”

I smirk. “Well, I’ve found her very… flexible.”

“Oh God,” she groans. “You’re making this a sex joke.”

“Tell me to stop and I will,” I say.

She smiles, but doesn’t say anything. We both know she likes it just fine.

We’re halfway up the long road to the house when a figure leaps off the porch and starts jogging towards us. For a second, I don’t recognize who it is. A small person in baggy denim and a flannel shirt. But then I see the strawberry blonde hair swinging in a ponytail behind her.

“Elise?” Belle gasps, no doubt thinking the same thing I am.

What the hell did this farmer do to her?

Elise actually smiles as she approaches. A real smile, not a sarcastic teen one. And then she honest-to-God waves.

“Hi!” she chirps easily.

Belle just blinks at her, dumbfounded. I have to break the silence. “What’s going on?” I ask.

“Just waiting for you two. I’m done for today. Einar gave me these clothes.” She holds out her arms and smiles down on herself. “They’re his wife’s. And they’re easier to move in than what I had on.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my sister?” Belle finally manages.

At that, Elise rolls her eyes.

“There she is,” Belle says. “Good to know she’s still in there somewhere.”

“God, you’re so embarrassing.” Elise walks past us towards the car, but there’s a hint of amusement in her expression.

Belle trails after her. “What did Einar have you doing?”

“Taking care of the animals. I fed the sheep and helped gather the eggs from the chicken coop.”

“I thought this was supposed to be a punishment. Why do you sound happy about that?” Belle asks.

Elise shrugs. “It was fun. The animals were cute. And Einar says I can ride on some of the horses tomorrow. Apparently, his daughter used to help out on the farm, but she moved away last year. He’s not even mad about the fence; he’s just glad for the help. Isn’t that cool?”

“Yeah, cool,” Belle says. But when she looks over at me, her jaw drops.

I just nod in agreement. Everything always works out if you make it that way.

Right as we’re climbing into the car, I get a text from Arslan. It’s a single word: *Done*.

I spent the day fucking a beautiful woman in the Icelandic countryside while her teenaged sister finally ditched her attitude, all while Arslan was back in the States dishing out Bratva justice on my behalf.

It’s always a good day to be me. But today especially, I wouldn’t change a fucking thing.



When I walk into the sitting room, Belle is curled up on the couch with a blanket wrapped around her. There’s a book open in her lap, but I can tell she isn’t reading it.

“Where’s Elise?”

At the sound of my voice, Belle closes the book and gives me an easy smile.

“She wanted a shower and an early bedtime. Can you believe it?” She chuckles and shakes her head. “Usually, she’s up until dawn and sleeping all day. But one day of manual labor and she’s in bed by nine.”

“Seems like putting her to work was a good call.”

“Yeah, your good call,” she says.

“The farmer is the one who wanted her to work off the fence.”

Belle lowers her chin, giving me a dubious look. “And you’re trying to convince me you couldn’t talk the man out of it? You could have paid him off on the spot in cash. Or, more likely, intimidated him into apologizing to you for putting his fence where you wanted to park your car.”

I laugh. “Is that what you think of me?”

“It’s what I know of you,” she corrects. “But you agreed to his conditions. You wanted Elise to work. Somehow, you knew what was best for her when I didn’t.” A cloud settles over her face, dimming her smile.

“It’s always easier to solve a problem when you’re on the outside of it,” I say gruffly. “I’m not emotionally invested.”

“Because it’s my sister or because you’re never emotionally invested?”

“I learned early how to make decisions based on logic. Based on what would serve me best.” I shrug. “My emotions don’t control me. Only I control me.”

“Must be nice,” Belle scoffs. “I’m controlled by everything. My emotions, my sister’s emotions, the need for money and security... Hell, I’m only awake right now because I can’t stop thinking about a donut.”

“A donut?”

“Or a muffin,” she sighs. “Maybe a jam-filled pastry. Ooh, or ice cream. Or chocolate.”

Her eyes are dreamy, focused on the middle distance like she’s staring at a mirage of desserts floating before her eyes.

I snort. “Sugar. You want sugar.”

“Desperately.”

“Then call room service.”

“I tried, but the kitchen closed early tonight.”

"And?"

Belle blinks up at me, her hazel eyes a fitting shade of caramel brown tonight. "And... it's closed. There's no one to make or deliver food. Unless I want to change out of my pajamas and hunt down a bakery somewhere else, that's all she wrote."

"To be honest, I'm offended."

Her face creases. "What? Why?"

"After everything we've been through," I say, shaking my head, "after everything you've seen... you really think a locked door can stop me?"

She bites her lip in a nervous smile. I stand and offer her my hand. "Come on."

Even though no one in the building—in the world, really—has the authority to stop me from breaking into a kitchen I rightfully own, Belle still insists on whispering like a thief as I unlock the door.

"Maybe we can still charge everything we take to the suite tab in the morning," she says. "I'll call and tell them what I took. Or maybe you can. Or —"

"Jesus Christ, woman. Get inside and grab whatever you want."

I flip on the lights. Belle scurries towards the industrial-sized freezers like a mouse caught in the act. A mouse in a very tantalizing silk pajama set, to be specific. The shorts are high around her thighs, and I can't stop staring at her tight ass beneath the shimmering fabric.

I told Belle my feelings don't control me. But right now, that feels like a lie.

Because all I can think about doing is tearing that silk off her and devouring her right on the kitchen counter.

"Where are the bowls?" she asks, popping her head out from behind the freezer door. "The ice cream tubs in here are huge. I just want a bowl. A little bowl. And then maybe a baggy of toppings. Are there chocolate chips anywhere?"

I grab a metal rolling cart and wheel it into the walk-in. Then I start loading it up. “We can take a gallon of vanilla and a gallon of chocolate. Give me that whipped cream. Do you like chocolate syrup or caramel?”

“Nikolai! This is too much!”

“Both, then,” I say in answer to my own question as I add two jars of homemade sauce to the cart. Then I wheel the cart back into the kitchen and head to the pantry.

“That’s enough,” Belle hisses. “Nikolai, c’mon!”

“I distinctly remember some longing talk of donuts and pastries and chocolate.”

“No, this is plenty. I’m fine.”

I whip around so fast that Belle runs into me. I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her tightly against my chest. She gasps and looks up at me. Her lashes are long and curled, and they bat against her cheeks with every blink.

“I own the damn hotel, Belle,” I remind her. “You can have anything you want.”

She pulls her lower lip into her mouth. “Anything I want?”

I nod. “Anything.”

She thinks about it for a long time, her eyes memorizing my face. I wonder if she’s thinking what I am. About how good she’d taste, how good she’d feel on my cock right now.

But finally, she smiles. “I want pastries.”

I step back and wave her forward. “Then go get it.”

As she passes, I swat her ass, unable to resist. And aside from a playful warning look over her shoulder, Belle doesn’t seem to mind.

I’m not used to this shit. I’m used to porn star moans and plastic-enhanced women trying desperately to give me what they think I want.

But this? Belle’s warm smile, her genuine trust? It feels... strangely good. I

get the sense no one has taken care of her in a long time.

I like being the person who gets to.



Back in the suite, Belle moans as she bites into a cream-filled donut. “This is so good it should be illegal.”

She has a bit of cream on her bottom lip. I reach out and swipe it off with my finger before sucking it into my own mouth. Her eyes widen and her cheeks flush, but she quickly takes another bite and lets out another moan.

“If you don’t quit making those sounds, I’m going to be jealous of a pastry.”

She laughs. “You should be. I’ve never, *ever* been so happy. So satisfied. This donut is filling me in ways that I’ve never—”

“Easy,” I interrupt. “I’ve never turned down a challenge. I’m not sure you’re ready for me to take you up on this one.”

Belle lets out a long yawn before her smile returns. “You might be right about that. I’m exhausted.”

“That’s because I, a real man and not a pastry, fucked you stupid in a hot spring,” I remind her.

Her face flushes again, and she hides it behind another bite. Once she swallows, she leans back on the couch with a contented sigh. “Thanks for the desserts. I don’t usually have such a crazy sweet tooth.”

“I find that hard to believe. You just ate an ice cream sundae and three donuts.”

She narrows her eyes. “I thought we didn’t need to keep track, Mr. Owner? I had no idea you were taking inventory.”

“When someone is inhaling confections, it’s hard not to stop and take notice.”

Belle lunges across the sofa to slap me in the arm. “I’ll have you know that,

most years for my birthday growing up, I didn't even want a cake. I usually asked for fried chicken or alfredo and breadsticks."

"How fancy," I say. "I thought white bread with butter and sugar was the normal birthday treat until the kids at school informed me I was dirt-poor."

Belle's face falls. She reaches for me. "I'm sorry."

"No apology necessary."

"I'm glad you told me," she adds softly. "I like learning more about you."

Which is the exact fucking reason I shouldn't have said anything. It's the reason I usually don't. People are afraid of Nikolai Zhukova, Don of the Zhukova Bratva and CEO of Zhukova Incorporated.

But poor little Niko who ate sugar sandwiches on his birthday and moved out on his own at fourteen? That runt is pitiable.

And pity is the last fucking thing I'm after.

"I want to know what made you who you are today," she continues.

"I made me who I am," I say sharply. "My experiences were forced on me. But I overcame that shit."

"What shit?" she asks softly.

I shrug. "Find the word 'dysfunctional' in a dictionary and there will be a picture of the Zhukova clan next to it."

"Aren't mafias—er, Bratvas, I mean," she corrects, "aren't they usually family things? Wasn't your dad in a Bratva, too?"

I nod. "Briefly. My grandfather was don, and my father would've taken over. But they lost the Bratva before that could happen."

"How do you lose something like that?"

"There are lots of ways. But in this case, their supply chains were decimated, stash houses were burned to the ground, and half the men were killed, along with my grandfather."

Belle gasps. “Oh, I’m sorry, Nikolai. That’s—”

“Life,” I finish. “That’s life in a Bratva. But my father couldn’t handle it. He didn’t adjust well to being poor. Especially once my mother got sick and he couldn’t afford the treatments.”

Belle’s eyes are locked on mine. I like the way her devotion feels. I also like the way she keeps absently circling her finger over my skin.

“Then my mother died, and my dad dove headfirst into a bottle.” I jerk my chin towards her. “You know a thing or two about that.”

She nods sadly. “My mom fell apart after my dad died in the car accident.”

“I didn’t have an older sibling to look out for me the way Elise has you,” I tell her. “I had to figure out how to take care of myself so I didn’t end up like my dad. And that’s exactly what I did.”

“You say that like it’s easy. But you set out on your own at fourteen. And... how did you save the Bratva? You said it was lost.”

“Loyalty runs deep in my world. There were plenty of members willing to step up and help rebuild. They just needed a leader.”

“And they chose you?”

I shake my head. “*I* chose me. No one was fighting for the honor to lead a ruined Bratva, so I stepped up. I rebuilt the Zhukova name brick by brick, bullet by bullet. And I did it on my own.”

Belle murmurs, “Not everyone can do something like that. Not everyone can overcome their past.”

She pulls her hand away, but I reach out and grab it back. As soon as our fingers touch, her eyes lift to mine.

“Not everyone is meant to be a leader,” I say. “But there’s something to be said about knowing who to follow. And you followed me here.”

“You say that like it was a good thing.”

“Wasn’t it?”

Her smile is tentative. “I’m still trying to decide.”

“I’m not. And that’s why I’m a good leader.”

“Why?”

I bring her hand to my lips and press a kiss there. “Because I know what’s good for you before you know it yourself.”

BELLE

The moment my eyes open, I feel his absence.

I sit up and take stock of the plush white comforter wrapped around me. That's new. Nikolai must have brought it to me after I fell asleep. The note sitting on the glass-topped coffee table is new, too.

I reach for the folded piece of paper. I expect it to be from Nikolai, but then I recognize Elise's cramped scrawl.

My heart clenches with morbid possibilities. She ran away again. This is her goodbye letter. I knew her attitude last night was too good to be true. It was a trick. A ruse so she could slip away while I was in a sugar/Nikolai coma.

"Breathe," I whisper to myself.

After a few deep inhales and exhales, I calm down enough to actually read what Elise wrote.

B—

You were basically unconscious when we left (seriously, there was drool), so we didn't wake you. Nikolai is taking me to the farm to work today. He said he'll send a car for me this afternoon. Smell you later!

—E

Thank god. She's safe. She's taken care of.

For a moment, I luxuriate in the fact that someone else took care of Elise for me this morning. If I didn't feel so relaxed right now, I'd feel guilty about how relaxed I feel.

Taking care of my sister was my choice, and I'd make it a thousand times over again. But damn if it isn't a hard job.

I swipe at my face and cringe when I feel a crust of drool. "Oh dear," I mutter to myself, "that's not cute."

Wrapping the comforter around my shoulders, I shuffle away from the couch and into my room. But the moment I walk through the door, I stop in my tracks.

"What the—" I creep slowly towards the bed, blinking like the pile of art supplies spread across the comforter might disappear. "Who did—"

Then I see a second note. This one has my name written on the front in broad, angular print. Jesus, even his handwriting is confident.

Deny it all you want, but you're talented. I have the proof folded up in my wallet. I have to work all day today. Relax and enjoy the art supplies.

—N.Z.

By the time I finish reading, I have a goofy grin on my face that I just can't wipe off. If Nikolai was here to witness it, it would definitely rank on my list of most embarrassing moments. But thankfully, I'm alone.

I drop into the desk chair, crack the spine on my new leather sketchbook, and reach for the fineliner pens.



I'm so lost in my sketching that I don't hear the knock on the door. Or maybe I do, but my brain is too busy to worry about it or figure out what the sound means. A much more pressing matter is whether to build a balcony on the right side of the house coming off the second floor or add a four seasons room off the first floor.

Then the person knocks again, and I sit up.

"Ouch," I groan, pressing a hand to my achy lower back.

How long has it been since I stood up? My stomach growls. Or since I ate?

I look at the clock over the stove in the kitchenette and my eyes almost bug out of my head. "How is it already almost four in the afternoon?" I exclaim to no one.

I haven't showered or eaten or changed. I just sat all day and sketched. I filled three pages of my sketchbook from margin to margin.

On one hand, I can't believe I wasted an entire day. On the other hand, I can't remember the last time I had a day to myself to do whatever I wanted. The last time I got so lost in a task that the world around me disappeared.

Even when Nikolai isn't here, he's able to help me turn my brain off.

That goofy smile from before returns. At least until I pass by my reflection in the entrance hall mirror.

"Yikes." I quickly run my fingers through the bird's nest on my head and pinch my cheeks to give me a little color.

Convinced the person knocking on the other side of the door won't run screaming, I finally pull it open.

Thankfully, it isn't Nikolai.

"A delivery for you, Miss Belle." A young blonde woman in a polo with the hotel's logo on it holds out a stack of packages to me.

I frown. "For me? I didn't order anything."

"From Mr. Zhukova," the girl explains. She practically shoves the packages into my arms. "I swore I'd make sure they were delivered exactly at four. So you'd have time to get ready."

"Get ready?" I ask. "For what?"

As soon as the boxes are in my arms, she pulls a third note from her back pocket and hands it to me wordlessly.

“Of course,” I mutter. “Another note.”

The girl bows and pulls the suite doors closed.

Ookay then. Apparently, everyone is scared of Nikolai all the time, whether or not he’s even in the same zip code. I awkwardly slide the big packages onto the counter and then unfold the latest note.

There will be a grand opening gala tonight for the hotel staff and investors. These are for you and Elise. I’ll meet you there.

The note is short and to the point, in typical Nikolai fashion. But something about it feels grand.

I turn to the first box and lift the lid. Inside is a delicately folded ball gown in a beautiful shade of cerulean blue. It will look perfect with Elise’s hair and skin tone. The neckline is modest, but the skirt is short enough that she shouldn’t complain too much. A pair of nude high heels sit tucked into the bottom corner of the box.

I set the box aside and open the next one. I’m expecting something similar—a nice dress for a nice party. I’ve never been big into ball gowns or playing princess. Even business formal felt out of my reach until I graduated college and got my first adult job.

But when I open the lid on the second box, my heart nearly stops.

I’ve never seen something so gorgeous in my entire life.

The bodice is gold with tiny beads stitched on in an intricate pattern, interspersed with gold embroidery that continues down into the deep maroon skirt. I pull the dress out of the box and notice the train attached at the waist. It adds a bustle around the hips and flows well past the dress. It’s nicer than any wedding dress I’ve ever seen.

A quick, high-pitched whistle from the doorway pulls my attention.

Elise is standing there, her eyes wide. “Oh my—Who is that for?”

I blink at her and then back to the dress. “Me, I think.”

Elise snorts. “For your coronation? Are you and Nikolai about to become the

King and Queen of Iceland?”

“I don’t think Iceland has a monarchy.”

She kicks the door closed with a mud-covered shoe and wipes her hands on the front of her jeans. “Who is the blue dress for?”

“For you,” I tell her. “There’s a gala tonight, I think.”

“A gala?”

“A ball,” I explain. “A party. I don’t know. Nikolai sent these and told us to meet him there.”

The last few months have been a continuous string of teenage angst and snark. But suddenly, my sister’s face splits into a wide smile. “We’re going to a party?” she squeals.

I can’t help grinning back. “It’s for the grand opening of the hotel. I don’t know who all is going to be there. It will probably be a lot of older people. Boring music. Stuffy conversation. If you don’t want to go—”

“I want to go.” Elise reaches for the dress and then seems to think better of it, pulling her hands back to eye her dirty fingernails. “I should shower. And... can you do my hair?”

If my heart nearly stopped seeing the dress, it practically explodes when Elise asks me to help her get ready.

“Will I—Yes!” I say a bit too enthusiastically. I try again, a little more suave. “Of course. Yes. I’d love to.” Elise’s eyebrow quirks up, and I shrug. “Sorry, but I’ve been dying to French braid your hair since I picked you up. It was so short the last time I saw you.”

When we were kids, hiding out in our room to avoid Mom, I liked to braid Elise’s hair into intricate patterns. But a year before I left, she cut it up above her ears.

“Mom was talking about selling it,” she says quietly. “Someone said they had a friend who made wigs. She could’ve gotten three hundred dollars for my hair.”

I clap a hand over my mouth. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not,” she says. “So I cut it myself at school so she couldn’t.”

I have no idea why I am still able to be surprised about the lengths our mom would go to to get some extra cash. It puts a familiar nauseating dread in the pit of my stomach.

But I refuse to let our mom ruin this night. She’s ruined enough already.

I shake my head and give her a smile. “Well, I’d love to do your hair tonight. It’s definitely long enough now. Go shower and then we can start getting ready.”

Elise can’t bite back her grin. She starts to head to her room, but turns back one last time. “For what it’s worth, Belle... I think Nikolai is nice.”

It’s not exactly effusive praise, but by Elise’s standards, she basically erected a statue to Nikolai and had a national holiday named for him.

There’s so much I could say. So much I could tell her about what I know of him, what he’s done, what he might still do.

But in the face of this—giving my sister and me something to bond over, something to talk about—nothing else Nikolai has done seems to matter.

NIKOLAI

“We’re so happy to have you here with us, Mr. Zhukova,” Margrét says. “We didn’t know whether you’d be joining us or not, so there is nothing planned, but if you’d like to make a speech or—”

“No.” I gently wave away the hotel manager’s idea. “Don’t change anything on my account. I just wanted an excuse to dress up.”

Margrét smiles and looks over my attire, clearly appreciating me in formal wear. Her face flushes and then she excuses herself to get a drink.

In another universe, I’d follow Margrét to the bar and start laying the groundwork for what could be a pleasant mid-party fuck.

But what I said was a lie. All I really wanted was an excuse to dress Belle up. To let her and Elise put on nice clothes and escape into the fairytale they both seem to think is out of reach.

Then I turn around just as Belle and Elise walk into the party... and I realize my motivations aren't nearly so selfless.

I shouldn’t be surprised. They never are.

Belle looks as good as I imagined. Better, in fact. She is a goddess in gold and maroon. The dress hugs her curves and the long train trails behind her like she’s royalty. People have to hustle to get out of her way, but only because they're so transfixed by the sight of her that they stop walking in the first place.

She spots me and smiles nervously. Her hair is pulled back into a loose knot at the base of her neck, wavy tendrils hanging over her shoulder.

When I approach, I have to fight to keep my hands to myself.

“You both look incredible,” I say with a small bow.

Belle’s face flushes with pleasure, but she turns to her sister to fiddle with her hairpins. “Doesn’t she? She’s gorgeous.”

Elise swats her sister’s hand away, but she’s happy, too. She’s holding her chin a little higher today. As she should. Her blue dress offsets her pale skin and brings out the red undertones in her hair. She’s practically glowing.

Which is probably why the pastry chef’s teenaged son can’t keep his eyes off of her.

“Excuse me,” Elise says. She turns and walks straight to the young man. His eyes bug out of his head when he realizes she’s heading his way.

“My god,” Belle sighs.

“What?”

“Look at her. Going after what she wants. No shame, no doubts. It’s... it’s incredible. Admirable. I could never.”

“Maybe you should try it. You could make men’s eyes pop out of their head like that, too. If you wanted.”

“That’s just it. I’m not sure if that’s what I want... well, not just any man, anyway.”

“Did you have someone specific in mind?”

Belle’s lips pull into a wry smile. “Let’s see how the night goes. Then you can tell me if I’m more eye-popping in this dress... or out of it.”

I feel my dick strain against the zipper of my tuxedo. Maybe a mid-party fuck isn’t completely off the table, after all.

I lean down and whisper in her ear, “Don’t tempt me, Belle, or I’ll drag you upstairs right now and fuck you until everyone in the party hears you moan.”

“You wouldn’t be so tempted if you’d seen me two hours ago,” she says, her cheeks stoplight red. “The other gift you left today had me a little distracted. I didn’t even shower until the dress showed up.”

“I take it you found the art supplies.”

“They were hard to miss. You must have spent a fortune.”

I wave a hand carelessly. “I was happy to do it.”

That much is true. I like making Belle smile. I enjoy giving her things that once seemed impossible to her. It feels like magic, in the strangest way. Conjuring hope from thin air.

Belle shakes her head and looks around the room. “This is all so incredible. Unreal.”

The hotel is built around some of the natural geothermal hot springs like the one Belle and I soaked in yesterday. The main event room was designed with that selling point in mind, featuring floor to ceiling windows that look out on the natural pools and towering lava rock formations. Steam ripples off the water like clouds and reveals subtle designs etched into the unbroken panes of glass.

“Being here is more than enough,” she continues. “You don’t need to get me anything else. The last few days here have been... They’ve been the best gift I’ve ever received.”

Her eyes are glassy with emotion. I know she means it.

“I’m sorry, then.”

“Sorry about what?” she asks, frowning.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a flat, rectangular black box. “That I wasted my money on another gift.”

The worry slips off her face, replaced by a half-irritated, half-amused smile. “Nikolai, that is *not* funny.”

Smirking, I open the box and pull out a gold necklace with a large ruby set in the center. The colors perfectly match her dress.

“I... I can’t accept that,” she stutters.

“Good thing you don’t get a choice.”

I move around her and slide the chain under her auburn hair. She gently fingers the gem as I fasten the clasp.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she mumbles.

“Then don’t say anything. Let’s dance.”

Her eyes flare. “There’s no music.”

“Don’t worry. There will be.” I grab her hand and lead her to the center of the dance floor.

The moment I wrap an arm around her waist, I catch sight of the orchestra hurrying to pick up their instruments. A few moments later, they begin to play.

Belle chuckles. “Do you get everything you want the second you want it?”

“Sometimes even sooner.”

“Must be nice.”

I tighten my hold on her, molding her body to mine. “I’ve told you, Belle: all you have to do is ask. Whatever you want, I’ll give it to you.”

Belle looks up at me. I have a feeling we both want the same thing right now.

Her hand clasps down around my arm and her lips part in a soft exhale. It doesn’t matter where we are—the middle of a gala, in the corner booth of a restaurant, crammed in an airplane bathroom—this woman does things to me.

Right now, nothing else matters.

But just before I can lean in and make her wish come true, a flash of red catches my eye. I glance over and see I’ve caught someone’s attention.

Someone who was not supposed to be here.

BELLE

This broken kiss hurts more than anything that's come before it.

Maybe it's because there are so many people around. On the airplane, in his office, in the hot springs, we were always alone. What we were doing felt like a dirty little secret, a hidden guilty pleasure. No witnesses. Forget about it as soon as it happened.

But here? Now? We're in the middle of a party, surrounded by my sister and Nikolai's employees and God knows who else.

Not that you'd know it by the way he was looking at me up until about two seconds ago. If all you saw was Nikolai's face, you'd think we were the only two people in the room.

Whatever you want, I'll give it to you. I don't have the words to explain what that little sentence did to me.

But then Nikolai looks away. His eyes darken, focusing on something over my head, and he shifts away from me.

"Nikolai?" I ask in confusion.

He doesn't look down at me. His eyes stay fixed on whatever he's looking at. "Stay here," he orders. "I'll be back."

I turn and watch as Nikolai crosses the room—and heads straight for another woman.

Not just any woman, though. I recognize her. The day Roger surprised me at Zhukova Incorporated, I saw Nikolai in a meeting with this woman and Giorgos Simatou.

She looks much different today. Her dress is flaming red and dips dangerously low across her chest. I'm honestly surprised I can't see her belly button. Her hair is slicked back into a tight, posh ponytail, and even from across the room, I can see her lips are slathered in bright red lipstick. She looks like an Instagram model, the kind who's always posting from private jets and white sand beaches.

Nikolai grinds to a halt in front of her and starts furiously whispering something I can't hear.

I feel exposed standing in the middle of the dance floor all alone, so I make my way to the edge of the room with everyone else.

Elise is still standing with the blonde boy she introduced herself to when she arrived, but I can tell she's watching me, too. Watching *us*, actually. Her eyes keep darting from Nikolai to me and back again.

"Champagne, miss?" A waiter asks, holding a tray of champagne flutes in front of my face, obscuring Nikolai and the woman from view.

I take one, mostly because I seem to have lost my voice all of the sudden, and sip on it as I watch my date talk to another woman.

But when her hand lands on Nikolai's bicep and then drags slowly down his arm... I nearly throw my glass across the room.

He's mine, I want to scream, beating on my chest all the while.

Except Nikolai isn't mine. Not really.

A week ago, I hated him. I was going to turn him in to the police for embezzlement. That's laughable now, considering he killed a man while we were out to dinner together, and considering I know all the other terrible things he's done, and I slept with him anyway.

If I went to the police, I'd end up in a cell right along with him. Maybe even a straitjacket.

The woman in red stretches up on her toes and presses a kiss to Nikolai's cheek. My heart clenches so hard I want to vomit. I wait for him to push her away, to pull back.

But Nikolai stands perfectly still.

He accepts it.

I look over at Elise. She's staring at me, her eyes wide. She's all the way across the room, but I can hear her voice in my head. *You cannot let a man treat you like this.*

We aren't really dating, I want to tell her. *Nikolai didn't promise me anything.*

But then I hear his words in my head, too. *Whatever you want, I'll give it to you.*

Well, I don't fucking want *this*.

I grab the train of my gown in my hands and march across the room towards Nikolai and the woman. I'm burning up from the inside out with a fiery cocktail of emotions. Rage and shame, disgust and lust.

But above all, *righteousness*. What's that thing they say about kids—they're always watching? I have to show my baby sister—and almost as important, myself—that I'm worthy of respect. That I won't be treated like a throwaway piece of trash. That women deserve more than to be the playthings of powerful men.

Nikolai and the woman don't look up as I approach, which makes this all hurt even more. They're so wrapped up in each other that they don't even notice me. I have to clear my throat to get their attention.

Only then does he look over. But as expected, his expression is neutral. Calm. What would actually ruffle this man's feathers, I wonder? Nuclear explosions? Pigs in the sky?

"Hi." I should have thought of something better to say on my way over, but there wasn't time, so I'm stuck with the lamest opening line in the history of bitchy, pre-catfight confrontations.

The woman looks at me now. Her makeup is smudged into a perfect smoky eye and her cheekbones are high and sharp. She looks like the kind of woman I'd expect Nikolai to be with. Flawless, just like him.

"Hello," she drawls, arching a brow like a bug just crawled across her shoe. "Who are you?"

"Belle Dowan. Who are you?"

Something like recognition flickers over her face. It's like she's heard my name before. Did Nikolai mention me? Stupid hope flares in my chest at the thought.

Stupid, stupid hope.

"I told you I'd be back, Belle," interrupts Nikolai. "I'll explain everything after—"

"There's nothing to explain," the woman cuts in.

Nikolai clenches his jaw. "You showed up unannounced, Xena. That deserves an explanation."

Xena. Even her name sounds interesting and unique. Exotic. More exotic than "Belle," at least.

"Is our engagement not explanation enough?"

It feels like someone has poured a bucket of ice cubes down my back. "I'm sorry... what?"

"Belle." Nikolai's voice is a warning. "You need to—"

"We're engaged," Xena blurts.

"You're en—" I shake my head. "Since when?"

"It's been in the works for quite a while," she says with a vicious smile. She can see how much this hurts me. I'm not exactly concealing it very well. "But it became official last week."

My vision swims. For a moment, I actually think I might faint.

I've been sleeping with a married man. Or a soon-to-be-married man, at least. Nikolai promised himself to someone else and then spent a week fucking me silly.

I guess I really was the dirty little secret after all.

Maybe Nikolai says something just then. I can't be sure because my ears are ringing. Blood is thrumming through my veins, and I want to cry.

But I won't cry here. Not in front of him. Not in front of all of these people.

I have to get out of here.

First things first, though...

A waiter walks by with a tray of appetizers. Exquisite timing. Tiny little crackers topped with a soft white cheese and a dollop of some kind of jam. Whatever it is, it looks messy. Perfect for what I have in mind.

I yank the tray out of the waiter's hands and smash it into Nikolai's chest.

The crowd gasps as the tray clatters to the floor. I can't lift my eyes any higher than the red jam smeared across the front of Nikolai's suit. If I do, I'll see his gray eyes—and then I'll definitely cry.

So without another word, I turn and sprint for the exit.

As far as I'm concerned, this party is over.

NIKOLAI

The elevator doors have already closed, but when I hit the button, they slide open again.

And there's Belle.

Her arms are crossed over her chest and her eyes are red and puffy. She's crying. As soon as she sees me, her spine straightens. "Stay away from me."

"Belle—"

"I'll scream," she warns. "I'll scream so fucking loud, I swear."

The doors try to close, but I hold them open. "Okay. Do it. Scream."

"Are you deaf? I said I'll—"

"You'll scream, I know." I nod. "And what do you think will happen? Everyone here works for me, Belle. Do you think they'll save you?"

The fear in her eyes shifts to full-blown terror as she realizes how isolated she is.

"Rethinking your decision to come to Iceland with me?" I ask.

"I'm rethinking everything. I was... I was so stupid," she whispers, her fists clenching at her sides. "I knew who you were and what you've done, but I came with you anyway. I should have known better."

"And who am I?" I stalk into the elevator.

Belle presses herself flat against the back wall. “A filthy, lying criminal.”

“I’m a criminal. I’ll give you that.”

“And a liar.”

I shake my head. “When did I lie to you?”

“You’re engaged!” she screams. “I asked you on the plane if you were married or engaged.”

“How noble of you to ask after we’d already fucked.”

Her face twists. “It doesn’t matter. You would have lied anyway. You told me you were single.”

I shrug. “At the time, I was.”

Her mouth falls open. “So sometime between then and now, you found time to get engaged? What the hell, Nikolai?!”

“You’re making this into a bigger deal than it needs to be. I planned to tell you about Xena when the time was right.”

“*Xena*,” she spits. “She even sounds like the kind of trendy bitch who’d be fine with an open relationship.”

I snort. “Believe me, she’s absolutely not.”

I’m actually surprised Xena isn’t standing outside the elevator doors right now, demanding to know what is going on. Though she’s probably still riding the high from seeing Belle smear a serving tray all over my chest. Given the scene it caused, I’m sure she wishes she’d done it herself.

“Then why did you bring me here and buy me this dress? Why did you trot me out in front of her like that?”

“I didn’t ‘trot you out’ in front of anyone.”

Right now, part of me thinks a life of celibacy might not be so bad. Especially if it means never having to deal with this kind of infuriating drama.

But that part of me exists north of my equator. The southern hemisphere, below the belt, is very not down with the idea of celibacy.

Especially since Belle is still wearing her dress...

And she wears anger very, very well.

“And why did you bring Elise into it?” Her voice trembles at the mention of her sister. “She was starting to like you, for God’s sake. She was happy here, and now, it’s all... it’s all... You ruined everything!”

“I didn’t even know Xena was going to be here. I have no clue why she came.”

“She’s here to visit her fiance, you asshole!”

The elevator doors ding open behind us. I turn and face two men waiting to get on. “Take the stairs,” I snap.

They jump back, eyes wide, and I smash the “Doors Close” button followed by the emergency stop. A long, keening alarm sounds, but I ignore it and turn back to Belle.

“I don’t give a shit about Xena Simatou. She means nothing to me. She is just —”

“Giorgos’s sister,” Belle gasps. I can see her connecting the dots. “She’s related to that other mafia guy, isn’t she? So this is some kind of... arrangement, or something?”

I nod. “More or less. Giorgos and I are working together and—”

“And he’s pimping out his sister to you?” She wrinkles her nose. “That is sick, Nikolai. He’s prostituting his sister for what? Money?”

“Protection,” I say. “Access. And yes, money. But Xena is the one who demanded the marriage between us as part of the contract. I didn’t want it.”

Belle snorts. “Of course you didn’t. You can’t exactly whisk random women off on international trips and fuck them in airplane bathrooms if you’re married, can you? Then again, maybe you can! Because you’re engaged, but here I am anyway. Like an idiot.”

“I didn’t bring you here as a secret,” I growl. “This wasn’t some hidden affair. Giorgos knew where I was.”

It’s why he sent Xena here, I’m sure. I made a bold move by bringing Belle here against their wishes and then burning down one of his buildings. So he sent his sister here to burn down my life, so to speak.

Thus far, he’s doing an annoyingly good job.

But he’ll pay for it all later.

With interest.

Belle’s eyes widen. “So I’m just some toy you’re dangling in front of your future in-laws?”

“None of this is about you. If you’ll just fucking listen—”

“I’ve listened too much already!” She swipes at the angry tears rolling down her cheeks. “I listened when you said you’d take care of me. I listened when you said you’d give me whatever I want. Do you think *this* is what I wanted?”

“Nothing has to change. This thing with Xena—”

“Marriage, you mean? Is that what you mean by ‘this thing’? You really ought to be specific.”

“This marriage with Xena is business,” I grit out. “That’s it. I don’t give a shit about her.”

Belle rolls her eyes. “As if that makes any difference. You’re engaged to her. You’re going to be married to her!”

She tries to push past me to release the emergency stop on the elevator, but I snare her wrist.

“Let go,” she snaps.

She tries to wrench her hand free, but she’s no match for my strength. I walk her back against the elevator wall. Her eyes widen. So green. The surface of a pond that goes deep, deep, deep.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I snarl softly.

“It’s too late for that.” Her voice catches, subtle but noticeable.

“Nothing has changed. Everything is exactly like it was.”

“Not for me.”

“Why? How is this different?” I challenge. “I’ll send Xena packing, and we can go back to—”

“To pretending we have a future together?” Her lower lip trembles.

It’s a big admission. Belle wants a future together. Or at least she did as of ten minutes ago.

I sigh. In my world, planning for the future is a fool’s errand. People get killed or betray you. They take what they want from you or die trying and that is simply how the game goes.

Belle wants something I cannot give her—certainty.

“I never made you any promises,” I say flatly.

Hurt flashes across her face, quick as lightning. Then she smiles.

It’s off-putting, the way her mouth turns into a grin while her eyes remain cold and lifeless. I hardly even recognize her.

“You’re right. You didn’t,” she croaks. “So I can’t be angry, right?”

“There’s nothing to be angry about. It’s business, nothing more.”

Belle takes a deep breath. She seems calmer now, but only on the surface. I can sense the storm raging just beneath her skin. “But if you and—*when* you and Xena get married, you’ll live together?”

“I—”

“She would be your date to events and galas? She would be on your arm in public? Xena would be the person who, in every public way, would be your wife?”

She’s not really asking anymore. She’s explaining.

I grit my teeth. “You don’t understand how this life works. Marriage is a tool. This will make my Bratva stronger.”

“And that matters?”

“It’s the only thing that matters,” I bite back.

For so long—for so fucking long—that’s been true. Growing up drowning in poverty, watching my father scrape together enough loose change to buy bottom-shelf booze while my hunger roared in my stomach, I swore to myself I would turn it all around. Someday, somehow, all that shit would change.

And I did it. I built everything from nothing. I remade the world in my image and I killed anyone along the way who tried to stop me.

I’ve come so far. And now that I’m so goddamn close to being enthroned on top, I can’t let anything—or *anyone*—distract me.

Not even her.

“Then it sounds like you have your priorities,” Belle says coldly. “And I have mine.”

“And what are those?”

“To take care of myself and my sister.”

I snort. “Oh, of course. You were doing a great job before I came along. When you get back to your ‘priorities,’ be sure to give Roger my best.”

Her face screws up. “Roger? What does he have to do with—”

“And if it’s not him, then it will be the next predatory boss who paws at you while you work a job you hate so you can scrape by. What a life it is you’re protecting.”

“Some of us have no choice!” she screams, slamming her fists against my chest.

I press forward closer, pinning her against the wall of the elevator. She’s a captive lightning bolt, trembling and twitching with emotion she can’t keep bottled up anymore.

I lean close and brush my lips against her ear. Her breath catches, her chest hitches, her writhing hands go still.

“You do have a choice, Belle.”

She shakes her head without looking at me. Her hair is falling out of its sleek knot. “No, I don’t. You took that away from me.”

I push off the wall and spin away from her. “Maybe I should have known you weren’t cut out for this life.”

“Oh, *I’m* the problem?” She laughs like she’s going insane.

“Yes, you are.” I raise my eyes to hers. “You won’t survive in this world. You don’t belong here.”

“Clearly not,” she snarls, even as her eyes glisten with fresh tears.

“I exist to lead my Bratva. My life is this business. And if you can’t see how connecting with the Greeks benefits me—my life, my Bratva—then I won’t waste my time explaining it to you.”

Her chin wobbles before she raises it and squares her shoulders to me. “Your life is this business. And I’m no longer a part of your life. So you can do whatever you want with either one. Count me out of all of it.”

We stare at each other for a moment. When I reach past Belle, she flinches. Until the buzzing of the emergency alarm cuts out and the elevator starts to move once more.

She stares at me until the doors open at our floor. When they do, she steps out, moving slowly like she isn’t sure what comes next.

But she isn’t my problem anymore. I don’t care what she does.

I don’t care about anything.

BELLE

I'm blindly chucking everything into suitcases when there's a knock at the door.

For a minute, I'm not sure if I should answer or not. Is it Nikolai? Do I want it to be Nikolai?

"No," I whisper, shaking my head. "No."

This thing between us has to be over. It shouldn't have even started in the first place. I knew who he was, but I let myself get roped in anyway. And now, I'm half a world away from home with no idea how or when we're going to get back.

Nikolai wouldn't just leave me stranded here, though. Would he?

"Yes, he would," I snort to myself. I kick the dress he gave me away into the corner. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever worn. Probably the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, period.

But it doesn't fit into my life. There's nowhere for me to wear it.

Just like Nikolai. He's gorgeous, but we don't fit. Don't match.

This is for the best.

As I go to answer whoever's here, I pray that one day I'll be able to say that and believe it.

I yank open the door, ready to fix Nikolai with an icy cold glare and hold him at arm's length. Any closer than that is dangerous. But when the door opens, it isn't Nikolai on the other side.

It's Xena.

Her lips are pursed tight. "Belle Dowan."

She remembers my name. I'm not sure whether that's a good sign or not.

"Yeah. That's me."

"I wasn't asking." Her voice isn't exactly cold, but it's far from warm. "May I come in?"

I hesitate, my hand gripping the edge of the door. Being alone in a room with a woman connected to a violent mafia—a woman who probably hates my guts, seeing as how I just spent the week having wild vacation sex with her fiancé—isn't a great idea.

Then again, a closed door probably won't stop her if she wants to kill me.

All I can do is hope she doesn't want that.

I step back and open the door. "Be my guest."

She steps into the room and drifts to the island to perch delicately on the edge of one of the stools, rearranging her dress just so to avoid wrinkling it.

"You aren't coming back to the party?" she inquires.

I chuckle and look down at my outfit of ripped jeans and a t-shirt. "No. No, I'm not. I'm done."

"Yes, you are." She cuts right to the chase. Nikolai can say what he wants, but this woman is a match for him.

I gulp. "I don't know what you mean."

"And I'm not here to fuck around," she snaps. "You've already embarrassed me in front of all the other guests. Don't treat me like I'm stupid."

I sigh. I'm so sick of these people and their inflated egos. "Listen, Xena...

Nothing was really even going on with me and Nikolai. I came here to work for him.”

I’m surprised a bolt of lightning doesn’t smite me on the spot for telling such an outrageous lie. Based on the expression on Xena’s face, she doesn’t buy it, either.

“Are prostitutes traveling internationally now?” she muses.

Anger surges up in me like lava. I’m ready to defend myself... Before I realize she isn’t too far off. Shame replaces my rage and I lower my head.

“I know how this looks from your perspective. If I was you, I’d hate me,” I admit. “But... I never meant for any of this to happen.”

“This?” she asks, gesturing between the two of us. “You never meant for me to find out? Or you never meant for—”

“Any of it,” I say hurriedly. “I had no idea you even existed. Well... I knew you existed. I saw you in the office at Zhukova Incorporated one day. Do you remember that?”

She frowns. “I remember.”

“I didn’t know Nikolai was engaged to you, though.”

Too many words to say and too many emotions to process clog my throat. I clear it, trying to stay calm. I need to squash down whatever I’m feeling and get through this so I can get out of here.

“I would never set out to be... to be the ‘other woman.’ I’m not a homewrecker, and I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“You didn’t.”

I shake my head. “What?”

“You didn’t hurt me.”

I frown. “Then why are you here?”

She rearranges her skirts and purses her lips. “How much do you know?”

“Know about...” Realization hits all at once. “Oh. Everything, I think. Marriage deals, mafias, Bratvas. Yeah.”

“Good. So I can speak plainly, then.” Xena says it like it’s a relief. How many lies do these people have to tell to live the way they live? I can’t imagine it. “You can’t hurt me because I am not emotionally involved in anything with Nikolai.”

I nod. “That’s what he said, too. But I don’t buy it. Marriage is marriage. If you’re here to convince me to be your third or something—”

“I wasn’t finished.” Her voice is commanding, and I instinctively snap my mouth shut. “I’m not emotionally involved with Nikolai, but we’ve come to an arrangement. I expect it to be respected.”

“And what arrangement is that?”

“Our marriage formalizes the deal between the Greek mafia and Nikolai’s Bratva. And it is exclusive. You understand my meaning?”

“No, not really. I can’t understand marrying someone you don’t love. Why not just... I dunno, sign a contract?”

She shakes her head. “This way, we are twining ourselves together. My happiness is his and his is mine. Think of our lives as... collateral. If the deal falls apart, we both go down with it. It’s insurance.”

“High price to pay for insurance.”

“Perhaps,” Xena agrees. “But I grew up knowing that I would be used to secure a better future for my family. I’ve been prepared for this for a long time.”

“How do you prepare for something like this?” I wrinkle my nose and then shoot her an apologetic smile. “I’m not... well, I’m trying not to judge you.”

“I decided a long time ago that if my marriage won’t be one of love, it will at least be one of respect. I won’t let myself be made into a fool. And worse, I won’t sit by while my husband fucks whores in our house as I grow bitter and jaded. I won’t do it.”

“That... actually makes a lot of sense.”

Xena looks up at me. And for the first time since I let her into the suite, I remember that she has the capacity to kill me if she wants. Something in her eyes is sparking my fight-or-flight instincts.

Between those two, though, it's not even a question. I'll take "flight," please and thank you. Preferably direct home to Oklahoma City, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars.

"So I need to know that you are done with Nikolai," she finishes. "For good."

Now is not the time for hesitation, but I hesitate anyway. I want to make sure I'm clear about what I'm giving up.

As I think, tears prickle the backs of my eyes. I've never been one to dream about a future. My present has always been too chaotic to start making plans. But for a minute there... I saw one with Nikolai.

In the end, I do all I can do: I nod. "I'm done," I promise her. "For good."

"It's not just for my sake," Xena adds. "I'm doing this for you, too. My brother will kill you if he thinks you're interfering with this deal."

She makes the threat so casually that I miss it at first. As it sinks in, though, goosebumps rise on my arms. "Excuse me?"

Xena nods in confirmation. "He'll come for you and your entire family. He's done it before."

My heart clenches. Thoughts of Elise run through my mind. What the hell was I thinking? Getting involved with Nikolai, bringing Elise into this world... Stupid. So reckless.

I spent my entire life blaming my mom for putting me and Elise in a dangerous environment, but then I turned around and did the same thing.

I might be even worse.

"Here." Xena reaches into her small red clutch and pulls out a small envelope. She holds it out to me. "This is for you."

I stare at it, my hands at my sides. "Is that hush money or something? Because I don't want to take it. Nikolai filled me in, but I don't know how

stuff like this works. I don't want the FBI knocking on my door because—"

"They're plane tickets." Xena opens the envelope and shows me what's inside. "For you and your sister. I figured you'd want to get back to Oklahoma City as soon as possible." My shock must be written all over my face, because Xena smiles. "It wasn't hard to find where you lived."

I mentally add "find a new apartment" to my long list of things to worry about in the weeks and months ahead.

"No strings attached," Xena continues, holding the tickets out further. "I want you out of my life as much as I'm sure you want to leave."

I was already packing when Xena knocked on the door, even though I had no idea where I'd go or how Elise and I would get there. This is manna from heaven. Elise and I can get on a plane and this whole thing can be over, whether Nikolai likes it or not.

In the end, it's not a choice. *Do it for her. Do it for Elise.*

I grab the tickets. "Thanks," I mumble.

"The plane leaves in a few hours," Xena says.

I see Nikolai's face in my mind. His square jaw and gray eyes. His deep, gravelly voice in my ear. The way his tanned, tattooed skin looked against mine when we were lying naked together, flushed with each other's sweat.

Xena stands up, smoothing out her dress. And then, with one final pitying look my way, she turns and leaves.

In a daze, I walk back to the bedroom and finish packing. Elise is still downstairs, but I'll go get her once our bags are packed. I'll explain everything—or as much as I can safely tell her, at least—on the way to the airport.

I reach for the pile of art supplies on the bed. My markers and pens, the notebook I started filling only this morning when I woke up feeling safe and protected.

Even now, knowing everything, some traitorous part of me isn't ready for it to be over. Deep down, I naively thought we could work this out. That I

wouldn't have to leave.

But this is it. There's no other way forward.

I leave the notebooks on the bed. There's no room for anything else.

I have to let Nikolai Zhukova go.

NIKOLAI

SIX WEEKS LATER

Arslan drops into the barstool next to me. “Day drinking again?”

“It’s afternoon,” I say, pointing to the clock above the bar. The hour hand is just barely past the twelve. “And since when do you give a shit about that kind of thing?”

“I don’t. I’m just surprised you’re here now since you didn’t come out to the bar last night.”

“Are you actually surprised I didn’t?”

Arslan shrugs. “I guess not. But I hoped you would. The mood around here has been... grim.”

He isn’t wrong, but instead of responding, I take another long drink.

“Come on, man,” Arslan groans. “You haven’t given me anything since you’ve been back. I kept my mouth shut and gave you space—”

I bark out a laugh. “Yeah, right. ‘Space.’ You don’t know the meaning of the goddamn word.”

He’s been pestering me every day about what happened in Iceland. But none of it affects the Bratva’s official plans, so there was no reason to say anything.

“I just want to know what went down with you and Belle,” he sighs.

Hearing her name shouldn't bother me. She was a nothing. A blip in the radar. Entertaining while it lasted, but I have actual responsibilities to deal with. A Bratva to run.

But it still feels like Arslan just poured cold water down my back.

"Like that," he says, jabbing a finger in my face. "What the hell happened that has your mug looking like that?"

I swat his hand away. "We didn't work out."

"No shit." I shook him a warning look, and he holds up his hands. "Trying to be a friend here. You need to purge. Get this chick out of your system."

"She isn't in my system," I snap.

I'm not one to sit around and chat about feelings, but even I have to admit that there is something to the idea of telling the story once and being done with it. Maybe saying it all out loud will hammer home how stupid I was to get mixed up with my shell company's naive little accountant.

"We had some fun," I grumble. "You're the one always telling me I need to relax more."

"You do! You need a vacation more than anyone I've ever met."

"And I guess that's what I had," I say. "A vacation."

"But...?" he prods.

"But then Xena showed up." I grimace.

Arslan suddenly flails his arms around his chest in a frenzy. For a second, I think he's having a seizure.

"What the hell was that?" I ask.

"You said the she-devil's name. I was trying to bless myself," he explains. "That was the sign of the cross."

I arch an eyebrow. "It looked like a drunk Macarena."

"Is there a sober Macarena? I've never seen one."

I shake my head and set my glass down. The whiskey doesn't taste as soothing as it did a few minutes ago. "Anyway, Xena showed up and that was that. Belle didn't know I was engaged."

Arslan whistles. "Shit. That's what you get for dating an accountant. They're buttoned-up types. The next numbers nerd who's down for a love triangle will be the first."

"We weren't dating. We were just... fucking around."

He rolls his eyes. "Right. That makes sense. You've been on edge for the last six weeks because this woman meant nothing to you."

"Sarcasm does not look good on you," I mutter.

"Then stop bullshitting me and tell me the truth," he counters. "You cared about her."

"Fuck off. Anyway, this isn't about her. It's about *her*."

"Who?"

"The She Devil," I scowl. "Xena."

Arslan crosses himself again.

"It's about the fact that she felt she had any say over my life," I continue. "And that she showed up without announcing herself. She waltzed into my hotel like she owned the place."

"She will, one day. In a manner of speaking."

"Don't fucking remind me."

He steers the conversation back on track. "Belle was pissed, then?"

I nod. "Pissed enough that she packed up and left that same night. I figured I'd go talk to her in the morning and help her and her sister get home, but she was gone."

"Back to Oklahoma?"

"I have no idea."

Arslan raises his brows. “You didn’t check? That’s unlike you.”

“She isn’t a threat,” I say gruffly. “Wherever she is, it doesn’t matter.”

There’s a brief pause before Arslan snorts. “I don’t believe you as far as I can throw you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re a heavy motherfucker, for one.” He reaches over the bar, snags two glasses, and pours us each a shot of tequila. “And second, it means she does matter—to you.”

“No, it doesn’t. She does.”

Arslan holds his glass up for a toast. “Yeah, she does. But the beauty of alcohol is that we can drink until nothing matters.”

“We have plans tonight, remember?” I ask even as I reach for my shot glass.

“Of course I remember.” He tosses back his shot, winces, and then grabs the bottle again. “Even more reason to drink.”



By the time Arslan and I stroll into the Greek restaurant downtown, we’ve gone from sober to drunk and back again. The only reason he’s standing upright is because he guzzled coffee straight from the pot like a water buffalo.

“Can I get you two started with any drinks?” the waitress asks as we walk through the door.

I glance over her shoulder to count the number of Greek soldiers lurking in all of the shadowy corners.

“Scotch,” I say. “Double.”

Arslan orders the same. As soon as our drinks are delivered, Giorgos spots us.

“Good luck.” Arslan pats me on the back and starts walking away, swaying a

bit more than normal.

“Some right-hand man you are.”

He laughs and slips into conversation with a few women standing around the bar.

Giorgos comes at me with his hand extended. I grip it and we shake, but tension ripples between us. We haven't seen each other in weeks. I've only met with him once after I got back from Iceland, and it was curt and to the point.

“Big day,” he remarks.

“No. That's tomorrow,” I tell him. “This is the rehearsal dinner.”

He smiles thinly. “You don't have to remind me. Xena would have my balls if I hosted her wedding in this dining room.”

“Too late. I think she already has them.”

Giorgos's smile falls. Whatever brief moment of levity we could have enjoyed, I've just killed it. Good fucking riddance.

“We both agreed to this deal, Nikolai.”

“If only I could forget.”

“And I still have other options,” he adds.

I turn to him, eyebrow arched. “Do it and see what happens.”

But Giorgos knows this already. I made it clear to him at our last meeting that if he partners with the Battiato mafia, I'll kill him before he can reap the benefits. I'll do it with my own bare hands, too.

And if it brings on war with the Battiatos? So be it. It's been a long time coming, anyhow. I've been on a collision course with the motherfuckers who ruined my family since the day I was born.

His mouth tightens into a grimace. “Then here we are.”

“Here we fucking are, indeed.”

I look past him into the room. I don't see Xena. She's probably waiting to make a grand entrance. She suggested the two of us plan a speech for when we walk in together, but I told her I'd rather choke. She took that to mean "no" and said we should arrive separately. Thank fuck for that.

I'm about to peel away from Giorgos and go hunt down another drink when my phone rings.

The name on my screen takes me by surprise. I have to read it twice. But both times, plain as day, there it is.

Elise Dowan.

I'm answering before I can even consider whether it's a good idea or not.

"Nikolai?" Elise whispers so softly I can barely hear her. "Is this the right number?"

"It is if you want to talk to me."

She sighs. "I didn't know who else to call. I swiped your number from Belle's phone."

I grip the phone so tight I hear the casing crack. Giorgos lingers nearby, that nosy bastard. I turn away from him so he can't eavesdrop. "Where is she? Does she know you're calling?"

Elise snorts. "No. She'd be... well, it wouldn't be good if she knew we were talking. She'd be mad."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have called."

"Just listen to me first. Please." I can tell it takes real effort for Elise to beg. The strain in her voice is obvious.

"I'm listening. But I won't be for long, so hurry up and out with it."

"She's sick," Elise blurts. "Ever since we got home, she's been getting worse. She can't eat, she's exhausted. It's getting bad."

Something stirs in my chest. Something I refuse to name or acknowledge.

"She can't blame me for everything that goes wrong in her life," I growl.

"This isn't because you cheated on her," Elise snaps.

"I—"

Elise laughs bitterly. "Save your breath. I saw it with my own eyes, okay? You broke her heart, and I hate you for it."

I grit my teeth. "Then why did you call?"

"Because you're the only person I could think of who can help."

"Get a phonebook and find a doctor. I'm told they have those, even in Oklahoma."

"She won't go! I've been telling her, but she swears she's fine."

"Maybe she is."

"If you could see her, you'd know she isn't," Elise argues. "Something is wrong. I don't know if she picked something up overseas. Maybe on the plane. I don't know if it's a virus or what. But something is wrong and it's getting worse. That's the only reason I called you. I'm desperate."

Giorgos is still watching me with a gleam in his eyes I don't like. An idea strikes me suddenly...

Could he have done this?

If the Greeks outright assassinated Belle, I'd know. But if they played the long game, if they poisoned her bit by bit... I'd be surprised, but not shocked. People have gone to stranger lengths to keep a deal together in our world. Maybe Belle was an obstacle Giorgos wasn't comfortable living with.

"You said she's not eating?"

"Hardly a bite," Elise sighs. "She's sick all the time and really pale. And she hasn't been sleeping well. Nightmares, I think."

Fuck. It could be anything. Poison is a coward's game, and I know nothing about it—intentionally. I do my killing face-to-face

I drag a hand through my hair. I'm one day away from completing this deal. From securing the future I set out to secure when I was a broken little boy

staring at his mother's corpse.

I let Belle distract me once. I can't do it again.

But if she's being poisoned because of me...

"Please, Nikolai." Elise's voice breaks. "I don't know what else to do."

"I'll call you right back."

I hang up and pull up my web browser as Arslan appears at my side.

"What's goin' on?" he asks. "You look tenser than normal."

"Business."

He looks over my shoulder. "What is—where are you going?"

I ignore him. "Can I trust you to handle shit here?"

"Handle what?" he hisses. "You can't exactly tag in a substitute for your own goddamn *wedding*, Niko."

"I'll be quick," I say. I see a flight to OKC leaving in the next two hours. I buy the ticket hurriedly. "But I have to go."

Arslan grabs my arm. "Slow your horses. Who was that on the phone? What in the hell is going on? I need more than this. I need to know—"

"All you need to know is that I'm making it your job to keep everything from falling apart while I'm gone. I'll be back. Don't fuck it up."

Before Arslan can say anything else to stop me, I turn and leave.

BELLE

The smell of the damp, musty bar rag makes me feel nauseous. But that's not exactly unique these days.

I keep telling Elise I'm fine, but I'm not. I haven't been in weeks.

Standing on my feet for eight or more hours at a time and slinging drinks to people who can barely stay upright on their stools is exhausting in a way I never would have guessed. But it's a job with a reliable, if measly paycheck. It's better than nothing. Not by much, though.

A slurred voice from the end of the bar calls for "another one," and I obey. My first night, I tried to cut a man off after he'd had at least twice as many drinks as he should have, but my boss informed me that wasn't my call to make.

"We aren't liable for these people. If they want to drink themselves to death, just make sure they clear their tab first," Tony said.

Charming one, that Tony. But unlike Roger, he's never made a move on me. I'm not worried he'll corner me in the back closet.

My bar for what makes a good boss is so low that Tony could clear it without even picking up his feet.

When I first got back from Iceland, my instinct was to try and reclaim my old life. Maybe I could erase the last couple weeks, go back to the way things were before.

But then I heard Nikolai's voice in my head.

When you get back to your 'priorities,' be sure to give Roger my best.

He was right, obnoxiously enough: I couldn't go back to work for Roger. Getting tangled up with an engaged man and fooling myself into believing he could want me was pathetic enough. I had to at least find a job where the boss hadn't tried to assault me.

So I slipped into my teeniest pair of denim cutoff shorts and assured Tony that I could increase business, bring in more male clientele, blah blah blah. He couldn't have cared less about that, though. It took me about four seconds into my first shift before I figured out why.

Tony's Watering Hole is for the drunks who have been banned from every other bar. The people sitting across from me aren't motivated by tiny shorts or flirting; they're motivated by endless drinks and no questions. The best thing I can say about Tony's is that it's quiet.

Which is why I look up the instant the bell above the door rings.

And when I see the familiar figure standing under the dimming neons, my heart stops.

"Long time, no see," Roger says, ambling over to the bar with a Cheshire cat smile.

Suddenly, eighteen inches of solid wood bar between me and the patrons isn't enough. Not nearly enough.

"What are you doing here?" I croak.

"Getting a drink. Think you could help me out with that? That's what you do now, right?"

I clench my jaw. I could try to kick him out, but Tony would be pissed. Unless someone is tearing up the bar or refusing to pay, Tony doesn't kick anyone out. "It's bad for business," he always says.

"What will it be?" I grit out.

"Dealer's choice." Roger grins mischievously. "You're the professional. Did

you go through training for this? Do they teach you to spin the bottles without spilling?’

I pour him a flat, foamy beer and slide it across the sticky bar top. “No.”

He’s so busy staring at me that he doesn’t even touch his drink. “You should have had your new boss call me. I could’ve given him a recommendation. Glowing, of course.”

Roger is loving my fall from grace. I want to shatter a glass over his head. The last time I saw him, he was unconscious on the floor of Zhukova Incorporated.

I preferred him that way.

“Or maybe I would have told him to choose another applicant,” he hisses. “Someone who isn’t such a tease. If you’re gonna hire a girl for her tits, she better be willing to put out.”

The grizzled man at the end of the bar calls for another round, but I can’t take my eyes off of Roger. Turning my back on him feels like turning my back on a wild animal. He’s unpredictable. I have to stay focused.

I already know what the price is if I don’t.

“I never teased you,” I snap. “You harassed me repeatedly and I was nice enough not to kick you in the dick the way you deserved. But I’m not sure even that would have gotten the message through your thick head: I don’t want to have sex with you.”

Roger’s face flushes with anger. A vein bulges in his forehead. “Is that why your new boyfriend dumped your ass, too?”

Pain lances through me at the reminder of Nikolai. The only thing that has kept me standing up and moving forward the last six weeks is actively *not* thinking about him. “Aggressive avoidance,” I’ve decided to call it. It’s been easy because Elise is the only other person who knew about the two of us.

I guess I forgot about Roger.

“He was not my boyfriend.”

There's a lazy clap to draw my attention from the end of the bar. "I asked for another one," the man hollers over.

Roger snorts. "Of course he wasn't. You were leading him on, too, I'm sure. But believe me: anyone willing to beat another man up on your behalf is expecting to get some pussy out of it. And the Zhukova guy is not what anyone would call generous. He expected payment."

It's hard to hide my wince. Mostly because Roger is right, more or less.

Nikolai was fucking me in his office while he had a fiancée waiting for him. I was probably his last hurrah before the big day and the happily ever after.

I ignore the ache in my heart and the uncomfortable swirling in my stomach. "Drink your beer and get the fuck out of here."

"And what if I don't?" Roger asks, a stupid smile smeared across his stupid face. "If you're back in town and working here, that means Nikolai must not be in the picture anymore. Your bodyguard is half the country away. He's probably forgotten all about you by now."

Angry tears burn the backs of my eyes. For weeks now, I've been on the verge of a breakdown. It feels like every single one of my emotional wells are fit to burst at any moment.

But I can't cry in front of Roger. I won't give him the satisfaction.

"I don't need anyone to protect me," I spit. "Then or now. I'll handle you myself."

Roger laughs and stands up. He plants his hands on the bar, his face coming far too close to mine. "There you go teasing me again. If you want to *handle me*, Belle, all you have to do is ask."

He reaches towards my waist, but before I can shove him away, a shadow appears over Roger's shoulder.

"Don't fucking touch her."

For one fleeting second, I think it's Nikolai. Somehow, against all odds, he's here to save me. Here to protect me like he promised.

But then I realize it's the man from the end of the bar. He looks different standing up than he does slumped in a stool. He's lanky but tall, and Roger is enough of a coward that he immediately backs down.

"Ease up, man. We're old f-friends," Roger stammers.

"I don't care who you are. You're slowing down service. Hit the fuckin' road, bud."

Threatening to assault me? Nobody cares. But slowing down the endless flow of booze?

That, my friends, is unforgivable.

Roger seems to sense that there's no way to get back in the drunk man's good graces, so he backs away from the bar. With one final glance my way, he ducks out of the front door and into the night.

The man drops back down into a new barstool and slaps the counter. "Now, for the last fuckin' time: *another one*."

I slide another glass his way and spare him the chit-chat.



Three hours later, the bar is finally closed. I lock the front door behind me and step out into the night.

The only nice part of the job is this moment right here. When my shift is over and it's both too late and too early for anyone to be out. The sidewalks are empty, the streetlights flash eerily yellow, and the world is quiet. Blessedly, blissfully quiet.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath of the crisp night air...

And a hand wraps around my mouth.

My eyes fly open, but I don't see anyone. Whoever is holding me is standing behind me. I start flailing, driving my elbows back and trying to kick at the legs behind me.

Then I hear him laugh.

"You shouldn't be out so late," Roger hisses in my ear. "It's not safe for pretty women on the streets."

It's been hours since I saw him. Almost enough time for me to forget about him. I can't believe he waited.

I want to argue with him. To beg. To reason. To scream bloody murder, if all else fails. But his sweaty hand is clamped down over my mouth so tightly that I can't even part my lips. My jaw aches from the force.

I flail, but Roger bands an arm around my midsection, pinning one of my arms to my side. Then he starts dragging me back into the alley.

Holy shit. This is it. I'm going to be one of those women on the news. Someone broken and left in a dark alley or tossed in a dumpster.

And Elise... what will happen to Elise?

Panic like I've never felt before courses through me. I want to fight, and I try, but God, I'm so tired. My body aches and my stomach rolls.

Even on a good day, a fight with Roger would be unbalanced. And I haven't had a good day in at least six weeks.

Roger spins me around and slams me up against the brick wall. I lash out in his direction, but he pins my wrists to the wall overhead and grinds his hips against mine. I feel his hardness and I nearly throw up in my mouth.

"You think you can embarrass me and get away with it?" he snarls as he fumbles for the waistband of my jeans. "You aren't special, Belle. You aren't as hot as you seem to think you are. And I'm gonna show you all you're good for."

Tears are freely flowing down my cheeks now. I'm sobbing too hard to be able to say anything useful.

I know it wouldn't matter anyway. Roger is beyond reasoning with.

Then, all at once, Roger drops away.

It's like a hole opens up beneath his feet and swallows him. But when I look

down, he's still there, albeit crumpled into a bleeding puddle of misery.

I wipe tears out of my eyes and look up to see a new figure standing in front of me. This one tall. And broad.

And very, very familiar.

"Nikolai," I gasp, not believing my own eyes.

He's holding a brick in his right hand. He shrugs and drops it onto Roger's gut.

"It's not a three-hole punch, but it did the trick."

Roger groans at our feet. I look at him, at Nikolai, at him, at Nikolai, then at my own shaking hands. I finally manage to rasp out, "What are you doing here?"

"Saving you. Again," he says. "It's turning out to be a full-time job."

I want to touch his face and make sure he's real, but I'm afraid what will happen if I put my fingers on him. I might not be able to purge him from my system a second time.

"But how did you—When did you—I don't understand what's going on. Why are you here?"

"Let's have this conversation somewhere else." He jerks his chin towards a black car I didn't notice earlier. He parked between the dingy street lights, lurking in a pocket of shadow. I'd expect nothing less from him.

I shake my head. Even from here, the citrusy, peppermint scent of him is overwhelming. In an enclosed car, I'm not sure I'll be able to handle it.

"No. No, let's stay here. Let's... You should go. Thanks, but I'm fine. You need to go."

"I do need to go," he says, glaring daggers down at Roger's body. "But only because, if that man moves a muscle, I'll kill him. Unless you want to be witness to that, we should get out of here."

"You can leave. I'm staying."

"You're staying with him?"

"God, no! He showed up tonight. I haven't seen him since—" *Since you broke my heart.* "I'm staying here. This is where I live. Where I work." I gesture to the faded *Tony's Watering Hole* sign above the door. "I can't go with you."

Some emotion I can't read crosses Nikolai's face, and I realize it's the first time I've let myself look up at him. His gray eyes are locked on mine, silver in the moonlight, and his jaw is working. He's bothered.

Is it because of Roger?

Or is it because of me?

"Why are you here?" I ask again, despite my better instincts.

"Just get in the car, Belle."

"Not until you tell me why you're—"

"Elise called me," he snaps. "She called me a few hours ago and said you were sick. She's scared."

Too many thoughts swirl through my brain. It's hard to grab onto any one of them.

"Elise called you? She—A few hours ago?" I frown. "And you're already here?"

Nikolai glances at Roger and then backs away like he's worried he won't be able to control himself if he gets within arm's reach. I can feel rage rolling off of him in waves.

When Roger wakes up, Nikolai really will kill him.

I sigh. "Fine. But... but you have to leave. You can take me home, but then you have to go."

"I can do whatever I want, Belle," he says.

When I look up at him, I wonder if I look as broken as I feel. "Please, Nikolai. You have to go."

He glances over me once. It feels like an assessment. Like he's checking me for damage.

Then he starts walking to his car. "Come on."

There are moments in life when you know you're making a life-altering mistake, but you do it anyway. Where you're helpless to do anything but take the moment's hand and let it lead you over the edge of the cliff.

So far, every single one of mine has been with Nikolai.

Sliding into his passenger seat now, the smell of him thick around me, I know I'm doing it again. But God, it feels so good to fall.

For a minute there, it's almost like you're flying.

NIKOLAI

I walk Belle up the rusty metal stairs to her apartment.

“Well, this is me,” she says, hesitating outside the door. “Um... thanks for ___”

“If you think you’re getting rid of me that easily, you’re even sicker than I realized.”

I snatch the key out of her hand and open the door myself. “Hey!” she protests. “You can’t just barge into my house.”

“Too late,” I say from the threshold. “Come on in.”

Her face is twisted in frustration, though it doesn’t take away from how beautiful she is. But Elise was right—something is off. Belle’s cheekbones are a bit sharper than usual and her collarbone juts out more than before.

I step into the pitifully small kitchen and wrench open a cabinet. Inside is a box of sugary chocolate cereal, protein bars, and a half-empty bag of coffee grounds. Not exactly Whole Foods.

“Have you eaten? I’m starving.”

“Then go find a restaurant. You can’t be here.”

Since we got out of the car, Belle has maintained a five-foot distance from me at all times. Like she’s afraid I’ll reel her if she gets too close with a gravity all my own.

Her fear isn't so far off. The desire to feel her body in my hands, to examine her with my own eyes up close, is strong.

Dangerously strong.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Because... because..." She glances towards the hallway and then snaps her focus back to me. "Because Elise is asleep, for one. Flying to Iceland and then leaving the way we did... She's been through a lot. I don't want to confuse her."

"Elise is the one who asked me to come," I remind her. "Try again."

Her lips press together so hard they turn white. "For two, your fiancée is probably wondering where you are."

"Almost certainly."

Not that I would know or care. I set my phone on Do Not Disturb. Arslan is the only person I authorized to bypass the setting and reach me, and he knows that is for emergency use only.

"You should get back to her," she finishes.

"Not until I make sure you're okay."

Her brows pinch together. "Why do you even care? I don't belong in your world, right?"

"I'm not going to sit by and let you die if I can do something to stop it."

"I'm not dying," she groans. "I just get sick sometimes. It's nothing."

"Explain."

Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, and she shoves her hands into her back pockets. "In the afternoons before work, I get, like, nauseous. It's probably just anxiety."

"Anxiety about what?"

"Oh, I don't know," she drawls. "Maybe the fact that I lost my job and almost

got raped and had my entire life turned upside down in a matter of weeks. And now, I'm working at a dive bar to make ends meet. Maybe it has something to do with that! But who's to say? I'm just guessing here."

Her sarcasm is as feisty as ever, but there's an undercurrent of desperation that didn't used to be there. It troubles me.

"Then quit," I suggest.

"I can't just quit. I need the money. I know you're not familiar with the concept, but 'money' is the thing 'normal' people use to buy stuff like 'food' and pay 'rent' and 'bills.' Wild, I know."

"Find a job somewhere else. You're smart. You're attractive." I don't miss the way her eyes flare at the casual compliment. "You could get hired somewhere else."

"You can't do this anymore, Nikolai. You don't get to walk into my life and tell me how to live. You lost that privilege."

"Oh, and what a privilege it was." I press a hand to my chest, my voice drenched in excessive mock sincerity. "The honor of a lifetime, surely."

Her eyes narrow to slits. "Get out."

"Not until I figure out what is wrong with you."

"Nothing is wrong with me!"

I reach out and brush my hand across her collarbones. "Then why can I see your bones poking through your skin?"

Instantly, Belle stiffens. She catches her breath and then glances down slowly at where my fingers are touching her at the base of her throat.

"Elise is scared," I add quietly. "She called me because she didn't know what else to do."

All at once, I see the fight drain out of her. Belle pulls away from me and sags into herself. Exhaustion is written in every line of her face. She leans back against the kitchen counter and folds her arms over her chest like that's the only thing keeping her in one piece.

“It’s just anxiety,” she mumbles. “And exhaustion. The last few weeks have been... hard.” She looks up at me nervously and then chews on her lower lip.

“What are your symptoms?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Like I said, I get sick. Mostly in the afternoons. Usually before my shift. I’ll throw up once, sometimes twice.”

“Are you eating?”

“Protein bars,” she says, gesturing to the cabinet. “Cereal, when I can stomach it. But I work so much that I don’t have a lot of time, anyway. When I’m not working, I’m sleeping. That’s probably what Elise is worried about more than anything. She’s alone too much.”

I shake my head. “No. She was worried about you. She wants you to go to a doctor.”

“As soon as Tony decides to get us health insurance, I’ll get right on that,” she snorts.

“For fuck’s sake, Belle, you shouldn’t have run off like you did. I would have given you a job. I told you after what happened with Roger the first time that I’d take care of you, but you decided to leave and put yourself and Elise in danger. And why? Because you were jealous of a woman I don’t even care about?”

“Don’t act like I left over nothing,” she snaps right back. “And besides, that may be where our fight started, but I left to protect Elise.”

“Stop using your sister as an excuse.”

“Stop acting like I’m being crazy! Being part of your world isn’t safe for her. Not when Xena is in your life. Not when I’m caught in the middle of some deal with you and the Greeks. It’s not safe.”

“Running like this might not be safe, either.”

Belle’s eyes dart to my face. They’re suddenly wide, her exhaustion from a moment ago shucked off with a new burst of adrenaline. “What—what does that mean? Are they—Is someone coming after me?”

“That’s why I’m here,” I explain. “You’re sick. I need to know why.”

Slowly, Belle nods. “Oh, that’s why you’re here. It’s not because... It’s just guilt. You feel guilty. Like maybe you’re the reason this is happening.”

It’s not hard to see the conclusions she is drawing. That I don’t care about her. That I’m only here to make sure my hands are clean, so that if she dies, it won’t be my fault.

I could easily dissuade her of those opinions. All I’d have to do is unzip and show her the achingly hard cock that’s stayed stubbornly stiff since I grabbed her by the waist outside of that shithole bar and lifted her over Roger’s unconscious body.

But it’s easier this way. It’s better if she thinks I don’t care.

Because I shouldn’t. I can’t.

“I’ve never felt guilt a day in my fucking life,” I scowl. “But if the Greeks are fucking with you to try to manipulate me, that’s something I need to know.”

Belle rolls her eyes. “I’m not your child. I can handle myself.”

Something suddenly occurs to me. *Child*. I swallow hard. “When was your last period, Belle?”

She opens her mouth and then closes it wordlessly. She backs away from me. “I don’t know. Why the hell do you need to know?”

“Answer the question, Belle.”

I watch her eyes shift as she does the mental math. The color drains out of her face, and I know she’s thinking what I’m thinking.

“You’ve been throwing up,” I say. “You’re tired. Emotional.”

“I just found out I was your secret mistress and I lost my job,” she hisses. “Of course I’ve been emotional.”

I step forward. She tries to back away, but there’s nowhere for her to go. Her back is pressed against the countertop, pinned in the corner.

I stop in front of her, looking down. “Belle.” My voice is gentle, but she still

flinches. “You’re pregnant.”

“I’m not pregnant,” she spits. “I’m not. Because... I can’t be pregnant. I can’t, okay? I’m not. This isn’t happening.”

“Who did you sleep with last?”

She glares at me. “Who? *Who*? Who the fuck do you think, Nikolai?”

I arch an eyebrow in response, although I have to clasp my hands together behind my back so she doesn’t see them shaking violently at the thought of another man laying so much as a finger on her.

“It was you! You’re the last person.” She crosses her arms tightly over her midsection, almost like she might be able to hide the truth with her arms. “And I should have had a period a month ago... but I was feeling sick and stressed, so I thought I just skipped a month. Maybe I did. Maybe this is nothing.”

“You need to see a doctor.”

“If I want to do that, I’ll do it on my own.”

I ignore her, mind racing already. “You’ll come back to the city with me, and I’ll make an appointment with the best OBGYN there is. Then I can set you up in a nice place with a chef who can make sure you don’t lose any more weight. That can’t be good for the baby.”

“We don’t even know if there is a baby!”

“And Elise will come, too, obviously. You’ll both come with me, and—”

“I’m not coming with you!” Belle shouts. Her eyes dart to the hallway where I assume Elise’s room is, and then she clears her throat. “I’m not coming with you. I’m staying here. It doesn’t matter if I’m pregnant or not. I don’t want to be with you. I’d rather raise this baby on my own.”

“Luckily for the child, you don’t get a choice in that.”

“The hell I don’t! This baby is mine and—”

“This baby is *mine*,” I growl, cornering her against the counter again. Belle tries to back away from me, but there’s no space. Nowhere for her to go.

“This baby is mine. And as long as you’re carrying it, you’re mine, too.”

So much for making her think I don’t care. Then again, I’ve never done “aloof” very well. Tepid isn’t an option. I run hot or cold.

And when it comes to Belle, I’m burning up alive.

BELLE

Nikolai's body is pressed against mine. The hard, flat expanse of his abs and the steel beams of his arms might as well be a cage.

"This baby is mine," he growls, his gray eyes alight with a possessiveness I've never seen before. "And as long as you're carrying it, you're mine, too."

And there it is. The other shoe.

Ever since he showed up outside the bar, I've been waiting for it. I've been trying to understand why he's here at all. What has changed since Iceland? Is he going to call things off with Xena? And if not, am I fine with being "the other woman"?

The answers, respectively: nothing, no, and absolutely not.

So back to the original question: why the hell is he here?

And here's one final answer. He's here for this. This maybe-baby.

I grit my teeth and slam my fists into his chest. My hands sting from the contact. I might as well be punching a concrete wall for how much good it does.

But I have to do *something*. I'm so sick of doing nothing. I'm so sick of letting the world have its way with me.

"I. Am. Not. Yours!" I shout, punctuating each word with a punch.

“Wrong, *kiska*,” he murmurs. “You’re mine in every way, in every place. On land, in the water, in the air. On top of a mountain, you’re mine. You’re mine, Belle Dowan, and no one else’s.”

I punch him again because what the hell am I supposed to even say to a growly, possessive, somehow-heart-melting little speech like that? Punching is the only logical response.

It once again does approximately zero good, though. Nikolai doesn’t even flinch, but something in my hand crunches unpleasantly.

“Ouch!” I shake out my hand. “Shit.”

Nikolai plucks my hand out of the air almost tenderly and uses his thumbs to straighten my finger out. I’m so surprised by the tenderness that I don’t move. I just watch him work, inspecting my hand with his silvery eyes.

“Would you make some kind of effort to keep yourself safe?” he grits out. “It’s exhausting to do it for you.”

I yank my hand away. “Would you get away from me?”

Once again, I try to push him off of me, and once again, I fail miserably.

My cheeks are flaming as Nikolai bends towards me. His lips are mere inches from mine. “No. Looks like you’re stuck with me.”

“I don’t want to be ‘stuck’ with you. That’s why I left. You’re getting married to someone else. You can go be stuck to Xena.”

“I don’t need to be stuck to her. She doesn’t almost get herself killed everytime I look away for one fucking second,” he says darkly. “And even if she did, I wouldn’t care.”

My heart lurches. But as soon as the hope rises, I swat it down.

The baby. He cares about the baby and that’s it. He’d give this much attention to any woman carrying his Bratva progeny. I’m a breeding mare, nothing more. A means to an end.

“You don’t even know if I’m pregnant. Women skip periods all the time.”

“Then let’s go get a definitive answer.”

“No!”

He arches an eyebrow. “Why not?”

I don’t have a good reason and he knows it. I shove on his chest again, and finally, he gives me a little space. Nikolai steps back, and I can take a deep breath at last.

“Fine, I’ll... I’ll call a doctor,” I tell him. “Tomorrow morning, or whatever. But you have to leave. You can’t be here. Or anywhere near me.”

It hurts too much.

Those four little words sit on the tip of my tongue, but I bite them back. I don’t want him to know how much he affects me. Even now. Even though it must be blindingly obvious.

I flew halfway around the world with him on a whim. I let him finger me in his office when I didn’t know a thing about him. It’s well-established that Nikolai Zhukova shuts down the rational parts of my brain.

Which is exactly why he has to stay away.

“I can’t protect you well from far away, Belle. Stop making this difficult.”

“The only reason I need protecting is because of you to begin with! So stop showing interest. Stay away and no one will look twice at me.”

Xena seemed to think Giorgos wouldn’t pay me any mind if I disappeared. It’s why she gave me the plane tickets. But now, Nikolai is here and ruining everything. Xena forgave me for almost ruining her wedding once. Will she forgive me again?

And if she doesn’t... what is she prepared to do to get even?

“People will always look twice at you, Belle.”

Again, my heart clenches, but I know what he really means. “Only because I got tangled up with the wrong person. I must have *I’M STUPID* tattooed on my forehead.”

His expression is cold and unreadable, but he’s looking at me like he can read every one of my thoughts. Like he understands me, inside and out. For all I

know, he does.

The palpable chemistry between us has always been overwhelming, but now, it has me feeling actually dizzy. Nikolai came rushing back into my life like a tsunami, and suddenly, I don't know which way is up.

"Belle."

He says my name, but it sounds far away. His handsome, frustrating face swirls in my vision, spiraling like a whirlpool. I reach out to him. My hand clamps around his strong bicep, my nails digging into his skin, but even then, the sensation is distant, ethereal.

"Belle."

Even as black dots appear in the corners of my vision, I fight to look at him. His hand smooths down the side of my face. Calloused thumbs brush across my cheeks so softly that I know it has to be a dream. My eyes flutter closed and then they snap open again.

All at once, the fog in my head clears. The dizzy spell passes.

"What?" I snap irritably. "I'm fine."

Nikolai is kneeling over me. A lock of dark hair has fallen over his forehead. We fell to the floor somehow, but I'm cradled in his arms now.

For the length of one breath, I relish how good it feels. Words he's never said and never will say echo in the valleys of my brain. *I caught you. I'll always catch you.*

But then I see them for what they are: a fool's fantasy.

I scramble up and away from him. "It's just been a long time since I've eaten. I'm fine."

Nikolai reaches past me to snag a protein bar from the cabinet and shoves it into my hand. "Eat," he commands.

I roll my eyes, but even I know that spiting him on this one is stupid. I force my hands to be as steady as possible as I peel open the wrapper. The first bite tastes like chalk. The second tastes like ashes. Neither one is easy to swallow.

He watches me the whole time, hardly blinking.

“You can stop hovering. I’m fine.”

“No, I cant. And no, you aren’t.”

I drop the half-eaten bar onto the countertop. “So what? You’re just going to linger here? Keep an eye on me? I don’t think so. You have a life to get back to. A Bratva to run, remember? You can’t hang out here and babysit. This isn’t Iceland. That trip is over. This is real life.”

“Iceland was real, Belle.”

I bark out a vicious laugh. “Hell no, it wasn’t. It was a big, fat lie. And you acting like you can be here with me? That’s a lie, too. I’m not falling for it. You can’t stay here. You’re not welcome.”

The dizziness from a moment ago is returning. My chest is heaving, my breathing coming in huge, heavy gasps. It’s hard to catch my breath, and I don’t know why.

“Just... just leave,” I plead hoarsely. “Go.”

He responds by placing his palm over my heart. “Breathe, Belle.”

I try to shrug him off, but he refuses to budge.

“Relax,” he says. “You’re going to have a panic attack. Breathe.”

I follow his prompts, inhaling and exhaling when he says, staring into his gray eyes the entire time. And when my racing heart has finally calmed and my lungs don’t feel like overinflated balloons in my chest, I back away.

“Now, go.”

“No.”

I groan. “Why not? I’m sure your wife will give you plenty of kids. You don’t have to stick around for this one. We’ll be fine without you.”

Flashes of what my life will look like flood my mind unbidden. Caring for Elise and an infant when I can barely take care of myself. Scrapping for every dollar, every bite of food.

But I just barely managed to stave off a panic attack. I can't invite another one in now. I shove the thoughts away as best I can, compartmentalizing them for later when I'm alone.

"Whatever weird sense of responsibility you seem to be feeling, you're free," I tell him. "I absolve you. Go back and forget about us. I'll be—"

Suddenly, Nikolai is surrounding me. His arms around me, his face right up in mine.

And I know instinctively—a sick but undeniable truth—that if he kissed me now, I'd give in. If he wanted to fill the ache I've had for the last six weeks, I'd let him.

I wish that wasn't true. But some things can't be reasoned with.

"Don't you dare say you're fucking fine again, Belle," he snarls protectively. "Don't you dare."

"Let me go," I protest weakly.

"Again and again, you refuse to act in your own best interest," he sighs. "I can't trust you to do what's right. So if you won't, then I will. Regardless of what you think."

I frown. "What does that—"

Before I can even get the question out, my front door opens. A dour, middle-aged man with a mustache comes into the room. He is wearing all black and carrying a syringe in his hands.

"Nikolai," I manage before my throat starts to constrict with panic.

"I told you I'd take care of you, Belle. Right now, this is what that looks like."

The man walks into the kitchen. I try to jerk away, but Nikolai's hold on me is too strong. I don't stand a chance.

The man lifts the syringe. I open my mouth to scream, but Nikolai captures my lips with his.

His kiss is firm but gentle, and for a few blissful seconds, I sink into the

familiarity of his body against mine. I've missed it. I've needed it.

Then I feel the prick in my arm.

"Why?" I mumble into his open mouth. But my eyes are already dropping closed.

I feel a huge, warm hand at the back of my neck.

I feel the drop of blood leaking out onto the crook of my elbow.

And then I feel nothing.

BELLE

I'm freezing cold.

Shivers move up and down my limbs, a tingling that seems to radiate out from my bones. But I can't move. When I was a little girl, I used to get sleep paralysis like this. I'd wake up without waking up, and I always knew when it was happening because I was so damn cold.

So I'm just sleeping, that's all. That's fine. It would make sense of the crazy dream I had. Of Roger showing up at Tony's, followed by Nikolai. Of Nikolai driving me home, the syringe, a baby.

It was all a dream.

Actually, on second thought: me, pregnant with Nikolai's baby?

Scratch that, it was all a nightmare.

Just like when I was little, I start to wake up bit by bit. The paralysis fades away. Sound comes back first—air rushing past, distant horns, the crackle of an air conditioner.

Then motion. I twitch a finger and touch cool leather at my side.

"Hello?" a male voice calls from somewhere in front of me. "You finally alive back there?"

I pry my eyes open, blinking against the deluge of sunlight.

“That’s an affirmative, she is alive. Welcome back,” the same man says, a twinkle of a laugh on the edge of his voice.

When my vision finally resolves, I realize I’m in the backseat of a car. The man talking to me is driving. I’m alone. No sign of Nikolai or the person who injected me with... What the hell was I injected with? I try to ask, but the words come out jumbled.

“You’re still coming off the sedative,” the man explains when he sees my confusion in the rearview mirror. “Nikolai told me to tell you to relax. You’re safe.”

Easy for him to say! I try to scream. In reality, it sounds more like, “Ease-fhim-seh.”

We pull to a stop at an intersection and the man turns to scrutinize me. I finally recognize him, from the night I fell down the stairs at Zhukova Incorporated. He was the man Nikolai was talking to in his office.

“Arslan,” he says by way of introduction, waggling his fingers in a saucy little wave. “Considering all the shit you’ve put my boss through, I’m surprised we haven’t officially met yet.”

I clear my throat and run my tongue over my lips before I try to speak again. My lips are slightly more cooperative this time. “All the shit I put him through?” I rasp. “More like the shit that he’s...”

Arslan smirks. “You’ve been awake two minutes and you’re already arguing. No wonder he had to drug you.”

“He didn’t need to drug me! He just needed to... to leave me alone. What the hell is going on?” I claw at the seatbelt across my chest, suddenly very eager to be free of anything restraining me.

“I’d leave that on if I was you. Traffic in the city is a bitch, and I’m trying to keep to the schedule. You’re still drowsy.”

“The city?”

Arslan grins. “Welcome back to the Big Apple, baby.”

I look out the window. Steel buildings pressing close to the street. Hordes of

people whisking along the sidewalks. I see a subway station entrance and feel my chest constrict.

“How did I—? Where is—? What did he—?” All of the questions fizzle out before I can finish them.

“Shit,” Arslan says, “I’m not good at this. Bad bedside manner, I’ve been told. More than once. But, um, let’s see, start with the basics... You’re fine, okay? I’m not going to hurt you. No one is. You’re here because Nikolai was concerned.”

I’m here. In New York City. I’m here. And where is...?

“My sister,” I gasp. “Where is Elise?”

“In another car. She’s fine, too. But Nikolai didn’t want her to see you all zonked. He wanted to give you a chance to wake up and calm down.”

Rage ripples through me. “He wants me to calm down? After he kidnapped me? Is he fucking delusional?”

“What can I say? He’s a charmer.” Arslan chuckles, but nothing about this is funny.

“What does he plan to do with me? Lock me up because I wouldn’t go to a doctor?”

He glances back at me in the rearview as we resume driving. “You shouldn’t joke about things like that.”

An icy dread slips down my back. The last time I was here, I had some level of protection. An employer, coworkers, et cetera. If I disappear now, Tony won’t so much as call my cell to see why I missed a shift. He’ll replace me in two minutes flat and keep on moving. I can practically hear him in my head now: *Dead bartenders are bad for business.*

“Will he really lock me up?”

Arslan shrugs. “Not if you cooperate. But he really is worried about you.”

I snort. “Yeah, right. If he was worried, he wouldn’t have drugged me.”

“Believe me, I know Nikolai. Drugging you is actually a good sign. It’s a lot

better than being dead, don't you think? That's what happens to people he doesn't care about."

I shiver involuntarily and suddenly realize how cold I am. "Why is it so cold in here?"

"Oh." Arslan reaches for the air conditioner. "You had a slight temperature spike when they took you off the plane. Nikolai wanted to make sure you were cool."

"Well, now, I'm freezing. Turn the heat up. Please."

Arslan hesitates before reaching for the air again. "Fine. A bit. But like I said twice now, Nikolai is worried about you. He's on edge. I'm not throwing myself into the fire for you or anyone."

"So you just do whatever he says? You blindly follow his orders?"

He smirks. "Is this one of those 'If Nikolai walked off a cliff, would you follow' kind of questions?"

"Well, would you?"

Arslan doesn't even think about it. "Yes. Absolutely."

"Are you serious?"

"Deadly," he says.

"But why?"

When his eyes meet mine in the mirror this time, all signs of humor are gone. He really is deadly serious. "Because I've never known Nikolai to do something without a damn good reason. Which is the only reason I'm risking bringing the entire wrath of the Greek mafia down on me by transporting his secret pregnant mistress to his house. Because, despite it all, I trust him."

"I wish I had your trust," I grumble. "And we don't know I'm pregnant yet."

"That's another thing," Arslan says. "I've known him my entire life. We grew up together in the inner circle of hell and fought for the Bratva side by side for years. He's *never* wrong."

My stomach twists with nausea. I fold my arms around my midsection like that'll make all this go away.

Except I can't quite bring myself to wish I wasn't pregnant. Even as I'm thinking about how difficult it all will be, there's a flutter of excitement in my chest. The looming anvil that hung over my head everyday before I set out to start my shift at Tony's is gone.

"If you want my advice..." Arslan starts.

"I don't."

He carries on anyway. "Trust him. Even if you don't feel it yet, trust him. He'll earn it."

"Yeah, no thanks. I'll stick to hating him instead."

He guffaws at that. "You don't hate him."

"How the hell would you know?"

He catches my eye in the mirror again, one eyebrow raised. "Because sometimes, I'm right about things, too. And I know what hate looks like. This thing between you and Nikolai? That ain't it, sweetheart."

The jerky car ride and Arslan's bargain-brand therapy session is making me nauseous, so I lean my head back and try to relax. Eventually, I'll try to fight my way out and get myself and Elise out of here.

But right now, there's nothing to do but wait.

NIKOLAI

I watch through the front window as Belle climbs out of the car and runs to Elise. She wraps her baby sister in a hug like she thought she'd never see her again.

As if I'd do something to hurt an innocent little girl.

"Are you okay?" Belle asks, running her hands over Elise's hair.

I can read Belle's lips, but Elise is facing away from me. From the way she waves her sister off, I'd guess she's telling her all about how nice the private plane was and that she's already been settled into a guest bedroom so nice it blows the suite in Iceland out of the water.

Still, Belle pulls her in for another long, desperate hug. She buries her face in her sister's strawberry blonde hair as if it's the last time.

After another minute, I step away from the window and lean against the front doorjamb. From here, I can hear Belle perfectly.

"I'm so sorry. This has all been such a mess. I can't believe I dragged you into... whatever this is. You should be at home, not traipsing all over—"

"I like traipsing," Elise says. "Besides, traveling is a kind of education, isn't it?"

Belle arches a brow. "That sounds like something Nikolai would say."

"That's because I did."

At the sound of my voice, Belle snaps her attention to the house. Her entire body goes rigid. I spend a second admiring each curve. Memorizing her, savoring her.

Then her top lip curls in a sneer.

I shake my head and say softly, "You don't want to have this conversation here."

"The hell I don't!"

I jerk my chin towards her sister as a reminder. "Sure about that?"

Realization flickers across Belle's face. It obscures the rage for a second—then it's back with a vengeance. She opens her mouth again, but before she can say anything, I grab her arm and drag her through the front door.

"Hey!" she shouts. "Get off me!"

I ignore her and haul her down the hallway, even while she tries to dig her heels into the wood floors.

I turn towards a door to the right. I sense the moment her rage turns to panic. Her muscles tighten, and she whimpers.

"Don't... don't lock me up."

I open the door and shove her inside before following her in and closing the door behind us.

Belle looks around, blinking. "You're locking me in a library?"

"I'm talking to you in a library," I correct. "If the talk goes poorly, we'll circle back to locking you up."

For a few seconds, she's mesmerized by the floor-to-ceiling shelves that ring the room. Each one is loaded down with books, thousands of them.

When she looks back at me, it's like blinking back into reality. Cold, hard reality. The wonder fades from her face.

"You drugged me."

“You annoyed me.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Is that all it takes? I annoy you and you sedate me?”

“If that were true, you would have been sedated from the moment we met.”

Her hazel eyes are mostly green now. They’re practically nuclear with fury. “You don’t get to control my life. I’m not in your Bratva. I’m not... I’m not Arslan.”

I’m so surprised that I snort out a laugh. “Thank fuck for that. You’d be a terrible second-in-command.”

“Screw you.”

“Are you honestly offended?”

She crosses her arms and steps towards me. “I’m not as useless as you seem to think I am.”

“Debatable,” I snap. “We spend all of our time either fighting or fucking.”

Her pouty mouth falls open. I watch the flush creep over her chest and into her cheeks.

“That’s not true,” she whispers.

I close the distance between us in a single stride. “That’s what we do, Belle. We fight and we fuck and then we do it all over again. Often at the same time.”

“Only because you never stop arguing,” she snaps. “Ever!”

“Says the woman who doesn’t even want to be here, but is still bickering about her imaginary place in the Bratva hierarchy anyway.”

Belle’s cheeks go red. “I’m only here because you drugged and kidnapped me. If you’re tired of me, then send me back home.”

“So you can starve yourself? Or pass out and tumble down the stairs? Or get attacked in an alley by your former boss?” I shake my head. “No, princess, I think I’ll keep you here.”

Belle grabs a fistful of my shirt and tries to bring me down to her level, but I don't budge. Huffing, she stretches up onto her tiptoes. "You aren't responsible for me. I've taken care of myself my whole life. I never had anyone looking out for me."

"Ah, there it is."

"What?" She looks dubious.

"The reason you're so bad at recognizing when someone is taking care of you. Because no one has ever done it before."

Her jaw is set, her eyes narrowed up at me. "Is that what you're doing?"

I shake my head. "I've never met anyone more stubborn in my life."

"Oh, really? Have you met you?" She's not smiling, but there's amusement in her eyes.

"Touché."

Slowly, her fist unclenches. Her hand flattens on my chest and she lets loose a long sigh. "I'm tired of fighting, Nikolai."

"Glad to hear it." In one sweeping motion, I scoop her into my arms and press her back against the bookshelves. "Time for fucking, then."

She opens her mouth to say something, but I catch her lips with mine. Instantly, she softens in my arms. After a moment of struggle, she kisses me back and arches her body into me.

Still, there's remnants of the anger there. She claws at my shoulders and digs into my back with the heels of her feet. It's lovemaking with violence seeping into the edges.

I slide my mouth along her jaw and down her neck. I can feel the pounding of her pulse against my lips.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you," she pants, scraping her fingernails down my neck.

I reach between us to undo her jeans. "I never apologized," I remind her, sliding my hand beneath the soft material of her panties. I arch a brow. "And

apparently, I don't need to. You're already soaked."

"Shut up," she says just before she grabs my face with both hands and kisses me again.

She slips her tongue in my mouth as I slide a finger into her. She clenches and then relaxes as she adjusts to me. When I drag my thumb up to circle her clit, she rips her mouth away and gasps.

"See how good it can be?" I whisper, adding a second finger to her warm heat. "You and me..."

"And your wife?"

I curl my fingers inside of her. It's a miracle to watch her melt. To witness the stubborn, reckless little brat give herself over to my hands.

"Forget her," I say. "She's done. It's over."

Belle's eyes snap open. "What do you mean?"

"It's over," I repeat. "The wedding is off."

Belle studies every inch of my face, looking for the truth. But that's exactly what I just gave her.

And after one long moment, she recognizes that.

Then she unzips my pants and wraps her soft hand around my throbbing shaft. "Fuck me," she whispers.

She doesn't have to ask me twice. I rip her jeans off her legs and press myself to her opening. Then I catch her jaw in one hand so she can look at me and only at me.

"Watch me when I bury myself in you, princess," I rasp. "I want to see the look on your face. I want you to see the look on mine."

All she can do is whimper and nod.

I press into her. One inch, three inches, six, eight, all of me. "Good girl," I whisper to her, still keeping her face clenched in my grasp. "Taking all of me like such a good girl."

She bites at her lip, though she still follows orders and keeps her eyes locked on mine. Her legs tighten around my waist until I'm filling her to the hilt.

There's a moment there that I want to last forever. When I'm fully inside of her. When her eyes are molten green and glowing with lust. When every cell of me is vibrating with how fucking bad I crave this infuriating woman.

It hangs in the air endlessly like a shooting star.

Then it comes crashing down to earth.

I start to fuck her, hard and relentless. Every thrust draws out another broken moan from her sweet lips. I capture her nipple in my mouth and bite. She claws my shoulders. We rip pain and pleasure from each other in equal measure.

The shelves shake with the force of our fucking. I'm palming her thighs so hard I know that there will be a perfect set of ten purple bruises on her skin not long after we're done here.

Good. I like knowing I've marked her as mine.

"I'm going to come," Belle moans. She grinds herself into my body as I fill her, and it takes all of my strength to hold back my own release.

She bursts like a dam. The sound coming out of her mouth is new and familiar at the same time. Fuck, will watching this woman come on my dick ever not be the sexiest thing I've ever experienced?

I'd go to war for her right now.

I'd kill for her right now.

I grit my teeth and hold back, ignoring the fire roaring in my own belly. I am not finished with her yet. Not by a long shot.

As soon as her frantic, hitched breathing starts to even out, I pull out of her, spin her around, and plant her hands on the shelf. She obeys instinctively, pushing her hips back for me to enter again.

She's dripping for me. "You're so damn tight," I growl in her ear. "I could finish like this."

She arches her spine and that waterfall of dark hair spills over her back.
“Then do it.”

“Not until you fall apart for me again.”

I reach around to find her clit with one hand. The other hand stays plastered to her hip so I can spear her on my dick again and again, and again and again. I’m sweating, she’s dripping, both of us are panting mercilessly. But I know what the rising pitch of her moans means.

“Come for me,” I command. “Now.”

Almost like she was waiting for my permission, she lets go. If the first one was sudden and violent, this one is softer, smoother, though even more powerful in the end. I keep thrusting into her as the orgasm consumes her from her trembling toes, up to her shaking thighs, out into her fingertips where they’re tap-dancing on the bookshelf like she’s being electrocuted.

She’s falling, falling, falling.

And this time, I let myself fall with her.

I’ve never come so hard in my life as I do right then. It feels like it comes from my fucking soul and rips out of me with a fury. It burns as it goes.

When it’s finally gone, I’m exhausted.

Slowly, I pull myself out of Belle and step backwards. She turns just as slowly and looks at me warily. One hand stays planted on the shelves like she’ll fall without the support.

I can see it written all over her face: she needed that. She wanted that. She missed me.

And now, she wants me to tell her the same.

I could do it. Those four little words: *I missed you, too*. It’d be so simple. The polar opposite of the antagonistic headbutting that has been the bedrock of our whatever-the-fuck-you’d-call-this since we met.

I open my mouth to finally say exactly that.

But what comes out instead is, “Get dressed.”

Her face falls. “Nikolai...”

“I have work to do.” I turn away and zip my pants. “Arslan can show you to your room and—”

“What is this?” she demands. “Between us, what is this? Where are we?”

“We’re right fucking here, Belle. I came and picked you up. I brought you back to my house.”

“And what if I wasn’t pregnant?”

The underlying questions aren’t exactly subtle. She might as well be shouting them in my face. *Without this baby, would you still want me? Would we still be here?*

For the second time in as many minutes, the opportunity to fix all this is right there for the taking. *Do it, you bastard*, snarls a voice in my head. *Don’t be such a fucking coward. Tell her what she means to you.*

But for the second time in as many minutes, I don’t.

Hurt flashes across her face. “You owe me an answer.”

“I don’t owe you shit.”

“You kidnapped me!”

“And you begged me to fuck you. You’ve lost the moral high ground.”

She inhales sharply. “Is that what this was? You proving that everything you’ve done is okay because I... because I’m attracted to you? Do you even *hear* yourself?!”

“I don’t have anything to prove to anyone. Especially not to you.”

She blinks at me, her mouth set in a firm, angry line. I turn away from her.

“Get dressed and find your room,” I growl over my shoulder. “I have work to do.”



“Where the fuck are you, Zhukova?” Giorgos yells into the phone.

I’m in my office with the door locked. I heard Belle slam her bedroom door closed twenty minutes ago, and I haven’t heard anything since.

“I’m not at the church,” I answer grimly. “That’s all you need to know.”

“We’ve been reaching out since you disappeared last night,” he says. “You can’t treat my sister like—”

“I can do whatever I want,” I say calmly. “Which is why I’m calling off the wedding.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

“I’m not going to sign my life away to your sister for any deal. The wedding is off.”

He snorts. “Is it that bitch from before? What was her name again? Xena won’t like this.”

“This is about no one but me. I don’t want to marry your sister. I never did.”

“You’re going to take down our entire deal for a bitch on the side?” Giorgos scoffs. “I never thought you’d be so weak.”

“Save that insult for when you’re ready to die,” I growl. “I can end you if I choose, Giorgos. My threat stands. If you turn on me, I’ll kill you long before you have the chance to reap the benefits.”

“I’m not the one you should be worried about,” Giorgos sighs. “Watch your back, Nikolai. You’ve been warned.”

Then the line goes dead.

BELLE

I dismiss my alarm before it even rings. It's the middle of the night, but I've been awake for hours.

Back at home, I could hardly keep my eyes open long enough to drive home and crawl into bed after a shift at the bar. Now, I'm wired. Every time I remember I'm in Nikolai's house, it's a dump of adrenaline straight to my veins.

But I won't be here for much longer.

I slip out of bed, shove my phone and a change of clothes into my purse, and then pad across the hall to Elise's room. Her door is unlocked. I push it open and step into the darkness.

"Belle?"

I see Elise propped up in bed, her face glowing from her phone screen. I don't know why I'm surprised.

"Why are you still awake?"

"Why are you lurking into my room like the boogeyman?" she retorts.

"Fair enough," I sigh. "But it's because we need to be quiet."

She pauses whatever is on her screen and reaches over to flick on her lamp. I stop her before she can. "No. No lights. No one can know we're awake."

“Belle?” she whispers nervously. “What is going on?”

“We’re leaving.”

“But... but we just got here.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I rifle through the drawers in her room and shove as much of it as I can into my purse. Nikolai bought her new clothes and I want to take as much of it with me as I can. God knows where my next paycheck will be coming from. “We need to get out of here.”

“But... but...” she whimpers. “Don’t get mad, okay? But I’m the one who called Nikolai. I told him to come and get us. I’m the reason we’re here.”

“I know.”

Elise hesitates. “You know?”

I nod. “Nikolai told me the night he showed up. He said you were scared for me.”

“I was. I am,” she says.

“And I’m sorry about that. I should have taken better care of myself. I was just—”

“Heartbroken?”

I look over my shoulder at her, eyebrow raised. “Did you see me crying and eating whole tubs of ice cream?”

Elise rolls her eyes. “That’s how people in movies mourn. We don’t do that. Not in our family. We just... keep going.”

Her timid voice breaks my heart. Elise has been through far too much in her short life. We both have. From day one, we’ve been mourning.

Mourning the fathers we lost.

Mourning the mother we had.

Mourning the protection we needed so badly and were never, ever given.

But if it’s up to me, Elise won’t have to mourn anything ever again. Which is

why I have to get her out of here. It's why what happened with Nikolai in the library can't change my mind.

At the end of the day, no matter what is between us, nothing means more to me than protecting my sister.

"And we have to keep going now," I tell her, trying to convey as much fierce meaning in as few words as possible. "I'm doing my best to keep you safe. I'm asking you to trust me."

Elise gnaws at her lower lip.

"I know Nikolai has given us... well, everything," I admit. "But trust me: there's more you don't know. Stuff I can't tell you."

If Elise refuses to come with me, I'm not sure what I'll do. Unlike Nikolai, I didn't pack a Bratva doctor and a syringe full of sediment in my bags. I can't knock her out.

Even if I could, she's too heavy for me to carry. And if she is kicking and screaming, Nikolai will be on us before her door is even open. I badly need her to agree to come with me, but I try to hide my desperation.

Finally, Elise nods. "Okay."

"Okay?" I ask, relieved.

"Yeah," she says. "You're my sister, B. Of course I trust you. But... you have to promise to see a doctor when we get back. I need you."

Tears brim in my eyes. I nod. "Deal. Done. Absolutely."

Elise slips on a pair of shoes and pockets her phone and a crystal paperweight from the bookshelf. "We can pawn it for some cash," she explains when I give her a questioning look.

I wave her away with both hands. "I don't even want to know where or why you came up with that idea."

"Should I put it back?"

I shake my head. "No. He has more money than God. He won't miss a few priceless knick-knacks. But this is the only time I will ever condone stealing.

You hear me?”

“I hear you, *Mom.*”

A few weeks ago, it drove me crazy that Elise sarcastically called me “Mom.” But now, I see it for the compliment it is. It’s a tiny token of love. One she’s been trying to give away for years without success.

I’ll take it.

I take her hand in mine as we slip silently out of Elise’s room and into the hallway. She lets me hold it, to my surprise.

Along the way, we snag an antique-looking trinket dish, some crystal glassware from a bar cart, and a gilded letter opener from a hallway table. If we can find a pawn shop quickly, it should be enough to get us a rental car.

We’re in the back hallway, heading towards the rear of the house where I saw a door into the backyard, when I hear movement.

“Quiet,” I mouth to Elise, tip-toeing around a corner towards the back patio.

I open the door as quietly as I can and usher Elise out. Then I leave it cracked open to avoid the noise of closing it. As soon as Elise and I are at the corner of the house, I grab her arm and pull her to a stop.

“Follow my lead, okay?”

She nods.

“Whatever happens,” I continue, “no matter who appears or what they say, you stay quiet and follow my lead.”

“Do you have something planned or—?”

“Just promise me you’ll listen,” I interrupt. “Ready?”

She nods again, and we move around the side of the house towards the main street. Apparently, if we exit the driveway and keep walking, we’ll run into Prospect Park. That’s what I was told, anyway. That’s where they’ll meet us.

We stick to the landscape along the sides of the driveway, moving from tree to tree, doing our best to blend into the shadows. By the time we’re moving

across the street to the tree-lined median, I'm cautiously optimistic this might work.

Then a car pulls up alongside us and the doors snap open.

A man in a black bomber jacket and dark, wavy hair climbs out from the passenger seat while another man stays behind the wheel. He hitches a thumb towards the backseat. "Get in."

Elise grabs the back of my shirt and tries to pull me away.

"It's okay," I reassure her, even though this wasn't supposed to happen quite like this. We're still too close to Nikolai's house. He could see us.

I turn to the man. "Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am," he says. "It matters who you are. Belle Dowan, right?"

Elise gasps behind me. "How does he know who you are? What's happening?"

I ignore her and nod. "That's me."

"Get in."

"No," I say, straightening my spine. I try to keep my voice steely and steady. Elise needs something she can lean on. I want so, so badly to be that something.

The passenger gets out and comes around the back of the car. He's an entire head taller than me, and he reaches for my purse. "Get in, girls. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Elise is breathing heavily behind me. "Belle?"

I want to pull her into a hug, but I have to stay focused. This isn't exactly how I thought it would go, but I can improvise. But if we're going to do this directly in front of Nikolai's house, we need to move faster.

"We aren't just going to climb into your car," I say, playing my part as well as reminding these men what their job is. Kidnappers aren't supposed to ask nicely, and the cameras are watching, so they need to read their lines right.

The tall man grins. “Then I’ll throw you in.”

He grabs my arm and pulls me towards the car. Elise yelps and grabs my other arm. I fist my hand in the sleeve of her sweater. She can’t run away. She has to stay with me. For this to work, she has to stay—

A gunshot echoes down the dark street.

My heart leaps into my throat. I turn around just as the man next to me drops to the ground...

With a gaping hole in the side of his head.

Before I can even process it, another shot rings out. The driver slumps down, bashing his chin on the top of the car door before he collapses back into the front seat. Every bit as dead as the first.

“Oh my God!” Elise screams. She grabs my arm and reels me away.

This time, I go with her. I’m too stunned to argue. None of *that* was meant to happen.

“Who did that?” I whisper, looking around.

Even though I already know.

I turn back towards Nikolai’s house just as he steps off the curb. His gun is raised and ready. Once he’s sure the only two men in the car are dead and no one else is nearby, he lowers it. His expression is surprisingly neutral, considering he just killed two people.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “Did they hurt you?”

Elise runs to hide behind him. “No, I’m not fucking okay. What the hell is happening?”

My little sister is sobbing. I can barely even move. Can barely think. Can barely breathe.

A second later, Arslan walks towards the scene. “Clean-up duty again,” he grumbles. “My favorite.”

His voice is thick with sarcasm, but surprisingly thin on shock and horror.

Probably because he's neither shocked nor horrified. This is normal for him. For both of them.

"We have to call the police, don't we?" Elise asks. She looks from me to Nikolai. "Those guys. They're—"

"Dead now," Nikolai finishes. "They were going to hurt you, and I stopped them. I don't think there's anything for the police to do."

She blinks at me. I just nod. There's too much to explain. Too much I haven't told her. It will be easiest if she just listens to Nikolai.

"Follow me," he growls.

Elise is stuck to Nikolai like glue. In her mind, he just saved her life. But I trail behind, and Nikolai notices.

"Move quickly," he barks. "We need to get inside before anyone notices us."

We follow him back into the house, walking straight up the driveway and through the front door.

How long was he watching us? Did he have eyes on us the entire time we were "sneaking" out of his house? Maybe he even laughed as we darted amongst the foliage. I can picture him, face aglow from the security screens, chuckling while we creep along like *Pink Panther*-esque idiots.

This was all so stupid, wasn't it?

Inside, Nikolai pushes me towards Elise. "Get her to bed and meet me back here."

I start to walk Elise to her room, but she shakes me off. "No. Talk. Do what you need to do. I'm... I'm okay."

I squeeze her arm. "What you just saw wasn't okay. You're in shock."

"Maybe. But I'm okay. I'll... I'll talk to you in the morning."

Numbly, she shuffles down the hallway and into her room. The moment her door is closed, I spin on Nikolai.

"You killed two people. In front of her! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with *you*?" he roars, looming over me like a thundering volcano, ready to burst. "After everything we talked about, after everything I did to bring you here and keep you safe, you turn around and throw yourself into the line of fire. Why?"

"You're the one who put us in the line of fire!"

"Because the Greek mafia was about to turn you into hostages to blackmail me. Or worse—they were going to dispose of you."

I shake my head. "You don't know who that was. Or what they were going to do."

"That's what they do with problems, Belle. And you are one huge fucking problem. Take it from me."

My hand itches to hit him, but I know it won't do any good. He's steel and stone from head to toe, from skin to soul. "Then let us go! All you do is complain about how much trouble I am. So why put yourself through it?"

"I'm not putting myself through anything," he hisses. "You're putting me through it. You're putting yourself through it, too. And Elise."

"I was trying to be free!"

He snorts. "Free from this luxurious, safe mansion I've trapped you in? Yes, I'm sure everyone will be so sympathetic to your plight."

"A gilded cage is still a cage."

There's no question: that's what life with Nikolai would be. I'd have a beautiful house and all the things I could ever want—wonderful trips, beautiful dresses, time and supplies to sketch and design.

But I wouldn't have the only thing that matters.

And living so close to Nikolai but not being able to have all of him... that would be the worst kind of prison. Like chaining a starving woman just out of reach of a buffet.

"Do I have to remind you that the only reason you're here is because you refused to take care of yourself?" he snaps. "I flew to Oklahoma City. I came

to your house to try and help. I could have sent Arslan to pick you up and drag you to me if that's what I'd wanted."

"What are we doing then?" I ask, choking back a sob. "Why bother bringing me here or coming to my house at all? It sounds like we're both just miserable."

"Because I will do anything to protect someone I love."

I'm no fool. It's the baby. He's talking about the baby.

My heart squeezes, but the pain doesn't take my breath away like I expect. I guess I'm getting used to Nikolai's indifference. Maybe one day, it won't hurt at all.

But that day isn't today.

"I lied to you," I blurt. "When you asked about who I've slept with since I last saw you, I lied."

"Is that right?" His voice is a threat.

"Yup. I've had loads of sex. Lots of it. With regulars at the bar. With Roger. And Tony, too."

Shivers move down my spine at the thought of touching any of those sweaty, alcohol-soaked scumbags. I clamp down on my molars to keep Nikolai from noticing.

"Great. Your point?"

"The baby probably isn't even yours. The dad could be anyone. I don't even know who. So all of this talk about responsibility and taking care of the people you love..." I wave my hand dismissively. "You can forget that. If you're only keeping me here because of your love for your child, well then, you should know you might be doing all of this for Tony's baby. Who even knows?"

"I never said I was doing this for the baby," he spits.

I frown. "Yes, you did. You just said you'd do anything to protect—"

"To protect someone I love, yes," he finishes. "But I wasn't talking about the

baby.”

I open my mouth to respond, but the words dry up as realization settles over me. I’m afraid to move and disturb the moment. Afraid it might slip away before I can grab hold.

“What?” I croak.

Nikolai doesn’t blink. His eyes are luminous, irresistible. “I wasn’t talking about the baby,” he repeats. “I was talking about you.”

NIKOLAI

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know they're true. They've been simmering under the surface for days, weeks, months.

If I was anyone else, I'd laugh in my own face. What kind of self-destructive idiot risks decades of hard work for someone so infuriating? I can have any woman I want at the snap of my fingers. The world is mine for the taking, along with anyone in it.

But like I've always suspected, love is a virus. A weakness you beg for, even as it sucks you dry.

And I'm absolutely sick with it.

Belle blinks at me, stunned. Since I showed up outside the bar where she worked, she's been all passion and indignation. Right now, though, she's utterly blank.

The longer the silence stretches, the more ridiculous it all feels.

"You... you love me?" she stutters.

"I called off my wedding, didn't I?"

Belle shakes her head. "That wasn't my question."

"I flew hundreds of miles at the drop of a hat to save you from a rapist," I grit out. "I chased your sister around when she ran away—twice. She crashed my car into a field of horses and I didn't say a thing."

“Actions speak louder than words,” Belle says softly.

“And mine have been clear as crystal since the beginning,” I fire back.
“You’re the one who chose to leave.”

“Because you were getting married!”

“And now, I’m not.”

“So what?” Belle blinks frantically. “What do you want from me, Nikolai?
What am I supposed to say?”

What a question. What an impossible fucking question.

But I don’t need to know her answer. Asking the question itself is answer enough. So I turn and walk away, and I leave the worst mistake I’ve ever made behind me.

I make sure I don’t look back.

Even though it kills me not to.

NIKOLAI

HOURS LATER

It's after midnight, but I don't give a shit. I pound on Giorgos Simatou's front door as hard as I can.

"Open up, you spineless bastard!" I shout. "I know you're awake. If you're waiting for your men to come back with a prize, you'll be waiting a long while."

When the door opens, a man I don't recognize is standing in the threshold. He's young with a patchy beard and wide, timid eyes. A lackey in every sense of the word.

"I want to see your boss," I bark. "Now."

"Don Simatou isn't available." His accent is thickly Greek.

I kick the base of the door hard. The man stumbles back, and I march past him into the entryway.

"Hello?" My voice echoes off the high ceilings and marble floors. "Someone is here for you, Giorgos."

"Giorgos isn't available," the man says again as he scurries up from behind me. He's breathless, fumbling for a weapon at his hip.

I swat it out of his hands and pin him against a wall with an aggressive *thump*. "I just killed two of your friends for intervening in my affairs. Are you really so eager to become the third?"

I hear a gun click behind me. I turn just as a second man points his weapon at the center of my chest. “We don’t want any trouble, Don Zhukova,” the man intones.

In one swift move, I reach out and twist it around so the muzzle is now pointing at the man’s neck.

“Neither do I,” I hiss. “Which is why you’re going to get me your boss. Now.”

The man’s eyes are bulging from their sockets. He’s trembling already, the coward. Pitiful. “The boss isn’t available. It’s late.”

“Not too late for him to send two men to my house to snatch up my woman, though, is it?”

My woman. The words slip out unintentionally. Belle isn’t mine. Not in the way I want her to be. But Giorgos doesn’t know that. And he came for her anyway.

“Giorgos isn’t here,” the man says yet again, holding up his hands in surrender. “The boss is out.”

The first man behind me moves for his gun, but I pivot around the soldier I’m holding and aim the one in my hand at his friend. They both freeze.

“Giorgos ought to place more emphasis on your manners. You should always use his proper title in mixed company. He should place more emphasis on your training, too. It’s far too easy to kill you.”

Both men are shaking now. They share a nervous glance. It’s pathetic, but enough to tell me what I need to know: he really isn’t here.

I drop the gun on the floor and kick it skittering down the entryway. Both men breathe a little easier.

“Tell Giorgos I want to talk to him,” I snarl over my shoulder.

Then I stalk out. As soon as I’m back in my car, I call Arslan.

“Please tell me you haven’t killed more people,” he pleads when he answers. “I just disposed of the last two. And if it’s alright with Your Mighty

Bratvaness, I'd like to get some fucking shut-eye."

"No one else is dead. Not for lack of trying."

"Oh, you gotta be shitting me. Did he send more schmucks after you?"

"No. I came to him."

Arslan hisses out a string of unintelligible curses. "Now, I *know* you're shitting me. You walked into Giorgos's house in the middle of the night? *After* you killed two of his men? Are you suicidal?"

"No. Homicidal."

He blows out a breath. "You could have called me, Nikolai. You *should* have called me."

"I'm calling you now."

I know Arslan well enough to know there's a lot more he wants to say. But he knows me well enough to know I'm not in the mood to hear it.

"Better late than never. What ill-advised adventure are we off on now?"

"Weren't you just lecturing me about being reckless?"

"No. I was lecturing you about being reckless alone," he clarifies. "You know I don't like being left out."

On a normal day, I might laugh. Tonight? Not a fucking chance. "This is a solo errand. I need to know where The Lion is."

There's a long stretch of silence on the other end of the line, but I know Arslan is still there. I give him time to process.

"We're talking about an actual lion, right?" he finally asks. "A zoo escapee or something?"

"Don't fuck with me, Arslan. Not right now. I want to know where he is. We need to talk."

He lets out a low whistle. "Maybe you really are suicidal."

"He is the last person on earth who could possibly hurt me," I scoff.

“That’s not what I—” He huffs out a breath. “Why put yourself through this? Tonight of all nights?”

“Do you have his location or not?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course I have it,” he says. “Are you sure you want it?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t sure.”

“I just want to make sure you’re—”

“Still the boss?” I interrupt. “Last time I fucking checked, I am. Text me his location.”

I hang up and hurl my phone into the passenger seat. The muscles in my jaw are aching from being held clenched so tight.

A minute later, my phone vibrates. The address belongs to a halfway house twenty minutes away. I punch the address into the GPS, but before I can set my phone down, it vibrates again.

ARSLAN: I’m headed that way, too. I’ll steer clear, but I’ll be nearby if you need me.

I consider telling him to stay the fuck away, but then I don’t bother. Arslan can be a pain in the ass, but he’s loyal. I’ll never fault him for that.

I make short work of the drive. The halfway house is an old apartment building. The bricks are faded and the front steps are cracking, but compared to where I grew up, it’s a fucking palace.

Strange that, now, I could buy the building he’s living in outright. It’s a good feeling.

It feels like justice.

The night manager is reluctant to let me in. “Can’t it wait until the morning? Visiting hours are over.” He checks the sign on the wall like maybe the hours might have changed when he wasn’t looking.

“Family emergency. I need to sort it out tonight. I’ll do it with your help or I’ll bang on every door until I find him,” I say calmly. “Your choice.”

The man can sense I mean every word. He sighs. “Who are you looking for?”

“Ioakim.” I say his name woodenly. It’s been a long time.

“Ioakim?” His eyebrow hits the roof of his forehead.

Son of a bitch. Arslan has bad intel. He isn’t here. He bailed out of the program and is back on the streets. Or maybe he already OD’d and I didn’t know. The thought of him dying alone in some godforsaken hospital should make me sad, but I don’t feel anything.

“Yeah. Ioakim Zhukova.”

The man grimaces like he smells something foul. He hitches a thumb over his shoulder, pointing towards a room behind him.

“Funnily enough, he’s actually awake. I saw him go into the rec room ten minutes ago.”

I turn and stomp off without bothering to reply.

The “rec room” is just a large room with chipped wooden floors and a few card tables. Retractable basketball goals are tucked up against the ceiling, but the rims and nets are missing.

The empty space makes it easy to spot the dark-clad figure hanging out of the partially opened window. He tips his head back and blows out a long stream of cigarette smoke. It looks ghostly against the dark sky beyond.

“I thought people came to these kinds of places to get clean,” I say.

He jerks in surprise at the sound of my voice and knocks his head against the window frame. His mouth is pulled down in a deep frown when he turns around. Defensive, wary. Just like he’s always been.

But when he sees me, his face splits into a grin.

“Nikky.”

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my father face-to-face. Over ten years. He’s aged double-speed in that interval. His once-full face is gaunt now, creased with deep wrinkles, worn sallow with smoke. His eyes, the same pale shade as mine, are deep-set and hooded. What’s left of his hair is thin and

gray.

He looks like a stranger.

In so many ways, that's exactly what he is.

"Nikolai," I correct. "How's it going?"

"Better, now that my boy is here to see me." He crushes his cigarette on the sill and flicks it out the window. "And I'm here to give up the hard stuff. Compared to all that, cigarettes aren't so bad, you know what I mean?"

"No. I don't."

He nods quickly and wrings his fingers together. "Probably best that way. You stayed clean, then?"

"I didn't want to end up a fuck-up like you. So yeah, I stayed clean."

"Fair enough," he says, pursing his lips. "I'm glad you're sober."

"I'm not. I just know how to handle my poison of choice."

He holds up his hands. "Again, fair enough."

"Aren't you going to defend yourself?" I snap. "You used to come up with every excuse in the book. You told me it was in our DNA."

"Not anymore. I'm giving up excuses, too. I'm trying this new thing where I own my mistakes."

I snort. "That must take up all of your time."

"Most of it," he says with a humorless smile. "My therapist says I'm her most reluctant patient. But I'm working on it."

My grandfather would roll over in his grave if he knew his son was in therapy. It's surprising enough that I arch an eyebrow. Ioakim notices.

"It's required to keep your room here," he explains. He gestures around. "It's one of the nicest places I've been, so I'm willing to put up with it."

I look around, clocking the water damage across the ceiling and the peeling paint on the walls.

“Well, maybe it’s a little worse for wear, but that’s why I like it. I can relate,” he chuckles.

I should have asked Arslan more about what to expect. I expected to show up and find my father slumped over in a crack house or sleeping in a gutter somewhere.

But he’s standing up in front of me, fully clothed, and talking coherently. I can count on one hand the number of times all three of those things have happened at once since Mom died.

It’s unsettling.

“Did you check yourself in or did a judge toss you in kicking and screaming?” I ask.

“I put myself on a waitlist a year ago. They have a scholarship program. If you get selected, you have to stay clean on your own for three months before they let you in.”

“And you did it?”

“Barely,” he admits. “It was fucking hell. I had the shakes under a bridge one night so bad I damn near walked up and threw myself off the top. If I was able to walk at all, I might’ve done it.”

“Shame,” I snarl. “We’d all be better off.”

Hurt flashes across his face, but he shrugs it off. “I deserve that.”

“You deserve much worse.”

“I don’t even deserve this visit,” he agrees. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. I’d given up on the idea.”

“It’s not like you tried to reach out.”

What the fuck am I doing? I hardly even know why I’m here. Maybe to remind myself of the kind of father I don’t want to be.

It doesn’t matter how Belle feels—I’m never going to abandon my child the way my father left me.

Whether she likes that or not.

He shakes his head. “No. But I kept up with you. What the papers say, anyway. You’re a businessman.”

“Just like Grandfather,” I add.

He smirks, and for a second, I’m ten years old again, staring up at my dad while he leans against the kitchen door with a beer in his hands.

He seemed so big to me then. Now, I’m taller than he is.

“I figured you’d picked up the family trade. I’m not surprised.”

“After you were done with our family, there was nothing left to pick up. Grandfather died, Mom died, and you disappeared,” I growl. “I didn’t ‘pick up’ anything. I swept up the shattered pieces you left behind and glued it all back together. One, by one, by one.”

“I wasn’t in charge when the Battiatos attacked,” he says defensively.

“No. And you refused to step up after the fact.”

“If I’d fought back, they would have killed me just like they did your grandpa.”

“Maybe it would have been better that way. At least you could have died with honor instead of rotting away from the inside out in this fucking dump.”

His jaw hardens, and for the first time, I see why people used to say we looked alike. “I couldn’t throw my life away,” he whispers. “I had you and your mom to think about.”

I snort. “You never spared a single fucking thought for us.”

He lunges forward and clasps my hand in his. “The two of you are all I ever thought about, Nikolai. Ever. It’s the only reason I stayed in the Bratva at all.”

“What does that mean?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t want to live that life. It was my father’s dream, not mine. I wanted to get out and forge my own path, but... I met your

mom.”

“Don’t tell me she wanted you to stay in. Don’t blame her. Don’t lie to me with that shit.”

My mom died before I ever had a chance to ask her about her early years, how our family formed. Then my father left. So by the time I had questions, there was no one around to answer them.

“No.” He puts one wrinkled finger in the center of my chest. “She got pregnant with *you*. And I needed the money the Bratva could offer. The dependability. It wasn’t the time to strike out on my own.”

“So you married her?”

“Not just because she was pregnant,” he insists hastily. “I’m not honorable enough to marry her just because I knocked her up. No, I would have married her anyway. I loved her. I knew it from the moment we met.” He runs a hand through his thinning hair. “I’ve never loved anyone the way I loved her. She was all I needed. The only thing that mattered. When the Bratva collapsed and we were broke, it didn’t matter as long as I had her. And as long as we had you.”

“How touching,” I mutter.

But it’s all bullshit. If any of that was true, he wouldn’t have left. He would have stayed.

He ignores me and continues. “But then she got sick. And I couldn’t do a damn thing to protect her from it.”

This part I know from experience. Mom got diagnosed and died six months later. It was fast and heartless and brutal, just like everything else in this world.

“It broke me,” he whispers hoarsely. “And I know I let you down, but... at the time, I saw me leaving as a benefit to you. What did I have to offer you?”

"You could have rebuilt the Bratva," I suggest. "Or tried, at least. You could have tried to restore our family name. Done something to make Mom proud. You could've done anything but what you did."

"That kind of thing wasn't me," he sighs. "I would have failed. Probably brought more Battiato attention to your doorstep. No, if anything, I was going to be a burden around your neck. I figured leaving was for the best."

I offer him a dramatic slow clap. "You're so selfless. Abandoning your pre-teen child so you can go shoot up day in and day out to run away from your problems. You're a fucking hero. They should build statues of you."

He slumps forward. "Do you have a kid, Nikolai? Kids?"

"It doesn't matter. You'll never meet them."

He winces like that was the harshest blow yet. I almost feel bad for him, but only in the way you feel pity for a bird that flies into a window.

"I know you'll never forgive me for what I did. Or didn't do," he adds. "But losing your mom broke me. We didn't have the money to get her the treatments she needed, and she was always better with you than I was. She knew how to talk to you. When she was gone, I couldn't make it work. And I'm sorry for that."

I'm not sure what I expected from him. He's apologizing. At times in my life, that's all I wanted from him. Recognition of what he did. Remorse.

But it's not enough now.

It will never be enough.

I wave him off and back towards the door. "Don't be sorry."

"Does that mean you forgive me?" he calls after me, a wild kind of hope in his eyes.

"Fuck no," I snort. "It means I refuse to be weak like you."

BELLE

He loves me.

I can't wrap my mind about it.

As soon as Nikolai stormed out of the room last night, I stumbled back to my room and crawled into bed. I stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows deepen and then fade away as daylight streamed through the sheer curtains.

Now, it's full morning, and I'm still lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling.

"I should have said it back."

My voice is raspy from lack of sleep and disuse, but my mind is as clear as it's been in weeks.

Nikolai wanted me to respond. He wanted me to say it back. At least, I think he did. That's what people want when they confess their feelings, right?

I love you.

I love you, too.

Simple. Uncomplicated. But things between me and Nikolai have never been simple. We are complicated in every sense of the word.

"He loves me," I say softly.

Hearing it out loud doesn't help me make any more sense of it. Lying in bed and letting the day waste away isn't helping, either. I need to take action. I

need to keep moving forward.

I should get up and go talk to Elise. Last night was a lot for me to absorb, and I already knew about Nikolai leading the Bratva and the mafias gunning for us. So Elise must have been blindsided beyond belief by the violence she witnessed.

But I can't go to her. Not now. Everything I thought I knew has been turned upside down, and I'm in no state to offer comfort when I can't even comfort myself.

Plus, it's early. Hopefully she's still sleeping. She needs the rest.

I slip out of bed and grab my phone from the nightstand. Making a phone call when I don't know if or where Nikolai has cameras or bugs set up in my room is a big risk, but I'm out of options.

I step into the dark walk-in closet and leave the door cracked to let in a little ambient light from the main room. Then I nestle in amongst a rack of brand new clothes to hopefully dampen my voice.

"It's me," I say softly when the line clicks open.

There's a sigh. "You're alone?"

"Yeah, I'm alone."

"He doesn't suspect?"

I frown. "I don't think so. But... the two men you sent are dead. I don't know what you heard about what happened, but he killed them."

"That's what I get for not sending my best," Xena says. She doesn't sound especially put-out. More like she misplaced her car keys than sent two of her own mafia members to their deaths.

After weeks of talking to her, I'm not too surprised. From what I can gather, living in this world—a hellscape filled with Bratvas and mafias and death—skews your emotional range towards apathy. There's too much horrible shit going on all the time to get upset about any of it.

"But you're okay?" she adds.

“I’m not hurt.”

I haven’t been “okay” since Iceland. Xena knows that. It’s why she stayed in touch even after she handed me two plane tickets to Oklahoma City.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to you,” she said the first time she called my phone. “If my brother thinks Nikolai is still hung up on you, I don’t know what he’ll do. So you have to tell me if Nikolai reaches out.”

“Can’t I just ignore him?” I had asked. Even though I’d had more than enough experience with the man, I was still naive. Somehow convinced it was possible to ignore Nikolai Zhukova.

“No,” Xena said, “you can’t. If he reaches out again, let me know. I’ll take care of it.”

Which is why, when Nikolai kidnapped me and brought me back to New York City, Xena was the only person I told. I snuck her a message as soon as I could, and she came up with a plan within the hour.

“I’m so glad to hear from you,” she says now. “I hoped you’d call, but I didn’t actually expect to hear from you so soon. I expected Nikolai to keep a closer eye on you.”

“He did. Or he would have, probably. Something came up.”

“What?” Xena asks.

He confessed his love for me, and I stood there mute and dumbstruck.

“I’m not sure,” I lie. “But he’s out of the house. That’s why I called. Are we still good for everything?”

“Of course. We had a minor hiccup, but I promised I’d take care of you.”

I hear the echo of Nikolai saying the same thing. Yesterday morning, I thought it was because I was pregnant. That Nikolai only wanted to take care of me because I was carrying his baby. It probably had something to do with his bloodline and creating an heir or whatever-the-fuck. I was a means to an end.

But now? Now, I don’t know what I think.

He loves me.

Does that change things?

"So the plan hasn't changed?" I ask.

"No," Xena says. "I'll obviously need to orchestrate another pickup for you, but the plan is the same."

New identities. A new life in Canada. Money to start over.

When Xena first suggested the idea, I shut it down. "I can't move to Canada. I've barely even been out of the Midwest," I argued.

"All the more reason to go," Xena insisted. "It will make you harder to track. And believe me—you want to be difficult to track."

Between the little Nikolai and Xena had each told me, I learned about what Giorgos had done to gain power. If he could kill his own parents in order to become the boss, what would he be willing to do to me?

"You there, Belle?" Xena asks. "I'm sticking my neck out for you. I need to know if you're going to pull out."

"I'm not going to pull out."

She sighs. Even without seeing my face, she can tell I'm torn. "You're living in his house now. You can't let him get to you. He's manipulative."

I take a deep breath. Is that what Nikolai's admission was last night? A manipulation to keep me close and cooperative? If so, he's an evil genius.

Even worse—it's working.

"I know. I'm not letting him manipulate me."

"You say that as if you'd know it was happening," she murmurs. The bitterness in her voice is hard to miss.

"I'm sorry about the wedding," I say quietly. "I know it might not matter, but I didn't ask him to call it off or anything. I've been asking for him to let me leave. I didn't reach out to him. I don't want to be here."

"Stop groveling," Xena snaps.

"Sorry."

"You're done apologizing, okay?" she adds, her voice a little softer this time. It's a lesson we've gone over before, more than once. "You and me, we're the same. People don't expect anything from us. They'll try to steamroll us if we let them."

"I know. Shit, I know."

"No one is going to look out for people like us except for us, right?"

That's what Xena has said to me from the beginning. Nikolai wants to protect me, but I have to learn to be on my own. It's the only way I'll really be free. And Xena is willing to help me make that happen.

She knows what it's like. She's been controlled by the men in her family her entire life. But she has the desire to make things better for herself.

And now, finally, so do I.

Even if that means denying my feelings for Nikolai.

Even if it means running away and starting over.

If I can take care of Elise, it will all be worth it.

"You said Nikolai is out of the house, right?" she asks.

"I think so. I haven't seen him since last night. He took off, and I never heard him come back. But I haven't left my room yet."

She lets out a short sigh of frustration. I'm not as good at any of this as she is. "Okay. Well, once you're sure he's out of the house, you should break into his office."

I frown. "Why? Won't that raise even more suspicions? I want him to think I'm content living here, not trying to escape."

"This isn't just about you anymore, Belle." Her voice cracks like a whip, and I can't help but flinch. "He called off the wedding. My family's deal with him is shit unless we can get Nikolai and the Bratva back on our side. To do

that, we need leverage.”

It takes me a second to put the pieces together. “You want me to spy on him?”

“Just look through his office and try to find me something I can use.”

I groan. “I don’t know.”

“You’re just snooping. Everyone knows how to snoop.”

“I’m not sneaky, and I’m a terrible liar. I don’t even know what I’m looking for.”

“You need a little motivation?” she asks. “You being useful to my brother is one of the only things that stands between you and your sister and certain death.”

My eyes widen. Xena may be accustomed to talk of death, but I’ll never get used to the casual threats they throw around.

“But you said you’d help me escape.”

“And I’ll keep trying to do that,” she assures me. “But there’s only so much I can do. It would be a whole hell of a lot easier if you could help yourself a little, too.”

My brow furrows. “I left once I knew you existed. I stayed away from him. I’ve been doing my best, but when he decides to drug me and throw me in a plane, there’s only so much I can do, Xena.”

“I know, I know, sweetheart. I’m just saying... Make yourself useful. Show that you’re on our side. Maybe then, if everything goes wrong and my brother is given the chance to kill you, he’ll choose to spare you instead.”

I’m not sure whose side I’m on anymore. Nikolai may be a criminal, but the Simatous aren’t any better. It just so happens that Xena is the one offering to help me escape.

And really, if the Simatous weren’t in the equation at all, I think things would be different. Nikolai confessing his love might have changed things. Maybe I’d be able to stay here with him. Maybe we could live together. He could

help me raise our child and take care of Elise.

Maybe... we could have been happy.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. A whole field of maybes, each one as worthless as the last.

“Okay. I’ll do it,” I say softly. “But I’m not going to risk getting caught. The only reason I’m doing any of this is to protect myself and my sister. If it gets dangerous at all, I’m out.”

Xena lets out a low whistle. “Atta girl. About time you found a little backbone.”

Her compliment, as backhanded as it is, shouldn’t matter to me, but I find myself smiling anyway.

“Snoop around while he’s out, gather what you can, and we’ll try meeting again tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” The confidence I felt a minute before fades. “You don’t think it’s risky to try again so soon?”

“No. This time, I’m sending in someone more capable of getting the job done properly.”

An image of the two dead men flashes across my mind. I quickly try to shove it away. I don’t want to be responsible for anyone else taking a bullet to the head. “Who?”

“Myself,” she says.

“*You?* Xena, do you think that’s a good idea? If Nikolai catches you—”

“He won’t,” she interrupts. “Life amongst all these useless men has taught me one important lesson: if I want something done right, I have to do it myself.”

We say our goodbyes and hang up. I sit in the closet for a long few breaths, steeling myself to do what I just promised I’d do.

Then, when I can’t wait anymore, I stand and get to work.

The house is silent as I move down the hallway. I stop outside Nikolai's doorway. I don't hear any movement from inside. And after a minute with my ear pressed against the door, I finally feel confident enough to crack it open.

The room is dark, but I can make out the rumpled bedding and a sleek wooden dresser standing against the back wall. I can also tell the bed is empty. It's a good thing, but I wouldn't have been disappointed to see a sleeping Nikolai. It's been too long since I've seen him without a scowl on his face.

I consider looking around his room, but as soon as I open the door, I'm immediately overwhelmed by the peppermint citrus scent of him. Standing in his bedroom doorway is like being wrapped in his arms.

I close my eyes and inhale. When I'm gone, I'll miss this smell.

Ridiculous tears well in my eyes, and I spring back into the hallway before I do something stupid like flop face-down on his mattress to breathe him in.

After checking to make sure the library is empty—and blushing when I see the shelves Nikolai shoved me against just yesterday, my handprint still marked in the dust—I move across the hall to his office.

Like his bedroom, his office smells like him, but it's disguised by the scent of leather and old books. The room looks remarkably similar to his office at Zhukova Incorporated. There's a large desk in the center of the room, bookshelves along the back wall, and a filing cabinet and bar cart off to the side.

Also like his office at Zhukova Inc., it is next-level neat. I half-expect to see a "For Display Purposes Only; Do Not Touch" sign planted somewhere.

"Don't touch anything," I mutter to myself. I try to step lightly across the plush carpet. He'll probably notice the footprints I leave behind.

I push the door mostly closed, leaving a small crack for plausible deniability in case I'm caught, and then tip-toe around his desk.

The top right drawer has a lock in the center of it, so I go for it first. To my surprise, it slides right open when I pull. Inside is a stapler, some blank sticky

notes, and a bundle of highlighters. It looks like any normal person's desk. Like my old desk, back when I was a run-of-the-mill accountant and not a sleaze-trap bartender.

The rest of the drawers are equally as mundane. A stack of printer paper, some empty manila folders, a book of stamps. If I didn't know any better, I'd look through this desk and think Nikolai was actually the CEO he pretends to be—as opposed to the murderous don I know he is.

Five minutes into searching, it's obvious that, wherever the paper trail is for all of Nikolai's many sins, it isn't here. This room is giving up a whole lot of nothing.

With a groan, I flop back in his desk chair and twirl around. And that's when I see it.

On the middle shelf straight in front of me... are two framed pictures.

Drawings, actually. Sketches.

From my sketchbook.

I stand up slowly and creep towards the shelves as if the drawings might disappear if I move too quickly.

The first one is the sketch Nikolai stole from me in the conference room at Zhukova Incorporated. A half-finished pencil drawing I did just to ease my nerves. I can still see the creases in the paper where Nikolai folded it into fourths and tucked it in his pocket.

The thought of him pulling it out later, unfolding it, slipping it into a frame... I swallow a lump in my throat.

The sketch in the next frame is the one I worked on in Iceland. A fantastical house that defies the laws of physics. Because that's what it felt like to be with him in that hotel. Hiking across the gorgeous countryside, soaking in hot springs, and sneaking into the kitchen for midnight snacks felt so unreal. So removed from my normal life.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I was relaxed. I was happy.

And Nikolai kept the drawings.

“What does that mean?” I whisper.

I know what I *want* it to mean. He kept some part of me with him even before he knew I was pregnant. He framed it and placed it in his office where he’d see it everyday.

Maybe he isn’t trying to manipulate me. Maybe he really does love me.

Maybe Xena could be wrong about him. Maybe *I* could be wrong about him.

Under all of his scowls and taunts and bloodstains and darkness, Nikolai Zhukova might actually have a heart. And maybe, just maybe, I managed to find my way into it.

A smile pulls at the corner of my mouth.

Just as I hear Nikolai’s voice in the hallway.

BELLE

There's no time to get out of the room.

Nikolai is in the hallway. And close, by the sounds of it. He's going to catch me in here. So the only option is to not look as guilty as I feel.

I shut the last drawer I opened, push his chair back under his desk, and straighten the stack of papers on the corner. Then I drop down into the leather chair in the corner, cross my legs, and wait with what I hope is a convincing smile.

When the door opens, my heart is pounding.

But considering the devastating cut of his jawline and the tight pull of his muscles as he walks into the room, I think my heart would be pounding regardless.

He notices me immediately. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you." The lie sounds good. At least, I think it does.

He pushes the door closed behind him. The latch clicking into place sounds final. Suddenly, the room feels claustrophobically small.

"You been waiting long?" Instead of moving to sit behind his desk, he rests on the lip closest to me. His knee brushes across mine. I jolt at the contact, then curse at myself silently for it.

"Not long. I noticed your room was empty, too."

He arches a brow. “Why were you in my room?”

“I, uh, I wasn’t. I just... I peeked in. When I was looking for you.”

Is it my imagination or does he look amused? After last night, I wasn’t sure I’d ever see his smile again.

“Where were you?” I add. I wonder if my cheeks are red. They feel red. I’m pretty sure they’re red.

“Out.”

All night? Where did he sleep? Part of me doesn’t want to know, but another, much more jealous part of me, wants to know everything.

“Did it have something to do with the Greeks? Did you go see Giorgos?”

He leans back and watches me. His eyes scan my face, and I feel like he can read every single one of my traitorous thoughts.

“How’s Elise?” he asks, ignoring my question.

I’ve been so focused on taking care of Elise in the long term that I almost forgot about taking care of her in the short term. The fact that Nikolai is thinking about her plucks at my heartstrings in a very dangerous way.

“She’s... actually, I don’t know. Still sleeping, I think. I haven’t talked to her yet.”

He crosses his ankles, relaxing back. “I hope I didn’t traumatize her too much.”

“I hope so, too. But kids are supposed to be resilient, right?”

I’m not worried about Elise, to be honest. She’s made of tougher stuff than I am. I’m actually hoping *I’ll* be resilient. Every time I close my eyes, I see brains splattered on the car window.

“I was,” he says. “I saw my grandfather kill a man when I was eight. And look at me now—no emotional baggage in sight.”

My eyes must be bugging out of my head because Nikolai elaborates. “Taking me along on a collection run was his idea of bonding, I think. He

didn't plan for it to get deadly, but he didn't coddle me after it happened, either. I was expected to be okay with it."

"And were you?"

He shrugs. "It was all I knew."

I blow out a breath. "That's... that's crazy, Nikolai."

"That's life," he says. "You do whatever it takes to get ahead, to protect the people you love, and to get what you want. It's brutal, but it's how you—"

"Love. It's how you show love."

Nikolai looks at me with the same searching expression he wore after he told me he loved me. Last time, I was rooted to the floor, struck dumb with shock.

But now, I sink to my knees in front of him.

His silver eyes turn molten. He curls his fingers in my hair as I unbutton his pants with trembling fingers. As I stroke his growing erection and take him in my mouth, questions swirl in the back of my mind. Is this part of my cover? Am I doing this to distract him from the fact I was snooping around his office?

Or is there another reason?

The truth is pounding against my ribcage.

I want him.

I love him.

Nikolai groans his pleasure as I swirl my tongue over his tip. I lick and suck, working him until his strong thighs flex under my fingers.

He grabs my hair and pulls me away gently. As soon as I stand up, he grips my waist and turns, setting me on the edge of his desk.

"Take these off," he says, grabbing my jeans and yanking them down. Then he tugs on the hem of my shirt. "This, too."

I pull the shirt over my head and then unhook my bra before he can even ask.

There's no time to wait. This is happening so damn fast, but it's not a ride I can get off of. It's not a ride I *want* to get off of, either.

"Good girl," he murmurs. He circles his thumbs over my nipples until they're pointed and aching.

He leans forward and takes one in his mouth. Then the other. Then, achingly slowly, he licks a line down my body.

He pushes my legs apart. "Spread wide for me."

My entire body is shaking with need and anticipation. I plant my palms firmly on his desk to try to stabilize myself. But when Nikolai dips his head between my legs and his stubble brushes over my sensitive skin, there's no amount of stabilization in the world that could prepare me.

He tastes me in long, luxurious strokes. By the time his teeth graze over my clit, I'm seeing stars.

"Nikolai," I gasp, my thighs clamped around his head. "I can't—I need—I want."

"I know, beautiful Belle. I know." He slides a finger inside and strokes, setting off an explosion inside of me.

I cry out his name and buck against his mouth until I'm wrung out.

When he stands up, I mold myself against his warm body. I run my hands down the hard planes of his chest and stroke the hard length of his cock. He's so hard, so *here*, so fucking vital and real that I cling to him because the world just makes more sense when I do.

This started as a lie.

This started as an accident.

Now? Now, I have no earthly clue what this is.

He hooks my legs around his waist and slides me to the edge of the desk. "Are we ever going to fuck in a bed?" I muse deliriously. "Airplanes, libraries, the floor... One day, it could be good to try a nice, soft mattress."

His mouth is hot against my neck as he kisses over my pulse and skates

across my collarbone. When he finally pulls back, his lips are swollen and gorgeous. “Maybe one day.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He nods solemnly. “But not today.”

Then he slides into me in one thrust, and suddenly, it doesn’t matter where we are. All that matters is that it’s Nikolai.

Here.

With me.

When he pushes into me again, I’m filled completely. My eyes roll back in my head and noises I’ve never heard before pour out of my mouth.

“You fit around me so good, *kotyonok*,” he growls. “Like you were made for me.”

It’s so easy to believe him. How could it ever be this good with anyone else? I can’t walk away from this, from him. Not when everything about us feels so right.

I sit up and wrap my arms around his neck, bringing our mouths back together. Nikolai sweeps his tongue past mine as I rock myself against him. With just a few strokes, I’m panting against his neck.

“That’s right. Take what you need.” He strokes a hand down my spine. “I’ll take care of you.”

I work myself on his length until I’m out of my mind with need, gasping for release.

“I’m so close.” I grab his stubbled jaw and kiss him hard. Then I press our foreheads together. “Come with me. Please.”

A low rumble moves through Nikolai’s chest, and then he digs his fingers into my hips and drives into me. My pleasure ratchets up, my body tensed and ready for the beautiful destruction that’s coming.

He pounds into me again and again, his breathing growing heavier with every connection. I grit my teeth, fighting back the need to release, waiting for him

to join me.

“Nikolai,” I pant. “I can’t—”

His cock slides home again, and he holds me to him. I feel his body draw tight.

“Come,” he rasps.

And do I. Oh, God, do I.



“Where are we going?”

I shift in the passenger seat, wondering whether I can reach my phone and tap out a message without Nikolai noticing. Probably not. He notices everything.

“Why? Nervous?”

That would be an understatement. The last twenty-four hours have been a fever dream of pleasure. The kind of fantasy I used to chastise myself for inventing. Because what’s the point in dwelling on something you can’t ever have?

Except, I did have it. For a day.

Nikolai made love to me on his desk and then carried me to his shower. He washed my hair with tender fingers and wrapped me in a fluffy white towel as big as a comforter. Then while I ate breakfast, he talked me through what he wanted to say to Elise.

“She’s your sister. She should know the truth,” he said. “Or, the basics of it, anyway. I’ll explain to her that I have enemies who might want to hurt the two of you, which is why I killed those men. To protect her.”

When we sat down with her for the worst conversation I could ever imagine, Nikolai was gentle and patient. He fielded her questions, gave me space to chime in. It felt... easy. The way we worked together was almost second nature, and I couldn’t help but imagine the way it would be with our baby. How we would balance each other out.

Then the sun came up this morning, and I woke up to a text from Xena.

XENA: 10 this morning while he's at work. Confirm and I'll get you what you need.

Since the moment Nikolai showed up outside Tony's and drove me home, I've been planning to get away from him. I've been working with his ex-fiancée to escape and start a new life.

But maybe I was wrong the whole time.

Maybe Nikolai is my new life.

Maybe my future is here.

Nikolai keeps glancing at me, his silver eyes sparkling. I try to push all my other thoughts aside and stay in this moment with him.

"No, I'm not nervous," I say. "It's just that you're supposed to be at work right now. And you're not. Which you always are. But should I be nervous?"

He smiles cryptically. "With me? Always."

Ten minutes later, we pull into a hospital parking garage. My heart thuds heavily in my chest. "Nikolai?"

He kills the engine and turns to me. "You have to be seen by a doctor, Belle."

"The last time you surprised me, we went to Iceland. This is slightly less exciting."

"We need to know what's going on. If I'm going to make plans to protect you and Elise and the baby, I need to know if there is a baby."

I bite my lip. I could fight him and refuse to be seen by the doctor. Then I could slip away and meet up with Xena.

But I want to talk to a doctor, too. I want to know if the fantasy I lived in for the past twenty-four hours could become real life.

So I nod. "Okay."

He jumps out of the car, comes around to my side, and pulls the door open.

“Good. Then let’s go see our baby.”

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that Nikolai pulled strings here, but I still do a double-take when we don’t even pause in the waiting room.

As soon as we walk in, a nurse is waiting to escort us into the back. She takes my weight and my blood pressure, and then she leads us into the ultrasound room. The lights are dim and large screens hang on the walls.

“Lie back on the table and the ultrasound tech will be right in,” the nurse says.

My knee bounces nervously while we wait. Nikolai reaches out to steady it.

“It will be fine,” he reassures me. “No matter what.”

I want to ask him what he means. If I’m not pregnant, what will happen between us?

But I’m nervous enough as it is. There will be time for those nauseating sorts of questions later.

The ultrasound tech who bustles in is a middle-aged woman with warm brown hair and a wide smile. “Are you Mom and Dad?” she asks.

“Mom,” I breathe. “Wow. That’s weird.”

“We’re the parents,” Nikolai says curtly.

The woman claps her hands. “Then let’s see your baby, okay?”

I slide my shirt up and she squeezes a warm jelly across my stomach. When the wand slides over my stomach and an image flickers on the two screens on the wall, I purposefully look away.

There are a few times in life where you know the next seconds will rearrange your entire future. This is one of them.

I want just a few more moments of blissful ignorance. One last breath until “Before” becomes “After.” The tech swirls the wand around, pressing and prodding while she taps away on her computer. Then she points up at the screen on the ceiling.

“You see that right there?” she asks, pointing to a small white ball in the corner of the screen. “That’s your baby.”

My entire body unclenches with a *whoosh* that only I can hear. “It’s... it’s a real baby?”

“It’s a real baby,” she chuckles.

“And it’s okay? Is everything normal?”

“If you need a better machine to see more, I can buy one,” Nikolai offers.

I laugh giddily. I have a feeling he’d buy an entire hospital if he needed to.

“Everything is normal as far as I can tell now,” the tech says gently. “It’s early, so all anyone will be able to tell you is how far along you are and whether the baby has a heartbeat.” She points to the screen again, tapping her nail against a pulsing little flicker in the center of the bundle. “See that right there? That is your baby’s heartbeat. Nice and steady.”

She walks us through more details and measurements, and I listen and nod, but I’m not absorbing a word. Nikolai is stroking my hair absently. A smile he can’t seem to suppress is stretched across his face.

After the tech turns off the machine, she directs me to the attached bathroom to clean up. The second the door is closed, I pull out my phone.

BELLE: *Thanks for your help, but I can’t meet today. And I can’t help you anymore.*

Then I put my phone away and try to breathe.

NIKOLAI

I open the top drawer of my desk and glance at the black and white sonogram photo.

Arslan would no doubt have a joke for this situation, but looking at it is the pinch in the arm I need to prove to myself that all of this is really happening.

I'm going to be a father. A *father*.

After the appointment, I wanted to take Belle back home and celebrate by fucking her in my nice, soft bed for once, as per her request. But I've been away from the office for too long. Bridget has a massive backlog of messages for me and my inbox is overflowing.

I'm cracking into my email when Bridget calls. "Mr. Zhukova, I have two people here in the lobby who want to talk with you."

"Then you have two disappointed people. Tell them I'm busy."

"I know you said you didn't want to take any meetings today, but—"

"Tell them I'm busy."

"Wait," Bridget says before I can hang up. "Mr. Zhukova, I think these people are detectives."

Shit. "Do you know what they're here about?"

"They won't talk to me. They just want to see you."

Whatever it is, it's not great. I text Arslan. ***Detectives here.***

"Fine," I tell her. "Send them in."

A minute later, there's a sharp knock on my office door.

"Come in."

Detective Andrews is closer to my age with a rounder middle. He steps in with a younger detective whose name I've forgotten trailing behind him. He nods as he drops into the chair across from my desk. "Nikolai."

"Detective Andrews." I turn to the other man. "And your name?"

"Howard," he says, shifting his shoulders. I'm not sure if he's offended I forgot him or not. Either way, I don't care.

"Detectives Andrews and Howard, what can I do for you today?"

"We've been trying to get in touch since yesterday," Andrews explains. "We left a message with your secretary and never heard back."

"I was out of office yesterday. I just got back in an hour ago."

"Any reason in particular?" Andrews asks.

I fold my hands over my desk. "Personal business and a doctor appointment. Any reason in particular you're here?"

Half the city's detectives are on my payroll, but they don't usually show up to my office unless there's a good reason. I expected to hear from Andrews after Arslan set fire to one of the Greek holdings last week.

But considering the timing of their arrival, my guess is this visit has something to do with the two men I shot in front of my house two nights ago.

Andrews tilts his head to his younger colleague, and Detective Howard shifts forward. "Have you spoken to Giorgos Simatou recently?"

"We spoke on the phone a few days ago."

"And that's the last time you talked to him?"

I frown and start to reach for my office phone. "What is this about? Should I

call Giorgos and have him confirm when we spoke?”

“That would be pretty difficult,” Howard says.

“And why is that?”

Andrews sighs and quirks his mouth into a grimace. It’s his “level with me” look. “Because he’s dead.”

My hand falls lifelessly to my desk. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“When?”

I think back to the two men at Giorgos’s house refusing to let me see him. At the time, the way they wouldn’t refer to Giorgos as their don struck me as odd, but not noteworthy.

Now, it makes sense—they already knew he was dead.

“That’s what we’re here to ask you,” Howard cuts in. “Anything you’d like to tell us?”

I frown. “You think I had something to do with this?”

Granted, if I’d found Giorgos two nights ago, there’s no telling what would have happened. He’d come after Belle—or so I’d thought—and I might have killed him just because I was in a shitty mood.

But the important fact remains: I didn’t. I didn’t even see the man.

“Listen, Nikolai,” Andrews sighs. “We have surveillance footage of you at Giorgos’s house the night he died. We have a view of his front drive. You kicked down his door.”

“It was already open when I kicked it,” I correct. “And I’m sure the security footage inside is conveniently missing. No one saw what went on in the foyer?”

“There were no cameras inside.”

I snort. “Of course there were. But whoever is orchestrating this was smart

enough to get rid of them. How else would they frame me?”

“You’re saying you didn’t do it?” Andrews asks.

“We have witnesses testifying to troubles between you and Giorgos,” Howard adds. “You recently called off your wedding to his sister, didn’t you?”

“That’s when I last spoke to him. I called him the day I was supposed to marry Xena. When I went to his house two nights ago, he wasn’t there. My guess is he was already dead.”

“How convenient,” he scoffs. I turn my gaze on the young detective and his face reddens. Still, he shrugs and adds, “We all know you aren’t as upstanding as you appear.”

Andrews pats the man on the back. “Mr. Zhukova is innocent until proven guilty.”

“Aren’t we all.” I raise my eyebrows suggestively. “You have skeletons in your closet, too, I bet.”

Andrews winces. He knows who really writes his paychecks.

“Gentlemen,” I say, “listen. I called off my wedding to Giorgos’s sister. He was upset about it. I went to talk to him. He wasn’t there. I talked to two of his men who, in retrospect, seemed suspicious. You should talk to Giorgos’s employees if you want to know what’s going on. And the new boss while you’re at it.”

“Who is the new boss?” Andrews inquires.

I shrug. “If I knew that, I wouldn’t have shown up on a dead man’s doorstep trying to talk to him, would I?”

Howard grimaces. “Why should we believe you?”

“You shouldn’t,” I say. “But talk to the night manager at Freewald Rehabilitation House. I bet they have security cameras, too. You’ll see me there when I was supposedly twenty minutes across town killing Giorgos.”

Andrews is scribbling across a notepad in his hand. “That’s your alibi?”

“No, that’s the truth. Plus, you know the rumors about the Greeks, don’t you?”

“About Giorgos killing his parents?” Howard asks.

Andrews shoots his partner a dirty look. He tries to feign ignorance about most of the criminal organizations in the city. As long as his checks clear, he doesn’t want to know shit. Apparently, Howard doesn’t have the same hang-ups.

I nod. “Rumor is he killed them to claim power. Maybe this is history repeating itself. So if you want my opinion, I say you track down whoever is in charge now. I bet you’ll find a trail of blood.”

The interview is as good as over after that. I know better than to answer any more questions without my lawyer present, so Andrews and Howard slink out as quickly as they arrived.

The second they’re gone, I pick up my phone.

Arslan answers on the second ring. “The detectives have been asking around about you,” he says. “No one has said anything, obviously. Anything I should know?”

“Get to my house. *Now*,” I hiss. “Call an additional security team to check on Belle and Elise.”

I hear shuffling on his end as he shifts me to speaker and starts tapping out a message on his phone. He’s carrying out my order before he even knows why.

“What the fuck is going on, Nikolai?”

“Giorgos is dead, and I suspect the Greeks are under new leadership.”

“Who?”

“Fuck if I know,” I say. “But we’d be stupid not to assume this has something to do with us. Their new leader is trying to frame me. Which means that until we have this all sorted, I don’t want Belle out of our sight.”

Arslan curses under his breath. “I’m on it. I’ll head to your house myself

right now.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

I hang up and grab my keys, but before I’m even out the door, my phone rings again.

“What?” I answer, assuming it’s Arslan calling me back.

But instead of Arslan’s deep grumble, I’m met with Xena Simatou’s grating voice. “Is that how you greet your ex-fiancée?”

“No, you’re right. How about ‘Good riddance,’ instead?”

“Always the charmer, Nikolai.”

“Why are you calling? I’ve just heard your brother is dead. Shouldn’t you be mourning?”

“You know as well as I do that there’s no time for mourning. Not in the lives we lead.”

I sigh. “What is this about, Xena?”

“This is a warning. Not that you deserve it,” she snipes. “You know, I was already in my wedding dress when you called it off. I was ready to walk down the aisle. You don’t think you could have given me some more forewarning?”

“You knew I didn’t want to get married. Don’t act surprised.”

“But I am. It’s not like you to let your emotions take the wheel,” she says. She pauses, then adds, “Is she worth all of this?”

I grit my teeth together as I see red in my vision. “Don’t talk about her. *Ever.*”

She chuckles. “Fine. Then I’ll be brief: Giorgos’s second-in-command has taken over. They’re working with the Battiato mafia. Prepare for war.”

Before I can say anything, Xena hangs up the phone.

BELLE

It's been hours, but I'm still riding high from the doctor's appointment, scrolling through the sonogram pictures the doctor's office emailed. Nikolai took the ones they printed out. I won't be surprised if our baby's first sonogram ends up framed in his office next to my sketches.

The thought makes me unbelievably giddy. I'm grinning when my phone rings.

It's an unknown number, but I know with a sickening drop in my stomach that it's Xena.

"Hello?"

"Get out of the house right now," Xena hisses. "Grab your sister and go."

"Xena? Did you get my message? I texted you that I'm calling off the plan. I know you went to a lot of trouble, but—"

"He knows."

Ice settles in my veins. "What?"

"Nikolai knows you've been working with me. He knows you were planning to disappear. He knows what you've done."

Inhaling is difficult. My lungs feel like stone. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to catch my breath.

“But... how? I just saw him. Everything was fine.” *Everything was perfect.*
“What happened?”

“There’s no time to explain, Belle. I’m trying to help you here. You have to get out of that house before he gets back.”

I blink again and again, as if that will change anything. It’s like waking up from a good dream, trying desperately to cling to the warm, fuzzy feeling. I’m not ready to give up on this fantasy.

“Belle!” Xena snaps. “You have to move. Do you have any idea what Nikolai does to people who cross him?”

In my mind’s eye, I see the men who came to get me the other night. One of them falls sideways in a pool of his own blood. His friend collapses back into the car after a gunshot wound to the head.

Dead. Dead. So fucking dead.

That could just as easily be me.

It could just as easily be Elise.

My hand is shaking around the phone. “What do I do?”

“Get your sister and get outside,” she instructs. “I’ll take care of everything else.”

Xena hangs up. I move in a daze to Elise’s room and shove the door open. She’s sitting in the center of her bed, a laptop open in front of her.

“Ever heard of knocking?” she grumbles. But when she sees my face, her eyes widen. She slides to the edge of her bed and grabs my hand. “Belle, what’s wrong?”

“We have to go.”

I hate that I can see the panic lance through her. I hate that I brought this chaos and trauma and pain into her life.

But right now, the only thing I can do to protect her is get her out of this house.

“Is this about what Nikolai said? About his enemies?”

How do I explain to her that Nikolai might be the enemy now? I can't. There isn't time. Instead, I nod. “We just have to go, okay? Now.”

She slips on her shoes, and we run through the house and straight through the front door without stopping to grab anything. No covert mission this time around, no sneaking from tree to tree. We sprint as quickly as we can down the curved driveway towards the road.

By the time we reach the curb, a sleek black car pulls up in front of us.

Elise gasps and tries to pull me back, but the passenger window rolls down and Xena Simatou looks out at me from the driver's seat.

“Get in,” she orders, a crack of desperation in her voice.

I push Elise towards the car. “It's safe. It's okay.”

“It's that lady from Iceland.” Elise does a double take as I help her into the backseat.

“Xena,” she explains with a tight smile. “Nice to meet you.”

Then we peel away from the curb and tear down the street.

Everything is happening so fast. It's only been a few minutes since Xena first called, and now she's here, and I'm leaving Nikolai's house. None of it feels real.

“How are you here already?” I ask a few blocks later.

Xena is careening around corners and driving way too fast down residential streets. I keep checking the side mirror, expecting to see people tailing us.

“I was already nearby.”

“You were?”

She nods. “I know how much danger I put you in by asking you to spy.”

“To *what*?” Elise blurts from the backseat.

I look back and give her a sympathetic smile. One day, I'll explain

everything.

If we live that long.

“I didn’t want to leave you in a dangerous situation,” Xena continues. She reaches over and squeezes my wrist. “Us girls have to stick together, don’t we?”

Her fingers are cold against my skin, and I shiver. Xena made a habit of saying stuff like that. “*Women have to help each other out, Belle.*” And it always made me feel like we were in some secret sorority. The Dysfunctional Women of Nikolai Zhukova.

But in person, her words ring hollow. I look over, and her expression is flat. Her eyes are dark and hard as marbles. As panicked as she sounded over the phone, she looks perfectly at ease now. Which is only making my panic worse.

Xena presses on the gas as she takes a turn, and I grip the door handle. “Put your seatbelt on, Elise.”

“Already done.”

Well, that’s a first. I look back. Just like me, my sister is gripping her door handle with two white-knuckled hands. Xena doesn’t seem to notice our fear.

“Are we being followed?” I ask. “Do you think we could slow down a little bit?”

“Sorry,” she says, not sounding sorry at all. “I’m a bit of a wild driver. Are you feeling sick?”

“A little, actually,” I admit. My stomach is churning, but that’s not so unusual these days. Morning sickness has become an all-day affair. Still, this feels different.

“Carsick?”

“No,” Elise says from the back. Her voice sounds weak. “That’s me. I got the carsick genes.”

Xena glances over at me, but I keep my eyes straight ahead. It feels like she’s

trying to see through my skull into my thoughts. And for some reason, I suddenly don't want her to know what I'm thinking.

"It's been a busy day," I explain. "I just saw Nikolai an hour ago and everything was fine. When did he find out about—"

"I was actually tailing you this morning," Xena blurts suddenly.

"You were?" I try to keep my voice even and calm, even though my heart is racing.

"I thought something was wrong when you went to the hospital."

"The hospital?" Elise asks from the backseat. "I thought you two were going out for breakfast."

I didn't want to lie to Elise, but there was no reason to bring up the pregnancy to her until I knew it was really happening. Then there was no time to talk about it before Xena called and we rushed out the door.

This is really not how I want her to find out I'm having a baby.

"Nikolai just had something to do at the hospital first," I lie.

"You went to the obstetrician wing," Xena adds, cool as could be.

"Xena, not now," I beg under my breath.

She ignores me. Elise leans forward, her hand on the back of my seat. "Belle?"

Slowly, I turn back to her. "This isn't how I wanted to tell you. And I was going to tell you. I swear. I just wanted to be sure first."

Her eyes widen. She's surprised, but I can't tell if it's tinged with horror or happiness until she squeals, "You're pregnant?!"

The news has gone from horrifying to confusing to joyful and back again so many times that I don't know what response is right anymore. I settle for a sighing nod. "Yeah, I am."

"Oh my God. I'm going to be a big sister," she says. "Or, wait, I meant an aunt. An aunt! Wow."

I bite back a smile. “Yeah. Aunt Elise. Wow.”

When I turn back to Xena, her jaw is clenched. “Is Nikolai the father?” she asks.

The mood in the car has been difficult to read since the moment Xena picked us up. But now, it’s unmistakably tense. Something is wrong. Something I don’t fully understand.

But I know enough to keep my mouth shut.

It’s not like it matters, though. A non-answer is answer enough, and Xena knows that. With every passing second, the car moves faster and faster.

Elise is groaning in the backseat as we swerve one corner after the next, her car sickness rearing its ugly head. But she’s looking a lot worse than an upset stomach if I don’t get her out of here.

“Xena, stop the car.”

“No.”

My heart is racing, but I take a steadying breath. “I’ll stay in the car. But let Elise go. Let her out.”

Xena’s eyes flicker to the rearview mirror.

“She’s just a kid,” I whisper. “Please. Whatever is going on, let’s deal with it. Just the two of us. Leave her out of it.”

Her expression doesn’t change, and I’m not sure she is even listening to me anymore. Then suddenly, Xena slams on the brakes.

We all jerk forward, and Elise lets out a shriek. “What the f—” she breathes. “Belle, what is going on?”

Tears are welling in my eyes, but I force them back. I don’t want to scare her anymore than she already is.

I turn in my seat and give her a small smile. “You’re going to get out.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “What? Where are we—”

“*You* are going to get out of the car. You’re going to get out. And you’re going to find Nikolai.”

He’ll take care of her. I know he will.

“But we ran away because of him. Because of... well, I don’t know why. But I thought he was dangerous?”

Xena snorts softly, and a shiver races up my spine.

I was so stupid. So fucking stupid.

I should have called Nikolai after Xena called me. Even if it was true and he’d found out that I was working with the Simatous, I could have explained things to him. Maybe he would have understood.

But I panicked and followed my worst instincts, and now, I’m in a kind of trouble I can’t even fathom.

“I was wrong.” I grab Elise’s hand. Xena shifts slightly. I follow the motion to see her fingers hovering over a gun wedged between her seat and the center console. A silent threat. “Nikolai will look out for you. But you have to get out of here now.”

“No. Not without you,” Elise says firmly.

“We don’t have time for this,” Xena snarls. She hoists up the gun and points it at my stomach. “Your big sister isn’t going anywhere. Get out of the car while you still can.”

Elise’s face turns deathly pale. Her mouth opens and closes, but nothing comes out.

A tear slips down my cheek. “I’m so sorry, Elise.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not going—”

“Move!” Xena booms. Whatever charade she was playing before is over now.

Elise jolts. I squeeze her hand one last time. Hopefully not the *last* last time, though. Just the last time for a little while.

“I’ll be okay. Just go. I’ll see you later.”

I have no clue if I'm telling her the truth or not, and I can see that Elise isn't sure, either. But she listens. With tears in her eyes, she gets out of the car on shaky legs and steps up onto the curb.

The second the door is shut, Xena slams on the gas. "Touching," she seethes mockingly as the engine screams. "Nothing like a sibling bond."

"I'm sure you and Giorgos are just as affectionate," I bite back. "Scheming to kill people must really bring you two together."

Xena snorts. "Please. I did the scheming. Giorgos just followed along."

I try to breathe through my pounding headache, my surging fear. "This is a scheme, isn't it? Right now? Nikolai probably doesn't even know I worked with you."

Xena scoffs. "It was too easy to even be called that. You trusted me so much. You didn't even ask any questions. I told you to run, and you said, 'How fast?'"

"Stupid," I mutter. "I was so stupid."

"You really were. I have no fucking clue what Nikolai saw in you. I mean, he was willing to throw away our deal and go to war... *for you*. It's beyond comprehension."

So much for women supporting women.

"So does Giorgos know you're here with me?" I ask. "Does Nikolai know? This is some kind of blackmail plan, I'm sure. So will there be a ransom?"

My thoughts immediately turn towards Elise. What will happen to her without me? She'll probably be sent back to our mother, which breaks my heart.

But I can't think about any of this right now. Survival is most important.

"Everyone underestimates me," Xena says finally. "I'm a woman, so what could I know about leading a mafia? Women have carried the world on our backs since the dawn of time, but we can't be trusted to make important decisions or, God forbid, tell a man what to do. No one ever expected sweet, pretty, docile Xena to be calling the shots."

"What about your brother?"

"He's the exception," she admits. "But only because he was fucking clueless."

"'Was'?" I ask, not missing her use of the past tense.

"My brother never wanted to lead. He never knew how to. He could puff out his chest with the best of them, but when it came to the moments that truly mattered, he folded. Even before he became don, he came to me for advice. He swore I'd be his second-in-command."

"And were you?"

She nods. "Secretly. Because unlike so many men in this world, I don't need the recognition. Spare me the gold busts and towering statues. I'm fine with creeping behind the scenes and wielding the real power."

We're still driving way too fast, but the roads are widening and the traffic is thinning out. We're moving out of the city now. I want to ask where we're going, but I know she won't tell me. Part of me doesn't even want to know.

"The thirst for power must run in the family," I say. "Your brother killed your parents so he could inherit the Bratva, right?"

"Giorgos?" Xena laughs. "That rumor always killed me. Forgive the bad pun. The fact that people think he'd have the guts to do something like that... Baffling."

"I wouldn't say you need guts to kill your parents. More like a diagnosable mental disorder," I mumble.

Xena snaps her attention to me. "I did it."

I practically swallow my tongue with shock. "You killed your parents?"

"And God, I made it hurt. So it looked like an enemy carried it out," she says. "Giorgos couldn't handle the sight. He stayed outside and kept watch. I did everything myself. *I* killed our parents and handed him the crown. *I* arranged the details of the deal with Nikoali. Then *I* shot up the club where he and Arslan were drinking after I found out he was seen dancing with you."

"You tried to kill him?" Nikolai never told me that.

“He’d been warned what being with you meant for our deal. But he didn’t seem to take it seriously. I decided to up the stakes. Of course, all that did was send the two of you off to Iceland together.” Her nostrils flare. “He was insistent on embarrassing me.”

“But I thought there were no feelings between the two of you? You said it was an arranged marriage.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll let myself be made a fool of!” she screeches. “The fact that my future husband would prefer to be in the arms of some penniless accountant instead of me? It’s ridiculous. But I’m sure if I was a naive little whore like you, he’d be a lot more interested.”

“He’s not with me because I’m young,” I spit. “It’s because we’re in love.”

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize how ill-advised they were. I fight the urge to clamp my hand over my mouth.

Xena turns to me slowly, her eyes narrowing to slits. “Then I was right to make my move now instead of waiting. Giorgos thought I was being rash. He wanted to try to talk to Nikolai again. To *reason* with the son of a bitch.”

“Maybe he’s right,” I protest weakly. “Nikolai would be willing to work with you, I’m sure. You can come up with a new plan.”

“This is the new plan! The first plan was to marry Nikolai and then kill him when the opportunity presented itself. A honeymoon hike to the cliffs, then *oops*, he slipped. How tragic.”

My heart squeezes uncomfortably. And I was just going to let Nikolai get married. For weeks, I sat at home, miserable and missing him, but I was just going to let him get married to another woman.

A woman who planned to kill him.

The thought is enough to steal my breath. Nikolai’s death would have been unbearable then. But now... it would kill me, too.

“What did your brother think about that?”

“He wasn’t a fan,” Xena sighs like she’s bored. “That’s why I killed him first.”

We're on the far edge of the city now. Soon, there will be nothing but open country around us.

"You'll never get to Nikolai," I tell her. "He's stronger than you. Smarter than you."

Xena shrugs. "I guess we'll see. You certainly wouldn't be the first to underestimate me. And Nikolai doesn't even know I'm in charge now. That's an advantage. An advantage that will probably help me get close to him. Close enough to do what needs doing."

Xena's eyes are on the road, lost in her plotting and completely unaware that she's done to me exactly what has been done to her her entire life. She has underestimated me.

I may not be born and bred for the Bratva lifestyle. I may not be Xena, always ready with a plan and prepared for what is coming around the next corner.

But I have something she doesn't have: a heart.

And it belongs to Nikolai Zhukova.

Xena presses on the gas, accelerating through the next turn, and I don't hesitate. In one fluid movement, I unbuckle my seatbelt and throw myself across the center console.

She shouts in alarm as I smash into her side. I feel the car jerk, the steering wheel spinning wildly.

It's a chaos of tangled limbs. But for the first time since getting in the car, I'm calm. My heartbeat is strong and steady.

And it's his.

It's *his*.

It's been his from the moment we've met.

NIKOLAI

I'm halfway home when Arslan calls. "They aren't there," he says, breathless.

"What?"

"Belle and Elise are gone. Security shows them running out of the house right after you called me. They got into a black sports car. The men tried to follow, but they lost her. They're gone."

Possibilities and unanswerable questions pop into my head faster than I can sort through them.

"What's the move?" Arslan asks.

"We search for them. Every Greek hangout, their headquarters. Every square inch of the city where a Greek or Battiato man has ever set foot. Xena said the Greeks are working with the Italians now, so anything is possible."

"On it," Arslan says. "I already have men searching, but I'll join in, too. Where are you going to start? Let me know and I'll meet you there."

I clench the steering wheel, doing my best to fight through my rage and think clearly. Belle muddies my senses, but she deserves my best. She and Elise both do.

"Meet me at that Battiato bar where you saw Giorgos meeting with—"

Before I can finish the sentences, I turn to the right and see a truck barrelling

towards my car. There is no time to hit the gas or brake or turn.

There is only time to brace for impact.

The truck hits my passenger side door at full speed, sending my little Ferrari spinning like a fucking top.

I don't know how many times the vehicle spins, but when I open my eyes, the road is gone and all I see is the cloudless blue sky.

For a moment, I think I might be dead. Maybe this is the transition to heaven.

But then I realize if heaven and hell are real, I'm almost certainly heading down. Plus, I can still hear Arslan's muffled voice roaring through my speaker phone.

"Nikolai! What the fuck happened? Are you there? Hello? Nikolai!"

I blink a few times and then take in my surroundings. My car ended up ramped on top of another vehicle along the side of the road, the hood angled up towards the sky. All my windows are shattered and smoke is pouring out from under the hood.

But I'm alive, and I'm not injured. Not as far as I can tell, anyway.

I unclip my seatbelt with a groan and reach for my phone where it fell in the backseat. Twisting around sends a sharp pain lancing down my neck, but it's bearable.

"Nikolai!" Arslan bellows. "Where are you? What the fuck happened?"

"Calm down." My voice sounds far away, like I'm talking underwater. That can't be a good sign. Maybe a concussion.

"Shit. It sounded like you got hit by a train."

"Close enough," I rasp, pulling uselessly on my door handle. "I got in a car crash. A bad one. Someone slammed into me."

"Was it an accident?" he asks.

"I don't know. I haven't even seen who—"

Suddenly, I hear the familiar *pop, pop, pop* of gunfire pinging against the back of my car.

“Shit.” I lunge for my gun in the glove compartment. “Not an accident.”

I give Arslan my location and then hang up the phone without another word. I need to be fully present if I’m going to get out of the next few minutes alive.

I kick at the door with all my strength. It takes two attempts, but the metal finally creaks open. I slide out and drop to a crouch behind the ruined vehicles.

More violent cracks echo through the air. I can’t see who’s shooting, but judging by the frequency of shots, it’s at least two people. Maybe three. Maybe more.

I reach into the hidden compartment under the driver’s seat and pull out my submachine gun. Then I take a deep breath to steady myself and pivot around to take aim over the hood.

There are four men in black converging on me, but I can see the insignia on their chests. Three of them are Greek, but the fourth has the Battiato crest over his heart.

Xena warned me. *Prepare for war.*

I take aim and fire. One man drops. The other three find cover.

But they have the advantage and the momentum and I’m pinned into this shitty position. A sitting fucking duck.

I’m weighing my scant options when I hear the familiar rumble of Arslan’s motorcycle. My best friend roars onto the scene from the left, already firing at the Battiato soldier ducked behind the crunched remains of the truck that demolished me.

Two versus two. That’s better.

He brings the motorcycle to a screeching stop near the curb and then dives off, crawling over to the cover of the two cars stacked in front of me.

“You’re lucky they didn’t blow you right off that fucking bike. You should

be in an armored car.”

“Look what good it did you,” he says, gesturing to the scrap heap that used to be my favorite ride.

We take turns shooting over the hood, keeping the remaining two men at bay. But after a few minutes of trading useless fire, I’m starting to get antsy.

“Why aren’t they advancing?” I growl. “What’s the point of this attack if they aren’t going to come in for the kill?”

“They’re cowards?” Arslan suggests.

“Yes, but that’s not it. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Almost as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I hear more gunfire. But this time, it’s coming from behind us.

I hear something else, too—the wet *thunk* of a bullet meeting flesh.

Then Arslan groans.

I spin around and immediately spot another Battiato soldier advancing on foot down the sidewalk, a gun in his hand. I fire and catch him in the stomach. He dives behind a concrete half wall, and I reach for Arslan’s shirtsleeve.

“Get up, man,” I say. It’s more of a plea than an actual order. “Come on.”

Arslan’s only answer is a bloody cough. That’s all I need to know.

If my best friend could shoot off at the mouth with some stupid comeback, he would. I have to get him out of here.

I shift my legs so I’m standing over Arslan, and then move on a continual pivot, firing anytime I see movement. I try to ignore the warm, sticky puddle gathering under my feet. The nasty, rasping breaths coming from Arslan’s chest.

I’m going to get us both out of here. And then we’re going to find Belle and Elise.

I’m going to be a father, goddammit.

“Don’t move,” a voice behind me says.

I curse under my breath.

“Drop your gun, Nikolai.”

I lay the gun down on the hood and turn around, hands raised.

A Battiato soldier is standing behind me, his gun trained on my chest. When our eyes meet, he grins. “I was hoping I’d be the one to capture you.”

“You haven’t captured anyone.”

He tips his head in Arslan’s direction. “Your friend is down and you don’t have a gun. You look pretty caught to me.”

“Shows what you know.”

He fights an eye roll. “This was easier than I thought it would be. I guess I should have listened to the Greeks. They said their don assured them it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“That’s right. Giorgos is dead,” I say. “Who is in charge over there now?”

He looks surprised. “You mean you really don’t know?”

“I’ve been a little busy getting shot at,” I snap.

His eyes narrow. “You can thank Xena Simatou for that.”

It takes a second for his words to sink in. But when they do, icy hot rage burns through me. “Xena?”

“Killed her brother for the honor,” he confirms, nodding. “And considering how easily she captured your little whore, I’d say her reign is off to a good start.”

“Where is she?” I grit out.

“Xena?”

“Belle.” I hate even saying her name in the presence of a piece of shit like this man. He doesn’t deserve to hear it.

He smiles acidly. “You’ll see her soon enough. I think Xena has plans for your reunion. That’s where I’m supposed to take you.”

If this man thinks he is going to lead me to a meeting with Xena with my hands bound behind my back, he’s the dumbest fucking fool on the planet. There is not a chance in hell I’m walking out of here without a fight.

“What a good dog you are. She isn’t even your boss.”

“No, but that’s what she wanted me to call her in bed,” he spits. “‘Boss’ moaned my name all fucking night.”

I snort. “Do you feel special because she spread her legs for you? I bet she laughs about how easy it was to win your loyalty. Xena has done a lot more for a lot less, but you must have been truly desperate.”

The man’s neck turns red. I see his finger twitch on the trigger. “I’m supposed to bring you in unharmed, but... well, I’m sure she’ll understand if you got clipped in the heat of things.”

He raises the gun. Just as he pulls the trigger, I dive to the right.

The bullet flies past, taking a chunk of my shoulder with it. I tuck and roll, but as soon as I can, I’m back on my feet, charging towards him. The man is swinging his gun wildly to take aim a second time.

I hit him. I hear the *pop* of gunfire as my arms wrap around the man’s waist. I feel a burst of heat in my stomach.

And we both tumble to the ground.

TO BE CONTINUED



*Nikolai and Belle’s story continues in Book 2 of the Zhukova Bratva duet. Click [HERE](#) to start reading **Tarnished Queen**.*