



Stolen By the Don

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: He crashed my wedding and kidnapped me.

Now he's putting a ring on my finger...

And his baby in my belly.

Roman Volkov crashed my wedding,

Threw me over his shoulder,

And dragged me out the chapel.

Now I'm a prisoner in his gilded cage...

And a puppet under his masterful hands.

I should run away from Roman.

But when he whispers filthy promises in my ears,

He makes one thing very clear:

I'm his... forever.

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ROMAN

“And do you, Isabella Ricci, take this man to be your?—”

The silence that fills the cathedral as I walk through the large, creaking mahogany doors curls my lips into a satisfied smirk. It lasts only a millisecond and is quickly followed by the sound of guns being drawn, but it pleases me.

“Please, please—” I click my tongue and shake my head, keeping one hand on the gun tucked into my waistband. “Let’s not resort to hostilities now, shall we? I’m only here for one thing.”

I look around at the collective shock on the faces of the attendants, and the angry expressions on the faces of the men with their guns trained on me.

As if they would ever get the chance to fire.

“What do you want, Roman Volkov?” someone asks tightly.

Ah, yes. My smirk widens into a face-splitting grin. “I was starting to think my reputation no longer preceded me.” I pause my march down the aisle to give the man my attention.

I note his appearance—a knife wound down the side of his face and across his lip, giving him a perpetual scowl, and the presence of a limp with one leg placed ahead of

the other.

Marco Ricci's hound dog. One of the men who was so unfortunate as to stand in my way when I went looking for the bastard. I should've taken the leg from him altogether.

"You know what I want," I tell him, stepping in his direction. He moves a step back, fear sharply crossing his face. "Where is he?"

He sneers. "You're making a terrible mistake. You shouldn't have come here. Do you expect to leave alive?"

"Why not?" I shrug nonchalantly. "I only came here for one thing today. And that is—" My gaze spins toward the altar, where a dark-haired woman with olive skin watches my every move.

Her eyes are the darkest shade of brown I've ever seen. Almost black, except for the way they gleam in the lights above her. The man beside her is irrelevant, so I don't bother sparing him a glance. "Her." I point. "I'm here to take my bride."

"Never!" the hound dog spits.

From the corner of my eye, I see him tilt his head, a subtle sign for his men to attack. I lift a finger, and my men—men I carefully planted in the church before the wedding ceremony began—rise from the pews, slipping their hands inside their jackets.

The soft rustle of fabric is nearly drowned out by the sharp metallic clicks of safeties being disengaged. Gasps of horror ripple through the church as many of the guests fall to their knees, hiding underneath the pews.

The other men hesitate for a second, but that second is all I need to know they're

outnumbered. Outmaneuvered.

“See.” My smile fades into a cold, leveling glare. “I told you. You don’t have to resort to hostilities. You allow me to take what’s mine, and I’ll let you give my message to Marco Ricci. Tell him that I intend to marry his daughter and that she will be pregnant with my heir by this time next month.”

His face turns a shade of translucent pale, and I catch the gasp of shock that leaves the bride’s lips before she quickly masks it.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I address the crowd, continuing my walk down the aisle. “I’m not here to disrupt your day. In fact, I’m willing to get things over and done with. Ten minutes,” I say, keeping my eyes trained on Isabella. “That’s all I ask.”

When I get to where she stands, I hold out my hand. The groom, choosing this moment to prove his masculinity, cuts in front of me. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Move,” I growl. “Now.”

He takes out his gun, pointing it at my forehead. “No. You move. Or else I’ll splatter your brains across the floor. I don’t know what audacity brought you here, but I’m giving you one last chance to get the fuck out.”

A dry laugh escapes me—one full of disbelief and fury. “You must have a death wish, talking to me like that with your hands shaking.”

He takes the bait, looking down at his hand. I react, hitting him squarely in the elbow. The gun clatters to the ground as he winces in pain, and I kick it away, far from his reach.

“Playtime’s over,” I mutter, turning to Isabella again. A fine sheen of sweat gathers on her forehead, but her chin remainstilted.Stubborn,I muse.Good.I didn’t expect her to be anything else.

It only means I’ll have fun breaking her.

I hold out my hand again. “You’re either leaving here on your feet or—” For some reason, she picks the second option, making a break in the other direction. I sigh, watching her skate on her heels for a moment before I catch up to her in long strides.

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I throw her over my shoulder.

“Let me go!” she yells, her fists pounding against my back. “Let me go, you brute!”

Brute? That’s a word I haven’t heard in a long time. When her fists do nothing, she sinks her fingers into my shirt, clawing and ripping the fabric to get to my skin. I feel the sting of her nails, but it doesn’t slow me down.

“Let me go, or I swear I’ll be the one to put the bullet between your eyes!” she protests, clawing and wriggling against my hold. I see her hand as it reaches lower, and I slap a hand over her ass as a warning.

“Keep fighting, printsessa, and I’ll give these people something real to gasp about.”

As I near the doors, I hear a click behind me. It’s faint, a lost sound amidst the gasps and murmurs, but I hear it. In a flash, I spin on my heels, my gun going off before the groom can take his shot.

He falls to the ground with a thud, and a loud wail echoes against the walls.

“You killed him!” Isabella screams. “You killed him, you murderer!”

Ignoring her protest, I walk through the doors, leaving the attendants to deal with the dead groom. Isabella is still fighting as I approach the cars parked down the curb. My second-in-command, Sergei, opens the door to a black Mercedes.

“No!” Isabella grabs the edge of the open door, the space where the frame curves

inward but hasn't shut yet, her fingers locking onto it like a lifeline. She pulls forward with all her strength, bracing her feet against the inside edge of the car, trying to launch herself back out.

It's desperation. Pure and raw—and it kicks at something dangerous inside me. Something that is very tempted to see how much fight she has inside her.

But it's useless.

I lean down, pry her fingers free one by one despite her kicking legs and venom-laced curses, then slam the door shut with her inside. Her fists bang against the window, her eyes furious behind the glass.

I give Sergei the order. "Take her home. Keep the doors locked. I'll be right behind you."

He nods curtly and gets behind the wheel without a word. The car pulls away, and I watch it go before sliding into the passenger seat of the next one.

"Well," Leo—my best friend who I've known all my life—drawls as I close the door. "If you were going for shock value and theatrics, I'd say you achieved just that."

"Drive," I mutter, leaning back and closing my eyes. I don't want to listen to his feedback now, because I know he has reservations.

He shrugs. I feel it. "Sure. I'll just shut my mouth and act as your designated driver. That's what you pay me for, right? To be your getaway driver after you shoot a groom dead at the altar."

My eyes open slowly, and I pin him with a burning glare. He lifts one hand in surrender. "My apologies. I didn't mean to be sarcastic. I just thought you had a

different plan.”

I don’t respond, and he sighs, turns the ignition, and pulls the car away from the cathedral’s curb. I close my eyes again, letting my thoughts settle as he drives.

He’s right, though. I had a different plan. Killing Marco. After learning that the bastard had resurfaced, I had only one goal. To find him and see the fear in his eyes as I watch the life drain from them.

Then he vanished. I had dozens of my men watching his hideouts, and he still managed to vanish.

That’s when the plan changed.

When I heard that Marco Ricci was marrying off his daughter to a bastard son of a powerful bratva pakhan, I knew what I had to do. A life for a life. Since he had betrayed a blood pact, I would take the only thing that mattered to him.

His daughter.

Dark-haired, olive-skinned Isabella Ricci. The image of her standing by the altar, her chin tilted and defiance flashing in her eyes, fills my mind. My lips curl into a smile, and my fingers dance on my thigh.

I’ve heard about her—how she has shadowed her father from a young age, and the influence she has among his Russian and Italian allies. It wouldn’t have mattered what she looks like or what she can do, but knowing what I know makes it more interesting.

“You know you just declared war, right?” Leo comments.

One eye opens. “Let him come. He’ll be walking to his death.” It’s exactly what I want.

Leo glances at me, sees my unbothered expression, and shakes his head. “I’m not talking about that. You killed a Glazastov. His father will come for you. With the entire Glazastov brotherhood behind him. They never really liked you anyway.”

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I scoff, waving his concern away. “I killed his bastard son,” I correct. “Boris Glazastov has so many sons he doesn’t know all their names. This was an attempt to build a long-lasting alliance. It won’t matter to him that one’s down.”

He arches his brow, and I point ahead, wordlessly telling him to focus. “If he’s that worked up, I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse. A treaty with the Volkov bratva or hanging on the coattails of a man on the run.”

Leo clicks his tongue. “When you put it that way.”

“You have so little faith in me, Leonardo,” I say.

“I’m simply looking after you,” he replies.

I roll my eyes, then close them again, shutting him out. My thoughts wander to Isabella, and I touch my chest, patting the places where her fingernails broke my skin.

I just hope she hasn’t decapitated Sergei.

The giant iron-wrought gates open inward as Leo drives in, passing through a long row of canopy trees. The house—a stately mansion with cobblestones—comes into view as we get closer. Leo pulls up in front, and Sergei hurries toward the car, holding the door open for me.

“Boss.” He nods.

“Where is she?” I ask, noting the bright strip along his cheek where she probably

swiped at him.

He looks over his shoulder. “In the living room, boss. The main one. I didn’t know what to do, so I left her there.”

“Thank you. That’ll be all.” He walks away as Leo gets out of the car.

Leo takes one look at the house and shakes his head. “You know what? I think I need a drink somewhere else. I’ll see you later.” He promptly gets into the car again and drives away.

I purse my lips and tuck my hand into my pocket for a moment before striding toward the front door. It swings open, and I enter, my steps echoing on the marble floor of the grand foyer. The house, centuries old, was worth a fortune when my father first made an offer to buy it. Then, the owner, an old pakhan, tried his hand at upstaging my father after a short-lived attempt at a takeover.

His penance was the house and his dignity.

As I approach the living room, I hear muttering and angry heels pacing. I pause, allowing myself a moment to imagine what an angry Isabella will look like when she’s not hanging over my shoulder.

I liked her there. More than I should.

It was brief, but the memory of her body, soft and warm even as she kicked and screamed, has lingered long enough for it to leave an imprint. The swell of her ass in my palm, round and firm beneath the thin layers of silk, made it impossible to not want to grip tighter. The scent of her skin, a mix of floral perfume and adrenaline, clung to me long after I threw her into the car.

If she were some other woman and under different circumstances?—

I barely duck out of the way as a shoe comes flying in my direction.

“You bastard!” she spits. “You—you killed my husband! And you kidnapped me.”

“If you’re recounting the events of the past couple hours,” I drawl, “then yes. But I suggest you focus on what’s happening now.”

My response throws her off, and she goes quiet for a moment, thrusting her hands onto her hips. She’s quick to recover, though. “Focus on what? The fact that you intend to marry me and make me pregnant?”

I nod, heading over to the leather sofa and sitting. “Yes, Isabella,” I say without mincing words. “We’re going to get married, and then I expect one—” My brows furrow. “No, two children from you.”

“H-how—” she stutters. “How could you say something like that? Marriage isn’t something you force on a person!”

I rise slowly, letting the weight of the moment stretch between us. Every movement I make is deliberate, controlled, and poised. Because I’m nothing if not calculated. Isabella’s eyes track me as I close the distance, and though she doesn’t back away, I can see her bracing.

My gaze locks on hers, darkening with every step. “Isn’t that what you were about to do?” I say, my voice low, sharp, and dangerous. “Marry a man your father forced on you? An arranged marriage. One you didn’t choose. One you were willing to accept for the sake of loyalty. Duty.”

She inhales sharply, her spine stiffening with fury. “At least he didn’t kidnap me,”

she says, her voice trembling with rage. “At least he didn’t murder someone in front of me and drag me out of a church like some...like some prize.”

“Tossed over my shoulder,” I correct her. “I didn’t drag you. But I know you want answers, so I’ll give them to you.”

I let the suspense build, watching her frustration gather as she picks at her nails. “Your father broke a blood pact,” I say as my hands clench at my sides, filled with anger at the betrayal. “Marco Ricci betrayed my father and killed him. He’s gone underground, so you’ll pay the price of his crime.”

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I reach out, brushing my thumb across her cheek. She shivers, and her eyelashes flutter. “So, Isabella Ricci, you’re right about one thing. You are my prize.”

“I’m never going to marry you,” Isabella hisses as I step away, leaving her alone in the living room. “I’d rather die before I let you slip a ring on my finger. You monster!”

Looking over my shoulder, I note the way her hands tremble as she holds them together. I chuckle. “We’ll see. Isabella Ricci. We’ll see.”

Marco Ricci broke a blood pact, which means he’s now in my debt. One way or another, I intend to be paid in full.

2

ISABELLA

The asshole!

“Argh!” I drag my fingers through my hair, pulling strands loose as I pace the living room. I should’ve shot him. If I’d gotten my hands on a gun, I wouldn’t have missed.

My father didn’t have me spend hours at the shooting range, starting at age eleven, just so I could miss a target that a common man could easily shoot with one eye closed. Unlike my dead fiancé.

But I had been in shock.

I had so much on my mind already—finding out that my father had disappeared the day before my wedding, leaving a message urging me to go ahead with it because the fate of our family depended on the union, was enough to mess with my head.

First off, I was marrying a man I barely knew. A week earlier, Dad had called me into his office. I'd assumed it was to talk about retirement plans and how he wanted me to finally take over.

To take up the position I'd been training for my entire life.

No. I found a man there. A lean, unsteady-looking man with a moustache, standing in my father's office. I recognized him immediately because he looked like Boris Glazastov's son—the head of the Glazastov bratva faction.

And then he tells me I'll be marrying him in a week.

Even though I protested, I had to marry him because it was the only way to keep our family safe. Dad wouldn't give me any more explanation. If I valued duty and responsibility and wanted to take over, I'd do as he said.

So, I did.

Only to have my wedding interrupted by none other than Roman Volkov. A ruthless, cold, arrogant bastard whose reputation preceded him.

I would've shot him on the spot before he had the chance to walk down the aisle, but for the fear on the faces of the men my father said would protect me. And the shock that hadn't quite left my system.

"Marry him?" I scoff loudly, thrusting my hands onto my hips. "Never."

And the blood pact. What was that about? I know my father had dealings with the Volkov family, but according to him, it had been a short-term contract. The way Roman makes it sound, my father was a consigliere.

My father killed Roman's father? That's impossible.

Dmitri Volkov died in an accident. It was on the news. Roman is looking for someone to pin it on, and it's definitely not going to be me.

My anger builds to the point where pacing doesn't work anymore.

"I'm not a ditzy bride who's going to cower and agree to everything just because he has some power," I mutter under my breath, kicking off the heel I didn't throw at Roman.

My feet hurt like hell.

The hallway leading from the living room stretches longer than I expected—wide, with high vaulted ceilings and tall windows that let in faint streaks of afternoon light. The floor beneath my feet is polished marble, cool and smooth. My anger simmers as I take in the elegant sconces that cast a soft golden glow against walls decorated with portraits of people I don't recognize.

It's beautiful. But also cold and imposing. Much like Roman. I'm sure he needs the space so he can contain his frigid personality without turning anyone to stone.

I'd rather turn to stone than take his last name.

I pass room after room—an ornate dining room with a table long enough to seat ten, a drawing room that smells faintly of old leather and cigars, and a sunroom with sheer curtains billowing ever so slightly.

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None of them hold the man I'm looking for.

A curving staircase looms to my left, and I take it, my hand trailing over the gleaming mahogany rail. The second floor is quiet, and the silence is deafening enough that my steps quicken as I walk past closed doors. Some are slightly ajar, showing glimpses of guest bedrooms, a darkened library, and another hallway that turns sharply left.

A frustrated breath leaves me.

Did he leave? I muse, biting my lower lip. Maybe I can escape, get out and find my father.

Doubling back, I head down the stairs, turning right past the grand piano I somehow missed earlier. Then—finally—I spot a door set back from the rest, half-shielded by shadow. It's heavy and dark, the wood carved with faint patterns.

My fingers curl around the handle, and my pulse thrums. With a soft exhale, I open the door and step into his study.

Like every other room in the house, the study is spacious. The walls are so tall that I crane my neck to see the ceiling, and the bookshelves on the side walls are filled to the top with books.

But it's the man seated behind the desk, his face half-illuminated by the lamp perched at the edge of the desk, that catches my attention.

And steals my breath.

I never stopped to think about it, probably because I was fighting for my freedom and wondering how a man could shoot another person dead and not bat an eyelid. But Roman Volkov—as much as I hate to admit it—might be the most striking man I’ve ever laid eyes on.

His eyes are a dark, deep blue. Like the ocean. A blue that carries a tempting chaos. Looking into those eyes feels like the first time I held a gun in my hand, not because my father wanted me to, but because I’d finally found the one I could call mine. It felt heavy, like it could pull me under, and I wouldn’t survive, but I craved it regardless. His hair is a striking black, with streaks of gray around the temples, and sits in thick, orderly waves pushed to the back of his head.

My gaze flickers to the bridge of his nose and the cut of his jawline. It’s almost impossible to believe he hasn’t had some work done. And his lips—slightly wide and pressed into a thin line.

His appearance sends one message. That he doesn’t care whether you live or die.

Everything about Roman Volkov screams power. Danger. At the back of my mind, alarm bells go off, telling me to run. To turn around and make it as far as possible.

For some reason, it’s not because he has me captive in his house.

No. It’s something else that pools in my stomach and sinks below with a faint but present throb. Roman Volkov might as well be the most dangerous man I’ve ever come across, but unfortunately for me...that also means he’s devastatingly irresistible.

“You’ve agreed to my proposal, yes?” His voice is rough around the edges, like silk dragged over gravel, unmistakably thick, deliberate, and unapologetic. It sinks into my skin, reaching for my senses.

Thankfully, the words get through first, and I snap out of my daze.

“Proposal?” I spit. “Even if I had a reason to, I’d never marry a liar.”

His brow arches. His head tilts. “Liar?”

“Yes.” I move from my position by the door and walk to his desk. Up close, his eyes are not just blue. They’re cold and calculating. From the corner of my eye, I see a matte-black pistol resting beside a crystal tumbler filled with whiskey.

He could kill me.

I ignore the way fright wraps around my throat, cutting off the air for a moment. “You said my father broke a blood pact and killed your father.”

Roman’s chin lifts. Yes?

“Your father died in a car accident,” I point out. “It was in the news. CEO of Volkov Industries dies in a tragic car crash,” I say as if reading the headline from memory.

He doesn’t respond, but his silence tells me I’m close to the truth, so I continue. “Why would you say my father killed him? You’re looking for someone to blame, aren’t you? And you think I’m the helpless woman who’ll let you walk all over her and be intimidated by your threats.”

Still no answer. Somehow, his silence is more infuriating than his words. “You think I’m going to cower and call my father so you can threaten him into giving you...” I throw my hands in the air with an exasperated exhale. “Whatever it is you want from him.”

I jab my finger at him. “That’s never going to happen. So you either let me go, and I

won't come after you when I leave, or you lose out on everything, including your life."

Roman suddenly leans forward, and I jerk back instinctively. His fingers flex on the desk, and the lamplight catches a fresh gash along the back of his hand. It's red and angry against the lean muscle and the veins that ripple along his fingers.

"I don't want anything from your father, Isabella." He runs my name over his tongue. "Except his head, of course."

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His head?

“And I’m disappointed,” he throws out casually. His gaze rakes over my body, open and unbothered, lingering on the low-cut neckline of my wedding dress and the transparent lace that starts inches above my knees and flows all the way to the floor.

I should’ve gone for something modest.Or extravagant.But I wasn’t about to deny myself the pleasure of my dream wedding, even if that wedding was one I didn’t fully consent to. So I went to the bridal shop and picked the second dress they showed me, which was the most expensive.

I regret that decision now because Roman’s gaze makes me feel...exposed.

Like I’m wearing next to nothing, spread out for his sole pleasure. I bite down on my lip, curbing the urge to cross my arms over my chest.

Let himlookall he wants. He’ll never touch me.

“I did my research on you, Isabella Ricci,” he continues as his gaze returns to my face. “You were supposed to take over from your father. You’ve been in the family’s business since childhood, and you know how the bratva works.”

“And?” I ask pointedly.

He shrugs. “It’s odd, that’s all. That you’d believe everything you see in the news. I guess it’s because I haven’t killed your fatheryet. Because when I do, it won’t be an accident. It will be so gruesome that the media will report it word for word. Marco

Ricci—” He gestures with his hand in the air, as if he’s reading a headline. “Consigliere for the Russian bratva, killed and dumped in a gutter like a pig.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” I sneer. “You wouldn’t dare!”

When his lips curl, I realize it was bait. His theatrics, the delivery...it was all bait to see how I’d react. From the wedding upstaging till now, I’ve just been playing into his hands.

No.

No, Isabella. How could I not have seen it?

I take a deep breath, and another, until I find composure. “So you’re saying that my dad was responsible for your father’s death, and yet you framed it as a car accident? Why?” I purse my lips into a thin line. “Were you so ashamed to admit that the Volkovs have a weakness? Was it that you knew people would find and exploit that weakness, and you had no defense?”

“Did he also teach you how to be manipulative?” Roman replies, not missing a beat. “I can’t imagine you went very far. He must’ve been disappointed.”

The jerk.

“I—” I stop.

There’s no use going back and forth with him when I’m not sure what he has planned. The more I give him ways to get under the skin, the more leverage he has to keep me riled up.

Keep your head down. The first lesson my father taught me when I was finally

allowed to attend meetings with him. He warned me he wouldn't protect me, so I would face the consequences without mercy if I spoke out of turn. I was naive, but I learned my lesson after being publicly ridiculed that day. Instead of showing my hand, I learned to observe—see what the other person has before making a move.

Exhaling slowly, I let my hands drop to my sides. “I guess there's nothing else to say, then.” I hesitate, just a fraction, to see if he'll have any reaction to my sudden switch, but his face is like a mask, revealing nothing.

Not yet, anyway.

“I hope you don't come to regret your decision, Roman Volkov,” I mutter, the words stiff on my tongue as I spin on my heel and walk out.

The door clicks shut behind me, but the rage and helplessness don't. They stay lodged in my throat like a scream that's begging to claw its way out. I bite down harder, jaw clenched, fingers fisting the fabric of my dress as I storm down the hall in bare feet.

“Calmati,” I whisper over and over. Calm down. Breathe. Focus.

I take the stairs slowly, knees aching and dress heavy as it brushes along the floor. Halfway up, I pause, bracing a hand on my thigh to catch my breath—and that's when I feel it.

A bulge beneath the lace. My breath stutters.

I blink, my heart thudding as I hitch up my dress and reach beneath it. My fingers graze the inside of the garter to find a pocket. I find my phone inside, smooth and cool against my skin.

Shock slams into me like a wave. My mouth opens slightly as I pull my phone free,

staring at it in disbelief. I slipped it therebefore the ceremony because I couldn't trust anyone with it. I didn't have bridesmaids or friends at the wedding, and my father taught me better than letting valuables fall into the wrong hands.

With the chaos that ensued, I forgot about it.

My phone. A harsh, triumphant laugh slips past my lips as I look over my shoulder, grinning at the study's door.

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Roman Volkov has no idea what he's done. By the time he finds out he's brought an enemy into his house, it'll already be burned to the ground.

I'll make sure nothing's left. Not even the ashes.

3

ROMAN

I close the open document on my desk as Leo walks in, adjusting the cuff link on his shirt. Leaning back with both hands flat on the desk, I wait for him to sit before speaking.

"He's still on the run?"

He nods. "Yup. I checked in with the men you had stationed at his safe houses and placed some pressure on the others in case one of them knew something."

"I see," I mutter as my fingers dance on the polished wood. "Do you think he's left the country?"

Leo scoffs. "In a plane? I doubt it. We have eyes and ears at every airport and private tarmac. Unless he went through the water route as cargo, I bet he's still in the country. He's hiding, that's all."

A crooked smile spreads across my face as I shrug. "Then it's time to flush him out. Time for phase two." I lace my fingers together. "Tell the men I said they're welcome

to use any means. As long as it gets us the answers we need.”

“Okay,” he replies, but he makes no effort to leave.

“What is it?” I ask, purely because I know he has something to say and not out of curiosity or interest.

Leo sighs. “Marriage? I can see you using her to get to Marco Ricci, but you’re not serious about making her your wife, right?”

“Why not?” I ask.

He drags his chair forward and leans closer. “Because it sounds like madness to me, Roman. I can understand marrying for the sake of an alliance, but this is the daughter of the man who killed your father. It’s worse than signing a treaty with a former rival.”

My eyes lock on Leo’s and narrow. “You don’t have to remind me.”

I was the one who identified my father’s body.

I had to find out who killed him, because I couldn’t believe he’d die in a car accident that was clearly staged. I had the bloodied knuckles that brought out the truth from his driver—that he’d been paid by Marco Ricci, our consigliere, to sabotage the car.

And then I continued digging, only to find out that Marco Ricci wasn’t the only culprit. Men my father trusted in the brotherhood had conspired to take him out. Then, they tried to take out his son too.

“I know whose daughter she is.” My voice is rough, and I force the words through clenched teeth. “I also know Marco Ricci is a dead man when I find him.”

Before then, I intend to make him experience the worst pain possible.

His only daughter, only child—she is mine. And any child that comes from her is mine.

“I’m ending his lineage,” I say. “When I watch the life drain from his eyes, I want him to know that he’ll never get the chance to pass down his traitorous blood to anyone else.”

Leo is silent for a minute, then exhales loudly. “Remind me never to get on your bad side, Roman.”

What was it Isabella called me again? A monster? While she offered to spare my life if I let her go...dressed in her wedding dress.

I close my eyes with a quiet sigh, and the image of Isabella, defiant and angry, her chest heaving as she stood in front of my desk, slips into my head. She looked even better than she did standing next to her fiancé.

The feigned meekness of loyalty in her eyes was gone, replaced by a fire. My fingers curl as I imagine what it would’ve been like if I’d taken that heat in my hand and fanned it.

If I would have spread my hand across her face, my thumb tracing the outline of her full, rosy lips, and slipped it in, watching her mouth take me. It would’ve flamed the column of her throat and settled at the nape, where her pulse beat wildly.

Her dress.

It would’ve burned the fabric, plunging the neckline lower until she had nothing on.

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Nothing to shield her from the weight of my gaze.

Watching her cleavage rise as she raged had made my chest coil with barely leashed hunger. I hid it well, but I wanted to rip her dress from her body, leave her naked and trembling—not just from desire, but from knowing she belongs to me.

I want to take that fury in her eyes and turn it into something raw, something desperate.

Watch them roll back as she begs me to take her.

The sheer lace over her legs did nothing to deter my imagination, either. I couldn't stop thinking about how easy it would be to leave my chair and rip apart the delicate fabric. Her whimpers...how loud her moans would be as she begged me to touch her.

The spark in her eyes, in her stance.

“Hell.” I drag a hand over my face. It was almost irresistible—the urge to bend her defiance to my will until she was raw and needy, ready to take everything with a single word on her lips. My name.

My cock twitches in my pants, and I move my hips forward to ease the discomfort.

“Are you rethinking your decision? Because I can think of other ways—” Leo holds his tongue when I open my eyes, silencing him without saying anything. He clears his throat. “You know what? I’ll get ahead on plan B.” He stands up. “What about the accountant? What do you plan to do about him?”

My father's personal accountant. He'd been stealing money for two years and funneling it into offshore accounts for Marco Ricci. My guess is that's how the bastard managed to go underground.

Unfortunately for the accountant, he did a shitty job of covering his tracks and made the stupid decision to not follow Ricci underground.

I wave Leo off. "I'll see to it."

"Sure," he replies, picking at an invisible piece of lint on his shirt before he walks out of my office.

I wait a beat before picking up my phone. "Marge," I say to my secretary, a sixty-year-old woman who used to work for my father. One of the few people my father trusted who didn't betray him. "Tell Alex I need to see him, will you?"

"Sure. Would you like me to have him personally escorted?" she asks, letting it slip that she knows something is about to happen.

That's why my father trusted her. She knows what goes on behind closed doors but minds her business well.

"Yes, Marge." I smile. "Thank you."

Ten minutes later, the door opens, and Alex walks in, followed by a security guard. "Thank you," I tell the guard. "You can go."

The door closes again. I inhale, taking a good look at him. Alex Hart. A man small enough that he should've learned how to be timid.

"Alex." I point to the chair Leo vacated. "Please sit."

Fear. It slashes through his face and freezes him on the spot. Well, I'll give him one. He certainly knows when he's walked into a trap.

"I-I..." he stutters. "He forced me. He said that if I didn't do it, he was going to—he was going—" He rubs the back of his neck as his gaze darts around the office.

He was going to...?

I know he doesn't have a family or a dependent, so Alex Hart's motivation was pure greed. Not that it would've stopped me either way.

"Sit," I say, sternly this time.

He swallows thickly as he nods, then drags his feet all the way to the chair. I settle back into my seat, eyes never leaving him. Time stretches between us. I wait, watching him dig his grave in fear. It'll be easier for me to bury him in it.

He swallows again, the sound loud in the otherwise silent room. "Th-thank you," he whispers, barely audible, his voice thick with terror.

"How much did you steal for Marco Ricci?" I ask. "No, forget that." I shake my head. "Tell me something better. Where is he?"

Alex's eyes widen, and he flinches back into his seat, his voice a desperate squeak. "I-I don't know! I swear, I don't know!" His hands twist together, his knuckles white, and his gaze darts frantically across the room as if the answer is written on the walls. "We only spoke once. The other times, he gave me the order through?—"

He cuts himself off, realizing he's said too much. But I know more now.

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There's someone else. There's always someone else, but this time, it's a middleman.

Leaving my chair, with my fingers spanning the curve of my desk, I stop in front of him. "Who?"

"Nobody," he replies hastily. "Nobody. It was only me. And I promise you, it was just the one time. I was going to tell your father, but he threatened that he'd have me killed if I did. Then I thought I could replace the money, but I-I?—"

My fist snaps out, hitting his face. His head jerks to the side, a soft gasp escaping his lips. I step back, my breath controlled, my eyes narrowing as I watch the shock still rattling him.

"Don't lie to me, Alex," I growl. "Who else was involved?"

"I swear," he begs. "There's nobody else. Please forgive me. Please."

I'm certain of one thing now. Whoever the middleman was, he's still working for this company. He's still around, living and breathing. Also—Alex is scared of him, so I'm dealing with someone who was high on the list of the people my father confided in.

But he won't remain hidden forever.

I grab my phone. "Marge, hold my calls and postpone my meetings, will you?" My eyes dart to the door briefly, and then back to Alex so he knows there's no escape. "It looks like we'll be here for a while."

Leo shows up to the sight of a broken chair and a security guard exiting my office. My sleeves are rolled up and I'm wiping my hands on a napkin when he walks in.

He shakes his head. "I don't want to know, and I'm sure he deserved it. I came back with a status report."

"What do we have?" I ask as I toss the napkin to the trash can in the corner, untucking my sleeves before I sit.

"Nothing." He clicks his tongue. "Nothing at all. If he told anyone about his plans, it couldn't have been more than one or two. And neither of them are anywhere to be found."

I'm not surprised. It's the only reason I haven't found him.

"Do you think she knows?" he asks with a subtle chin tilt.

Isabella.

"She's his daughter," Leo continues. "If he trusted her enough that he had plans to hand over his business, he must've told her something. Or she knows where he could be hiding. Ask her," he suggests.

I arch a brow.

He's unbothered by my lack of response. "You took her. She's your intended bride. And she lives in your house. That makes you the most qualified person to ask her where Ricci is. The sooner we get to him, the faster we learn how many people were involved in the incident."

She'd probably spit on my face, or take a vow of silence just to spite me.

“She might also be in communication with him,” Leo throws in. It’s an afterthought for him, but...why didn’t I think about that?Isabella didn’t have any belongings on her when I carried her out of the church, but I didn’t bother finding out if she had her phone stored anywhere.

Dresses have pockets, don’t they?

“Call Sergei,” I say, but then I change my mind. “No.” I shake my head. “Don’t. Let it go.”

“Even if I might be right?”

Even so.

I made an error—a terrible oversight on my part. If Isabella has been fooling me all along, pulling an act with moments of fear and forced defiance, then I intend to find out.

But I won’t give her time to cover up her tracks. I intend to find out exactly what she’s been up to.

Hours later,I walk into a quiet house, my footsteps echoing through the foyer. Sergei approaches as I step through the archway, his head dipping in a curt nod.

“Boss.”

“Where’s Isabella?” I ask.

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He points in the direction of the stairs. “I saw her head up an hour ago. Is there something wrong? She hasn’t left the house,” he’s quick to add, covering his bases. “I checked.”

Good.

I had the housekeeper, Polina, set her up on the second floor, on the far end of the opposite wing of the building from my rooms. As much as I don’t intend to let her leave, I’m not keen to see her face often.

I don’t need a reminder of the face of the man who killed my father. And I don’t need to lust after his daughter, either.

Like a stubborn, unrestrained being, my mind conjures up the image of her in her wedding dress, the neckline dipping low enough to expose the delicate swell of her cleavage.

Sin.

Temptation.

A distraction carved in white lace against her olive skin.

I grit my teeth as I walk away from Sergei, dragging a hand over my face. The last thing I need is to be thinking about the way her skin looked against the soft lightning in my study, or how much I?—

“Marco Ricci.” I say his name aloud, forcing my thoughts back to order. My father’s cold face flashes before my eyes, his eyes filled with death. “Bastard,” I hiss as I cling to the handrail, climbing the stairs. My fingers dig into the surface, and my nails break as I drag them along, rage pulsing through my veins.

Isabella Ricci is a means to an end. Nothing more.

She might end up with my last name, sitting by my side, but she’ll never be anything other than a trophy and a conquest.

I find myself pausing at her door, a hand poised to push the handle open and catch her unawares. For some reason, I hesitate. If she’s guilty, I’d have to do things that would force her to see the monster in me. The part of me that only people who beg for mercy get to witness.

Do I want her to see it?

A muscle ticks in my jaw as I push the door open, half expecting to see shock on her face and then a pillow flying across the room. Instead, it’s empty.

I enter, closing the door softly behind me. I haven’t been in this room in years, not since I moved out after I turned twenty. My father wanted me to stay, but I was adamant that I needed to get out from under him if I wanted to build myself into someone who could take over the organization.

Then he died, and I moved back in, into the larger suite.

The soft, matte gray of the walls is faded, but the color fills me with a nostalgia that doesn’t settle. Light-colored curtains hang by the tall windows, drawn halfway to let in thin beams of reluctant light. The bed and most of the other furniture in the house changed when I moved in.

This bedroom was mine.

Now it's hers. And it looks as if nobody's slept in it.

Where's Isabella?

Glancing at the bathroom door, I listen for the sound of a shower running. There's silence, but my thoughts run south again, and I picture her behind the door.

Naked.

Her bare skin kissed by steam, olive-toned and slick with water. Her hair wet and curling at the ends. Droplets gliding over the curve of her spine and down her body. The image hits me harder than I expect, dragging heat through my blood like wildfire and punching through my gut.

I let out a rough, ragged exhale, ignoring the sharp pull downward and turning away sharply. The door to the hallway stares at me, but I don't take a step forward.

Because I'm supposed to be finding out the truth from Isabella, but truth has another meaning now.

The truth is that I want her. Badly.

And wanting her is starting to feel a lot like losing control.

Like weakness.

"Fucking hell," I grunt as fresh annoyance slams through me. It's enough to get me out of her room, slamming the door behind me. I stride down the hallway, past the door to the kitchen...which Isabella walks through, startling me.

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She's wearing a shirt. Just a shirt, hanging well above her knees. The shirt covers barely enough to keep my mind from making a U-turn in the previous direction. And it's mine.

"Isabella." Her name is like a scratched record on my tongue, and I can't help but glance at the hem of the shirt.

She follows my gaze and then meets my eyes again with a shrug. "You didn't give me anything to wear. I slept in my wedding dress—thank you very much—and then I had to scavenge for this. If you're going to kidnap a woman on her wedding day, the least you could do is bring a change of clothes."

For all her smart talk, she pulls the shirt lower, fighting for more length before crossing her arms over her chest.

"Polina will get you clothes tomorrow," I say.

Isabella shrugs, feigning nonchalance. "Sure. As long as she knows to get them in my size. If you're wondering what I was doing in the kitchen..." She holds out the core of an apple. "I was hungry. You might be Count Dracula and dine on blood, but some of us haven't sold our human hunger for fame and fortune."

I blink once, slowly. "What?"

She sighs, annoyed that I didn't immediately catch on. "It means there's barely any food. Not that it's your problem."

My voice stays flat as I respond. “Polina will get you something.”

“Sure.” She shrugs. Then she starts walking off, bare feet padding against the marble, before tossing over her shoulder, “I might as well die of starvation before my father finds me.”

The way she says he’ll find her with such certainty has my eyes narrowing. The phone.

“Isabella.”

She pauses on the second step and turns.

I watch her eyes, observing them for the truth she’s trying to hide. “If you know where your father is, it will be best to tell me.”

“Tell you?” she scoffs with a dismissive wave of her hand. “You want to kill him. Why would I tell you where he is so you can kill him? Besides...” She blows out a breath. “I don’t know where he is. He didn’t attend my wedding, remember?”

She knows something.

I intend to find out one way or another, even if it means I have to carry out certain plans earlier than intended. “Inform him that you’re getting married in a week,” I tell her.

Her eyes widen. Fear.

“And beginning tonight, we’ll be sleeping in the same bedroom.”

ISABELLA

When I was ten, I had a severe ear infection that led to me having to use a hearing aid for a couple of weeks. Now, I'm pretty sure the infection must've returned, because I can't have heard Roman correctly.

The first part—getting married—I heard. He said it when he walked into the cathedral and tossed me over his shoulder.

The second?

I struggle to keep my jaw from dropping, and my hand goes clammy, making my grip on the railing slippery. My fingers tremble as he stares at me—no expression, barely readable.

“Bedroom?” I squeak.

Roman nods, his tone unwavering. “Yes. You're my fiancée, and there are certain duties I demand of you. The first night was to give you enough time to settle in. Tonight, you do what's required.”

What's required?! Inside my head, my thoughts are screaming. He means sex. That's the only explanation for what he just said.

No. No. No freaking way.

He's hot, a silver fox with an amazing build and a physique that would probably work on me if we met at a club or something, but no. I'm not ever letting Roman Volkov, the man who kidnapped me from the church, made me his prisoner, declared that he was going to marry me...see me naked.

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Did I add that I'm a freaking prisoner here? All because he has some grievances with my father.

"There's no—" I bite my tongue. Hard. It's a test. The same way he had me tripping over my words while I stood in his study, still wearing my wedding dress. Roman wants to see me riled up and desperate, so I'll do anything he asks.

My lips curl into a subtle sneer. Never. I'll jump off a building before I let him see me at my breaking point.

"Sure." I shrug, flipping my hair over my shoulder. "If that's what you want, who am I to stop you? I personally prefer role-play—I'm very good at playing starfish. But..." I pout. "I'm sure you can work something out. You're big and strong, after all."

"I'll be the last person to judge you on your preferences," he replies without missing a beat, before I'm done basking in my witty comeback. I'm down to my last line of defense, which is walking away. But, I don't want to.

It's foolish, maybe overzealous, but I know he's always gotten the last say. Hopefully, this one time, I be able to break that streak.

Peeling my lips back and exposing a forced, bright smile, I point toward the ascent of the stairs. "You wanna go first? Or walk behind?" I ask.

He tilts his head but doesn't bite, his expression unreadable. I keep going anyway because quitting mid-sentence would give him too much satisfaction.

“Make sure to bring a blanket, because I hate sharing,” I say with a dramatic sigh, tossing my hair over my shoulder. Theatrics help distract me from the very real and very inconvenient image that slips into my mind—us sharing a blanket, naked underneath.

Nope. Absolutely not.

I shake my head as if I can physically dislodge the thought, my lips pressing into a line. I’d rather sleep in a tub full of freezing water than spend one night tangled up in the same room, in the same bed, with him.

But when I glance at Roman again, just for a second, the thought takes on a life of its own. I can’t take my eyes off his broad shoulders, toned chest, strong hands. My face flushes so fast it burns, and I spin around on my heel before he notices the color rising in my cheeks.

Without another word, I rush up the stairs, bare feet slapping against the marble like a warning to myself: Don’t. Even. Go. There.

The door slams shut as I retreat into my room, and I clutch my chest, breathing heavily. One more minute, and my performance would’ve fallen apart like a box office reject.

As I keep my palm against my racing heart, I hear footsteps up the stairs. Blood roars in my ears as I spin around, searching for a lock on the door.

There’s none. Nothing to protect me from Roman if he follows up on his word.

“Shit,” I mutter, looking around the room frantically for something to use as an obstacle. The chair close to the vanity is the only thing I can move, and my feet slide across the floor as I practically jump to get it. Somehow, I manage to push it from its

corner to the door, wedging it under the handle. I hold my breath as the footsteps get louder, the sound of them in the hallway like a terrible warning.

What was I thinking when I challenged him? I moan as I dissolve in panic. I was practically urging him on. Even if he had no intentions of doing anything and was simply threatening me, I dangled a carrot in front of his face and called him a dumb horse.

The closer and louder the sound of footsteps gets, the faster my heart beats until it's the only thing I can hear. The footsteps slow, then come to a stop outside my door. I clamp my lips shut and hold my breath, not making a sound.

As if it'd stop him.

As if anything stopped him when he killed the man I was supposed to marry in cold blood.

"Miss Ricci." It's the housekeeper's voice. I jump back when she knocks. "Miss Ricci?" she calls again.

It's not him. It's not him. But what if he's behind her? It could be a ploy. But even as I consider the thought, I realize how unlikely it is. A man like Roman Volkov is used to having everything he wants—ruthless, egoistic, narcissistic, top-of-the-line asshole. He wouldn't do anything that would hurt his pride.

Like putting on an act to get me to open the door. That's why he had to barge into a cathedral with full pews. He could've gotten me before I reached the church or after, but he wanted to make a scene.

"Miss Ricci?" Polina knocks again. "I came to change your sheets, ma'am."

“One moment!” I call out before dragging the chair out of the way again. A bit wary still, I open the door a fraction, peering behind her to make sure there’s nobody else.

Satisfied, I step away, letting her in. She gives me a puzzled look as she enters but doesn’t comment. I stand by the door as she strips and replaces the bedsheets before leaving.

When the door clicks shut, I stare at it for a long minute, chewing on my nail as I debate whether I really need the chair or if I’m just being paranoid.

In the end, paranoia wins. I drag the chair into place and wedge it under the handle, sighing as I shake my head. Then I make my way to the bed and drop onto it with a dull thud.

I can’t keep doing this. I can’t stay here much longer—I need a way out. Lifting the pillow, I reach underneath and pull out my phone. But before I can unlock it, I freeze. My brows draw together, Roman’s words echoing in my head.

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“If you know where your father is, it will be best to tell me.”

It wasn't a question. Not really. It felt like a warning, as if he knew the truth and was waiting for confirmation. I glance around the room, my grip tightening on the phone.

The phone? My eyes widen.

“No,” I whisper, heart thudding. “That's not possible.” If Roman knew I had this, he would've taken it when he brought me here.

Unless he wants me to use it. And this is a trap.

Why did it have to be me?

With a frustrated groan, I hurl the phone to the other end of the bed, watching it bounce once before going still. I drag my hands through my hair and over my face, sighing loudly.

Later. I'll deal with it later. Right now, I need a shower. Maybe it'll wash away this feeling crawling under my skin and keep my thoughts from going south whenever I see him.

The way he looked at me...his dark blue eyes roaming over the shirt. Like he was thinking of ways to take it off.

Shaking the thought off, I peel off the shirt and head into the bathroom, letting the hot water beat down on me until my skin turns pink and steam clouds the mirror.

When I step back into the bedroom, a towel wrapped around me, I head to the closet to pick out another of his shirts. Three shirts—that's all I have to wear until I get more clothes.

I had to scavenge for them since I couldn't keep wearing my wedding dress. Polina was kind enough to wash them for me, and as much as I didn't want Roman anywhere near my body, I didn't have any choice.

I still don't want him anywhere close. Not after what happened downstairs.

"It's just a shirt," I murmur. One that he hasn't worn in a long time. Still, I stare daggers at it for a beat before snatching it up.

The fabric slides down my body and ends at the top of my thighs. It's soft—worn cotton. I inhale softly as the faint smell of expensive cologne, burnt orange, and a hint of coffee envelops me. The sleeves are too long, swallowing my hands until I fold them back. The collar slips slightly off one shoulder, and I catch my reflection in the mirror.

His shirt. My skin. For a moment, I slip, losing myself in a fantasy in which he's some other man whose scent makes me heady and causes my nerves to throb. I wrap my arms around my middle, imagining they belong to someone else.

Someone with bigger, slightly calloused hands that slide across my skin—a combination of rough and gentle. My hands fall lower as I press my thighs together, and a shiver runs down my spine, settling between my thighs, teasing my thoughts further.

My eyes fly open as a whimper slips past my lips, and I see myself in the mirror again, but this time, I'm a reflection of forbidden desire.

Lust.

“It’s a chemical reaction,” I tell myself. “Nothing more.”

I exhale, pulling the shirt lower before walking away.

The surprised look on Roman’s face when he finds me sprawled across his living room couch the following day is enough to make my morning feel like a five-star breakfast. Still, I school my features, softening my grin into something more polite.

Less gloaty.

I am gloating on the inside, of course, but I have a plan to execute. The last thing I need is him catching on.

“Good morning,” I say with exaggerated cheer, flashing him my most innocent smile.

He gives a short nod. I grit my teeth behind a tight smile and fight the urge to roll my eyes. “You look like you’re off somewhere,” I add, tone airy. “Work, perhaps?”

Another nod.

Seriously? If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was talking to a holographic projection. I push down my irritation.

Focus, Isabella.

“I have a request,” I say, lifting my chin slightly. “I’d like to leave for the day. You can assign a security detail, as many as you think will keep me from running away, but I need to get out.”

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He opens his mouth, but I cut in, raising my hand sharply. “Before you say the house is ‘big enough,’ I want you to think about something.” My voice softens, almost trembling—Oscar-worthy. “You took me from my wedding, Roman. You pulled me from everything familiar and brought me to an undisclosed location.”

I hold his gaze. “Unless you plan to keep me locked up like some ghost bride no one’s allowed to see or hear, I think I deserve some kind of normalcy.”

I don’t give him a chance to cut in.

“Also,” I add quickly, “if you’re serious about this whole ‘marriage’ thing, you really don’t want people whispering that your wife only exists behind closed doors.” I tilt my head slightly, my voice dipping into something like teasing. “Unless that’s the look you’re going for?”

Roman’s response after I’m done is silence that stretches on forever. His eyes scan me slowly, calculatingly, like he’s peeling back every layer of my performance.

Avoiding his gaze, as unnerving as it is, will give me away, so I square my shoulders and widen my eyes. His gaze lingers on my face, then drops briefly to my arms.

He shifts his weight slightly, arms still folded across his chest, and when he rubs his chin, I think he might actually give in. Then his mouth tugs downward, the slightest frown curling at the edge. His voice is flat. Final.

“No.”

No?!

“What do you mean, no?”

“No,” he repeats.

I nod. “Yeah, I heard you. The single word was loud and clear. But I need to know why. I have a right to leave, don’t I? This isn’t Beauty and the freaking Beast.”

His expression doesn’t waver, not even when I take a step closer. “Unless you’re some type of sick, twisted man who thinks women don’t have rights, then let me go out. Like I said, you can send as many men along as you want. I don’t care.” I shrug, implying my nonchalance.

A ghost smile touches his lips as he shakes his head. “I’ve had men locked in places without light for less offenses, IsabellaRicci. And now I’m convinced that your father did a terrible job of teaching you how to get what you want.”

“Either that...” He clicks his tongue. “Or the people you think it worked on were just plain stupid.”

That’s it. I’m done. I toss my hands in the air. “I tried reasoning with you, and it didn’t work. Don’t blame me if I find another way out.”

“Escape?” he asks as I’m about to make a dramatic exit.

Escape? I did think about running away, but the thought didn’t last longer than the first day he brought me here. Now I plan to destroy everything he owns from the inside out. But for now—I face him, staring into his eyes as I wait for something to give.

Maybe a half-second lack of confidence in his ability to restrain me in this house?
“Are you scared?” I ask, shaking my head with as much cockiness as I can muster.
“That I’ll find a way?”

“No,” he replies flatly. “My men have orders to shoot you if you try to escape.”

Shoot?!

“You’re—” I exhale shakily as shock pours through my system. “You’re a monster.”

Sergei walks in and pauses when he sees us. He clears his throat awkwardly. “I’m sorry. I’ll wait outside.”

“No,” Roman stops him. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Like that, I become some forgotten relic, standing in the living room with steam pouring out of my ears as he walks away.

Shoot me?

I’ve come across men with no regard for human life before. I’ve watched them take the lives of other men without a shred of emotion.

But Roman? Roman Volkov is the devil, and I’m trapped in his lair.

5

ROMAN

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Leo doubles his pace as I stride through the lobby, catching up with me as I get to the elevator. He shakes his head as he struggles to catch his breath.

“I need to put in more hours at the gym,” he comments while I press the button that turns green. “But between shadowing you and attending to other matters, the only time I have is between noon and two pm.”

The doors open, and I step in, waiting for them to close again before turning to him. “Twelve and two?”

He nods. “Yeah. You’re a morning person, which means I can’t be in sweaty shorts when you need me, and you’re not the kind to go straight home from the office either. Twelve to two is the least busy time of the day—according to my data—” I glance down when he looks at his watch.

“I have Sergei,” I remind him. “You can take time off if you need to.”

“You need me,” he says with a quiet snort. To prove his point, he presses the button for the top floor, before facing me with a smug look and an arched brow. See?

“What’s the update?” I ask, ignoring him.

He leans against the metal wall as the elevator rides up. “Nothing new. And believe me, I’m using every resource at my disposal. A lot of loan sharks and safe houses are out of business now.”

It’s not enough.

My patience is thin, and it's close to snapping. I don't want to start a war, but the longer Marco Ricci stays hidden, the less likely I am to honor certain obligations and treaties.

"Alex," Leo comments. "What did you do to him?"

The accountant. "Took him off the list," I say flatly.

Leo shrugs, pushing upright when the doors open. He follows, hot on my trail, as I walk to my office. "Okay. Who's next?"

"Mr. Volkov," Marge greets me with a polite smile.

I nod, but Leo looks at her desk with a big grin. "Marge. You look as beautiful as ever."

He kisses her hand, earning an eye roll from her and a swat on the shoulder when he refuses to let go. I leave them, moving on.

My seat is barely warm when Leo walks in. "The list," he reminds me. "Who's next?"

An executive.

It took a couple of broken fingers and a bloodied nose, among other things, to get the name from Alex, but he eventually confessed. I have to admit, I was a bit impressed that he held out that long.

Two broken fingers, but I expected him to rattle from the threat alone.

"What do you have on Billie Russell?" I ask.

Leo rubs the back of his head, frowning a bit. “The former director of human resources who’s now on the executive board?”

I nod.

“The standard,” he says. In addition to being the only person I trust, Leo has an unofficial capacity in the company. A photographic memory with a large file on everyone in upper management.

“Any family?” I ask.

He purses his lips, thinking. I reach for my laptop to do a quick search, but I barely have it open when he snaps his fingers. “Yeah, an ex-wife. They split five years ago in a messy divorce. She took the house.” He laughs. Why?”

“Children?”

“Yeah. Two. Again—” He gestures. “Why?”

My jaw clenches, and my anger coils, sitting patiently in my gut. “He was the middleman between Alex and Ricci.”

Leo drags his hand over his face with a sigh. “How many now? At this point, you’re better off turning the company inside out. He used to attend dinners at your house, didn’t he?”

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Yes. Another person my father stupidly trusted. At this point, I'm starting to think the man I knew... wasn't the man he was. I learned almost everything I know from my father—he was ruthless, nearly unforgiving, and had hard boundaries.

He must've slipped in his older age, letting them get to him.

It doesn't matter. Weak or not, I intend to avenge his death. One by one, everybody who played a part will pay.

Marco Ricci is the cherry on the cake.

"I need you to find out where his kids are. Have someone go there and send proof while keeping an eye on them."

"Whatever you say," he replies.

The door opens slightly, and Marge pokes her head through. "Didn't want to disturb, but Billie Russell says he'd like to see you. Something about an idea for next quarter. Where do you want me to put him?"

Leo chuckles darkly. "Speak of the devil, and he'll appear. Put him in the conference room, Marge."

"Sure."

"You're a sweetheart," he tells her as the door closes again. Then he turns to me, adding when I tilt my head in question, "I didn't think you wanted a clean-up crew

here for the second time in two days. Besides, it's soundproof." He stands. "I'll make the call. Give you some room."

I flex my knuckles as he leaves before getting to my feet. My eyes wander to the spot where Alex begged for mercy, his pitiful wails like a stain that'll never wash out.

When he begged...he begged.

Unlike her.

The parting comment before I left was supposed to scare Isabella into staying put, but even if it frightened her, she didn't let it show.

And last night...I thought she might've cowered. Or found an excuse to keep me away so she could use one last Hail Mary to reach her father.

Instead, she invited me to come along.

"You wanna go first? Or walk behind?" Her words echo in my head, teasing me. "I'm sure you can work something out. You're big and strong, after all."

A starfish.

A knowing smile curls my lips. If—no, when I take Isabella to bed, she won't just lie there. I don't intend to show her affection or tenderness, but I'll make her beg for more.

For my touch. For my head between her thighs and my cock inside her. Her sneers will become broken, ragged moans as she clings to me, and the only thing on her lips will be my name as I use her.

I take a deep breath, and the image of Isabella in my shirt comes to mind again.

Weak buttons. They'd snap easily under my hands, falling to the ground with ease. Her soft skin in my hands, her breasts spilling out, and her legs spread.

She'd make a pretty sight. Pretty, pink, and very fuckable. When it happens, I don't intend to hold back.

Marge knocks again.

"I'll be out in a minute," I say, pushing Isabella out of my head. Soon. I'll have her carrying my last name and my child.

For now, I have other things to attend to.

"One last thing," I mutter as I reach into my desk drawer. My fingers touch something cold and hard, and my smile widens as I remove it and tuck it into my waistband.

Billie hurriedly stands when I walk into the conference room. "Mr. Volkov," he addresses me. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

"Sure," I reply, nonplussed, taking my place at the head of the table. "You said you wanted to discuss something pertaining to the next quarter?"

His head dances as he nods, and I watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallows. He's nervous. Either he knows something is coming his way, or he's drowning in guilt.

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Neither makes any difference to me. If he's here to ask for mercy, he'll find out that his fate would've been better as a fugitive.

I would've found him, but that's beside the point. "Go ahead, Bille."

"Okay." His hands fall on his thighs, and he rubs them together. "So, you know I worked for your father. Spent twenty years working alongside him, so I know a lot about this company. I was thinking we could establish trade relations with a wider international market."

He clears his throat and loosens his tie. "I could go," he says with a sudden upbeat attitude. "I don't mind breaking the ground, putting the work in. You don't have to pay me as much as I earn here. I'll do anything for this company."

A low, humorless laugh rumbles from my chest. It startles him—just enough to make him shift in his seat.

"You should've run, Billie."

His eyes widen. The room stretches into a thick silence, broken only by the subtle tick of the clock on the wall.

"You had your chance. You could've disappeared, and changed your name. Started over somewhere far from here." I lean forward slowly, my voice dropping to a near whisper. "But instead, you walked right into the lion's den, thinking you'd walk out with a promotion? I mean..." I scoff. "I would've found you, but you'd have bought yourself some time."

He swallows hard, his smile twitching at the edges, trying to hold.

“You really thought I wouldn’t find out?” I shake my head. “Stealing from my father was the last mistake you’ll ever make.”

“Steal? Me?” he repeats, feigning shock as he presses a hand to his chest like I’ve just accused him of murder. “Why would I do that?”

I stare at him flatly. “You tell me.”

He lets out a shaky chuckle as if the idea is so absurd it’s laughable. “Your father was good to me,” he says, dragging out every word with exaggerated sincerity. “I owe him everything, Mr. Volkov. To think that I’d steal from him? Impossible.”

His eyes widen for effect, but I see right through the act.

“Then I suppose the money you embezzled for Marco Ricci happened on its own?” I say coolly, watching the twitch in his jaw.

The silence that follows is louder than anything else he’s said. “Alex gave up your name.”

His chair scrapes back, and I see his feet point toward the door. He’s getting ready to run.

Too late.

“Alex Hart is the last person you should trust, Roman,” he says, using my name as a desperate last resort. “Your father never did. I knew he was stealing, and I told him to come clean. I never thought he’d turn on me.”

I say nothing.

He's already dug a hole. I should bury him in it, but I don't intend on getting rid of him just yet. I look away for a second, and he bolts out of the chair.

The sound of my gun cocking stops him in his tracks. "You might want to reconsider taking another step."

"Wh—" I smell the same fear Alex showed as he swallows thickly. "What are you doing?"

I point to his chair. "Sit."

He's quick to comply, and I place the gun on the table, watching him unfold in terror. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to tell me where Marco Ricci is. And before you deny it, know that I don't have any problem putting the bullet between your eyes. In fact, it'll bring me much pleasure to do so."

"I don't know," he says, his hands visibly shaking on the table. "The last time I saw him was a week ago. He said he needed some money. A big amount. I told him it would raise flags, but he said he would hurt my kids."

I shrug, my hand sitting lightly on the gun. "Save your sob story for someone who cares. Tell me where he is, or you might really start worrying about the safety of your children."

As he fidgets, I reach for my phone and send a message to Leo. A minute later, a video pops up. I press play and slide my phone across to him.

His hand flies to his mouth in a horrified gasp. "My—" He looks at me, eyes wide. "Where did you—where?—"

“I’ll ask one more time. Where is Ricci?”

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“I don’t know! I promise you, I don’t know! He said he was going to contact me because he had something to do out of town, but I haven’t received any calls from him.”

I see.

He’s telling the truth, that much I know. “You get to keep your head on your shoulders, Billie. However, you’re going to listen to my next words carefully...”

“What are you doing here?” I ask when I head down hours later—the sun set a while ago—and see Leo standing by the car.

He shrugs. “I felt you needed some company.” He opens the back door, but I ignore it, reaching for the front passenger door. “I also gave your driver the day off, so you have me for the rest of the day.”

I wait until he comes around, gets in, and closes the door to call him out. “Spill.”

Leo hesitates, then sighs. “Nope. You don’t want to know what I think. So I’m going to pretend like I agree with your plan. When’s the wedding?”

My lips press into a thin line as my forehead furrows. “Wedding?”

“You’re getting married to Isabella Ricci, aren’t you?” He starts the car, slowly pulling away from the parking spot. “I only have one question—what if he never comes for her? Your main goal is to use her to get Marco, right? What if he abandons his daughter? From what I’ve heard, he treated her more like an employee than his

only child.”

On a different day, I’d ignore Leo’s skepticism, but after Billie... The pool of people who know about Marco Ricci’s whereabouts is getting smaller, and with no rumors of a plan to retrieve Isabella, I am getting worried.

If he manages to slip further away, my plan has failed. For the most part.

The pulse in my temple is so loud from my seething anger that it drowns out everything, including Leo’s voice. It rises through my chest, coiling around my throat until it’s the only thing I can see and hear.

Fucking bastard.

He won’t get away with it. No matter what I have to do—I’ll find him. I swear.

I’m out of the car the moment it stops, kicking the door open and striding through the house and to the stairs without so much as a pause. Leo calls after me, but I don’t break stride. His voice fades the further I go, drowned out by the storm in my chest.

I reach Isabella’s door. No hesitation this time. No knocking. I shove it open?—

And freeze.

She’s just stepped out of the bathroom, a white towel clinging low to her hips. Steam curls around her like smoke, and water drips from her hair, sliding down her bare shoulders and gliding along the curve of her collarbone.

She stops when she sees me, her lips parting slightly, breath catching. And for one long, burning second, everything else disappears.

The words that sat on my tongue, the anger raging in my chest...everything has turned to smoke. Because all I can think about is how goddamn good she looks like this—dripping, flushed, and half-naked in the middle of her room.

And how easy it would be to reach for her towel, tossing it away. Naked. Olive skin glistening from the shower, and at my mercy.

My eyes rake over her body without subtlety, and my jaw ticks as her face flushes, the warm pink spreading to her chest. How far does it go? I wonder as my gaze sinks lower, to the point where her towel stops on her thighs and the rest of her legs go on forever.

They'd look better over my shoulders, her thighs spread wide and her pussy quivering against my tongue.

And wrapped around me as I fuck her, my cock sliding in and out of her tight, wet?—

“Get out!” she shrieks, and I duck just in time for her to grab a pillow and chuck it at my head. Surprisingly, her towel stays in place despite all the movement. “What are you doing here?!”

“What do you think?” I rasp. My voice is thick with lust, and a large part of my brain isn't thinking anymore. Somehow, my thirst for revenge and the rush of desire have blended into one ticking bomb.

Isabella's eyes widen as I take a step forward, and I see a flash of fear, mingled with uncertainty. It doesn't slow me down, and I cross the room, keeping my gaze trained on her until she backs herself into the wall.

Earl gray. Cream.

I inhale sharply as the smell of her bodywash hits my nostrils. She smells like warmth. Slightly nostalgic, like a luxurious tea break in a steam-filled spa.

“Wh—what are you doing?” she breathes, her voice barely holding steady.

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I feel her shiver as my thumb brushes her cheek, slow and deliberate. “What do you think?” I murmur, leaning in, my lips grazing the shell of her ear. Her breath hitches.

My fingers drift lower, trailing the edge of her jaw until they rest lightly at the base of her neck—right over the fluttering pulse that gives her away.

My other hand finds her waist, sliding down her curves with practiced ease until it settles on her hip, gripping her just enough to make her gasp. She’s soft. So fucking soft, even with the towel between her skin and mine.

My fingers dig into the cotton, and I take a second to think about ripping it off her body. “You’re shaking,” I whisper, tightening my hold. “Are you scared...or excited?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Why?” I mutter as my fingers skim the end of the towel, barely touching her thigh. “Are you scared of how much you want this? How much you want me to touch you?”

She gulps heavily and turns her head away.

“No,” I say. I shake my head, cupping her chin and forcing her face back to mine. “I told you, didn’t I? You’re going to be my wife. And you’ll warm my bed.”

If I can’t get Marco, I’ll use his daughter as I please.

“Please.”

Something about the way she says the single word, like a broken plea, breaks through the fog in my mind. I see the single tear that falls down her face and the scared look in her eyes—like a rabbit caught in a trap, desperately gnawing at his leg to escape.

My hands fall away like they touched a live wire, and I step back. She falls to the ground as I let go, curling into a ball and shaking all over.

What the hell did I just do?

What was I doing?

“Isabella—” My voice sounds like it’s coming from someone else.

“Don’t.” Her voice cracks around the word. She won’t even look at me. “Please...go away. I beg you.”

The breath leaves my lungs like a punch. I stare for a second longer, unsure if I’m more furious at her for making me feel this way or at myself for what I’ve done.

I don’t speak again. With one last look at her, I spin on my heel and storm out, slamming the door behind me hard enough to rattle the walls.

She was the one taunting me yesterday, wasn’t she? The starfish. “I’m sure you can work something out. You’re big and strong, after all.” So why the hell do I feel like the monster now?

My fist curls as I walk into the kitchen, heading mindlessly for the sink as if water will somehow wash away my guilt.

It doesn’t matter, I tell myself as I stand in front of the running water. I don’t care if she’s terrified. Isabella Ricci is nothing more than a means to an end. I shouldn’t care

how she feels, if she hasn't served her purpose for being here.

Being my wife and giving me an heir. I won't touch her. Not yet.

But she'll be my wife. Today.

6

ISABELLA

My stomach rumbles loudly as I pull the covers over my head and tuck my legs closer to my stomach, curling up like a ball.

It's not going to make the hunger go away magically, and I might eventually pass out from the pangs that are ravaging my body, but if it keeps me in this room, behind that door, then I would rather pass out than take a step over the threshold.

Not after what happened last night.

I'm scared. I know.

As much as I hate to admit it, I am scared.

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I didn't expect to walk out of the bathroom last night and find Roman in my room. Nor did I expect him to press me against the wall and put his hands on my body.

Worse yet...I'm also ashamed. Ashamed that for a moment, I was willing to let him take what he wanted. My body, betrayer that it is, almost slipped out of rationality and into lust. Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew it wasn't about lust or desire.

It was control.

His thumb on my cheek and his fingers digging into my hip—everything was about control. I couldn't let him take my body that way, and yet I knew if I fought, he'd easily overpower me.

So I begged.

“Fuck!” I kick the covers angrily, throwing them off. I drag my fingers through my hair, yanking strands out. “Argh!” I can still see myself, like prey caught in a trap, begging for its life.

My father would rather let himself get gutted than beg for his life, and he never failed to teach me about pride.

“Never beg. It lets your enemy know they have the upper hand.”

He didn't say anything about forcing me to get married for the family's sake. Just sprung it on me because he knew his daughter, who would do anything to please her

father, wouldn't refuse.

All of them. My father. Roman. The big guy who drove me from the wedding and dragged me into the house while I kicked and screamed. I wish they'd all burn in hell.

But Roman Volkov most of all. If I watched him burn, I wouldn't put out the fire. Rather, I'd get gasoline so he didn't have a chance to survive with his charred body.

My stomach grumbles as I think of everything I'd like to do to him, and another sharp pain shoots through me, making me double over with a groan.

"Fine!" I throw my hands in the air. "I'll eat."

I tiptoe to the door and squint through the peephole. There's no one there. That's good. Exhaling slowly, I remove the chair wedged under the door handle.

There's no one in the hallway either, and I dash through, reaching the stairs. Halfway down, I realize how I must look—if there was an audience. Like a frightened mouse without a backbone. The image is insulting enough that I straighten up, squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin as I continue.

"Miss Ricci."

"Jeez!" I jump, hand flying to my chest, only to find Polina staring at me from the foot of the stairs. "Hi," I mumble.

"It's past noon," she says flatly. There's no emotion on her face to help me decipher if she's displeased or just stating the time, but it doesn't matter because she barely says more than a few words to me.

Despite the number of staff who come and go—from Polina to the gardener, the man

with the van who came to deliver food supplies yesterday, and the men standing outside the house with their guns to make sure I don't escape—it still feels like I'm the only one living here.

A large, empty house.

Because barely anyone looks my way. If Polina didn't have to interact with me, I'm sure she wouldn't spare a glance in my direction either.

"Oh well," I mutter, pushing the thought aside before it festers into a deep feeling of loneliness. "What's for breakfast?" I ask.

"It's past noon," she reminds me.

Oh. She's displeased, then. "Lunch," I correct as my stomach makes the same soul-sucking sound. "What's for lunch?"

Lunch is a two-course meal of wild mushroom risotto with steak salad. Polina leaves me in the kitchen, and after a couple of look-throughs, I find a few bottles of red wine in the adjoining pantry.

It looks vintage, probably one of Roman's prized collections.

"Good." I grin. "The more the merrier."

I open a bottle, then another. When I leave the kitchen, both bottles remain open and hardly touched, abandoned on the counter.

"Some sightseeing?" I murmur as I stand outside the door, glancing around. I haven't been anywhere since the day I stumbled across his study.

Because the memory of being toyed and played with never left my head. And some part of me held on to the idea that—other than my plan for revenge—my father would find a way to get me out. But after trying to reach him several times without success, my hope in the latter is waning.

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It's left to me now. To find a way out.

Exhaling, I veer away from the kitchen and deeper into the house. The silence grows heavier the farther I walk, and I make turns into rooms—the drawing room, the one that smells of cigars, all of them with large windows.

The windows taunt me with their view, reminding me that I haven't stepped out of the house since my supposed wedding day. I haven't felt the sun on my face or what it feels like to be free.

The urge to find something heavy and break the glass is tempting, but Roman's words do not leave my head. I might've thought he was pulling an empty threat before, but after his presence in my room last night, I'd rather plan carefully than take the risk of a bullet between my eyes.

I grit my teeth as I step out of the room, slamming the door hard enough that it rattles.

Find something, Isabella. There has to be something in this house. Something I can use.

My search leads me to a door that's a different color from the others. I hesitate in front of it as if something is holding me back before I push it open.

I'm instantly bathed in stale air, the kind that hasn't moved in years. The drapes are drawn tight, and dust clings to every surface like a second skin. Sheets are draped over the furniture, like ghostly silhouettes of couches and chairs frozen in time. Even the light fixtures on the walls are broken.

But it's not just the dust or the quiet that grips me.

It's the familiarity—the way the drapes block the light as if keeping everything and everyone out.

Her bedroom.

My mother's bedroom. After she died—when I was nine—my father forbade me from going into her room. He didn't move anything out, not the sheets on her bed or the dress on her chair. It was as if he didn't want to move on...or at least that's what I thought.

At eleven, I learned never to mention her when he took me to the shooting range and left me there for hours. He never said why, but I knew it was my punishment. So instead of disobeying him, I snuck into the room now and then, sitting in the middle of the dust and smell, desperately clinging to her fading memory.

Then I left home. And when I came back, everything was gone. Not a trace of anything remained. It was almost as if she never existed.

A sob clings to the back of my throat as the childhood memories rush through my head, so vivid I can almost touch them. Almost smell her. My shoulders shudder as I press my fingers to my face, struggling to keep them from breaking me down.

“Miss Ricci?”

I quickly wipe away a stray tear before turning to face Polina.

“Were you looking for something?” she asks.

I shake my head. “I'm sorry. I got lost.” The flicker from my face to the room and

back tells me she doesn't believe my lie. "Lunch was great," I say, hurrying to cover it with another. "Thank you."

She remains silent, but I step around her, leaving the room before sadness envelops me again. My fingers dig into my shorts as I walk away, and frustration replaces the loneliness in my chest.

I never forgave him. I never forgave my father for erasing my mother like she wasn't mine to mourn too. And I'll never forgive Roman either.

Until the day he's gone.

My tour around the house ends abruptly after Polina finds me, so I head back to my room. Somehow, I end up taking a nap for hours, then waking up to a terrible headache and the sound of a thousand drums beating at once in my head.

My head too heavy to sit on my shoulders, pounding in my ears, and my hair a mess, I stagger out of the room, heading downstairs to find Polina.

I need painkillers.

My first stop is the kitchen, but it's empty. There's no Polina. I try the living room—a familiar place—but she's not there either.

I should head up and sleep some more. Maybe it'll help. But the thought of climbing the stairs while my neck feels like a frayed thread holding my head up makes me want to puke. So I drag my feet further into the house, whispering her name in a hoarse voice.

I pass by a door—no recollection of how I got this far—and hear a voice that sounds like hers.

“Bingo!” I thrust my hand out so excitedly that it only makes the aftermath feel even worse. I’ll feel better. I just need some painkillers, and then one night without thinking about Roman. Or my father. Or my fucked-up situation.

Pushing the door open, I walk in with my request at the tip of my tongue.

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It never escapes.

Because it's not Polina.

And I didn't walk into any random room. I walked into his room. There's a naked Roman standing in the middle of the room, his back turned...but naked anyway.

My jaw drops while my eyes greedily wander from his broad, carved shoulders like stone slabs to his back muscles, moving with casual grace. Grace? More like power. Because it shouldn't look so...intimidating.

A slew of silver scars of various lengths cover his back, like battle souvenirs. My fingers trace lines on my thigh as I imagine running them over his back, across the lines.

Isabella.

A part of my brain, probably the one I should listen to, reminds me that I'm standing in his room. I should get out. Turn around and leave before he either notices my intrusive presence or turns and does something I won't escape from.

It's a valid warning, yet my gaze wanders even lower to his thick, corded arms flexing as he rakes a hand through his damp, dark hair. He's oblivious, or maybe indifferent to my presence, but I can't stop staring. Not when his back trails off into a well-toned waistline and two—I shudder. Stiff hips, narrow waist, and a backside so criminally perfect it could start wars.

I see everything. And I mean everything.

“You should know it’s rude to stare,” he says in a low, measured voice that scratches the back of my head as he turns. “And more rude to walk into a person’s room without knocking first.”

Knocking?

My brain can barely comprehend his words. They sound like words, but I can’t hear them. My eyes are bulging out of my head, glued down.

Down there.

Down...where it jerks. His dick.

Heavens. I’ve seen a handful in my time, but this—it’s big. Veiny. And it goes on and on like it’s incapable of fitting anywhere.

Is this what he wanted...when he said we were going to start sleeping in the same bed? A slow burn spreads from my chest, melting down my spine, coiling low in my belly like a match to gasoline. My thighs press together without permission, a futile, desperate reaction to a hunger I never agreed to feel.

“Bella,” Roman says. “Bella?”

I don’t blink until he crosses the room, grabs a towel, and wraps it around his waist. Then, like a flipped switch, my thoughts return to the present. To find him staring at me with a knowing, proud smirk on his face.

Shit.

Shit.

My face floods faster than I can stop it, heating up so quickly I can feel it through my palms that I slap against my cheeks.

“Have you seen enough?” he asks with amusement in his voice.

I was staring. Shamelessly. At his penis.

“I—” I stammer, but no excuse will bring back the minutes of my life I just lost.
“I?—”

“You what?” he asks calmly, making his way toward me. A lump lodges in my throat, and my gaze darts again like a magnet. Even with the towel, I can still see the outline.

“Is that how much you want me?” He’s beside me before I can blink, his larger figure towering over mine. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth as Roman’s thumb glides across my mouth, pressing at the seam of my lips. His head lowers, and a shiver runs through my body when I feel his breath against my neck.

No.

Yes.

This shouldn’t be happening!

“Why do I have a sneaky feeling that if I touched you, you’d—” His voice is low and amused. And too freaking close. “Melt in my hands? If I slipped my hand—” His hand slips into my comfy shorts, and I let out a shaky breath. “You’d be wet? Aroused? Needy?”

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My thighs press together harder as his thumb rubs circles inches away from my clit, starting a fire from the friction between my panties and his touch. A whimper slips past my lips as his fingers slide lower, cupping.

My knees buckle when Roman grazes my neck with his teeth, his mouth sucking on my skin.

“Please.” I don’t know when the word escapes, but it does, like a needy prayer.

“Please, what?” he rasps. “Touch you? Feel that?” His thumb pushes, and my knees almost give way. “Feel how your body’s already giving up on you? You’re soaking wet, Bella.Moya koska.Don’t fight it.”

Even if I wanted to, I can’t. I need him in places I shouldn’t let him into. I want him so much I feel like I might break apart if he lets go.

I want Roman as much as I hate him.

“I can picture it,” he whispers in my ear. “You—against the wall. Your legs spread and your body quivering as my tongue settles on your clit. Then on my bed, on your hands and knees as I fuck you from behind. You’re going to take it, aren’t you?”

I make a strangled sound as my head bobs.

“I know you will.” I feel him smile against my neck as his hand pulls my shorts lower, dragging my panties with them. I jerk, grabbing and digging my fingers into his arm, and he thrusts a finger into me.

Then there's a knock on the door.

"Mr. Volkov?"

It's Polina. My eyes go wide like saucers as I glance over my shoulder. The door is locked, thankfully. I have no idea when that happened, but if she had walked in and seen me like this...I might've begged the floor to open and swallow me.

I start to say something, but Roman is quick to cover my mouth. He shakes his head. "Shh. Be quiet, Bella. I still have use for you."

He leaves me standing there, half-turned, heart racing, thighs clenched, as he strides naked to the door with all the arrogance of a god.

"Yes?" he says, voice calm, composed, like I'm not standing behind him on fire.

I barely hear her response. It's muffled, something about dinner arrangements or the car, maybe both. Roman replies with a longer answer, although his tone is clipped, like the bare minimum politeness she deserves.

And at that moment, it hits me.

What the hell am I doing here?

I blink, fresh shame prickling my skin like ice water. My hands move quickly, yanking my top straight and adjusting my shorts like it might salvage what little dignity I still have.

When he closes the door and turns back, I can't look at him. I can't face him.

"I—uh—I should go," I mutter, voice tight, eyes locked on the floor as I rush past

him.

Roman doesn't bother convincing me to stay. It's almost as if he's come to the same conclusion. I don't wait to find out.

I just run.

I keep running, ignoring Polina's glance as I pass her, until I end up in my room. My chest is burning from the rush of adrenaline, and I slide to the floor, hitting rock bottom with a thud.

"What was that?!" I yell, mostly to myself, because I should've made a turn the moment I walked in and saw him. I should've hightailed it out of there like my tail had caught fire.

I let him touch me.

The same day I said I was never going to forgive him, I let Roman touch me.

And the stupid headache that had me stumbling around is gone.

"I could've just waited it out," I moan. I don't think I can face him again. That's it. I was going to work out a killer revenge plan, but at this point, my self-inflicted death might be enough.

The startling, unexpected knock on the door slams my soul out of my body for a split second before I hear Polina's voice.

“Dinner is in an hour, Miss Ricci.”

“I’m not hungry,” I murmur.

“Nonsense,” she says. I blink twice, taken aback.

Nonsense? She’s never openly scolded me. Given me occasional looks of displeasure, maybe, but nothing so blunt. “You need some food in you. Come downstairs, or I’ll tell Mr. Volkov you no longer need my food.”

Blackmail?

Does everyone in this house have it out for me?

7

ROMAN

I can still smell her.

I watch my fingers as they dance on the dining table, the lingering scent on them. Sex. That’s what she smelled like. Even before I turned, I could tell she was aroused.

For a moment, I thought about telling her to leave. It wasn’t how I planned—taking her to bed and making her mine. I want her to beg for it. To watch her eyes roll back as she takes my cock. To see her spent, speechless afterward.

But the smell. It wrapped around my senses, dug under my skin, and worked its way into my head until I struggled to breathe and think.

And I would've fucked her there, against the wall, if Polina hadn't interrupted.

"Mr. Volkov." Polina appears. "Apologies for the delay. I'll be serving dinner in a moment."

"Tell me—" I stop her before she can leave. "Why did you ask me to eat here?"

She shrugs. "It's a dining room, sir. It should be used. And I thought Miss Ricci could join you tonight. It'll make it easier to serve you both and ensure that nobody skips dinner."

Isabella?

"She's coming?"

Polina nods. "Yes. I informed her. She should be down any moment."

My fingers stop drumming as my eyes dart toward the only entrance into the dining area, half expecting to see her. When I look away, Polina's staring at me with curiosity.

She clears her throat when I arch a brow. "I'll set the table."

I inhale as she walks away, pressing my fingers into the hollows of my cheeks. "It's just dinner," I mutter as my mind fills itself with images of her clinging to my arm and the tight feeling...wet with my finger inside her.

My dick twitches, and I sigh again, flattening my palm on the table. It might be near

impossible to eat in this state—a state of being undone by how much I want her—but I have to maintain a semblance of control.

It's sex.

I don't need anything more from her. Not emotions or feelings or affection. When she's in my bed, it will be because I want to see the way her eyes roll back and her legs tremble.

It's solely because I want to fuck her. Nothing more.

“Miss Ricci. Glad you could join us.”

My fingers dig into the polished wood, and I force my head to keep from turning when Polina announces her presence. I keep a flat expression as Isabella comes into view. Her hair is swept into a quick updo, and she's wearing something simple—a pair of sweatpants and a shirt.

A basic fucking outfit.

And yet, my thoughts still find a way to veer off, especially when she sits, and it becomes obvious that she's wearing nothing underneath. The her nipples are visible under the shirt, poking against the cotton.

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I drag a hand over my face with an exasperated sigh. I shouldn't have touched her, because her smell. Jesus. It's headier now and messing with my senses. I can imagine the feel of her breast in my palm—soft, round, her nipple between my fingers.

Polina shows up, filling the dining area with a different aroma. I sigh as I rub the bridge of my nose, silently grateful for the interruption. I wasn't happy when it happened hours ago, but I couldn't be more relieved now.

Dinner goes painfully slow, and the silence does nothing to help. With a mind of its own, my gaze wanders each time Isabella leans forward, and each time her hand brushes against her chest. The subtle movement does everything it's not supposed to do to me—and I lose count of how many times I look down to see that I have barely gotten through the food.

My self-distaste rises until I can barely sit without gritting my teeth. There's no reason she should have this much effect on me.

Grunting, I push the chair back and rise to my feet with the napkin crumpling in my fist. I catch the look of surprise that flashes on Isabella's face, but she doesn't comment.

"Goodnight," I mutter, tossing the napkin on the table before storming away.

I stop at my study instead of my bedroom, choosing to throw myself into more work instead. Besides, I still have a lot to sort out after my father's unexpected demise. Documents, deeds, and certain ownerships with companies that no longer have any functionality. He left so much I wasn't aware of.

Grabbing a fresh stack of contracts, I slip behind my desk, spreading them out before sitting. The first one dates back ten years, and I flip open yellowed pages, hoping to make sense of the fading letters.

“This might take hours.”

Even better. I’ll have enough to keep my mind and head busy. By morning, things will have returned to normal.

Time passes, and I’m halfway through the yellow pages with scribbled notes on another paper when I hear a sound.

Like a thud.

I pause, glancing at the door.

What was that?

Polina, probably. I dismiss it, turning to the document again. A minute later or more, I hear the same thud but even louder. I look at my phone, contemplating if a call to Polina is necessary.

When the thud comes a third time, I grab my phone as I stand, hurriedly leaving my office. She might be in danger. Not from someone breaking in, but perhaps she fell and got stuck somewhere.

Walking down the hallway, I hear a faint sound, like a cry, but it’s coming from upstairs. Without thinking, I race up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I dash into the hallway, expecting to see a catastrophe, but I see Isabella.

...standing in front of her bedroom door, banging with her fists.

My lips flatten into a thin line. “What are you doing?” I scold.

She doesn’t reply. Or look at me. Then I notice it...her fists aren’t touching the door. The thuds might’ve come from her, but they’re not hitting the door anymore. It’s almost as if she’s pushing against something else.

Something that isn’t there.

And then I hear the faint cry.

“Isabella?”

My chest tightens as I walk toward her, slowly, like approaching a wounded animal. When I take her hand, she jerks, eyes wide and unfocused. And suddenly, she’s pushing at my chest with both palms, whispering frantic, broken things I can’t make out.

She’s looking at me but not seeing me, like I’m a ghost.

She’s having a night terror.

My protective instincts take over, and I wrap my arms around her body tightly, giving her no room to pull away. “I’m here,” I murmur. The words come out easily, and I give them to her without holding back. “You’re safe, Bella. I’ve got you.”

She resists for another few seconds, and then something in her gives out. Her muscles go slack, and her body trembles.

I don’t let go until the crying stops and she’s quiet. Then I unlock the door, open it, and carry her back to bed, tucking her under the covers.

As I turn to go, I hear her rustle. Then my name, as a whisper, like she's unsure of what's in front of her. "Roman?"

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I look over my shoulder. She looks fragile and frightened—a bird with a broken wing needing care and protection. It tugs at a part of my heart I never thought existed, pulling so hard that ignoring it causes physical pain.

“Did something happen?” she asks quietly.

“No.” I shake my head. Admitting what happened would make it seem more than it actually is. I would’ve done the same thing to anyone to keep them from hurting themselves.

And what good would Isabella be to me with cuts and bruises? I’m just protecting what belongs to me.

“I see,” she sighs. “Could I—could I ask for a favor?”

Don’t ask me to stay.

“Sure.” I shrug. “Go ahead.”

“Could you...” Her eyes turn downward as she hesitates, then up again as she continues with some courage, “...stay? I feel so scared. It’s silly, I know, but I promise I won’t talk about it tomorrow. Or any day after.”

Again, I think about what would happen if I turned her down. I’d be inconsiderate and selfish, but it’s not any more than what she already thinks of me. “Fine.”

A soft smile touches her lips. “Thank you.”

I grunt in response, heading to the armchair in the corner of the room. Leather creaks beneath me as I settle in, elbows on my knees, eyes still on her. Isabella doesn't say another word. She just pulls the covers over her head like a child hiding from monsters.

After a couple of seconds, she goes still. But I can see the way her shoulders tremble beneath the sheets. Like the fear hasn't left—it's only burrowed inside her bones.

My mind replays the scene again—watching her hit something imaginary with her fists. Another door, maybe? Why? What happened to her?

“No.” I shake my head vehemently before I go down an emotional rabbit hole. With one last look at her sleeping figure, I stand up.

I did what was needed, but I also overstayed.

It won't happen again.

8

ROMAN

I look up, still dealing with the yellow pages from the night before, when Billie Russell walks into my office. I could've finished with this hours ago, but she has snuck into my thoughts more than I can count.

“I have something,” he says with a hopeful, overeager smile. “Something I think you'll want to hear.”

“Is it worth bargaining for your redemption?”

He freezes mid-step, the color draining from his face. Despair. Fear. Fright. All in one expression. It makes me laugh.

“I’m kidding,” I say, though my tone doesn’t change. “Sit.”

“Th-thank you,” he stammers, quickly dropping into the chair opposite me.

I close the document and set it aside, folding my arms across my chest. “It’d better be good,” I warn, voice cool. “Because if it’s not, I’ll make your life very miserable, very fast. Go ahead.” I motion lazily. “Make your case.”

Billie swallows, nods, then leans forward like he’s got something sacred to share. “I found out from a source, someone who used to work at the offshore bank where we moved the money, that Marco Ricci hasn’t left the country.”

I say nothing.

“In fact,” he continues, eyes flicking toward the door like someone might be listening, “he’s in the city. Desperately trying to find a way out.”

It’s not exactly news. I suspected as much. But now I’ve got more than theory to work with. Still, I don’t show it.

Instead, I shrug. “And how do I know you’re not lying to me, Russell?”

He blinks. “I—what?”

“See—” I lean back in my chair. “Here’s what I think. You’re holding out. You’ve got something else buried, and you think throwing me this juicy lead will distract me from the stink coming off whatever else you’re hiding.”

“No.” He shakes his head quickly, his voice rising with desperation. “No, I swear. I’m not hiding anything. That’s everything I’ve got.”

I stare at him for a long, silent moment. Then I lean forward, elbows resting on the desk, voice low. “Then you won’t mind if I test you, will you?”

He swallows hard. “Test...?”

“You said a source, right? Former offshore bank employee?”

He nods slowly.

“Name. Give it to me.”

His mouth opens and closes. He glances toward the window like salvation might be out there, drifting in on the breeze. When he looks back, my face is the only warning he’ll get before my mercy runs out.

“I...I can’t give you that,” he says at last. “He’d be killed. Probably by Ricci’s people.”

I smile coldly. “If you’re lying to me, you’ll be killed. Definitely by me.”

He flinches.

“Think carefully, Billie,” I say, already reaching for my phone. Once he gives me a name, I’ll need Leo on it immediately. If there’s any chance the source could be in danger, I need my best man to extract him.

“I swear I’m not lying,” Billie pleads. My hand stills on my phone as I watch him tremble. The stink of shame and regret hangs over him like a perpetual cloud. “I can get you proof—real proof—by tomorrow. Just give me a few hours.”

Clicking my tongue, I pick up my phone regardless. “Then you won’t mind me bringing in someone else?”

Russell pales again. “Who? Why?”

“To see if you’re telling the truth,” I reply. “He’s going to track down your source independently. If you’re right, you live. If you’re wrong, he’ll put your teeth in a ziplock bag and send them to your children.”

“Fine!” He jumps to his feet. “I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything. But you should know he has no idea where Marco is. I told him it’d be better to confess if he did, and he swore he didn’t. Marco Ricci didn’t tell anyone about his plan. Maybe...” He scratches his head. “Maybe his daughter knows? He has a daughter!”

And she’s under my roof.

But if everything points back to Isabella, then she must know how to find him. I should’ve been working on that instead of granting her request to babysit her while she slept.

“Then again...” Bille sighs. “I don’t know if she’ll be that useful. He once said that he didn’t trust her and had second thoughts about giving her everything he worked for. According to him, she might turn out to be weaker than her?—”

“That’s enough.” My voice cuts through his rambling.

“Yes, sir.” He nods promptly.

I rise slightly in my chair, just enough to lean forward, eyes locked on him. “You should be worried about yourself, Russell,” I say, letting the words sink in like a knife. “You betrayed my father. As far as I’m concerned, you might as well have put the bullet in him yourself.”

The heat in my chest flares—sharp, unexpected. Not just anger. Something else. And it has nothing to do with my father.

It’s her. Isabella.

“The only reason you’re breathing right now is because you’re useful. That could change tomorrow. Hell, it could change in an hour.”

He swallows hard, hands twitching at his sides.

“So instead of dabbling in theories and airing out the dead man’s opinions,” I continue, “how about you focus on giving me something worth hearing?”

Billie nods, small and pathetic. “Understood.”

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“Good. Now get the fuck out.” He doesn’t hesitate, turning and shuffling out while trying not to trip over his feet.

I lean back again as my jaw grinds and my heel taps sharply on the ground. It’s Isabella. There’s no mistaking the source of my annoyance at Billie’s rambling.

But there’s more. She was supposed to be bait. While I had no intention of giving her back, she was supposed to befuckingbait. If she was disposable to him, he won’t be coming to save her.

Phase one of my plan has failed.

She’ll be disappointed. That the father she so championed, unable to believe him capable of committing a crime like murder, has abandoned her. It will certainly make things easier for me.

I imagine the look on Isabella’s face when I tell her that her father had no plans of handing over anything to her. She was simply a tool he used to push his ambitions. Her marriage would’ve been the seal—a union between the two families would’ve made him almost unstoppable.

Well, not almost. But he’d have gotten some form of protection against my wrath, making it a bit harder to touch him.

Perhaps it’ll be easier to break her now. When she sees that she has no one else to turn to and realizes she’s at my mercy, she’ll be more complacent. If nothing else, I’ll have a better idea of who Marco Ricci might be working with to flee the country.

In the meantime, there's something else I need to do.

Picking up my phone, I make a call. "Can you make some time for me?" I listen to the person at the other end for a while, nodding at intervals. "Okay. I'll see you at eight."

"Heading home?" Leo accosts me as I step out of my office.

"No," I say, walking past him.

He spins, catching up with me in a couple of steps. "No? Do you have other obligations I'm not aware of?"

"Yes, Leonardo. I do. And you were away for the entire day, so I could say the same about you," I say sarcastically. Not that I care what he uses his time for, but I'd rather not tell him the details of my plan until I can put a pin in it.

Leo steps in front of me before I can reach the elevator, arms casually spread like he's trying not to look like a barrier. "This is merely an observation, but I'd like to point out you haven't gone home in two days." He keeps his voice light. "Are you avoiding her?"

"Isabella," I say flatly. "You can say her name."

He gives me a knowing look, and for a second, I consider walking right through him. It'd be impossible, but I'd still like to try.

"So I was right." He folds his arms. "Avoidance isn't your style, Roman. You usually face things head-on. Handle it. Control it. Destroy it. So...what gives?"

"Misplaced curiosity doesn't suit you, Leonardo." I use his full name again, but my

tone is short this time, telling him not to push the subject.

He nods solemnly as his hands fall and he steps to the side. “My apologies. I overstepped.”

Even before the response leaves his lips, I already feel shitty. “I—” I start apologizing, but the words refuse to come out. Because it’s unlike me...taking back my words, breaking my rules, and showing affection for a woman who should mean nothing to me.

I sigh inwardly as I silently press the button, stepping into the elevator as the doors open. I turn, and there’s a look on Leo’s face. It’s concern but also something else.

The first time I saw it was at the morgue when I went there to identify my father.

Sympathy.

Fucking hell. It made me feel weak then. Vulnerable too. I look away as I press the button for the first floor, shutting him out of sight.

I don’t need his sympathy. What I want is Marco Ricci and everybody else who betrayed my father. Everything else is secondary.

“Boris Glazastov,” I say as the heavysset man stops me in front of Glazastov’s office. “Tell him it’s Roman Volkov.”

He reaches for the walkie-talkie attached to his gear, mumbling something. Then he stares me down—an intimidation tactic I let slide. I’m here to negotiate, not cause trouble.

Or I’d take him down without breaking a sweat. And probably break his hands in the

process.

“You can go in.” He opens the door.

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I walk into a large office that looks like something out of a nineties mobster stereotype—gold lining everywhere, tiger prints, and excessive furniture. In the middle of it, Boris Glazastov sits behind his desk. Overweight. Bald. Probably with a bunch of health issues, judging by the IV line standing beside his desk. I size up the men standing on either side—the same cut as the one by the door.

“Roman Volkov,” he rasps. “To what do I owe the pleasure of entertaining the man who killed my son?”

That.

If I were the kind of man who reviewed every decision carefully and avoided taking risks, I’d have left Boris alone. After all, I did leave his son in a pool of his own blood on his wedding day.

But I know Boris sees his children as extensions of his property, not as humans. More than anything, he likes power, money, and fame.

That’s why I’m here.

I walk up to his desk and pull out a chair, ignoring the immediate defensive stance from his bodyguards. “I’m here to offer you a deal.”

Boris chortles, slapping his hand on his desk. “A deal? What makes you think I’d be interested in whatever you’re offering, Volkov? If it’d been your father, I might’ve spared him a minute, but you’re young. And reckless.” His eyes narrow and I see him reach under his desk. A gun. “What is stopping me from shooting you right here? A

life for a life?"

"Your son would've killed me," I say flatly.

He shrugs. "You stole his bride."

"Bride?" My lips curl into a thin smile. "I simply took what was mine. You're no stranger to what happens when a blood pact is broken. Marco Ricci ran away, unwilling to face the consequences of his actions. I did what I had to."

I wait with bated breath for his response while calculating how long it'd take me to takeout the men. Ten seconds, I muse, judging by the proximity. I might get shot in the shoulder if Boris Glazastov remembers how to fire a gun, but he'd be going down afterward.

"I can't argue with you on that," he says, lifting his hand from underneath the desk. No gun. "So you're here because you want me to help you find him? You're aware we were in the process of signing a contract? Both families, allies."

I am aware.

I wouldn't have crashed the wedding and abducted the bride otherwise. I could've gotten Isabella anywhere else, but I couldn't let the wedding hold—and I had to do it while making a statement.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I don't need your help finding him." Because I doubt Boris knows where Marco is. If Marco didn't trust his own daughter, he sure as hell wouldn't confide in Boris. The man's loyalty is a currency that's easily bought and easily spent.

I lean forward, eyes locked on his, my voice ironclad. "But I know Marco's going to

reach out to you. And when he does...I want you to turn him down. Shut the door in his face. Cut him off completely.”

A beat passes. Then I add, just low enough to unsettle, “Because if you don’t, Boris, I won’t have to find Marco. I’ll just come back for you.”

“I see,” he murmurs. “I do have a choice, don’t I? Between a man on a run and the son of Volkov. I was mistaken.” He grins. “You are like your father—before he became senile and weak.”

I drop my hand to my thigh so he doesn’t see the anger that forces my fingers to clench. An insult to my father’s name, dead or alive, is an insult I refuse to accept.

But I let it settle, saving it for later. There are more important things to worry about. “Keep him away, and you’ll have the Volkov unwavering alliance.”

Boris grins, yellowed teeth stained with tobacco. “I look forward to doing business with you, Roman Volkov.”

“Same here,” I murmur.

I don’t offer my hand. Just shove it into my coat pocket as I turn and walk out of his office, the last thread of tolerance unraveling with every step.

The second the door clicks shut behind me, my mind’s already moving.

Sergei.

I’ll have him put someone on Boris’s tail. I don’t trust the bastard to keep his word. He’s merely a means to an end; that’s all he is. A pawn to help sever Marco’s ties—one by one—until the traitor has no hands left to play with. No allies. No exits.

And when it's done, Marco is buried, and the dust settles, I'll return.

Not for business, but to collect. For what Boris said about my father, and for daring to grin while saying it.

ISABELLA

“Ma’am.”

The delivery driver—a man in overalls who brings the food supplies every week—walks in for the fourth time with four cartons of apples stacked on top of each other. I nod, and he continues walking, leaving me by the foot of the stairs.

Biting my fingers.

And toying with a very terrible plan in my head. A spontaneous, out-of-the-blue idea that I’m sure will never work, because plans have to be carefully mapped out.

According to my father.

Not that I’m still in the business of listening to his voice in my head when he completely abandoned me.

The plan? Escape. How? In the back of the food van parked outside the house. There are only two problems with my plan.

One. I could get caught while leaving through the front door because there are three men standing between the exit and the van.

Two. Even if I managed to get into the van, I could still be discovered. Unless I have a plan for rendering a man unconscious, I might just be shipped back here.

He comes around again while I'm still biting my cuticles, offering a polite smile.

“Wait—” I call out before I can stop myself.

He turns around. “Were you talking to me, ma’am?”

I nod, clearing my throat subtly and straightening my shoulders. I have to look like I know what I'm doing. “Yes. I'm curious about your supplies,” I say, keeping my tone measured. “Where do you bring the food from?”

He looks confused and rubs the back of his neck. “A farm?”

A farm? That's like dropping a needle in a haystack. First off, I don't know exactly where I am. I was kidnapped, shoved into a car, and spent hours trying to break out. “Okay.” I shrug. “What farm? I need to know if it's organically grown. I don't know if Polina told you anything, but there are certain foods I can't eat.”

He rubs his neck harder. “I—yes. We grow our produce organically. If you want proof, I could?—”

“No.” I wave my hands, frustrated at the conversation going off course. “How far away is the farm? From here?”

He hesitates, thinking. “About an hour. Maybe more. It's on the outskirts of the city.”

I bite back my excitement. That's great. Just far enough from here to disappear and close enough to survive. Once I make it there, I can map out my next strategy.

“Is there anything else you'd like to know?” he asks.

I smile faintly and shake my head. “No, thank you. That'll be all.”

He nods and heads back out. I bite my nails harder, drawing blood and wincing at the slice of pain.

“Shit,” I mutter, staring at the bright red spreading around a small area. “Just a tiny cut,” I dismiss it aloud. I have other things to worry about, like how to get into the van without getting my brains blown out.

It takes fifteen minutes to devise a plan and ten minutes of rummaging around to find a pair of old overalls. I hold them up like a trophy, grinning proudly. Scampering up to my room, I change into the overalls, tuck my hair under a cap, and run back down, intercepting the van driver as he leaves the storage room.

Keeping my head down and pitching my voice lower, I say, “I’ll, uh...I’ll help you with the rest of the stuff.”

He studies me briefly, probably trying to decipher where I sprung from, but he doesn’t question it. “Sure.” He shrugs. “I could use another pair of hands.”

My heart is racing, and my palms are clammy as I follow him out of the house, keeping my gaze averted from the men standing guard. It’s the first time I’ve felt the sun directly on my face since Roman brought me here, and the urge to take a moment and savor the warmth is tempting, but my desire for freedom is greater.

“Here.” He hands me a box before I can look into the back of the van, and the surprise weight yanks me down. I struggle with it, grunting to play it off. I was going to hide as soon as I got out, but I might have to do some menial work after all. It takes two more rounds for the van to empty, and I come up with a last-minute excuse to remain outside while he heads in to inform Polina.

I climb into the back of the van, hyperaware that Roman’s men are watching me. A lump lodges in my throat as a gun catches the sun’s glint, and for a moment, I lose

my courage as my mind paints a vivid picture of what will happen if I get caught.

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It's a gamble—everything is a gamble—and the odds of me leaving unnoticed are slim. Forcing myself to remain calm, I close the doors, plunging the van into darkness. A plastic barrel sits in a corner, the only thing big enough to hide me if the driver decides to do one last inspection before leaving.

I climb in slowly, careful not to make any noise. Then I wait.

The wait feels like forever, but then I hear the sound of footsteps, more than one set. approaching the van. Polina's voice. "I'll pass your message along to Mr. Volkov."

The driver replies, "Thank you. Ah—if you don't mind me asking, is his wife allergic to anything? She was asking if the items were organically grown and said something about you being aware."

Shit. Shit. I shouldn't have said that. It was a spur-of-the-moment idea, and everything that came after was made up on the spot. If Polina decides to confront me before he leaves, my cover is blown. Sweat beads gather on my forehead and drip down into my eyes. I clamp my hand over my mouth to keep the faintest sound from giving me away.

"There's no problem, then," Polina replies. "Unless you have something you'd like to say?"

He clears his throat suspiciously. "Ah...no. I should get going."

Footsteps head for the front of the van, another set retreating. I hold my breath, counting down in my mind. The engine comes to life, and the van jerks, causing the

barrel and me to tumble. I bite down hard on my lip as I wince, not moving an inch from my uncomfortable position.

Freedom. I'm free. And I'll be back for revenge. Roman Volkov will regret not taking my offer of leniency when I first offered it.

"What the hell are you doing in the back of my van?!"

The voice crashes into my sleep like a grenade. I jolt upright, heart hammering against my ribs—and it's not the driver staring down at me.

It's someone else. Someone I don't recognize.

Panic flares hot in my chest. I scramble to my feet, fumbling for the cap I shoved in my pocket and jamming it over my head. My hair's a mess, and my face is too exposed. "I'm so sorry!" I blurt out, dipping into a hasty, low bow. "I—I must've dozed off while unloading. I didn't mean to—I'll leave right away!"

I don't wait for a reply before leaping out of the van, feet pounding against gravel as I break into a jog, then a run, putting as much distance between me and the man as I can. I don't look back. I can't risk it. If he recognizes me and figures out who I am, I'm done.

The van is nothing more than a smudge behind me when I finally stop. I double over, hands braced on my knees, wheezing for breath.

As my lungs begin to recover, I straighten slowly, only to freeze as I realize where I am. All around me...fields. Fields and fences, with dirt paths stretching outward like tangled veins. Rows of endless crops that seem to roll right into the sky. But there's no sign of a road, buildings, or people, except the man who scared me minutes ago.

Just a sea of farmland.

And me.

Standing right in the middle of it. Where's the driver? And he said the farm was an hour away. I don't know how long I spent asleep, but this looks like the middle of fucking nowhere. My stomach sinks as I turn in a slow circle, trying to get my bearings, but it's useless. I can't tell where this place starts or where it ends. Every direction looks the same—miles and miles of green, brown, and nothing.

Shit.

I drag my fingers through my hair as my optimism deflates. I knew it was too good to be true. Maybe I should've listened to my father, as unreliable as he has become. At least he was right. My spontaneous, patched-up escape plan has landed me smack in the middle of nowhere. And I'm on my own.

I need to find a way out. As I thrust my hands onto my hips, pacing and mumbling, I hear an engine roar. From afar, I see the van coming toward me.

My heart leaps. The van! I don't care if the driver looked like he could toss me around. He's my only way out of here. "Hey!" I yell, waving my arms above my head. "Please! Stop!" I start running toward it, kicking up clouds of dirt. "Please, wait!"

The driver doesn't look at me as the van reaches my position and speeds past. I scream louder until I can no longer hear myself, running until my legs give out and I fall to the ground. But it just keeps going, rumbling and growing smaller until it's swallowed by the heat haze.

"Screw you," I whisper, too tired to yell. "Screw you to hell."

There has to be someone else, right? A vast field, crops...there must be someone who can help me. I just have to find them. My feet feel like lead as I pick myself up off the ground and continue walking, each step bringing me closer to my final breaking point. Sweat pours down my face in torrents, and I toss the cap away, cursing under my breath.

My vision begins to fade too, slipping into memories of Roman's house, like a side-by-side comparison to the hellhole I'm stuck in. A well-played cosmic joke. Just when I'm close to giving up, I see a farmhouse.

And a man, sitting in front of it.

"Hi!" I call out, finding my voice again. "Hey! Can you help me? I need a car to get out of here."

He stands up, walking down a couple of steps. I pause as he approaches me, taking in his appearance. He's tall and lean, probably in his forties. A ball cap is pulled low over his brow, dirt smeared on his hands. He squints at me as I approach, his eyes narrowing. I see a flash of recognition in them.

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“You look familiar,” he says, tilting his head. “Wait a minute...”

My heart stutters. Let it be someone else.

“I know you.” He grins. “I followed Austin the last time he had to make a delivery. We were at Mr. Volkov’s house. I saw you there.” He points, while my heart digs a hole for me to bury myself. “You’re the boss’s wife, aren’t you? What are you doing here? You look terrible.” He whistles. “Hold on, I’ll call Austin. He can get through to Mr.—”

I don’t wait to find out what he has to say before I turn in the opposite direction, hastily walking away. If he calls Austin and Roman finds out where I am, I’ll never make it out again. I’d rather take the heat and the fatigue than be locked up against my will, forced to marry the man who killed my fiancé and intends to kill my father.

Which means I really have to find a way out of this place.

Like a never-ending comedy piece, it begins to rain. Heavily.

Hours, minutes...I’m unsure how much time passes while I remain huddled under a leaking overhang next to a locked shed, fighting the cold that sinks through my clothes and into my body. The heat was enough to weaken my knees, but the cold is worse. I try rubbing warmth into my arms, but my fingers barely move. Everything feels distant and fuzzy, and I slip in and out of consciousness more times than I can count.

Maybe this is it.

I didn't think my death was going to be caused by hypothermia in the middle of nowhere, but it feels like this is where it's going to end. At least it's better than living a life that isn't mine. If Roman wants me, he might have to make do with my dead, decomposing body.

I don't want to die. A small part of me screams, struggling to hold on. But my body slumps, my eyelids dragging shut. Everything tilts and blurs as I surrender myself to whatever comes next, letting go. Then, out of nowhere, warmth. My eyelids flutter, too weak to open, as I feel myself floating, cradled against a warm, solid chest with strong arms cradling my body.

There's a familiar scent mixed with the rain. It winds around me like a cocoon, wrapping my fading senses in the comfort of recognition.

"You're one stubborn woman, Isabella Ricci."

The voice cuts through the haze, rough and gravelly, laced with an exasperated fondness that somehow reaches the part of me that isn't frozen. A soft gasp escapes my lips. Roman. He's here.

For a moment, warmth floods my chest—hope blooming like a fragile flower, but it wilts just as fast. Because if he's here, it means only one thing.

He's taking me back.

Panic jolts through my weakened limbs, and I push, pressing my hands against his chest in a feeble attempt to free myself. My muscles tremble from the effort, but it's like trying to move a mountain. His grip tightens—firm and unyielding—as he catches my wrists in one hand and pins them against me.

"Are you really going to fight me now?" His voice is tinged with disbelief and a

glimmer of amusement.

A chuckle rumbles through his chest, low and soft, and I feel it against my cheek—like a warm vibration, a tether, a cruel comfort. It's maddening how tender it feels. Maddening how, even now, in the middle of my defiance, my body reacts like it's known this warmth all its life. I'm unsure if it's exhaustion or heartbreak, but I stop fighting. My head tips forward, my lashes brushing against his shirt as I sag in his arms.

"I hate you," I whisper, though the words lack bite. They barely carry breath.

"I know," he replies. "But not enough to let yourself die in the rain."

I hate that he's right, and I hate my body more for betraying me as it embraces the warmth greedily when Roman gently tucks me into the back seat of a car, closing the door behind him.

10

ISABELLA

"I've got it."

I drift in and out of sleep, catching the tail end of voices as I'm lifted in the air again. This time, I know it's Roman and the smell of my prison—his home.

Why did I bother going through the whole slew of getting into old overalls, hiding inside a barrel, getting tossed and turned, banging my head against the metal floor of the back of the van, if I was just going to end up back where I started?

It's unfair.

It's so...

What is that smell?

Hints of jasmine and lemon fill the air, and I hear the faint sound of water running in the background.

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Water? I open my eyes as Roman kicks open a door, surprised to see we're in a bathroom. And it's not mine either.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"Bathroom," he says as he places me on my feet.

"I know that," I say. But I didn't feel him climbing the stairs, which means we're on the first floor. There are only two bathrooms on the first floor, one not in use and the other—I gasp. "Your room?!"

He shrugs like the detail makes no difference. "Yes."

"Wh—why would you bring me here?" I question, taking a step forward with the intent of leaving. He stops me. Not with his arms wide open, like a barricade, but the mere presence of him standing in front of the door blocks most of the gateway.

Roman tilts his head, a lazy, floating smile on his lips. "Why else?"

"Why else?" My voice is shrill as panic sets in.

Sex? He's going to have his way with me, isn't he? I mean, he talked about it. He said it would happen, and I bragged about how unaffected I was. Called him big and strong and said he could take charge. And he brought me here, to his bathroom. With a whole freaking bath ready.

If that's not taking charge and making me eat my words, I don't know what is.

And the way he's looking at me...his deep blue eyes raking over my body shamelessly, makes my damp clothes wet again. I feel soaked to the bone, but not from the rain or cold.

It's heat—wet, heavy, body-sucking, nerve-racking heat. It breaks down my resolve, building a puddle of need in its wake.

“I don't want to.” I shake my head with as much firmness as I can muster, although my voice is merely a whisper.

“Don't want what?” he asks.

Do I have to say it out loud? That I don't want his hands on me?

But I do—I want him to touch me. Every part of my senses is heightened and filled with his scent. I can see the muscles under his shirt and the stretch of his shoulders.

I know what it feels like to be breathless and helpless under his unabashed, hungry gaze. When I walked out of my bathroom the other day and found him in the bedroom, I felt that split-second throbbing between my thighs before I screamed at him to get out.

But I shouldn't want him.

I'm his prisoner, and if it hadn't rained, I would've been halfway across the city by now, planning my revenge.

“Take off your clothes, Bella.”

“No.” I cross my arms against my chest. “You might've found me, but I won't let you force yourself on me.”

His brows shoot up, and for a split second, pure confusion slices across his face—before he tosses his head back and laughs. It’s not cruel, but it stings all the same.

“Force myself on you? When you’re two minutes from turning into a corpse from hypothermia?” His voice is dry with exasperation as he gestures toward the steaming tub. “I want you to get in before your lips turn blue.”

Oh.

I glance at the water, suddenly aware of the soft curls of steam rising toward me like beckoning fingers. The heat wraps around my frozen skin even from a distance, and I shiver in response, not from the cold but from realizing how badly I misread him.

“Oh,” I murmur, my voice a whisper of mortification. I bite my lip, then add, quieter still, “I thought?—”

“Clothes. Off.”

He cuts me off before I finish, his tone firm and devoid of patience, leaving no room for explanations or the lingering shame clinging to my spine.

I hesitate, fingers inching toward the damp fabric of the overalls. My hands tremble as I start to peel them off—until I remember he’s still here. Still watching.

Without turning around, I steel myself. “Can you...please leave?”

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There's a beat of silence, followed by the low drag of his voice. "Why? When we do finally have sex, I'm going to see you anyway." A pause, then— "Besides, I already know you look good naked."

My heart slams against my ribs. Blood rushes to my face so fast I feel dizzy. I clutch the fabric tighter, fingers fisting in the soaked cotton as I press it to my chest, not daring to move, not daring to breathe.

Because a part of me knows he's right. I might not be able to say no forever.

Not today, though. I need a slice of victory, something to tide me over from the train wreck I've been through. Seconds pass, and I hear the soft creak of the door opening.

And Roman walks out.

My shoulders sag in relief and a little bit of disappointment, but I push away the frustration as I climb into the tub, the water sloshing over the edge.

The bathwater soaks into my bones like a balm, and I sink beneath the surface until it muffles the world, leaving only the slow thrum of my heartbeat. My skin tingles as warmth returns to my limbs. The numbness fades—physically, at least.

I stay in until the water cools, then step out, toweling off with trembling fingers.

Wrapping the towel tightly around my body, I step close to the mirror. My reflection looks horrid, my hair damp and clinging to my cheeks and my eyes swollen.

And I'm reminded, again, that I could've died out there. I thought death was better than being held captive, but this just gives me a chance to try again.

Next time, I don't plan on going in half-assed. Shaking my head to air-dry my hair, I walk out of the bathroom, coming to a screeching halt almost immediately.

Roman is sitting in a chair across the room—legs spread, arms resting loosely on his knees, shirt unbuttoned just enough to show a glimpse of skin. His gaze lifts the moment he sees me.

My breath hitches. "You're still here."

He shrugs. "Didn't say I was leaving."

He's right. It's also his room, but it's common sense to know that I needed privacy. "You said I needed the bath," I say as I fold my arms. "You didn't say you'd be waiting for me outside of it."

"I didn't want you passing out again," he says simply. "I figured I'd wait."

"But you could've waited in another room," I mutter, pulse fluttering like a trapped bird. His eyes drop slightly, just enough to scan the towel, and my heart stutters.

"I could've," he agrees, then tilts his head. "But I didn't."

There it is again. That smug, entitled self-assurance that makes me want to scream and throttle him in the same breath. I roll my eyes hard enough that they might stick. "Fine. I'm going to my room. Or are you going to follow me? Because, well, it's your house, right?"

Roman doesn't miss a beat. "Do you want me to?"

Jesus freaking hell.

I throw my hands in the air, exasperated and halfway to launching a comeback sharp enough to make him blink, but my towel, traitorous and loose from my sudden movement, slips.

And falls.

For a moment, everything stops.

It's not just my thoughts or my lungs but my entire body. My muscles lock, and every nerve is stunned with such a vicious shock that I can't even move to cover myself. Heat floods my skin in a violent wave, and I stand there, frozen.

Mortified. Exposed. Every cell in my body screams at me to do something, but I'm stuck in that paralyzed second.

Roman steps toward me, crouching to retrieve the fallen towel with an infuriatingly gentle grace. When he straightens, his gaze is averted. Not teasing, like his words, or manipulative, like he's taking advantage of my vulnerability.

He holds it out to me.

I snatch it from his hand, the thick fabric shaking in my grip as I try to rewrap it around myself with some semblance of dignity, but my fingers tremble too much. I can't get it to tuck.

My hands fumble again, useless. Then his hands are covering mine, taking the towel and folding it in place. It should piss me off—my inability, his sudden switch from cocky to gentle, throwing me off-balance.

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Yet all I can think about is how good it feels...how every nerve in my body is on fire. His knuckles graze my collarbone, and his fingers dip beneath my towel to touch the top of my breasts.

My breath hitches, sharp and loud, and I hate how audible it is.

His head lifts, and his eyes narrow slightly, searching mine.

No. Not searching. That would imply that he can't see through me, because I'm as obvious as writing on the wall. I can smell the rain still clinging to his clothes, see the drop of water clinging to his temple.

His voice drops, rough as gravel, low as a secret. "Do you want me to walk away?"

Yes. No.

"I meant what I said, Bella. I'm not going to force you. It will happen, but when it does, it'll be because you want me. Because you've decided that you're mine to fuck however I want."

Dirty, filthy words I wouldn't take from anybody else, yet they turn me on so easily. Roman's thumb lifts to my cheek, and thorough pad caresses in a circle. "Tell me, printsessa, what do you want?"

Please don't make me say it.

I feel my towel slipping. Or my self-control. I'm not sure which.

“You,” I whisper.

A muscle twitches in his jaw as his hand cups my chin. “Do you?” he whispers, leaning close to my ear. His voice feels like honey, dripping down my throat...thick enough to pull me under. “I can still feel you fighting me. I like a bit of struggle, Bella, but not this time. This time, I want you to surrender.”

I spent years of my life having lessons driven into me by my father. Never let anyone control you, was the main point of every single one.

But those words sound completely pointless now.

“Please,” I hear myself beg. “Please.”

“Good,” he growls. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

My world explodes. Colors. Bright, blinding colors as his mouth claims mine in a searing kiss. His teeth nip my bottom lip before he swoops in, cradling the back of my neck. My hands go limp from the onslaught of pleasure...better than anything my mind could’ve conjured up.

I tilt my head, trembling as he nips my earlobe, grazing my skin with his teeth and sucking on it. The slight twinge of pain and the rush of pressure that follows wrangles a cry from my lips as I throw my arms around his neck, clinging hard.

Roman’s hand yanks my towel away, and he grabs my waist, pulling me flush to his body. My nipples harden as they rub against his damp shirt, the delicious friction driving me reckless. His hand slides lower, cupping my ass and squeezing as he tilts his hips.

I can feel him—his arousal straining against his pants, pressed between my thighs,

and the ache in my stomach swells and tightens until I'm reaching for his pants and tugging desperately at his zipper.

"Patience," he murmurs, grabbing my wrists and pinning them behind my back. He lifts his head, and I open my eyes when I feel him staring at me. "You're mine, remember?" His hand slides down my chest, cupping my breasts.

I shudder as his fingers pinch my nipple, tugging and teasing. "Mine," he repeats. My back arches and a tear runs down my face as he keeps my hands from touching him while he wreaks havoc on my body.

His fingers drift lower, pausing below my stomach. My legs spread, and my knees buckle. My fingers dig into his arm as his thumb slides over my clit, rubbing me slowly.

His name slips out as a plea, a long, drawn-out plea for more. Guiding me with his arm around my waist, he leads me to the bed.

"I want you on all fours," he orders.

I climb up shakily, bracing my palms and my knees on his sheets. I watch as he slides his head underneath me, lying down with his legs hanging off the edge of the bed. "Sit."

"Sit?" I blink twice, puzzled.

He doesn't repeat the order. But his tongue, touching my clit, forces me down on his face as my body jerks violently.

"Fuck. Fuck." I'm unable to form a coherent thought as his tongue swirls, slipping into my pussy and licking my clit. My head falls forward, my hair spilling over my

face as I fist the sheets, tremors racking me to the bone. A cry rips out of my throat as his mouth closes around my core, sucking firmly.

It's too much. Too fucking much. And yet, I want more.

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I push against his shoulders, but Roman keeps me firmly against his face, his hands digging into my hips and holding me down. His mouth is a full-on assault with no mercy, wrecking every inch of my body.

I feel him—his tongue, the slide over and over, the wet suction and pressure—until it's hard to tell where my body starts and ends.

Then I'm coming, clenching so hard my vision blurs in and out, plunging me into violet-tinged darkness. I black out, hitting my head against the bed as my body gives out.

I open my eyes moments later to see him standing next to the bed. Naked. I saw him the other day, but this... I swallow thickly.

He stares at me, an unreadable look on his face as he strokes himself, the sight of his hand moving up and down so hypnotic I can't look away. My tongue darts out, touching my lip, when I see precum glistening on the head of his cock.

"I like that look on your face." He smiles. "It's almost as if you can't hide how much you want this. Desperate," he drawls, stepping closer. As if pulled by a string, I go on my knees, tilting my head back to meet his gaze. He cups my chin, staring down at me with affection and pride. "You want me to fuck you, don't you? Until you're begging to come."

Wordlessly, I reach out, my hand covering his. He lets go, and I touch him, his skin warm to my palm. Roman throws his head back, a groan slipping out and a curse under his breath. His hand slides behind my head, and he guides me forward. My fist

drops to the bottom of his shaft, and my tongue darts out, licking the tip.

“Hell.” His grip tightens, but the slight prick of pain only urges me on. I part my lips, taking more of him into my mouth. He feels so...big. Full. My stomach tightens, and I press my thighs together as pressure builds again, throbbing fiercely.

I gag loudly as Roman tilts his hips, pulling away. Then I go down again, taking him back, savoring his harsh, raspy breathing and the trembles that shake his legs.

“Enough,” he grunts, tossing me onto the bed, my back meeting the sheets again. He strides over to his closet door and returns seconds later with a condom rolled on.

He looms over me, steadying himself with one arm as his mouth claims mine in a kiss. A soft, desperate sound slips from my throat as I cling to him, arms wrapping around his neck like I need him to stay, like I’ll fall apart if he doesn’t.

My legs lift to circle his waist, trying to pull him in, to feel more—all—of him.

“Look at me,” he rasps.

I open my eyes. His thumb traces over the outline of my swollen lips. “You look ruined. Wrecked. Just the way I like. I want to see your eyes when I fuck you. Don’t close them.”

Then he slides into me—slow, unrelenting—until the stretch forces a cry from my lips. My fingers clutch at his shoulders as my back arches off the bed. He stills, buried deep, his breath hot against my cheek.

“Shhh,” he murmurs, voice rough and dark. “You can take it. You were made to take me like this.”

His hand slides down my thigh, gripping tightly as he rocks forward just an inch. “Feel that? That’s mine now.”

“Please,” I beg, although I’m unsure what for. His other hand slides under my thighs, and he cups my ass as he tilts his hips downward, going in. Fully. My mouth trembles as my lips remain open, unable to form a word to explain how I feel.

“That’s it.” Roman smiles. “Just like that.”

He thrusts again, harder this time, and my back bows as the pleasure turns sharp and intoxicating. Roman groans low in his throat, eyes dark as he watches me unravel beneath him.

Then he pulls out slowly, only to sit back on his knees. “Legs up,” he commands, already grabbing a pillow. I obey on instinct, dazed and breathless.

He slides the pillow under the small of my back, adjusting me with firm hands until my hips are tilted perfectly for him. The second he sinks back in, I gasp—louder this time. The new angle has me reaching wildly for him, dizzy with how deep he goes.

“Beautiful,” Roman growls, voice thick with lust. “Look at you...fuck, you’re perfect like this. Taking every inch.”

His thrusts go deep and then faster, merciless strokes that leave me gasping, moaning, clawing at the sheets. Each one sends a jolt of raw sensation through me, my body arching into him, desperate for more. He doesn’t ease up. He watches me with hooded eyes, jaw tight, sweat glistening in the silver hair at his temple.

“Feel that?” he mutters, voice low and rough as gravel. His hands grip my hips like he owns them.

I cry out, the possessiveness in his tone sending a tremor through me. He leans in, one hand sliding up my stomach, between my breasts, to grip my throat—not tight, just enough for me to feel his claim. His lips hover over mine, his breath hot and heavy before he kisses me, swallowing my moans.

“Roman...” I whimper, barely coherent. My legs shake, heels digging into the bed as he keeps up his rhythm—deep, relentless, his hips slamming against me just right, over and over.

I can’t. “I can’t!” I cry as my core pulses around him in desperate, rhythmic spasms.

“Come for me,” he breathes against my mouth. “Let me feel you lose it.”

And I do.

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With a choked gasp and every muscle tensing as the orgasm rips through me, I climax, hot and hard and endless. I shatter around him, crying out his name, legs falling on the bed.

Roman groans, head falling to my neck as he keeps moving, pushing me through the aftershocks until I black out beneath him.

11

ROMAN

I tear my eyes away, anger blooming in my chest as I walk to my closet, leaving Isabella sleeping on my bed. I grab a shirt, buttoning it hurriedly before tossing a jacket on.

When I walk out, the covers have slipped lower, and she's naked from her waist up. Her breasts bounce gently as her chest rises while she sleeps on. My gaze drinks in her soft features—hair spread out on the pillow, half-parted lips, and the fading bruises on her neck and chest.

She looks peaceful. Almost innocent. Yet, lust rises inside me gleefully as blood rushes from my head to my pants. I tug on my buckle, exhaling quietly as my dick gets hard again.

Having sex with Isabella last night wasn't part of the plan.

When I got the call from Polina that Isabella was nowhere to be found, I panicked.

My first thought wasn't that she'd escaped. No, I assumed the worst—that someone had taken her. That she'd been kidnapped right under my fucking watch.

It would've made more sense.

But I clearly underestimated her.

That became obvious the second I pulled up the external feed—the one she doesn't know about. The figure in overalls was unmistakable.

No amount of dirt or disguise could hide the sharp defiance in her stride or the sway of those hips I'd already memorized. She thought she was clever. She wasn't.

Not to me.

The moment I realized it was her, I didn't waste a second. I drove straight to the farm, rage curling in my chest like smoke in a closed room. She'd put herself at risk. She'd walked out into a world that wouldn't think twice about tearing her apart, all because she thought she could run from me.

Foolish.

While I drove, I thought about all the ways I'd keep her from trying this again. I'd lock every exit, place someone at her door, and install cameras inside and out if I had to. Whether she liked it or not, she belonged to me.

But then I saw her.

Curled under a leaking shelter, soaked through and shaking violently... It made something twist low in my gut. Her skin was pale, her lips blue, and her fingers curled in on themselves as if her body was too frozen to fight anymore.

And just like that, the fury fell away.

Without thinking or planning, I was on my knees, gathering her in my arms. She didn't fight—not really. There was no fight in her punches, and I cared more about getting her warm than anything else.

Her body felt small and fragile against mine, limp with cold and exhaustion. Her breath came in uneven little bursts, and when her head lolled against my shoulder, I wanted to hold her in my arms and not let go.

I didn't care about the cameras. Or the guards. Or the damn plan. Because despite everything, I couldn't fight the desire to protect her.

So when she stood in front of me, her towel on the floor, I wasn't thinking about sex. When she asked me why I brought her to the bathroom, it wasn't to claim her as mine...physically.

Entertaining that thought—that Isabella means more to me—was fine last night. I allowed myself to feel for her more than I was supposed to.

Not anymore.

It was a one-time fluke that'll never happen again.

And my plan? It's back in motion. If she was ready to escape, despite my threats, it means she had a plan. If that plan involved contacting Marco Ricci, I intend to get every detail from her, no matter the means.

With one last glance and desire rising its tempting head, I stride out of my bedroom, closing the door behind me.

I meet Polina in the hallway. Her eyes are filled with questions and concerns. She, too, was worried that something might have happened to Isabella.

Stoic, firm Polina.

“She’s fine,” I say, easing her worry.

“Okay.” She nods, though the nod is hesitant. “I made soup for her. When should I take it up?”

“Anytime,” I reply with a nonchalant shrug. “I did my part. I brought her back. The rest doesn’t concern me.”

It’s a lie, but I deliver it well. “I’ll be out till dark,” I add, already walking past her. “No need to prepare dinner for me.”

“Oh,” she says, her voice catching in a way it rarely does. I stop and turn to her. “What is it?”

Polina hesitates, her fingers twisting the edge of her apron before quickly releasing it. “It’s nothing, sir. I just...assumed you’d be staying home. I made plans for you and Miss Ricci to have your meals together. I’ll make the necessary adjustments,” she adds briskly.

“That won’t be needed,” I reply curtly. “Miss Ricci and I will not be eating together...anymore. If it’s a hassle to make our meals separately, then I’ll have someone?—”

“Oh, no.” She waves her hands and shakes her head. “I didn’t mean it that way, sir. You don’t have to worry about me. Thank you.”

She walks away then, her hands clasped behind her back.

I have no business being in the same room with Isabella unless it's to make an heir. And before then, she needs to have my last name. As far as I'm concerned, I've dragged it on for too long.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, she becomes mine in the eyes of God and the law.

"Bill," I drawl as he walks into my office on time. "You're punctual. That's good."

He smiles—a continuous attempt to get on my good side. Which, as far as I'm concerned, is a waste of time. The only reason he's here, untouched, is because I have use for him.

The moment that ends, he ends.

"Sit." I point. "Tell me what you have for me."

He hesitates momentarily before picking up his pace, and my eyes narrow. He perches at the edge of the chair and clears his throat. "I—I found someone who might know where Marco is. Igor Smirnov."

I stroke my chin. "Who?" I've never heard the name before.

"He's a pakhan," he says. "He used to be under a different brotherhood but left and formed his organization a few months ago. According to my sources, he was a double agent for Marco when he was still under the brotherhood. When he left, he lay low."

"So?"

Billie exhales. "He's back. He's back, and he's making a lot of noise. One of my

sources said he was bragging about his plan for some families, yours included.”

Mine? My brow arches as I chuckle dryly. “Me?”

He nods. “Yes. But—but not for the reasons you think. He’s smart enough to know that challenging the Volkovs would be a death sentence. What he’s coming for is Isabella Ricci. Some people...” He swallows, his gaze shifty as he contemplates finishing his sentence. “Say that you have Marco Ricci’s daughter.”

“Some?” I say slowly as my lips twitch in a sardonic smile. “What do you think, Billie? Do you think I have the daughter of the man who betrayed and killed my father?”

“I don’t...” He scratches the back of his neck, glancing around furtively. “I don’t know. They say you took her on her wedding day. If you did, sir, I’m sure you had a good reason.”

“Damn right,” I growl, leaning back. “You’re damn right, Billie. And yes”—his eyes almost pop out in shock—“I took her. If you’re curious why, I think you’d find the answer if you ask yourself why you’re still alive.”

His brows furrow in confusion, followed by more perplexity as he scrunches his face. “Because I can help?”

Well...close.

“Why does he want her?” I ask, moving on.

“She’s his fiancée.”

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 10:02 am

I snort, the sound amusing in a mocking way. “His fiancée?”

His head jerks in a quick nod. “That’s what he’s been saying. Marco Ricci promised her to him in exchange for their alliance. He had things to settle outside the country, so he wasn’t aware she was marrying someone else. But since she didn’t and she’s with you...he’s coming for what’s his.”

The fucker.

A dark laugh rumbles up from my throat, dry and humorless, as I drag my fingers through my hair. Marco Ricci. I thought his greatest sin was killing my father. But as it turns out, the man’s offenses are bottomless. A shitty father. A coward. And now, a pimp in a thousand-dollar suit.

He abandoned his daughter with a man who had no mercy to give.

But not before he auctioned her off like some rare collectible, lining up bidders in back rooms and boardrooms.

I wonder how many men he approached. Two? Three? Did he plan to give her to one and burn the others, the same way he betrayed my father? If he hadn’t killed my father, he would’ve been a dead man either way.

He was already dead before I knew it. The only difference is that now his death is going to be by my hands.

I clasp my hands together, palms pressed so tightly they sting. My gaze settles on

Billie across the desk.

“He said he’s coming for her?” I ask.

“Yes.” Billie shifts under the weight of my voice. “He said she’s his. That you’ve got no claim. From the sound of it, he might make his move soon. Maybe we could give her to him. In exchange for Marco’s location. If he feels cheated, he might be willing to?—”

He pauses when he sees my expression shift. I tilt my head, the calm on my face masking the storm. “You want me to give her to him?”

Billie hesitates and then shrugs as if trying to soften his suggestion. “I just thought?—”

“No,” I interrupt, voice low, steady. “You didn’t think.”

The air shifts.

I rise slowly from my chair. There is no shouting, no slamming fists, just the quiet hum of something violent pressing beneath my skin. I see the pale spreading across Billie’s face and his Adam’s apple stuck in his throat. My fist curls and my fingers flex.

Do I really need him? I could find someone else—the list of people who betrayed my father is longer than it should be. It’s high time I go through them.

“Your life,” I say, “is much less valuable than hers. So if it ever comes down to a choice...” Billie swallows. “Pray I never have to make it.”

“I understand,” he says, trembling slightly.

“Good. Get out.”

He dashes out of my office, but he pauses at the door, closing it gently. I inhale heavily as I sit down, the weight of my anger pressing down on my chest.

Igor Smirnov. A no-name, small-time pakhan coming for Isabella. She’s mine. Mine alone. And if Igor needs to understand that, if he needs it carved into his skin, whispered into his ears as he chokes on his own blood, then I’ll teach him.

I’ll make him regret the moment he ever said her name aloud.

He’ll be a warning to everyone else—whoever was dumb enough to make a deal with Marco—that she’s my wife.

Reaching for my phone, I call Leo.

“How fast can you make plans for a wedding?”

12

ISABELLA

Wearing black feels like the best revenge for being forced to marry to Roman Volkov.

I’d rather die. Like I should’ve died from the cold and the heat.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 10:02 am

It's a shame no one's going to be there. I didn't care about the press covering my first wedding, but I'd gladly pay a bunch of them to be at this one. He'd never outlive the whispers—the bride wearing black with a bouquet of funeral flowers.

My fist curls tightly around the fabric of the dress's skirt as I stare at my reflection in the mirror—unblinking. The black dress clings to me like smoke, like mourning. My lips are painted a bold, violent red—not the shade of romance and attraction, but war.

Polina knocks on the door before entering my room. She's always neutral, but she looks more somber today.

“Miss Ricci,” she says, holding out a veil. It's black, but transparent. I wouldn't have cared if it was so dark that every step I took toward the altar was a stumble.

Maybe I should look for something that'll make me trip over my feet and bash my head against the floor. Maybe I'll die as quickly as my ex-fiancé did.

“No.” I grit my teeth as my fingers dig into my palm through the dress. I don't want to die. I want to stay alive—for the sheer purpose of revenge.

Roman walked into the house two hours ago, storming into my room. My body still carried the memory of last night...when he cradled me against his chest, touched my cheek tenderly, and made love to me like I was his.

No. He fucked me. There was nothing gentle about the bruises he left on my collarbone and my hips. I can still feel him through the throbbing deep inside me and my weak knees.

Then he said, “We’re getting married.”

Like he was making casual conversation.

I couldn’t believe it. “Married?”

He nodded. “Yes. Married. You’re to be my wife, remember? It should’ve happened in that order. You take my last name and give me a child.”

My jaw dropped. In that order? I had thought it was lust. That we were two people who wanted each other so much that logic and self-restraint didn’t matter. At least, I had wanted him so badly I couldn’t think.

But to Roman, we’d gone against his carefully crafted plan.

My body turned ice-cold, a stark reminder that I was a pawn to him. Not human—blood and flesh. He took me because I served a purpose—to show my father that he’d taken over his bloodline.

And when I refused, he said, “Fine. I’ll give you to one of the many men your father sold you to. You might think marriage to me is a terrible fate, but with them, you’ll beg for death. You’ll end up dying alongside your father.”

So I agreed.

Not because I was scared. No. I need to live. I’m getting married to Roman Volkov because I need to buy more time to escape. When I do, I’ll come back with so much fury that I’ll burn him till there’s nothing left of him.

Not even his ashes.

“Thank you,” I mutter as Polina stretches her hands out, silently reminding me that I’ve forgotten to take the veil. It’s a short one with a clip, and I place it in the middle of my hair, pushing it away from my shoulders.

Two weddings. In a month. Neither of them voluntary. Both of them—directly or indirectly—caused by my father.

Did he really sell me off?

The Glazastov family was one thing, but other men? I snatch the veil off my head, tossing it away in anger, but it only floats out of my reach, drifting in the air for a few seconds before it touches the floor.

“Fuck!” I grab a brush and hurl it at the mirror. It cracks.

“Miss Ricci!” Polina gasps, horrified.

“Tell me—” I turn to her as my chest heaves. “What do you think about your boss? Do you like working for him? Do you find it easy working for a man who kidnaps women and forces them to marry him?”

She looks away, but I’m relentless, needing somewhere to direct my anger. “Look at me, Polina,” I rage. “You’ve been living here for years. Do you turn a blind eye to his activities, telling yourself that your only concern is your job? Do you even have a conscience?”

How? How does anyone stand it? I’m barely a month in and already losing my mind.

“Mr. Volkov is a good man,” she mutters.

I throw my head back in loud, mocking, mirthless laughter. “Good man?” I scoff.

“You know he belongs to the bratva, don’t you? They kill people. They slaughter men in cold blood. How do you justify what’s good?” I ask her.

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“I—I...” she stammers. “I should go. Mr. Volkov needs me.”

As she hurries out of my room, I grab the brush again, hurling it at the door when it closes, missing her by a few inches. That—the fact that I could’ve hurt her—is enough to sober me up.

“Jesus,” I groan, dragging my fingers through my hair. It took me a while to prepare, but it looks like a mess in seconds. I stare at my reflection in the mirror again—messy hair, a deep scowl on my lips, and bright red.

This is what he gets.

This is what he deserves.

When I head out of the house an hour later, there’s a limousine parked with the door open. I notice curious glances from the men, but I ignore them.

Let them think what they want. At least one thing will be clear—I didn’t consent to this wedding.

“Such pretense,” I mutter as I get in. It’s empty, save for a bucket with a bottle of champagne, some ice and a few glasses.

“Please help yourself, Miss Ricci,” the driver says before the limo pulls out, driving away from the house. I grab the bottle, open it, and pour myself a glass. Swirling the frothy liquid around, I tip my head back and pour it down my throat.

I know he means I could have one or two, part of whatever service they offer, but getting drunk is the only way I'll go through the whole wedding without having the urge to punch the priest while he conducts the ceremony.

I'd rather not take out my frustration on an innocent person.

Is the priest even innocent, though? If he's officiating, then he knows who Roman is. If he does, and he's allowing a man like him to get married in his chapel, that has to be some offense.

So if I end up punching him...I pour myself another glass, then another, until the bottle is almost empty and I'm buzzed.

Happy married life, Roman Volkov!

Somehow, I manage to go through the whole thing. I don't remember most of it, because I remain buzzed until the very end and it lasts all of an hour.

No vows. No kissing. As if I'd allow him to come that close to me again. Last night was an egregious mistake. I've chosen to blame my near-death experience, and I've accepted that I would've clung to anyone else if they saved me from dying.

It wasn't Roman's charm. I was desperate for warmth.

"Isabella." He grabs my arm as I walk toward the chapel's exit doors. I turn with a disgusted look as I glance down at my wrist. "Are you drunk?"

"What a question," I snort. "How else do you think I lasted through this forced wedding, husband?" Sarcasm drips from the last word.

His jaw tightens as if he's about to protest, but he exhales, shaking his head. "Fine.

I'll take you home."

"Home?" I yank my hand out of his grip, the word leaving a bitter taste on my tongue. "Your house, you mean? And I don't know why you're asking. It's not like I have a choice. I'm a prisoner there, remember?!" I raise my voice, hoping to embarrass him, but he's unfazed.

He leans in, and I feel his breath against my ear. An involuntary shiver runs down my spine. "I know what you're doing, Isabella. But I should warn you, it ends up looking bad for you. If I have to carry you out of this building, I will. I will have you over my shoulder, even if you scream and yell."

A flicker of something—intimidation, maybe—twists in my gut, but I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin.

"Do your worst, Roman," I snap, spinning on my heel and stalking toward the exit, the train of my black wedding dress trailing behind me like a veil of smoke.

The evening air slaps against my flushed cheeks the moment I step outside. Freedom, even if fleeting, fills my lungs. For a second, I imagine bolting. Running until my legs give out. But I know I won't get far.

His footsteps are quiet, but I feel him before I see him—looming like a shadow I can't outrun. He catches up with me, and I whirl on him before he can say a word, holding a finger between us like a weapon.

"If you touch me," I warn, my voice sharp but trembling at the edges, "I will scream ungodly things. I'll cry out in horror. I'll say you did things no man can ever walk away from."

His eyes narrow slightly—not in rage, but calculation. Then, in a voice smooth like

velvet cut with steel, he says, “I don’t care what you scream, Isabella. But you will come with me.”

“Murder?” I hiss, my voice sharp enough to cut glass. “What if I tell everyone what you did? That you killed my fiancé at the altar?”

His face remains stone, unreadable. But I press forward, anger swelling hot in my throat.

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“Do you really think you’ll get away with it? Maybe you will today. Maybe no one will care because you’re Roman fucking Volkov. But I’ll keep screaming it. Over and over. Until someone listens. Until someone stops you. Or until you finally put a knife to my neck and silence me for good.”

For a heartbeat, neither of us moves. The air stretches thin between us.

I don’t want to die. But I’d let him think death is better than his mercy. Turning away, I march down the stone steps and yank open the car door, throwing myself inside.

I tear the dress away from my body the second I get home, pulling and ripping at seams that refuse to budge. Large holes appear where my fingernails dig into the lace, and when I toss it to the floor, it’s in tatters.

“Good riddance,” I mutter, kicking it for better measure. I thought I was making a statement by wearing black, but I should’ve known it wouldn’t matter to him. It wouldn’t make a dent in his plans.

He knew I was drunk. I wasn’t trying to hide it, and he didn’t say anything.

Because finishing the ceremony and getting that?—

I lift my hand, staring at the plain gold band. I wasn’t completely aware when he slipped it on my finger, and I forgot to throw it at him when I stormed out of the church. Ripping it off, I chuck it at the wall.

It hits, bounces off, and vibrates on the floor for a good minute before settling.

“Mrs. Volkov.” I mouth the words, too irritated to say them out loud. I’m no longer Isabella Ricci, the only child and heir to Marco Ricci. I’m now wife to a crazed, egoistic, self-centered, controlling man.

I’ll never say it out loud. The words Mrs. Volkov will never slip past my lips as long as I’m alive, nor will his ring touch my finger again.

“I don’t care what you scream, Isabella. But you will come with me.” Roman’s words echo in my mind, and I see his impassive, unbothered face. It didn’t matter to him that I was willing to tell everyone who he truly was.

Murderer. He would’ve done as he said, because he did it once, at the cathedral. It’s almost as if nothing affects him.

The asshole!

I drag my fingers through my hair, biting my cheek to keep from screaming in frustration. I’ll show him. Someway, somehow, I’ll make him regret forcing me down the isle.

As I walk to the bathroom, fuming, I hear a vibrating sound. I spin, gaze cutting to my bed. My phone? I haven’t used it since I tried contacting my father, but he didn’t respond.

And after Roman scared me into thinking we were going to start sharing a bed, I hid my phone under the bed. In hindsight, if he had followed through with his word, he might’ve found it easily.

I hear it vibrate again.

Dad?

I sprint to the bed, yanking up the mattress and slipping my hand underneath. It's my phone. But it's not my father; an unknown number flashes on the screen.

Desperate, I answer and place it against my ear gingerly. "Hello?"

"Miss Ricci?"

Nico? My heart leaps. Nico was one of my father's closest friends and his attorney until they had a falling out. My father never explained why, and I knew better than to ask, even though Nico had been like a second father to me.

"Nico?" I whisper as my eyes dart to the door. It's closed, but I don't have a lock, so Roman can come in any time.

Now that we're married.

I drag the chair with one hand, straining against the weight as I make it to the door. Wedging it under the knob, I return to the call.

"Nico?"

"Miss Ricci," he says, and I almost exclaim with joy. "I'm sorry I haven't reached out since..." He trails off, but I know he's referring to my wedding—the one where I was taken. "Your father is in a peculiar situation, so he asked me to convey his message."

My father? Hope and doubt strain against my heart. I thought he abandoned me, leaving before my wedding and going radio silent after I got here.

"He killed my father. Betrayed a blood oath...I will kill him."

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Roman's accusation. His promise to end my father.

If Dad knew that Roman was coming, it could explain why he had to run. But I've never known him to run away from a fight. He was the one who told me that I shouldn't let a rival see weakness, because they'll know they have the upper hand.

Why would he run away instead of facing Roman, unless he knew he'd done something abominable?

"No." I shake my head, refusing the thought. My father didn't kill Roman's father. He wouldn't. Unless he had a good reason. "Nico?"

"Miss Ricci?"

I hesitate, unable to get the words past my lips. The truth is, I'm scared. I want to believe that Roman made it up because he couldn't accept that his father died for any other reason. I want him to be wrong.

On the other hand, I thought I knew my father, but he gave me to a stranger and then disappeared. After my mother's death and his failed relationship with Nico, I have so many unanswered questions.

"Did my dad kill Roman Volkov's father?"

The silence that meets my question on the other end feels too heavy for my fingers. They shake as I struggle to hold the phone, and I can hear my heart pounding in my ears.

“Nico?” I can barely hear my voice. “Nico?”

“We’re going to get you out of there.”

That’s not what I asked. That’s not what I wanted. “How?” I ask, letting him get away with the subject change.

He clears his throat. “You don’t have to know the details. But we will need to take Roman out of the playing field before we come for you. There’s no telling what plans he has or the traps he’s laid out.”

Take him out? My eyebrows creep up. Surely they don’t mean...

“Are you going to kill him?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Just stay put, okay? I promise we’ll get you out of there. Your father wanted me to tell you he’s thinking about you,” Nico says.

Lies. Lies. Lies! I want to scream, but I do what I did before—bite the inside of my cheek as I inhale slowly. “Okay.”

“Good. I’ll talk to you some other time.”

The line goes dead before I can say anything, and I let the phone fall from my hand, watching it bounce as it hits the bed. I follow suit as my knees suddenly go immobile, losing their strength.

I should be happy. I’m finally getting out of here, and my father, even though I suspect Nico added that last message on his own, didn’t completely neglect me. Roman will be getting his due for everything he’s done. I might not have orchestrated it myself as I wanted to, but it’s happening either way.

So I should be relieved.

And yet, I'm not.

I can only think about Roman dying at the hands of the man whomightavekilled his father.

13

ISABELLA

I find Roman in the kitchen the next morning, drinking coffee. He pauses when he sees me, the mug hanging halfway between his lips and the counter, his eyes briefly assessing my appearance.

“Good morning,” he says.

Oh.It wasn't exactly a typical wedding night, but I expected him to either ignore me or come up with a remark to piss me off.

“Good morning,” I mutter, turning away from him to the fridge. I grab a bottle of water and tuck it under my arm, heading back toward the door. Since I can't leave the house and I'm not in the mood for breakfast, my only solution is to get more sleep.

“I've asked Sergei to drive you.”

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I hesitate, looking over my shoulder with one foot out the doorway. Is he talking to me? I blink slowly, confused. “Drive me?”

He nods. “Yes. You want to leave the house, don’t you?”

“Ah,” I scoff, clicking my tongue. “Now you think I want to leave? It didn’t occur to you when I tried to escape, or when you threatened to have your men shoot me, that I wanted to leave this place?” The last words come out with frustration as I grit my teeth.

Roman places his mug on the counter. He doesn’t respond for a minute, working on the cuff links of his sleeves. The expensive silver glints against the crisp white fabric stretched over his forearms, showing them off in a way that makes my chest flutter.

Wrong feeling. I push it away, focusing on my ire. “What changed?”

He lifts his head, gazing at me through half-lidded lashes. “You said it yourself. You were going to run away.”

Huh. What bullshit. I thrust my hands onto my hips, ignoring the thud of the water bottle as it falls to the floor. “And now? What makes you think I won’t do it again?”

He shrugs, eyes narrowing lazily. His voice thickens as he speaks. “Because you’re mine. You’re mine before the law, and no matter how far you run, I have a claim to you.”

In other words, I’m property. Branded property. It should make me livid, but my

thoughts race back to his bedroom after he brought me home. When he touched me and used me and I craved more.

A shiver pulses through me, twisting low in my belly. Before I can process my actions, I clench my thighs tight, desperate for friction, for something to dull the surge of memory coursing through me.

Roman notices.

Of course he does.

His gaze drops, and I hear a low sound. Like a growl. A grunt. The last time I felt him make that sound, it was against my skin, and he was inside me, stretching every inch of my body.

“You’re a cruel man,” I say.

“I don’t disagree,” he replies.

My fingers grip the bottle as I pick it up, distorting the shape of the plastic. He’s insufferable to the point where I want to pick him apart and watch him struggle to find his ego.

“If I can’t go wherever I want, I won’t accept your offer,” I say with a toss of my chin.

“You want to meet your father?” he throws back, not missing a beat.

It takes me a moment to recover, not because I’m thinking about what he suggested, but because I remember my conversation with Nico last night—their plan to break me out and what they intend to do to Roman.

I stare at him, wondering if he knows. Maybe I'm the one in the dark, and he has people monitoring calls between my dad and Nico. Maybe he knows they're laying a trap for him, and he's already one step ahead.

Or, he doesn't. For all his cockiness, Roman Volkov might have a blind spot.

"I have a question."

He tilts his head, asking me to go on.

"Do you think you're untouchable? Do you ever wonder if maybe, like your father, you might be trusting the wrong people?"

The change in his demeanor is immediate. I see the muscle twitch in his jaw and the slight flare of his nostrils. His father, I realize too late. I shouldn't have mentioned him.

But it was worth seeing him rattled. If I need to find his weakness, I know where to probe.

I'm basking in my temporary victory, and he walks toward me. My brain screams flight, but I stand my ground, forcing my thoughts to remain silent. He halts a few feet away and I let out the breath I was holding. It leaves my body like a betrayed whoosh.

Roman's voice, when it comes, is low and clipped. "You don't get to talk about my father," he says. "Not when you're in the middle of lying to me."

"A lie?" I push through the croak that follows the first word, squaring my shoulders. "I merely asked a question. You said my father was responsible for your father's death. And yet, from what I've heard, he was a tough man. The only way he

would've been set up was if he trusted the wrong people.”

“Like your father?” Roman drawls. “It sounds to me like you’re finally accepting that your father is a dishonest coward. Good for you.”

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I knew I was walking into a trap. I refuse to back down, taking a bold step forward. There's nothing between us now, not a hair's breadth or a finger length. I ignore my thoughts as they spiral, facing him squarely. "Sure. He might be dishonest and sometimes a coward. It's not as though you haven't runaway from a fight before. But you see..." I sigh pitifully. "The difference between you and I is that you're not ready to accept that you might be backing the wrong horse. It's a recipe for disaster, Roman Volkov."

This time, his silence makes me feel empowered. "A recipe for disaster," I repeat, clicking my tongue. "But good luck. I'm sure you can handle it. You're big and strong, after all." A swift flashback hits me, and I go pale for a moment. I remember when I said those exact words—big and strong. Tucking it away before it becomes a weakness he can pounce on, I flip my hair and turn, leaving him standing there.

My lips crack in a splitting grin as I climb the stairs. It feels good to be the one walking away. I'm sure my streak won't last, but for now, it's amazing.

I said I wouldn't accept his offer, but I'm out of the house in an hour, slipping into the back seat of a sporty Audi.

"Just drive," I tell Sergei as I lean back, closing my eyes. I can't risk Roman knowing about Nico, so I can't arrange a direct meeting. It doesn't mean I won't try, though. My dad has people everywhere—bars, clubs, and the most inconspicuous of places, like auto shops and cafes. There'll be someone there to deliver my message.

Our first stop is a vintage shop, and Sergei waits in the car as I walk into the shop. The smell of old stuff hits me—dust, age, and wear—and I clear my throat as I

approach the front desk, drawing the attention of the man behind the counter.

“Hi?”

He looks up from polishing a weird-looking piece, and his eyes widen when he sees me. “Miss...Miss Ricci?”

Thank heavens. “Hi, Mickey.” I smile, slapping my hand on the counter. “How’s it going?” My dad found Mickey peddling, gave him a shop, and uses the shop to launder money. He never told me outright, but he brought me along a few times, and it didn’t take long to see that he wasn’t buying any antiques. Mickey’s my age, but he lives and looks like he has no idea how the world works.

“Ah.” He scratches his hair, falling over his forehead. “It’s fine, I guess. I heard...” He purses his lips, reluctant to finish his statement. I don’t know if it’s true, but I heard something.”

“That I almost got married, but I was kidnapped?” I say.

His head bobs. “Yeah, but...but you got married again, right?”

Roman. It’s not surprising. We got married yesterday—a small ceremony that would’ve remained unknown if we were two other people, but the news has spread like wildfire.

“Yes,” I say flatly. “That isn’t going to be a problem, is it?” He might hesitate to help, especially if he’s heard that Roman has a bounty on my father’s head. “You owe us, remember?” I lean over when he doesn’t respond, pinning him with a glare. “What was it you told my dad? That no matter what, when we came calling, you’d drop everything to help?”

“Y-yes,” he stammers. “I was shocked, that’s all. And Mr. Ricci missed his last appointment, so I have no idea what’s going on.”

I see. “Can you reach him?”

He shakes his head. “No. He told me he’d contact me first to set a time and date. That’s the way it’s always been.”

Again, not surprising. If my dad were worried about Mickey selling him out, he’d want to hold all the cards. It also means I’m back where I started without knowing what he’s up to. I know Nico won’t tell—his relationship with my father might have frayed in the past, but it sounds like they’re back in business. And his loyalty is to Marco Ricci, not me.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

“Sure. If you’d like me to do anything else for you?—”

I’m already turning away, dismissing him as the door swings open, closing behind me.

When I get home, the house is quiet, and I climb the steps slowly, dragging my feet to my bedroom. The door remains ajar as I walk to my bed and climb on, tucking my feet under the covers. I’ll deal with it later.

Or maybe not. Maybe I’ll sit back and let things play out. If I know how my father intends to trap Roman, I might—somehow—summon a shred of pity for him.

Pity that he doesn’t deserve.

“Go away.” I kick my feet out when I feel something on my foot, too sleepy to be

bothered with identifying whatever it is. But it doesn't go away and I feel the tapping again, firmer this time.

In retaliation, I kick harder. "Leave me alone. I'm trying to sleep."

"Mrs. Volkov, dinner's ready."

Mrs. Volkov? I almost snort. Why would anyone call me that? As if I'd ever get married to Roman—my eyes fly open as it hits me. I am married to him. And it's Polina, standing at the foot of my bed.

"What?" I ask, simmering with fury. I didn't need to be reminded that I made the worst mistake of my life yesterday or that I had the chance to avoid it, but I fucked up.

"Dinner," she says with no emotion in her tone, and her face is flat. "Mr. Volkov is downstairs, waiting for you." Then she turns, low heels tapping on the ground and her hands behind her back, walking out of the room.

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“Close the—” I start to remind her that she left the door ajar when it dawns on me that I was the one who did it. I left the goddamn door open because I was too tired to be bothered with it.

Groaning, I drag myself into a sitting position, sweeping my hair away from my face. Dinner with Roman? Count me out.

If I could trade half a decade of my lifespan so I didn’t have to see him anymore, I would. Even if I had five years left, I’d do it with no regrets.

“Bad riddance,” I mutter as I flop back on the bed, yanking the covers over my head. As I close my eyes again, my stomach lets out a loud grumble.

Nuh-uh. I’m not hungry. I am perfectly capable of going till morning without eating, even though I’ve only had water all day.

“It’s a mindset,” I mutter, attempting to convince my mind. My stomach grumbles in protest, louder the second time. “Please,” I moan, slapping both hands over it. “Could you just spare me for one night?”

Another grumble.

Maybe if I lie still and act like I can’t feel anything, it’ll go away.

I last seconds, maybe minutes, before I leave my bed and head downstairs in a sweatshirt and loose-fitting shorts. It’s just dinner, I tell myself. I don’t have to make conversation with him or acknowledge his presence.

I can simply sit at the table, eat, and leave.

From a few feet away, I see Roman hunched over his phone. His eyebrows are drawn tight in concentration, and his fingers are supporting the phone while his thumb dances on the screen. His other hand sits on the table, tapping idly. He doesn't notice my presence, giving me ample time to slip in, but my steps slow the closer I get.

He looks like he just got in, and it shows in the way his brown dress shirt clings to the hard lines of his chest and arms. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbow, showing off more skin...or enough skin for my thoughts to make a hard left in the wrong direction.

Firm. Warm. Hard.

My mind floods with a vivid recollection of being cradled against his chest and held in his arms, the heat from the body slowly replacing the cold clinging to my clothes. My gaze dips back to his hand on the table...and I remember that hand grabbing my hips and marking my skin.

Heat floods my face, and I slap my hand on my cheek, shocked at how warm it actually feels.

Sensing my gaze, Roman looks up from his phone, quietly assessing me with eyes that drift from my sweatshirt to my shorts and back in a slow, unhurried motion. There's nothing sexual about the way he looks at me. It's detached, like I'm something to be observed without much interaction, but it lights the end of a fuse in my mind, fogging it up quickly.

I hear myself inhale audibly, and his eyebrow quirks with mild curiosity. "Is there something wrong?"

“No,” I reply sharply, breaking out of my very aware trance. “Nothing.” Berating myself silently, I look away as I hurry to the table, taking the seat furthest away from him.

Whose idea was it to have dinner together, anyway? Not his, I’m sure, because he’s gotten what he wanted. A wife.

And an heir.

Never. I’m not going to be a breeding tool.

It has to be Polina’s idea, and she’d only do something like this because she’s trying to play mediator.

“Dinner’s ready,” she announces, bringing in covered dishes. I watch as she places them gingerly, taking her time to adjust their position.

Huh. I tilt my head, watching her with questions brewing in my head. Why would she play mediator? To appease me, after I asked her why she’d agree to work for someone like Roman? Or maybe she’s trying to show me what she sees in him?

If it’s the former, her efforts are about to go down the drain, because I know what I think about Roman Volkov. Manipulator. Selfish. Greedy. Egocentric. Entitled. Brute.

“I could think of more words,” I mutter under my breath as I glance at him through half-lidded lashes, “but I’ll run out at some point.”

“What?” he asks, looking up at me.

I ignore him, digging into my food. He doesn’t push for a response, turning to his

food instead. For some reason, watching him eat annoys me. I know it's because of how unbothered he is by everything. I'm here, seething, and he's at ease.

It should be the opposite.

"I went out," I say, dropping my spoon. He nods half-heartedly without looking at me. "You must know, because you have Sergei reporting to you. He probably told you everywhere we stopped and who I spoke to. And then you went and interrogated them, probably to find out if they know anything about my father."

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His prolonged silence to my statement only infuriates me further. I cross and uncross my arms, glaring at him. “You might as well put a tracker on me,” I say, “or a communication device under my skin so you can record every single conversation I have with anyone who isn’t you. I’m sure it’ll help find my father since I’ve had no luck getting through to him.”

I realize my slip a little too late, and panic floods me, but I bite my tongue, hiding it away.

Roman lifts his head slowly, his spoon dangling from his fingers. I can barely tell what he’s thinking. “I didn’t assign Sergei as your driver to spy on you,” he says calmly. “It was to keep you safe. As for Marco Ricci, I’m aware you have no idea where your father is. If you did...” His mouth twitches with a ghost smile. “I’d have found out already.”

“How?” I ask. “You’ve only asked, what, once? And I never said I didn’t know where he was. You assumed that because you think of me as weak and incapable.”

He looks down at his spoon as silence passes between us. Then he lifts his head again, and his eyes are different. It’s almost inexplicable, but they dig into mine, unwavering, as if peeling back every layer I’ve spent years perfecting.

It’s the same way he knew how to touch me the right way. It’s how he had me crumbling in his arms when I should’ve been fighting against his touch.

“I don’t think of you as weak,” he says, his voice quiet but dense with intensity. “Not once. Not even for a second.”

The words make my breath catch. There's no arrogance in his tone. No smirk. Just raw, searing honesty.

“You're the one underestimating yourself, Isabella,” he adds, his voice roughening slightly. “And if you think I don't see every damn crack in that armor you wear, you're wrong.”

I swallow hard, but the lump in my throat doesn't move. I should say something—fight back, push him away, deflect—but the way he's looking at me has every word dying on my tongue.

“I know you have no idea where your father is because if you knew, you wouldn't have run to some farm. You'd have gone to him. And...” He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “I know he's a terrible father. He was willing to give you away for the sake of an alliance, and when it didn't work, he wasn't rushing to save you from my hands. Know this, printsess—any other man would burn down my house to free you.”

It's cruel.

It's so cruel that he manages to praise me and then make me feel horrible in a span of seconds. He didn't have to talk about my father. He didn't have to remind me how much I've been betrayed by the man I gave everything to.

And god, I hate him for it.

“You know nothing about my father.”

Roman chuckles under his breath, the sound full of disdain. “You think you do? Tell me, Isabella Volkov?—”

“Don't call me that.” I grit my teeth as my eyes flash with anger. “Don't you dare call

me that. I didn't agree to take your last name. You forced it on me."

"It doesn't make a difference," he continues smoothly. "You're mine. I can call you whatever I want. But tell me, do you know that we took him in after he fled from Italy?"

He leans forward, and the black in his eyes turns to slits. My breath slows, the air turns heavy, and a shiver runs down my spine.

"He ran to us for help, pledging his life alliance. If you say you know your father better than I do, you should know about these things. Then you also know that the price for breaking a blood oath is death."

I didn't.

I had no idea my father sought refuge from the Volkovs and swore his life to them. It explains why he never agreed when I asked, as a child, if we could return to Italy.

Even for a summer.

His response was a stiff no, and that was the end of it.

"There are rules, Bella," Roman adds quietly as he settles down, "and he broke them. If you think he doesn't deserve to face the consequences, then you're as much a hypocrite as your father is."

His words cut me to the quick, and the urge to defend myself crawls through my chest.

But I remain silent. I don't know if I can trust the words that come out of my mouth, because everything I know no longer holds true.

How much more did my father hide from me? How many times did I believe his words, unaware that he was feeding me lies?

My stomach churns, and the food makes my stomach sick. I push my chair back noisily and stand up.

“Isabella.”

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“I’m sorry.” I shake my head, the words catching on a sob. “I have to go.”

I hurry away from the dining area, my steps picking up pace as I get closer to the stairs. I take them blindly as my vision blurs, fighting back tears as I race to my room. I kick the door open and slam it behind me before my knees give out, plunging me to the ground.

God.

I bite down on my knuckles as my shoulders shake. The sobs dig through my body as they force their way through my fingers. It feels like death. Like I crawled through mud, and it got under my skin and into my blood.

Bile creeps to my throat, and I taste it on my tongue—it’s desperation for an exit. I crawl to the bathroom, bracing my arms on the toilet seat as I throw up. It comes out over and over until my insides feel hollow and my limbs feel like jelly. Then I let go, curling into my arms as my clothes soak up the dampness of the tiles.

I don’t care anymore.

My father. His plans. Reaching out to him. I don’t care what he intends to do if his plan for Roman involves saving me from a hellhole.

If this ends, I know where I’ll be going.

Far away from everything I’ve known to begin a life of my own.

ROMAN

“What do you plan on doing with him?” Leo walks up to me, holding an obscure metal sculpture in his hand. “It’s clear he doesn’t know anything. Anything that can help us, at least.”

I turn slightly, looking at the man seated on a chair surrounded by glass objects and a broken guitar. The strings are closer to him, gleaming with spots of blood that match the marks around his wrists.

Mickey.

One of Marco’s minor handlers in charge of laundering some of the money he stole from my father, and money he got from using the connections he gained through the Volkov organization.

When I told Isabella I knew she had no idea where her father was, it was because I didn’t have to get feedback from Sergei. Billie Russell had already told me about the vintage shop and a couple others, so I had some men check them out.

If something happened, they were to inform me.

So when Isabella had Sergei stop here, I knew it was a hit point. She unknowingly sold herself out, and the others she visited.

“Any news from the others?” I ask.

Leo shakes his head. “Nothing positive. One of our men was shot, and the handler ran away, but the others had nothing. I’ve distributed the runaway’s description to

various places, so we'll know if he turns up."

"Thank you," I mutter.

He sighs and drags a hand across his mouth. "You could ask her."

"She doesn't know anything," I say.

"She could be leading you on, Roman," he argues, and I hear the frustration simmering in his voice. "She's his daughter. Marco's daughter."

"I know," I hiss through clenched teeth as a vein throbs at my temple.

He clicks his tongue. "And you think she's in the dark about his whereabouts?" He scoffs. "You don't trust her, do you? Remember what your plan was, Roman? To use her to lure him out."

"I remember the plan," I bite out, each word clipped and lethal. "I haven't forgotten why I married her."

Leo raises his hands slightly, defensive but still pushing. "Then act like it. Don't start thinking with your dick."

He knows I've slept with her. Of course he knows. We've been best friends for so long that hiding anything from him is impossible. But his words make me feel weak and incapable of finishing what I started.

My hands ball into fists at my sides, blood roaring in my ears.

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“I was out of line,” he mutters. “I just can’t help but think you might be softening. I know I was against you marrying her in the first place, but we’re past that now. You can’t afford to feel anything for her, Roman. Not even guilt.”

Guilt. The word digs under my skin like a splinter I can’t rip out.

“She’s clueless because he never cared about her,” I say. “He wasn’t going to hand off his role to a woman he didn’t see as his daughter—to him, she was a tool that didn’t serve him well. That’s why he tried pawning her off to the Glazastovs. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn he had another child outside wedlock. His preferred options, maybe.”

Leo exhales audibly. “Damn. That’s cruel. Does she know about it?”

Yes. I told her the same day I made her my wife. “I know she’s been trying to reach him. I’ve seen the phone she hides under her mattress. If she successfully brings Marco out of hiding, I’ll be there to make sure he doesn’t slip through my fingers.”

“Alright.” He nods. He digs his hands into his pockets, kicking out his foot. “I’ll keep working on the leads we have. Should we let him go?” he asks, gesturing to Mickey.

“I’ll handle him.”

“Fine by me. I’ll see you later.”

The store’s door closes noisily, and I stand, making my way over to the seated man. His face trembles in fright as I get closer, and he drops his head when I stop.

“Look at me,” I order.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know where he is, I promise. He comes, collects the money, and leaves. That’s all, I swear on my life. If I knew anything, I’d tell you. I don’t want to die.”

His voice cracks on the last word, but I stay silent, letting the fear stretch, letting it wrap tighter around him until he’s practically shaking apart at the seams.

Pathetic.

I crouch down, leveling my gaze with his bowed head. “You think begging’s going to save you?” I murmur. “You think swearing on your life means anything to me?”

Slowly, painfully, Mickey lifts his head. His eyes are red-rimmed and wet. Disgust twists my gut.

Weak men. They’re all the same when the knife is pressed close enough.

“Please...” he rasps, chest heaving. Then he lifts his head and licks his lips nervously. I see the moment the idea creeps into his head. “If you let me go...I’ll tell you when he shows up. I swear it. I’ll even wear a wire and allow you to set up cameras in my store.”

A dry, amused chuckle rolls off my lips. “So fast? You could’ve held out a little longer, Mickey. How do you expect me to trust you when you rolled over like a dog looking for belly rubs?”

Not to mention, he’ll never be able to fool Marco. The second Leo and I walked into his store, he took one look at us and broke into a run. He confessed to working for Marco when Leo collared him and gave up everything else when Leo tied his hands

with the guitar strings.

All in fifteen minutes.

“You’re not useful.” I toss aside his offer as I stand, brushing lint off my pants. “But I have one piece of advice for you. Run. As far as you can, because if Marco returns, and he will, he’ll know you sold him out. You’re a dead man already, Mickey.”

His eyes widen in panic and he stands up as I turn. I look over my shoulder, and he falls back on the chair.

“I’ll do anything,” he begs. “Let me work for you.”

Work for me? I have no use for someone like him, but his offer is nothing short of insulting.

I turn fully, letting a slow, mocking smile curl my mouth. “Death at my hands?” I drawl, dragging the words out. “It’s a thousand times worse than death at Marco Ricci’s.”

I laugh under my breath, tilting my head as if genuinely amused by his stupidity. “At least with him, you might get a bullet. With me? You’ll rot so slowly you’ll pray for hell to come quicker.”

Mickey’s mouth opens and shuts like a fish gasping for air. He looks seconds from pissing himself. I give him a lazy wave like I’m brushing off something worthless. “Now, run along before I decide to start practicing.”

He trips over his feet, falls, gets up, and runs out the door, leaving it to slam in his wake. I shake my head, my gaze catching on the cut guitar strings again.

I'm done here.

As I walk out into the lazy afternoon sun, my phone rings. It's Billie Russell.

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“I have something for you,” he says in a hushed whisper.

“I have no idea what possessed you to reach out, Billie, but it’d better be good.”

“Oh—” His whisper carries urgency. “It is. I found out, from a reliable source, where Marco is. I verified it, of course, before calling. I’m not sure how long he’ll be there?—”

I cut off his rambling. “Spill.”

My fingers clamp down on the steering wheel as I slice through traffic, weaving recklessly between cars. My knuckles bleach white, my mouth set in a grim line carved by pure rage.

Marco Ricci. Of all places to show his face again—an orphanage. Typical. A coward hiding behind the helpless, hoping the setting would keep the fight from reaching him.

It won’t.

I’m going to walk through those doors and drag him out, bleeding or half dead, to the place where he’ll finally meet the end he deserves. Not even a convent of nuns would be enough to shield him from me.

I weave past a car, almost clipping it as my concentration slips for a moment when my phone rings. I let it go to voicemail as I step on the gas, driving faster and breaking the speed limit. It rings out again, and I groan, digging into my pocket for it.

Leo's name flashes on the screen, but another car slams on their horn, and the phone falls from my hand, dropping to my feet.

I can't reach for it. Not now. Leo's going to have to handle shit on his end. I could've told him about my plan, but I didn't want to play into Marco's hand...bringing undue violence to the orphanage.

He expects me to bring a group and stir up chaos. But he's missed one vital thing—Icraverevenge. It's my driving force, and until he's no longer breathing, I don't plan on backing down.

As the orphanage compound comes into view, I slow down, stopping a short distance from a small structure.

As I exit the car, my phone rings again, and it's still Leo.

I swipe up. "Yes?"

"Where are you?"

A nun walks out of the building. "Somewhere. Why?"

"This isn't the time for vague answers, Roman. I stopped by the store, and you'd left. Where are you?"

I take a step toward the building. "I'll fill you in later," I say.

"There's no later. Isabella just called me."

"Isabella?" My eyes narrow as I see a man walk out, his eyes immediately trained on me.

I see, before he shows it, the gun tucked into his jacket. Then he points to the nun and makes a motion, putting two fingers to his head and pulling the trigger.

“Wherever you are, leave.” I hear Leo’s voice from far away. “You’re in danger, Roman.”

15

ISABELLA

I wake up with a throbbing headache and the sun shining brightly through the open drapes. Polina. There’s no doubt it was her—she must’ve walked in while I was knocked out.

I wonder why she didn’t try waking me up, though. Probably because she saw how much of a shitstorm went down during dinner last night and decided that her plans to bring Roman and me together were futile.

“Shit,” I groan as I drag myself out of bed, almost falling back from the pain that stabs deep into my skull.

Why does it feel like I drank too much? I didn’t. All I did was spend an ungodly amount of time crying and then throwing up, then crying some more and more bile. I thought about showering, but I’m not sure I went through with it. Because all I remember after flushing the toilet was dragging myself to bed and pulling the covers over my head, pretending that I was somewhere far away where nothing could get to me.

Somewhere in the middle of playing pretend, I fell asleep.

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I shake my head as I walk to the bathroom, closing the door with a click. I gasp at the sight of myself in the mirror. I've never seen worse bed hair than the mess on my head, my eyes are red-rimmed and swollen, dark circles under them, and I must've dragged my nails down my throat because I see a fresh cut.

"You look horrible, Isabella," I mutter, stating the obvious aloud. My stomach grumbles too, reminding me that I not only stink up a storm, I barely ate dinner.

I need a shower first.

As I step inside, the water rains hot down my hair and pours over my body. I throw my head back and close my eyes, taking deep breaths.

"If you think he doesn't deserve to face the consequences, then you're as much a hypocrite as your father is." Roman's quiet words echo in my head, bringing back patchy images from the argument we had.

Am I...really a hypocrite? I've spent the past weeks defending my father and damning Roman to hell. I wished him all kinds of dark fates, and I told myself I didn't care if he had to die to gain my freedom.

But if my father did kill his dad, can I still blame him for what he's done? If the reverse were true, what would I have done?

Everything, and that's the truth. I'd have done anything to avenge my father's death, no matter the price. Even if it meant pulling a bullet through the forehead of anyone who stood in my way.

He taught me that—my father. Loyalty. Responsibility. Duty. They came before everything else, including fickle emotions like affection or empathy. Apparently, they came at the expense of family too, because he didn't hesitate to sell me off to the highest bidder.

Why would I expect Roman to behave differently? The Riccis might have been an extension of the bratva, but he belongs at the center. Head of the Volkov brotherhood. Even if he thought of sparing my father, he has responsibilities to the organization under his control.

The water turns cold as I lose myself in muddled thoughts, but when I step out, it's with one resolution—I don't care what my father does or who he makes dealings with.

I'm no longer his daughter.

Isabella Volkov. I wipe the fogged mirror, staring at my reflection. "Isabella Volkov," I whisper.

I told myself I'd never utter the last name aloud, and now it rolls off my tongue with acceptance. My marriage to Roman might've been against my will, and he might be an emotionless, ruthless brute, but a life with him is better than holding on to my father's empty promise.

"He was never going to hand it over to you."

My hands grip the edge of the sink as I suck in a deep breath, hanging my head low. It's over now. I need to think of how to survive here, being Roman's wife, until I figure out a way out.

This might be less than hell, but it's not heaven either—it's just a temporary place.

The sound of my phone ringing pulls me out of the bathroom in a hurry. I yank up the edge of my mattress to retrieve it.

It's Nico. "Nico?" I say.

"Miss Ricci."

Volkov. I don't correct him. "Yes?"

"Are you safe?"

"Yes," I respond flatly. I'm safer here than in my father's presence.

He sighs. "Good. Your father and I communicated after I called you. And—we've decided to do something about Roman Volkov today."

My eyes widen like saucers, and a gasp dissolves between my lips. "Today?"

"Yes."

When he told me they were going to take Roman out—kill him—I wasn't expecting it to be so soon. After I tried finding out the plan without success, I concluded I'd let it happen without my input. Then we argued last night and I completely forgot.

Back then, I saw it as a way out. Now...I'm not so sure. I exhale again, biting my fingernail nervously. "Is he going to do it himself? My dad, I mean? Or is he going to make someone else do his dirty work like he's been doing for weeks?" Anger seeps into my voice.

"Igor Smirnov."

Something about the name makes my brows knot tight. My thoughts scatter, and without thinking, I bite off my cuticle, wincing at the sharp pain. “Who is that?”

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Nico's silence stretches longer than usual, making the tension in my chest grow.

"I deserve to know something, at least!" I snap, frustration bursting out of me. "If you were going to keep me in the dark, you shouldn't have called."

"He's a friend of your father's. He once asked for your hand in marriage, but your father felt marriage to the Glazastov was a better option for everyone."

Oh. I see. I shake my head as a mirthless, hollow laugh escapes. "Marriage? Everyone? I was a bargaining tool, and I wasn't even asked?" Nico doesn't answer, but I know the truth already, so I don't push. "Why is he agreeing to help now? I doubt he's pleased that my father sidelined him."

"Because you're going to be married to him once Roman is dead."

The air feels thin, like I'm suffocating, as Nico's words hang in the air, vibrating in my chest.

"Marry him?" The question escapes me in a whisper, disbelief flooding every inch of my being. "After everything...you're telling me that once Roman is gone, I'm supposed to marry someone else?"

Nico doesn't need to confirm it—my stomach has already sunk. The truth slams into me like a freight train, and I stagger back, gripping the edge of the bed for support.

He doesn't care. I already know this, but god, it stings. My freedom, getting me out of here...nothing matters to Marco Ricci except his agenda. While I was suffering here,

he was thinking about his next move. His next power play.

Killing Roman is just a way to put it into effect.

I try to steady myself, my hands trembling, but it's useless. "You...you think I'm going to just accept this?" My voice rises, trembling with a mix of fury and disbelief. "You think I'll marry Igor Smirnov? After I agreed to marry some other person I barely knew? Just like that? Like I'm some pawn to be moved around on a chessboard?"

"It's for your own good," Nico replies. "He's a stable man with enough connections to keep your father afloat."

Fucking Marco Ricci! I see now why Roman talked about putting a bullet through his eyes.

"Once he's out of the way, I'll send some men to get you. I'll be in touch, Miss Ricci."

"It's Volkov," I hiss, but the call has ended.

I toss the phone on the bed as my head burns hot, anger and rage running white through me. I should've seen the signs a long time ago. No. I shake my head. I saw them. I just didn't want to believe it.

Now, my father is going to kill Roman.

I fly across the room and down the stairs with Polina's name on my tongue. "Polina? Polina?"

She appears.

“Roman.” My heart pounds. “I need you to call Roman.”

“Mr. Volkov?” She frowns. “Is anything the matter?”

Yes. He’s going to die. “No. But I need you to call him now.”

Still confused, she reaches into her pocket and takes out her phone. Then it hits me—I can’t call Roman. He might not believe me, or he might think I’m luring him into a trap.

I’m the last person he’d trust to keep him from getting hurt by my father.

“Leo.” I snap my fingers. “I need you to call Leo instead. Quickly.”

She does so without hesitation, and I snatch the phone from her hand and hear it ring. It rings, on and on, like a countdown toward an execution. “Pick up,” I mutter frantically as I tap my foot. “Pick up, please. Please answer the phone.”

It clicks.

“Hello?”

“Leo?” I don’t waste time with preamble. “Are you with Roman?”

“Isabella? No. Why?”

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“Call him. I need you to call and tell him that he’s in danger. My father is going to try to kill him today.”

Hours.

That’s how long I pace the living room, listening to every sound outside the door. Once, I walk to the kitchen for a glass of water, but it barely touches my lips before I race back when I hear the door open.

It isn’t Roman. Or Leo, either.

He killed him. I was too late, and my father succeeded. My mind begins to spiral, drowning in dark thoughts. He’s dead. Roman is dead.

The thought of it is too much to bear, too suffocating. I stumble back to the couch, collapsing onto it, my hands tugging through my hair as tears run down my face.

Then I hear footsteps outside. I freeze as my heart leaps into my throat, and the door opens.

Roman.

I barely have time to register his presence before I’m on my feet, rushing toward him, my pulse roaring in my ears.

“Roman.” My voice breaks as he shakes his head, telling me to stay away. His shirt is stained red with blood, and his movements are slow as he cradles his left arm in his

other hand, keeping a firm grip on the spot, still leaking blood.

“What happened?” My voice shakes, barely above a whisper. He drops onto the smaller sofa and I turn to Leo, desperate for answers. “What happened to him? I thought I called. I was early enough, wasn’t I?”

“A gunshot,” Roman grunts. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

My hands fly to my mouth as I gasp. Gunshot? I was too late, then. I could’ve told him the day I got the call from Nico, but I waited until the last moment, clinging to my anger against him.

I bite my lip hard, keeping the tears away as I approach him.

Regret fills me as I crouch, and my hands tremble when I touch his arm. His body stiffens beneath my touch, and he winces, his jaw clenched tight. “You should go to the hospital,” I say. “Why isn’t he at the hospital?” I turn to Leo.

“It’s a flesh wound,” Roman replies before Leo can. “You should go, Isabella.” His eyes flicker to mine.

I can’t. I caused this. And I need to fix it, somehow.

“Fuck,” he mutters under his breath as he moves, his face turning pale from the pain.

I clear my throat and rub my hands down my pants. “You’ll need to get it stitched, at least. I’ll do it for you if you’re not going to the hospital.”

Roman scoffs, the sound sharp and dismissive. “I don’t need a fainting nurse on my hands, printessa. I’ll see to it myself.”

I grit my teeth, the urge to snap back rising in my chest, but I bite it back—just barely. I step back, folding my arms across my chest, and glare at him with as much defiance as I can muster. “Princess? I’m not weak, Roman. I’ve seen my fair share of flesh wounds and stitched up enough. Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I’m useless.”

His eyes narrow, his gaze sharp, and he tilts his head, a dangerous smirk curling at the corner of his mouth. “I never said you were weak because you’re a woman, Isabella. Far from it. But you shouldn’t claim to be what you are not.”

“Says the man who’s still bleeding out and might pass out any time soon,” I retort, not backing down an inch.

“Oh?” He chuckles, then turns a shade paler. I don’t wait for his quip before I turn, racing off as adrenaline kicks in, my footsteps pounding against the floor. I find Polina in the hallway, standing by the wall with a small box in her hands, holding it out to me.

“Take,” she urges, her voice steady, almost too calm. “You’ll need this.”

“Have you...” I start to ask, but she cuts in—a small, almost imperceptible shake of her head, asking me not to finish the question.

She’s been working with him for years. It’s probably not her first time seeing Roman all bloodied. That’s why she looks so calm.

I nod, accepting the box, muttering, “Thank you.”

Roman is slumped on the sofa in the living room, still gritting his teeth against the pain. Crouching, I open the box, pull out the scissors, and set them to work on his shirt.

As I peel the material away, the sight of the blood—too much of it—makes my head spin. I steady myself, taking a deep breath, trying to push down the rising nausea. I wasn't lying when I said I'd seen my fair share of flesh wounds, but I was definitely stretching the truth when I said I'd stitched them.

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I took some classes because my father made them mandatory, but I never got to practice on a human. I can't let him know that, though. I need to atone for stopping his revenge in some way. When I do, then I can call it even.

Then, I can leave without a stain on my conscience.

My needle goes through flesh as I work quietly, clamping down my jaw to keep the bile away. I tell myself it's just like the lifelike dolls I used to practice on, only bigger and more...personal.

Roman doesn't make a noise, but I can tell he's in pain from how he jerks and the muscles in his arm strain like they want to escape.

"There," I say quietly as I step back. "You're good as new."

He inspects the stitches as I gather the instruments and the bloodied patch of his shirt, shoving them into the box. I'll deal with it later.

"You were telling the truth," he says.

It's a simple comment, but it feels like high praise coming from him. My cheeks heat up as they turn red, and my fingers fumble, almost dropping an instrument.

"Thank you." Box in hand, I rise to my feet. "You shouldn't put pressure on the arm so you don't rip your stitches before they're ready to come out. And you might want to go to the hospital to ensure there's no infection."

“Bella.” He calls my name as I turn. I pause but can’t bring myself to look him in the eye. “You told Leo that your father was planning to kill me. You could’ve said nothing, and I might’ve died, earning you your freedom. Why didn’t you?”

Because it wasn’t freedom.

Because a part of me didn’t want to see Roman die. It could be that somewhere, in all the hate, I found a way to care for him.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “I just did.”

“You’re smarter than that,” he replies, not letting me go. “You wouldn’t do something like that unless you had a reason. Tell me, printsessa. Have you fallen in love with me?”

16

ROMAN

The slight tremble of her shoulders, the quiet inhale that reaches through the air, and the tight grip of her fingers around the first aid box.

She didn’t save me because she suddenly grew a conscience. Not after weeks of declaring, in every way possible, that she would rather do the most horrific things than have a slice of sympathy toward me.

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “I just did.”

Liar. There’s only one way to get the truth.

“You’re smarter than that,” I reply, not letting her escape. “You wouldn’t do

something like that unless you had a reason. Tell me, printsessa.” I touch her stitches, admiring them.

I thought I knew everything about Isabella, but it turns out there’s so much more to the woman who carries my last name. My wife. The urge to strip her layers down to the last one slithers across my skin.

“Have you fallen in love with me?”

“Love?” Her voice breaks.

“Yes.” I nod, watching her shoulders stiffen. “Love. It’s not hard to fathom if you think about it. It’s a chemical reaction. Only slightly more potent than lust.”

She whirls around. I expect to see anger clearly written on her face, because the point of implying that she’d fallen for me was to see her crack—but there’s something else there.

It’s denial, hovering beneath her silence.

“So?” I prompt, pushing at the layer. It’s cruel to reach for her vulnerability, but I’m driven by something other than tenderness.

“Who would be in love with you?” she sneers. “You don’t know what love is, Roman, and the fact that you think it’s the same as lust tells me everything I need to know.”

Huh. I turn to Leo. “Can you give us some space?”

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“No,” she snaps at him. “You don’t have to leave. I don’t have anything else to say to you, Roman. You’re welcome to make whatever assumptions you have about what I did. I don’t care.”

“Leo—”

He raises his hand. “Yup. Leaving now. I’m just going to see if there’s something to eat. If you bleed out, Roman...” He doesn’t finish his sentence as my eyes narrow in his direction.

As Leo vacates the living room, I push to my feet, ignoring the stab of pain that ripples from my arm and spreads through my body. My focus is Isabella, the tension radiating from her calling out to me.

My steps are deliberately paced as I approach, giving her enough time to run. To retreat. I inhale slowly, never once taking my eyes off her. I need her to see. That I don’t intend to be gentle.

That I want to take her apart, piece by piece, and see what she’s hiding from me.

“Tell me.” I stop inches from her, my head tilting with deep curiosity. “What do you think love is, Isabella? Willingness to die for someone? Loyalty? Duty? Because if that’s your definition, then Leo is definitely in love with me.”

“It’s not the same thing,” she hisses.

“Really?” I click my tongue. “Then enlighten me.”

Her lips part, and her tongue touches the roof of her mouth, but no sound escapes. A chuckle rolls off my tongue as I step closer, leaving nothing between us.

I lift my uninjured hand to her cheek, and my thumb brushes against her skin like a whisper. “You’re not in love with me, yet your body trembles when I touch you. Your lips part, and I can hear the sound of your heart racing.”

My thumb dips to the seam of her lips, eliciting an involuntary sigh. She clamps down immediately, but she doesn’t pull away. Defiance? A show of self-control?

I’m uncertain what she’s trying to prove, but it doesn’t matter.

My fingers drift lower as I cradle her face, and my other hand settles on her waist. “Tell me, Isabella, that your body doesn’t crave me. That if I stripped your clothes off, you’d protest.”

“I—”

“No?” I ask quietly. “I can see your nipples poking through your shirt. I bet if I touched you between your legs, you’d be wet. Aroused. For me.”

She doesn’t respond. My hand inches up from my waist, sliding over her chest. My thumb grazes her nipple, and she inhales sharply, her composure cracking again.

“Fight me all you want, printsess, but we both know the truth.”

“You don’t know anything,” she protests without a lick of fight in her voice.

I tut, letting my hands drop to my sides. “It sounds like you’re posing a challenge. Do you want to bet?” I ask. I lift my hand again, brushing her hair from her shoulder, and I feel a slight tremor run down her spine.

Dipping my head, I press my lips to her ear. “You’re mine, Isabella. Not just because I’ve claimed you, but because you want what I can give you. You want my hands on your body, my lips on your skin. You crave it so much that you’ve decided hating me is the best pretense.”

When my mouth finds hers, there’s no resistance. Like I said. Her hands remain stubbornly by her sides for a moment, but the lick of my tongue against hers wrangles a moan through, and her fingers fist my shirt as she gives in.

My fingers dig into her hips as I claim her mouth harder, nipping her bottom lip before thrusting my tongue into her mouth again. Isabella arches, rubbing her nipples against my chest.

I groan as my cock stirs in my pants, straining and jerking wildly against its restraints. I back her to the wall as my fingers make quick work of her shirt, pulling it over her head and tossing it to the floor.

I run my tongue across her collarbone, and she whimpers as it swirls over her nipples before sucking on them. Her fingers sink into my back, nails dragging over my bloodied shirt.

My leg slides between her thighs, and she lets out a broken sound as her hips jerk.

“Look at you.” I lift my head, cupping her lips with my index finger and thumb as she rides my thigh. “So responsive. So fucking responsive, Bella.”

Her breath stutters, lips parted around a gasp as I flex my thigh beneath her, forcing another shudder from her body.

“Grinding on me like you need it to breathe,” I growl, dragging my finger down her chin to her throat, pressing lightly. “You’re mine like this. Every twitch. Every sound.

Every goddamn drop of need in you is mine.”

I don't give her a second to catch her breath. My hands grip her waist, guiding her movements—harder, slower, crueler. Her head presses back to the wall, hair tumbling over her shoulders as her nails bite deeper into my back.

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“That’s it,” I murmur against her chest as I drag my tongue over her nipple again, my voice low and thick. “Use me. Take what you need—but remember who you belong to when you fall apart.”

Before she can collapse against me, I spin her around, locking my arm around her waist as my chest lines flush with her spine. My other hand slides up, rough palms cupping her breasts and teasing them with my fingers.

My mouth grazes the shell of her ear.

“Feel that?” I breathe, voice thick with hunger as my dick presses against her ass. “Tell you don’t think about it more than you want to, Isabella.”

She leans into me with a soft, keening sound, and I drag my mouth down her neck as my finger slips into her pajama bottoms, pulling it lower. I nudge her legs even wider, my thumb dipping over her clit.

“Fuck,” she cries.

“Keep your hands on the wall,” I murmur, fueled by a selfish need to drive her to the edge. Drive her to the point where it’s undeniable how much I want her. She obeys, and I press the pad of my thumb to her clit, circling it with every cry that leaves her lips.

My middle finger goes lower, sliding over her pussy. My chest rumbles with a harsh groan as I push my finger into her, and it goes in—the wet sound of her body clenching, driving me close to insanity.

Another finger, and she takes me in willingly, backing up and riding my hand with reckless desperation. “Ty vsya moya,” I rasp as her head falls on my shoulder.

My teeth graze her exposed skin, marking her neck with soft bites.

When her hand reaches behind, fumbling with my zipper, I snag her wrist, pinning it behind her back. I take her other hand too, holding both in place.

“Perfect,” I mutter as I take a step back, gazing at her flushed skin and the look of need as her head turns. “You look so perfect.”

A noise from further into the house momentarily steals my attention and I realize we’re still in the living room.

Even better. I step closer, crowding Isabella with my body again. “Do you want me to fuck you here?” I ask. “Where Leo can hear you? Where Polina can walk in on us?”

She bites her lip. My hand slides across her stomach again, cupping her breast. “That wasn’t a question,” I say.

A faint gasp escapes her throat, and I feel the way her body leans into my touch desperately.

My mouth brushes her ear as I murmur, “Keep your eyes on me.”

I slide my hand lower, dragging it over the waistband of her bottoms again. “Let them hear how much you want me,” I say, my voice low and rough. “Let them know exactly who you belong to.”

She doesn’t move. Doesn’t speak.

So I press my palm between her thighs and feel the heat of her arousal through the thin fabric. “Still not a question, Isabella.”

I pull her bottoms down, and my pants drop, the sound of fabric rustling too loud in the silence. I keep her close, pressing against her, the tension thick as I bend her forward, my grip on her hips tightening.

Her breath hitches, a soft whimper escaping her lips as I thrust forward—slowly entering her. She gasps, the sound like music, urging me on, pushing me to move faster, harder.

“Do you want this?” I growl as I continue to thrust, each movement meant to ignite every inch of her. “Right here? Right now?”

She doesn’t answer with words, but the way her body moves with mine, the way she clenches around me until I can barely breathe, says everything.

Her fingers grip the wall in front of her, nails digging into the surface, a silent surrender to the intensity of the moment. My hands never leave her hips as I set the pace, pushing her to the edge, to the brink of losing herself.

Losing myself.

The silence is broken only by the harsh sound of our breaths and the sound of my thighs against her ass, going deep with every thrust. She pushes back, matching the rhythm, failing and trying again.

I don’t hold back until I feel her tense, and every muscle in my body locks in response. Then she’s coming apart, shuddering with a loud cry that ends as I cup her chin and swallow the rest in a kiss, chasing my release too.

I hold Isabella for as long as it takes for her to catch her breath, and then I let go, reaching for my pants in the silence that follows.

She puts on her shirt in silence, and I don't see the anger in her eyes until she picks up her pants and faces me. "You were trying to make a point, weren't you?"

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“What point?” I respond flippantly. Because, somewhere along the line, I lost the plot.

“Nothing,” she bites. “I should go to bed. It’s late.”

“Don’t be delusional, printsessa,” I say as she walks away, frustration etched in her steps. “You think that at any point you were in control?”

She pauses and turns, and I see unshed tears in her eyes.

My jaw clenches as a stab of guilt, of self-hate, punches through my chest. I shouldn’t have touched her. I was trying to prove a point, but I could’ve done it any other way.

Instead, I let my frustration take over. I made her pay the price for my troubled emotions. I knew how to break her, and I did because I couldn’t handle the fact that, for a moment, I felt something deeper than lust.

“What other lessons do you have to teach me?” she asks, hurt bleeding through her voice. “That it’d be a mistake to think you capable of anything remotely humane? That you’re a cold, manipulative bastard who I should have no sympathy for?”

No. Yes. I don’t want her to see me any other way, because I’ll never be the man she deserves, the one I know she wants. Beneath the tough, stubborn exterior, I know what she wants—kindness, love, everything my world doesn’t accommodate.

“Yes.” I nod, dragging my hand across my face. “Yes, goddammit.” My words are harsh and rough, tinged with the same frustration I tried to bury when I made love to

her. “This isn’t a fairy tale. I am not on your side. You’re the daughter of the man who killed my father in cold blood, and I took you as a trophy, nothing more.”

“I see.” She nods slowly, her lashes fluttering rapidly.

She turns away for a moment, shutting her eyes. Then she faces me with a thin smile on her lips. “You’re saying I shouldn’t have saved you.” She laughs bitterly, biting down on her lip. “I guess I’m not as smart as you thought, then.”

My chest burns with more guilt as she continues, “But you seem to be mistaken about one thing, Roman. I chose to sleep with you. The sex?” She clicks her tongue. “It happened because I wanted it to. There’s a big difference between lust and love, and I promise you, I’m nowhere near the latter. You’re the last person I’d ever fall in love with.”

She exhales loudly, smooths her hands down her chest, and marches off without another word, leaving me in stifling, suffocating silence.

This is what I wanted.

For her to hate me the way she did when I threw her over my shoulder and took her from the cathedral. It wasn’t supposed to be a marriage with feelings or empathy—Isabella Ricci was my trophy bride, a punishment for her father, and a warning to everyone else.

I succeeded in reminding her of her position.

And yet?—

My nails dig into my palms as I clench my fists, and my jaw aches from how hard it clenches, holding back a flood of fury and much more than I can admit—all of it

directed at me.

Myself.

Because it should be a victory, yet all I feel is raw and stripped bare, down to the bone.

“Fucking hell,” I snarl as I stand, heading toward the kitchen. I need a fucking drink.

Something, any-bloody-thing to keep Isabella out of my head before it’s too late.

17

ISABELLA

By the time I get to my bedroom, my tears have dried, and the urge to slam the door shut has disappeared, along with my anger. I sink into my bed, arms spread out on either side.

A quiet, gnawing sensation is digging a hole through my stomach—regret.

Not because I called Leo and saved Roman from getting killed. That was just...keeping my father from having the upper hand. It was my personal revenge for his secrecy and his selfishness.

Not for patching Roman up. No. It’s because I let him touch me. For not pushing him away when he kissed me, for yielding when he had me against the wall, baring my vulnerability to his control.

I could’ve stopped when he told me I was being foolish, when he whispered in my ear that if the roles had been reversed, he wouldn’t have saved me. I should’ve

walked away, gathering the shreds of my self-esteem.

But I didn't.

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I let Roman touch me, knowing I wasn't just giving access to my body but my heart.

I knew he was cruel, but I craved it anyway.

That's what I regret.

"It's happened," I murmur, rising and heading to the bathroom. "It's in the past," I tell my reflection as I stare at it, looking into eyes that resemble mine. "I know better."

It might've taken getting tossed away and being reminded that I don't deserve his emotions to get my head on right, but I'm smarter now.

Shrugging my clothes off, I sink into the bathtub until the water covers my body. It's hot, almost to the point of scalding, but I lean back, closing my eyes and taking it in. It sinks into my body, stripping away Roman's touch—as much of it as possible.

I know much of it will remain in my mind, but for tonight, I'll pretend like everything's fine.

When the water turns cold, I step out and grab a towel, wrapping it around my body. I'm tired...too tired to do anything, so I climb onto the bed, tucking myself in with my towel still on.

Somehow, Roman doesn't plague my thoughts, and I fall asleep quickly.

I wakeup to the sun on my face, my head throbbing, and my stomach grumbling.

Tossing on a shirt and sweats, I head down to get breakfast from the kitchen, only to find Leo conversing with Polina.

When I walk in, he notices my presence, and the conversation stops.

“Isabella,” he says as his brows dip slightly while he studies my appearance. “Good morning.”

At least he didn’t call me Mrs. Volkov. Funny how I went from claiming Roman’s last name to ditching it in less than twenty-four hours.

“Good morning,” I mutter, dragging my feet to the fridge for water. I grab a bottle and turn to Polina. “Is there anything to eat?”

She nods. “Yes, ma’am. I was going to bring it to your room, but I thought I’d let you sleep in a bit longer.”

My mouth drops in surprise.

Polina? Let me sleep in? If anything, I expected her to have the curtains drawn before I woke up or to see her standing at the foot of my bed with a quiet, displeased look as she adds to the list of my offenses.

“Well...” I shrug. “Thank you.” I deserve some extra kindness after the night I had.

“Where would you like to eat?”

Another odd question. “Here.” I walk to the island, positioning myself. She heads to the stove while I take a swig from the bottle, placing it uncovered on the counter.

“Are you feeling alright?” Leo asks me.

I nod without glancing up. “Yeah. Why?”

“Nothing.”

His tone isn’t convincing, and something about how he says it pulls at my nerves. I glance at him then—just a flick of my eyes—but it’s enough. He’s watching me with a vague, almost guarded concern, like he’s trying to read something between the lines of my silence.

“If I look like I didn’t get much sleep, that’s because I didn’t,” I say, my voice sharper than intended. The quiet tension makes me feel exposed, as if he already knows something I’m missing.

He probably heard the conversation from last night. Before Roman kissed me, he told Leo he needed to speak with me alone—so Leo walked into the house, not out of it.

And if he heard the argument after, then he must’ve known we were having sex.

Come to think of it... My fork hangs in midair. Polina would’ve heard too.

What do they think of me, letting myself go for a man who made it clear, several times, that I am his trophy bride? After my dramatic protest of wearing black to my wedding and the accusations I hurled at Polina, after running away and failing, I let Roman touch me.

“Worst.” I stab the eggs. “Mistake.” I stab again. “Of. My. Life.”

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I chomp down hard instead of chewing, no longer tasting the flavor in the food. Everything feels bland, except Leo's keen eyes still watching me.

"Okay." I whirl around, pointing the fork at him. "What is it? Why are you here? Don't you have to be with him?"

"That would imply that I'm his assistant or his bodyguard."

I shrug nonchalantly. "Yeah. Exactly. That's what you are, isn't it? That's why you follow him everywhere." The jab is straight and meant to make him pissed, so everyone gets a slice of what I feel, but he merely purses his lips and tilts his head.

"I see your point. I drove him from your wedding. Your first wedding," he corrects.

The part of my life that feels like it never happened. "I'm not sure I want to know the answer, but tell me." I drop the fork and fold my arms. "Did you tell him it was a bad idea? Shooting a groom on his wedding day and stealing the bride? I get that he likes to make a statement, but it's bad luck, you know."

I drop my tone, and my lips curl meanly. "Enough bad luck that he might never get the revenge he thinks he deserves."

Leo strokes his chin, unbothered by my fearmongering. "That would only work if he believed in superstitions in the first place. Which, I'm sorry to tell you—because it seems like something you'd want—he doesn't. And Marco Ricci isn't going to hide forever."

I throw my hands in the air. “I don’t know who’s worse, you or him. And I also know why you’re here. You’re supposed to keep an eye on me so I don’t run away.”

“To where?” Leo asks.

To where?

I push the chair back noisily, standing up. “I’m allowed to leave the house, aren’t I?”

He nods.

“Good.” I grin. “Then I want to. I’m assuming you’re my designated driver. I’ll be down in fifteen minutes,” I add, tossing my hair over my shoulder as I stroll out of the kitchen. My stomach grumbles as I step into the hallway, and I groan, turning into the kitchen again.

Grabbing two slices of toast, I head out, shoving one into my mouth and chewing out of pure spite.

The second I walk into the vintage store, I sense it. Roman. From Mickey’s panicked eyes and his pale face, I know Roman must’ve visited him.

And the worst part? I know I led him right to this place.

Too bad. I held out some hope that he’d have something for me the next time I showed up. It doesn’t matter, though, because I’m not trying to reach my father. Leaving the house and coming here was an act of defiance. To whom or what...I’m not sure.

“W-what are you doing here?” Mickey stammers as I walk to his counter, shuffling backward. “I don’t—I don’t have anything for you.” His eyes dart to the door, where

the car is parked, and Leo is behind the wheel.

Leo was here too.

“It’s fine.” I shake my head, whispering as I lean over, “I’m not here for anything. I thought I’d check up on you.”

Mickey squints at me, his eyes narrowing with suspicion as he leans back, hands fidgeting near the edge of the counter. “Why?”

I start to reply, when I see the marks on his wrist. Bind marks. They’re faint, but I know torture when I see it.

“Hold on,” I say as I toss my bag on his counter, spinning on my heel and making an angry beeline back to the door. Leo exits the car as he sees me coming, holding the back door open.

“What did you do to him?” I bark, planting my hands on my hips.

Leo raises a brow. “What did who?—?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” I cut in. “I saw the look on Mickey’s face. He’s scared out of his mind. You did something, didn’t you? Tried to squeeze him for information about my father? Did you think my father would trust someone like Mickey? He can barely hold eye contact without sweating through his shirt.”

“That’s why he has only faint lines on his wrists,” Leo replies, unremorseful but not cruel. I wasn’t expecting an apology anyway. It only enforces the reason why he’s Roman’s best friend.

Kind, yet firm. “Chill,” he adds, closing the door. “I’m not going to hurt

him again. He's at the mercy of your father now, so perhaps that's who you should reserve your anger for."

I'm tempted to agree with his logic, against my better judgment, and I feel some grudging respect for it.

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“Let’s go,” I say, keeping the information to myself. “I’m done here.”

He opens the door with ease and stands to one side. “Your wish is my command.”

As the car drives away, I happen to glance out the window just in time to see a man walk toward Mickey’s store. His face is hidden with a hood drawn around it, but I get the sinking feeling that he’s one of my father’s men.

The door opens, and he walks in, and my heart sinks even further with one final realization.

Mickey’s as good as dead.

18

ROMAN

“Well, who do we have here?!” Igor Smirnov cackles as I walk into his office—a seedy-looking space in a run-down bar filled with filth, grime, and underpaid employees. The two women perched on either side of his desk scramble to their feet, looking at him for instructions.

“It’s Roman Volkov, everyone.” He spreads his hands. “The great, amazing, unbeatable Roman Volkov has wandered into my lair. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

I came to find out if he was truly behind the attack at the orphanage and beat him to a

pulp. If he wasn't, and Nico's words to Isabella were to throw me off, I'll only break a couple of bones.

For running his mouth about my wife. All in due time, though.

Pulling out a chair, I sit and cross my legs. "Why don't you tell your buddies to hurry along, hm? They wouldn't want to be here to see your ego crushed," I say.

His eyes narrow as a muscle jumps in his jaw, and for a moment, I expect him to try his luck. A punch, probably. One that I can easily deflect before I choke the life out of him.

Or his gun—then we'll see who draws faster.

He must've calculated and realized the odds were slim, because he pivots, grinning wildly. "Girls—" He turns to them. "Can you give us some space? I'll be down to take care of you shortly. I've got some important business to attend to."

They hurry out, tittering on their heels, slamming the door behind them. Grave silence settles in their absence before Igor clears his throat.

"You better have a damn good reason for interrupting my little party, Roman?—"

"Where is Marco?" I cut off his whining.

I don't raise my voice—I don't have to.

He blinks, momentarily thrown off, lips parting as if his mouth forgot how to lie. There's a flicker of unease behind his eyes, quickly masked by a smirk. Marco must've helped more than just his pride—because a man like Igor, used to groveling in dark corners, would never expect me to grant him an audience.

“Why?” he drawls when he recovers, leaning back as if bored. “Why should I tell you where he is? Because he killed your father? That’s the game, Roman Volkov.” He gestures vaguely, a careless flick of the wrist, letting nonchalance coat his tone like oil. “You either take someone out, or you’re taken out.”

“Spoken like a true lowlife,” I reply, my voice deadly calm. I lean forward, slow and precise, until the chair’s leather creaks from tension. “You call yourself a member of the brotherhood, and yet you flaunt the rules recklessly.”

I pause, letting silence choke the space between us. “You might’ve forgotten, Igor,” I say, “but if I decide you helped him escape, I’m coming for your life too.”

The color drains from his face before he can hide his fear. My lips curl in a knowing smile and I watch him squirm as he shifts in his seat.

Then he straightens his shoulders as if trying to reclaim ground already lost.

“Should I be scared?” he says with a forced chuckle, but there’s a slight tremor in his voice. “Why would I be, Roman, when you can’t even track down the man you desperately want?”

He leans forward now, emboldened by his own words, elbows resting on the table, eyes glittering with challenge. “Tell me...if you can’t find Marco Ricci, what makes you think you can touch me?”

I can tell he’s bluffing. His smile is all teeth, but I’ve seen the same smile before—from men who gamble, knowing they’ll lose. The only reason he’s confident is because of the men standing outside the door. But they won’t save him if I decide to kill him.

Again, in due time.

“Let’s try this a different way.” I ease back into my chair, interlocking my fingers.
“Did Marco put you up to the attack?”

“Wh—”

“Don’t play games with me, Igor,” I snarl. “He might’ve promised you an alliance, but he’s still a man on the run. A fucking coward who knows that his time is running out. Do you really think he can help you?”

It shows again—his uncertainty, his fear. “Think before you speak,” I warn him as he starts to reply, “because I won’t ask again. It’s your choice if you still have your life by the time I walk out of here. And you know very well that they won’t save you.”

It takes all of a moment for him to switch sides, giving up his stance with a shrug. “Fine,” he sighs. “I never trusted him anyway. He said he was going to give me his daughter, but he gave her to some bastard. Oh—” Igor tosses his head back in laughter when he realizes. He points at me. “That’s true. You kidnapped her, didn’t you? You beat me to it. I was blissfully unaware that my bride was being shipped off while I was out of the country.”

My fist slams hard on his desk, and he jumps, his hand flying to his chest. “Fucking hell!” He exhales. “What was that about?”

“You’re going off course,” I say simply as my fingers settle.

I don’t tell him it’s because I want to rip out his guts whenever he mentions Isabella. I don’t want to admit that she evokes such a visceral reaction in me, even in her absence...because it’s more than just owning her.

It’s everything else I can’t admit.

“Alright, alright.” Igor rolls his eyes. “You asked if I was behind the attack? Simple answer? No. If you’re asking if I knew it would happen,” he adds hastily, “then yes. Don’t get it wrong—I was offered, but I declined because I’d been fucked over once. I wasn’t going to go up against you, knowing he would dump me at any moment.”

For a man like Igor, spineless and stupid, it’s easy to know when he’s lying. And when he’s telling the truth. Which means, once again, Isabella was being used.

It’s as though they knew she was going to tell me.Or...The thought makes my blood boil.It was some form of emotional manipulation.

If Igor killed me, the man who kidnapped and held her against her will, then she’d feel indebted to him. Somehow, Marco thought it would make her willing to marry this?—

I look at him, at the slime and grime. I shake my head. How pitiful.

“What’s your plan?” he asks.

“None of your business,” I reply curtly.

“Why?” he jumps in right away. “You’re not the only one who was slighted, you know. I—I was duped too. Imagine discovering he’d promised other pakhans his daughter’s hand in marriage? I mean—” He huffs. “If I don’t get the girl, then I might as well get some compensation for it, right? He promised me a fraction of his wealth and connections too.”

My brows furrow as I tilt my head. “Why would he do that? What was the transaction about?”

Igor clicks his tongue. “I get what you’re not saying, Roman. And I would be

offended, but I thought so too. I have a faction, but I have nothing substantial to offer him—not like your father did. Then again, it should’ve been my cue that he would dupe me. Knowing what I know now...” He sighs. “I can tell you that Marco Ricci is a stain on the earth. I mean, I might kill a man or two, but my wife? That’s cruel, man.”

Wife?

My brows jump at that.

I never cared to find out what happened to Isabella’s mother, not even when Marco was faking loyalty to my father. They had business; the rest was none of my concern.

“He killed his wife?” I ask, keeping my tone measured.

Igor nods enthusiastically. “Yeah, he did. I heard he tricked her into marrying him so he could take over her inheritance while he worked for her family as a consigliere back in Italy. They ran away because her family didn’t agree to their marriage. Then, a year later, he kills her entire family. She didn’t find out until a couple of years later, and then he killed her. Made it seem like an accident. I don’t know why he bothered—it wasn’t as if she could tell anyone. Oh wait—” He laughs, shaking his head and clapping his hands. “He was working for your father, wasn’t he? I doubt Volkov would’ve kept him around if he knew.”

Igor’s right.

My father would’ve dumped him the moment he found out. He was a ruthless man who didn’t hesitate to take out anything that stood in his way, but senseless violence wasn’t something he supported.

So, he killed his wife so he could bury his secret forever.

“How did you find out?” I ask when it occurs to me that he wouldn’t have told Igor after going through all that crime.

Igor holds up a hand. “Wait. You’ll see.”

He reaches into his drawer for an envelope and hands it over to me. It’s sealed with a string looped around a button.

“Like I said, I had my suspicions. So, I did some digging. That’s why I was out of the country. When I found out what he’d done, I gathered evidence. To nudge him toward keeping his word, of course.” He grins mischievously.

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I unhook the string and reach into the envelope, taking out a blown-out picture. Bodies. Dead bodies.

“Gruesome, isn’t it?” Igor whispers. “That’s why he hasn’t returned to Italy. He’s dead if he does. That is also why you and I should partner up. We both have things to gain from seeing him dead.”

Placing the picture back into the envelope, I stand, letting my silence answer for me. “Come on,” he presses, his voice like a whine in my ear. “I didn’t kill you. I could’ve, but I turned it down. That should count for something, right?”

A menacing, humorless smile touches my lips briefly as I place my hand on his desk. “I’d never trust a rat like you,” I say.

Igor laughs, but it’s shaky now, the kind that hopes to lighten a mood that’s already strangling him. “Then tell me, Roman...” He grins. “You planning to keep Isabella all to yourself forever? Or do the rest of us get a turn? You don’t really want her, do you? It’s just to get back at Marco.”

I see red.

My hand flies across the desk, seizing him by the collar and fistfuls of his hair. I yank him forward and slam his face into the hardwood so hard it rattles the frame. The crunch of bone is instant and sickening.

He howls beneath me, hands flailing, blood dripping from his broken nose.

I lean in close, still pinning him down with my hand on his neck. “Mention her again,” I whisper, “and I’ll tear your fucking tongue out before you get the chance to apologize.”

I yank his head back with his hair so he sees my face. So he knows that my threat is a promise waiting to be fulfilled.

“If Marco reaches out to you, you’ll tell me immediately, or so help me god, I will end you.”

The sound of carefree laughter reaches from the depths of the house as I walk in—like sunlight spilling out of an open window. I follow it without thinking, and it takes my steps to the kitchen, where Isabella’s standing by the counter, a glass of wine in hand.

Leo and Polina are present too, but from the scene that greets me, she seems to have been talking with Leo. I don’t get to find out what they were talking about because he sees me over her shoulder and winks.

“You’re in time for dinner.”

“Dinner?” I repeat, puzzled.

Isabella whirls around, and I watch her expression, waiting for a hint to understand what I walked into. But she’s barely readable.

“Yeah,” Leo replies. “Isabella asked me to stay for dinner, and I wasn’t about to refuse Polina’s amazing steak and a good bottle of wine.”

My gaze darts to the counter again, and I see not one but two glasses of wine and a bottle of Merlot. I look at Isabella again, my brows furrowing as my confusion spreads.

When did they become best friends?

And why does it feel like she didn't expect me to return this early? It's my home, but I feel like a third party. An intruder.

"How would you like your potatoes, sir?" Polina asks. "Baked or roasted? Would you like roasted vegetables or salad?"

"Oh—" Leo snaps his fingers before I reply. "You should go with baked, and roasted vegetables. Isabella swears by them—she says they're amazing."

How much time did they spend together? I told Leo to watch over her because I trusted him to keep her safe, and for the company—but not so they could bond.

"Leo," I hiss through my teeth, "I need to speak to you. Outside." I jerk my thumb over my shoulder when he hesitates. "Now."

I turn without bothering to find out if he's following, walking down the hallway until we're out of earshot. "What was that?"

He shakes his head. "What waswhat?"

I hold my tongue to keep from sounding like an insecure man, even though I just returned from Igor Smirnov, where I showed him that she's mine.

Leo wouldn't go that far. "Nothing," I say, my tone clipped. "I don't want dinner. Tell Polina to set the table for you two."

"Ah, nope." Leo grabs my arm before I can leave. I whirl, arching a brow. "She's your wife. If anybody should be having dinner with her, it's you."

“Aren’t you best friends already?” It slips out. That spark of jealousy. It slips, and Leo catches on quickly.

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He tosses his head back, laughing. “You’re worried that I might be making a move on her?”

A muscle in my jaw twitches as I ignore his jab where it hits. “Why would I?” I ask, throwing on an air of indifference. “She’s my wife because I need her to be.”

He gives me a pointed, knowing look that sees through my lie. Then he shrugs. “If you say so. But I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t do that to you. I was only doing as you said, keeping her company. She wanted a bottle of wine. I couldn’t say no when she poured me one, and the next thing I know, I’m getting invited for dinner.”

“Why would she ask you?”

“Maybe because she didn’t want to eat alone? If you’re wondering why she didn’t extend the invite to you, maybe you should ask her. My job’s done here,” he says with a mock salute. “Goodnight.”

There’s no reason to keep him back, so I let him go, but I don’t move. I stand in the hallway for another minute, maybe two, until the silence feels heavier than the tension. Then I head for the kitchen.

Isabella frowns when I walk in alone. “Where’s Leo?”

“He left,” I reply.

Her eyes flick to the door, then settle on me again with a hint of disappointment. Maybe even accusation.

“He had other things to attend to,” I add, a little too quickly.

“Oh.” She glances at the counter, lips pressed together as her expression falls. “I don’t know who’s going to eat the food now. Polina made enough for two.”

Me.

She could ask me. One word, and I’d sit down. I’d eat with her. But she doesn’t.

And I don’t offer.

“Goodnight,” I say stiffly. As I walk away, I remember my conversation with Igor about her mother. Leo’s words come to mind again. “Maybe she didn’t want to eat alone.”

I look over my shoulder in time to see her slump. She reaches for her glass, lifting it. It touches her lips, but she doesn’t drink.

“Mashed potatoes for me, Polina,” I say as I return. Isabella’s eyes brighten as she looks up, and she almost looks pleasantly surprised. “I’ll have a glass of wine too,” I add, reaching for the Merlot.

I pour myself a glass and refill hers without saying a word. “Thanks,” she mutters.

You’re welcome. I’m so sorry about what happened to your mother. We could eat dinner together every night if you want.

“Sure,” I say instead, sitting with her.

As she drinks, a smile forms on her lips. The feeling it brings is unexpectedly warm and pleasant, settling snugly in my chest.

How much of the truth does she know? I wonder. I could tell her now, breaking the last shred of loyalty—if any—that she has for Marco Ricci. If done correctly, Isabella could become my best tool to find him.

Cruel. Ruthless. Unrelenting.

Just like me.

It fits right in with my plan, yet somehow, it's the last thing I want.

It's ironic—how I've gone from wanting to break her apart to wanting to protect her with every breath. She was mine because she belonged to Marco, and now she's mine because I can't seem to let her go.

19

ISABELLA

One. Two. Three. Four.

He's up to something.

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I count the number of chews it takes to soften up a bite of steak before swallowing while watching Roman from beneath my lashes. He's focused on his food, cutting it into chunks and chewing them with pleasure.

Everything about tonight—from Leo's departure, the wine, and now—makes me suspicious.

I could tell he didn't expect to see Leo when he walked into the kitchen. He was equally surprised to see the wine glasses. And I bet it had something to do with Leo leaving, not the excuse of "having something to do."

But if he didn't want Leo hanging around or staying for dinner, why is he here?

He could've gone to bed and it would've been like any other day. The dots aren't connecting. Which means something is afoot.

It could be either of two things—he's found my father and is trying to keep me distracted so I don't warn Nico that he's on to them, or...I don't know. I can't seem to come up with any other explanation, and it drives me to frustration.

I grip my fork, lifting my head to glare at his oblivious face. His ruggedly handsome, well-defined, utterly infuriating face.

Bastard.

I jab my fork into the table without thinking. The wood doesn't budge, and the fork springs back, catching the side of my palm and scraping it.

“Shit. Shit,” I mutter, dropping it like it’s burning me.

“Do you need help with the steak?”

My head snaps up. Roman looks at me with calm patience. The kind people use when speaking to small children. He gestures toward my plate, his voice mild. “Do you need some help?”

“No,” I say quickly. “It’s fine. I can handle it. Thank you.”

His gaze drops to the fork, still lying crooked on the table. He doesn’t say anything, but I feel the judgment all the same.

I reach for the fork again, this time with purpose, wrapping my hand around the handle like I’ve got something to prove. I aim carefully, steadying myself. Then I bring it down toward the steak?—

And miss it entirely.

Freaking typical. Just freaking typical. Of all the days to lose a battle with food, it just has to be today. “I’m fine,” I hiss as I pick the fork up again. “So you can stop looking at me like I’m clumsy.” But I don’t trust myself to aim right the third time, so I reach for the vegetables instead.

At least I’m being healthy.

I shove the vegetables into my mouth, crunching with a vengeance, too angry to taste the flavors exploding in my mouth. They taste like failure, more failure and frustration.

Roman returns to his plate, cutting up his steak with ease. I chomp down harder on

the vegetables, biting my tongue in the process.

Fucking—he reaches for my plate of steak, swapping it with his. “There,” he says, the corner of his mouth twitching like he’s fighting a smile. “That should work.”

“Why?” I snap, even though the slices are clean, precise, and way better than I could manage. “I didn’t ask for yours.”

He shrugs like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “You needed it.”

No.

No.

I burn with frustration. His help doesn’t ease the tension—it fuels it. “You don’t know what I need, Roman,” I say through clenched teeth. “And acting like you do just makes you look like a narcissist.”

He doesn’t react like I want, robbing me of a reason to lash out. He tilts his head and calmly asks, “Would burying your fork in my face make you feel better?”

My lips part in shock. I glance down. The fork in my hand is pointed—at his face. I let it drop in horror, staring at the sliver like it’s covered in blood.

Why should I feel terrible about wanting to draw a little blood from the man who kidnapped me? “If I did,” I say, tilting my chin in defense, “then you deserved it, don’t you think?”

“I thought you were against violence?” he replies smoothly, and I can tell he’s mocking me. He’s referring to my father.

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I ignore the subtlety, pretending the subject is still food. “If it’s deserved, then yes, I support it. But I won’t use an innocent object to even the odds.”

My subtle message isn’t lost on him as he arches a brow. My father might’ve killed yours, but you didn’t have to drag me into it.

His eyes darken, and his fingers reach out. I flinch instinctively, but he stops at the bottle of Merlot, picking it and pouring it into my empty glass. “You should have some more wine. It goes well with the steak.”

God. I grit my teeth so hard the sound grates on my nerves. “You’re the most infuriating person I’ve ever met. Egoistic, narcissistic, terrible, unimaginable?—”

“Brute?” he cuts in before I’m done ranting.

“Yes,” I spit. “You’re a brute. And don’t think for one second that knowing who you are makes it any better, because it doesn’t.”

Roman leans back slightly, the edge of a smirk tugging at his lips as he lifts his glass. “You’re beautiful when you’re pissed off.”

I freeze mid-breath. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He sips the wine casually, like he didn’t just flip the entire conversation on its head. “The fire suits you. Makes your eyes sharper, your voice stronger.”

My mouth opens, then closes. My brain short-circuits. “I—that’s not the point,” I finally manage, flustered beyond coherence.

“No,” he says, gaze steady on mine. “But it’s true.”

I part my lips, but the words stick to my tongue, shy and unsure. Groaning, I shove my mouth full of steak and vegetables, glaring at him as I chew. I was right when I thought that something was afoot.

Roman Volkov is incapable of being kind or courteous. If he thinks I’ll let it slip unnoticed, he has another thing coming.

I find myself tossing and turning for hours, unable to sleep without Roman and my father fighting for space in my thoughts. Pulling the covers over my head and pretending I’m in some faraway place doesn’t work, so I give up.

Swinging my feet over the edge of the bed with a groan, I stand up and head to the bathroom to wash my face. When I head out, I plop back on the edge of the bed and stare at the pillow over my shoulder.

Fluffy, cold pillow. If I lie down on it, I bet I’ll fall asleep.

Nope.

After another ten minutes of desperately searching for sleep, I toss on a sweater and longer pants before heading out of my room. The house is quiet, and the silence echoes so loudly that I tiptoe down the stairs, careful not to make a noise.

“Tea,” I mutter as I go over my options. Coffee would be my first option, but if I plan to get any sleep, then some herbal tea would work best.

As I make my way toward the kitchen, a pair of low voices drifts in from the living room—serious, clipped, and tense. I stop mid-step, instinctively holding my breath.

“We still don’t know where he is?—”

Leo.

“Then we keep looking.”

Roman.

I don’t need to hear the rest to know who they’re talking about. My stomach twists painfully, and I glance back at the staircase just a few feet away. I should turn around. Go back upstairs. Pretend I never heard a thing.

Because whatever they’re planning—it won’t end well.

I may have already grieved the father I thought I had and come to terms with the fact that I’ll probably never see him again...but that doesn’t mean I’m numb.

That doesn’t mean I can stand here and listen to them talk about him like he’s already dead. But I don’t leave.

Instead, my bare feet move silently across the floor, careful not to make a noise. The dread in my stomach digs deeper as I move closer, but curiosity eats at me, stubborn and unrelenting.

I need to know. It’s not just curiosity, but also the part of me that can’t quite let my father go. I hate him for everything I know now, but he was the only parent I had. He taught me almost everything I know. I would’ve done anything for him. It’s hard to let go of something like that.

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The conversation continues as I edge closer, stopping after a few feet and pressing my back to the wall, staying just out of sight.

Leo's voice cuts through. "And once you find him? What then?"

There's a moment of silence where the only sound is my heart pounding so loudly I fear they'll hear it. Then Roman answers, his voice colder than anything I've heard. "I kill him."

My breath catches, and my hand flies to my mouth to muffle the gasp. His response shouldn't surprise me. He's said it more times than I can count...that his end goal is killing my father. A life for a life.

Yet, hearing it aloud, not as a response to my taunts, tears something inside me. I bite my lip as tears fill my ears, forcing them to stay hidden.

Leo speaks again, quieter this time. "And Isabella? You think she'll forgive you for killing her father?"

My pulse jumps. Me? I've never really thought about it. What would I do if Roman killed my father? Could I forgive him, even if he proves that it was just?

As the questions fill my head, I wait. I wait, holding my breath for Roman's answer. "Why should that matter?" he asks gruffly.

Again, I expected it. He never once asked for my opinion or cared to know what I'd do if he took away the last family I had. But expecting it doesn't make it hurt less.

Tears bloom afresh, stinging my eyes until my vision blurs, but I refuse to let them fall.

I bite my lip harder until the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

“Get a grip,” I whisper to myself. “You’re not some weak thing. You don’t cry over men like Roman Volkov. Not anymore.” Roman. My father. I’m done caring about what they do and tailoring my emotions to their actions.

I inhale deeply, swallowing thickly. “I’m okay,” I mutter. “I’m okay.”

It still stings, and I bury my hands under my sweater, gripping the bottom as I turn. I’ve barely taken two steps when I hear Leo ask?—

“Will you let her go, then? You said you were going to make her your wife. You’ve done that. It was to spite Marco. Then you said you’d make her the mother of your children. Who will that be for, Roman? You?”

“I’ll let you give my message to Marco Ricci. Tell him that I intend to marry his daughter and that she will be pregnant with my heir by this time next month.”

Those were the exact words he said in the cathedral. He wasn’t going to just marry me—I had to carry his heir.

My palm covers my stomach possessively as the thought of being pregnant with Roman’s child slips into my head.

A girl. Smart. Stubborn. Fearless.

A boy. Strong. Brave. Courageous.

No. I shake my head vigorously, pushing the thought away with venom. What am I thinking? His baby? His kids? A harsh laugh peels past my lips, and I don't bother muffling it. I'd die before I let Roman continue his lineage through me. I'd rather return to that field and die of dehydration before I let a child grow in his world.

At least Boris Glazastov's son was a tool to unite both families. He was never going to be at the helm of anything.

But Roman? Roman Volkov, who everyone fears. Even my father, or he wouldn't have gone into hiding.

"So?" Leo echoes his question. "Is she still useful after you've carried out your revenge?"

The silence that follows doesn't startle me. Not anymore. It doesn't even tug at my curiosity. I've already heard enough—more than enough.

My hands drop limply to my sides, and I start walking again, slowly, one step at a time.

"I need her."

The words crash into me. My body freezes mid-step, and my head jerks toward the living room, breath caught in my throat. That couldn't have been real.

I must've imagined it, or conjured the words in some pathetic, desperate hope that I still mean something to him beyond being a pawn in his bloody mission.

I wait. Just a second longer. But there's nothing. Swallowing the lump rising in my throat, I sigh and turn toward the kitchen, convincing myself I heard only what I wanted to hear.

ROMAN

She was standing right here.

I run my fingers across the wall, my chest expanding as I inhale the lingering scent. Isabella was here. At some point during my conversation with Leo, I knew she was close by, but I wasn't sure how close.

Her scent floated in the air, enveloping the living room...a distraction that flooded my thoughts and made breathing impossible.

When I confessed, "I need her," those weren't the words I'd wanted to say. I had some other excuse to give, anything that would keep Leo from knowing how I felt. But all I could see was her pout, the stubborn tilt of her chin, and her frustration when she tried to cut into the steak.

Dinner. Something as simple as dinner was enough to force the truth out of my mouth. I didn't explain any further, but it was enough for Leo.

"Are you planning on repainting?" he asks as he walks up to me now, peering closely at the wall. "If you are, then I think you should go for a lighter color. Or, you know..." He shrugs. "Ask your wife what she'd like? It's her house too."

My eyes narrow as I turn to him. He raises his hands and steps back. "It was just a suggestion. You don't have to take it." But his lips curl in a teasing smile. "I'm starving," he adds. "I'm going to see if there's anything to eat. Do you want something?"

Yes. A glass of whiskey.

I'd take anything to drown out my thoughts.

I ignore his question and walk away, reaching the kitchen before he can follow. My hands move automatically as I grab a glass, but something outside catches my eye. A flash of hair swaying lazily in the breeze outside the window. Then I hear it—soft, irritated.

“Shit.”

My brows knit. “Isabella?”

Another mutter follows, full of frustration. “Hot. Hot. Freaking hot.”

Instinct kicks in. I grab a pack of ice from the freezer and cut through the kitchen, down the utility hallway, and out onto the balcony.

There she is—perched like a painting, knees drawn up and mouth puckered as she blows air with furious little huffs. Her face is twisted in discomfort, hands flapping like she's trying to cool the burn on her tongue.

And even at this moment, half in pain, she steals the breath from my lungs.

“You need something cold,” I say as I drop beside her, grabbing her foot before she can protest. She tries, her lips parting and her brows knitting, but the relief from the ice pack is instant.

She sighs, and her shoulders droop as her eyes close. “That feels good.” My lips curl in a smile. She opens her eyes. “How did you know I needed that?”

Because I heard her.No.I smelled her. Even when I walked into the kitchen, in the seconds before I caught the whisper of her hair, I smelled her still.

“You might end up amputating something one of these days,” I say, scolding her lightly.

Isabella laughs, and it bubbles out, wrapping around me, bright and careless.

Tossing her hair, she shrugs. “I know, right? I couldn’t sleep and I thought maybe some tea would help. But I should’ve known better—I had no clue what valerian tea tasted like. Then I tried it”—she tosses a hand toward the cup in exaggerated offense—“and I could’ve sworn I shoved sweaty socks down my throat.”

I chuckle, low and unguarded. At the same time, my hand reaches for her foot. I graze her Achilles heel lightly, and my thumb drifts to her ankle. Her skin is warm and soft, and when she lets out a quiet moan, her lips parting just slightly, I stop breathing.

I shouldn’t be doing this.

It’s too intimate. Too dangerous.

“You just need to keep the ice pack on it for a couple of minutes,” I say roughly, forcing the words out of my throat as I drop her foot carefully. “The pain should ease up.”

She nods. “Okay.”

I pull myself up, averting my eyes when she sighs again.

“I overheard you and Leo talking,” Isabella whispers. I look over my shoulder; my expression schooled to hide the parts she might not have heard. “I didn’t mean to, but

I was going to the kitchen and then...yeah.”

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She lets out a breathy, nervous laugh when I don't say anything.

"It's fine," she says with a shake of her head. "I didn't hear much. Just...you know, what you wanted to do to my father." She lifts her brows, trying for levity, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Which is something I already know. Right?"

Her voice wavers at the end like she's bracing herself, hoping I'll deny it, even though the truth's already settled in her chest like a stone.

"Again..." She waves her hands. "It's fine. You said it's a blood oath. I understand that. A life for a life and whatever the rules say."

In the months that have passed since my father died, not once have I thought about sparing Marco Ricci. But watching Isabella struggle not to fall apart, I feel my first shred of mercy for him.

"You should've gone for eucalyptus," I say, instead of allowing myself a moment of weakness. I've already done it once tonight. "It works better."

She nods slowly, hinting at my cover-up, but she doesn't push. "Okay."

"I'll make some for you," I offer, walking away. It's the least I can do before I take the only family she has left. As I turn on the stove and place a kettle on it, Isabella walks into the kitchen. She settles by the island quietly, her fingers tapping on the surface. The silence that stretches between us feels oddly strange and uncomfortable, begging to be filled.

What do I say?

Sorry?

I'm not sorry for holding up the terms of a contract that was broken. I'm not apologetic for going ahead with my revenge.

I do feel sorry, though. More than I thought I would when I started out.

"I wanted to be an astronaut."

I turn. "Astronaut?"

She nods, a small smile on her lips. "Yeah. It was a short-lived dream, but I stumbled on a book about the moon when I was very young. For some reason, it fascinated me. I thought about how amazing it'd be to walk on it." Her smile spreads, and I watch nostalgia fill her eyes.

It lasts the lifespan of a flickering light bulb before it dies. Isabella sighs, her face shuttering. "I was nine." She laughs bitterly. "I didn't know anything about the real world. But I was determined, so I had my father's driver take me to the library, where I read as many books as possible." She shakes her head. "Some words were too complicated, but I read them anyway."

I try to picture her as a child, poring through books in a library, her eyes shining with enthusiasm and excitement. She would've been the most adorable thing.

"Then he found out," she says. "He said it was foolish. I fought stupidly and hid one book in my room. Until he found that too. Then, when I was eleven, he took me to a shooting range. It was punishment for going into my mother's room, but he was also punishing me for defying his orders."

Shooting range? Eleven? I grew up knowing the bratva was my life, that I would head the organization after my father retired, but I didn't have any other dreams.

I wasn't forced to learn how to shoot or defend myself. I wanted to.

"I tossed the book outside in anger." Isabella's voice falters as she continues, her gaze staring straight into nothing. "I convinced myself that he was right. He was my father, the only parent I had left. So, I devoted my life to pleasing him. I was his perfect, loyal daughter, and if I inherited everything he built, I would be grateful that I got the chance."

Fuck. Fucking hell. The kettle whistles, and I turn off the stove and grab the handle. I don't let go or lift it, even as the steam burns my palm.

Killing Marco Ricci means avenging my father, but I wouldn't mind putting a second bullet through his head for Isabella.

For the childhood he stole from her.

"Anyways." She laughs as she blinks, refocusing in my direction, her hand dismissing everything. "I thought we could do with some small talk while you made tea."

She hops off the chair and gets two mugs while I look for the eucalyptus tea. I pour for us both and move to the adjoining dining table while she remains at the counter.

"What about you?" Isabella asks as I take a sip. I lower the mug slowly, and she shrugs. "I'm curious. Did you always grow up knowing you'd join the bratva? Did you ever think about leaving—at any point?"

I shake my head.

She laughs again, but it doesn't reach her eyes this time either. "I'm not surprised. You're pretty determined. I couldn't even go through with an escape plan. You would've braved the heat and found somewhere to stay through the storm."

"I'm not sure I would've," I say softly. "It rained pretty bad."

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Her lips twitch with her first genuine smile since we walked into the kitchen. “If you’re trying to make me feel better, it’s not working. I don’t know what I was thinking—getting into the back of a van and hiding in a barrel. I should’ve known that when he said farm, it’d be a place that vast.” She’s talking to herself now, staring down at her cup.

I want to praise her for her attempt, but the image of Isabella shivering next to that shed, her face almost blue, comes to mind. The moment when I came close to losing her...when I truly realized that I couldn’t let her go.

She lifts the mug to her lips, taking an audible sip. “You were right,” she says. “I should’ve gone for this. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She hesitates, her fingers tapping on the rim, but my ears are perked up, waiting for her question. “Did you go back to check on Mickey?”

My brow furrows. Mickey? Then it hits me—the jittery man from the vintage store. Her eyes flick to mine, searching, her body rigid with restraint.

“Leo didn’t tell me anything,” she rushes on. “Just like I didn’t tell you Mickey was working for my dad—but you found out.” She laughs without humor, shaking her head. “I went to see him because...I don’t know. Maybe I thought he’d tell me something useful. But when I was leaving, I saw one of my father’s men walk in.”

Her voice drops to a whisper as she bites her lower lip, teeth sinking into the soft

flesh like she's bracing herself for impact.

"Is he...dead?" she asks.

I don't know. I ended the lead when I found out Marco had planned an ambush. But if she saw her father's man there, the odds are that Marco disposed of his loose end. Just like he's going to do with Igor. I shouldn't feel sympathy for Mickey—he chose to work with a man like that.

Yet—

It's Isabella. She's found a way through my defenses and made me more human. More...emotional. "Yes," I say roughly, hating how it makes me feel. "He's probably dead. And every other lead I uncovered that belongs to your father is dead too."

Her bottom lip trembles before she presses it tight as if trying to swallow the heartbreak whole. For a second, I think she'll cry—her eyes shine, her throat bobs—but then she straightens, nodding with a quiet resolve that doesn't match the pain in her expression.

"I see," she whispers, voice brittle. Her fingers clench tighter around the mug, clinging to it. "I see. Why did I expect something else? He's a hypocrite, after all."

As I am. I pretend that I feel nothing, watching her struggle, but I do. Every time her lashes flutter in a desperate attempt to hold back tears, I feel it. And hate how much I feel it.

How much I see her.

"I should go." My chair drags against the floor as I stand. "Goodnight, Isabella."

She nods, her eyes downcast.

I walk past her, my jaw tucked in tight and my steps brisk, widening the distance between us until she's nothing more than a thought burrowed deep in my head.

21

ISABELLA

“Polina!” My voice echoes down the staircase as I nearly miss a step in my rush.
“Polina, wait!”

She pauses down the hallway, a basket in her arms, and turns with that ever-calm look on her face. “Ma’am?”

I push a hand through my hair, still tasting stale coffee on my tongue. “I—I’m sorry I overslept.” The words fall out fast, but they feel too small for the mess I am.

Truth is, it wasn’t just oversleeping. It was three damn cups of coffee last night. Three. And still, sleep danced just out of reach, like it has for the past few nights. I remember collapsing into bed sometime before sunrise, telling myself I’d close my eyes for just a moment, that I’d get up early, fix things, do something.

Instead, I woke to sunlight stabbing through the curtains and my skull pounding like a drum. I meant to sit up, maybe get a grip. Just a few more minutes, I told myself. Just a breath.

Next thing I knew—it was two. Two in the freaking afternoon.

And the only thing I remembered as I rushed out of my room was telling Polina I’d be hungry in the morning, so she had to make breakfast.

“Did you make breakfast?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. I figured you’d be in bed for a while. And since Mr. Volkov didn’t return last night?”

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“Wait—” My brows furrow. “Roman didn’t come back last night? Or, sorry—” I shake my head, stuck on technicalities. “This morning?”

I knew he didn’t return last night, because I was up till three. And one of the reasons I couldn’t sleep was because I couldn’t wrap my head around his persistent absence.

Two weeks. That’s how long he’s been away, almost like I’m the plague, and he’s scared of contracting a deadly virus.

“No,” she says. “He didn’t. Would you like anything for lunch?”

I’m lost in thought, so I don’t hear her question until it echoes. I snap out of it, blinking. “Yeah. I’d like something simple, please.”

She gestures to the washing. “I need to change the sheets for Mr. Volkov’s room, but I’ll be out in a minute.”

As she walks away, I take the rest of the stairs one step at a time, hitting the last with a thud. Where’s Roman? The last time we spoke, I overheard him talking about my father.

Then he brought me an ice pack and made me tea. I blurted out a memory I hadn’t remembered in over a decade. It felt like we had a moment, and then he ended the conversation abruptly, leaving me with a feeling of loneliness that I couldn’t shake off.

The next morning, he was gone, and Leo hasn’t been around either. I didn’t care.

Sure, I thought about Roman a few times, fleeting moments where my mind indulged in teasing me with certain...details. But he didn't return.

I went to bed.

The next day, the same. He didn't show up, and neither did Leo. That night, I couldn't sleep. I drank the eucalyptus. Then the next. Then the next. At some point, it felt like I was going crazy, coming up with theories for his absence. Switching tea for coffee because I ran out didn't help either.

Did he find my father, and he's keeping him alive so he can torture him? It would make sense—to stay away so I won't ask him questions, and so he can keep an eye on Marco Ricci simultaneously.

But Leo?—

Both of them being away at the same time makes no sense.

I shake my head, tossing away my new theories as I walk to the kitchen to wait for Polina. “Why should I care?” I mutter. “He's dead to me.”

“Roman?”

I whirl around, and a cheekily smiling Leo stands by the door, his hand shoved into his pocket.

“Where did you come from?” I demand.

He shrugs, walking in. “Beats me. I think I was summoned. What were you saying about me, Isabella?”

“Oh, I don’t know. That I hoped you’d disappear forever?”

He winces, touching his chest. “Ouch. That stung. I thought you and I were friends, but...” He smacks his lips. “I get it.”

“No,” I hiss, folding my arms. His amusement only irks me. “You don’t get it. You don’t understand anything, and I’d like you to leave me alone. Please.”

“It’s Roman, isn’t it?” Leo asks quietly. “You want to know why he’s been away.”

I scoff, turning away so he doesn’t see the lie I’m about to tell. “Why should I care? My life doesn’t revolve around him.”

He makes a sound, clearly showing that he doesn’t believe me, but I don’t defend myself further. “Either way, you’re not needed,” I say instead. “Unless you have another reason for being here?” I shake my head, walking to the fridge, pretending I have business there. “Never mind. It’s not my house.”

“But it is,” Leo argues. “You’re his wife. If anything, you have more right over it than Roman does. And I’m here because I thought you needed company.”

My hand pauses as it touches a bottle of grape juice. I look over my shoulder. “Company?”

Leo nods, smiling like a pleased Cheshire cat. “Yup. I’m sure it gets boring staying in a house like this. I know I’d lose my shit.”

It’s hard to tell if he’s offering genuinely or out of pity, but I’m tempted to believe it’s the latter. I’m not delusional enough to think spending one day together suddenly makes us friends...in the way that he’s Roman’s best friend and confidant.

But—

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“Since you’re offering...” I grab the bottle and shut the door. “I can think of a couple things to liven the atmosphere.”

He rubs his hands excitedly. I almost feel sorry for him, but since he assigned himself, I don’t. “Lay it on me. I’m down for anything.”

Oh, I intend to. When I’m done, he’ll withdraw his offer of friendship without thinking twice.

“Stick around,” I tell him. “You’ll find out.”

I almost changed my mind in the hours before it finally hit ten pm, but my resolve strengthened every time I thought about Roman being away.

I turn to Leo who’s sitting behind the wheel, and flash him a knowing grin. “What do you think?”

He stares beyond my shoulder at the blinking lights of the club across the street. He sighs. “When you said?—”

“You said you were down for anything,” I remind him, feeling giddy from the panic that spreads across his face. “Are you worried I’ll run away?”

Leo’s gaze drags back to me. “Will you?”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “I’m here to have fun. Besides, I know you’ll either be inside watching over me like a hawk or hanging out here, waiting to see me come

out.” I shrug. “Or you could relax and have fun. You don’t have to be Roman, you know. A night of letting your hair down won’t kill you.”

He seems like he might agree, but blows out a breath at the last minute, pulling out. “I genuinely fear what Roman will do if he turns up at the house and you’re nowhere to be found.”

My brows shoot up too fast to conceal my curiosity. “Turn up? He’s coming back tomorrow?”

Leo’s mouth curls with mischief. “If I tell you, will you abscond your plan and settle for something less...” He looks at the club again, helplessly. “Risky?”

“In this dress?” I yank the door open, getting out. “See ya!” I call out, waving before I cross the street. As I join the short line of people waiting outside, I spare a glance at the car.

Truth is, I don’t really want to be here.

At the club. With bright lights and people who look like they’re having a better time than I’ve had in years. Like my idea of hiding in the back of a van, this was spontaneous too.

Not really. The bouncer lets me in, and I wince as I enter the club. The music is much louder than I expected, and the building feels like it’s vibrating. I spent some time rethinking my plan, but it was fueled by my emotions and not a shred of logic.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t have some fun,” I mutter, leaving the floor and heading to the bar. Snagging a stool, I ask the bartender for a rum and coke.

“Rum and coke?” he asks, arching a brow as he assesses me. “You don’t look like a

rum and coke person.”

Yeah, but I don’t plan on getting wasted.

“What am I, then?” I ask, indulging him when he keeps looking at me.

He snaps his fingers. “A moment. This will be on the house.”

Moments later, he places a tall glass of something in front of me with a slice of lime.

“Vodka tonic for the lady.”

“Huh,” I mutter. I wasn’t going to go that far, but Leo’s on watch duty, and any chance I have of sleeping naturally was shot to hell days ago, so I might well help myself to an artificial sedative.

I pick up the glass and tilt it to my lips, gulping it down halfway as the bartender starts to say something. Big mistake. The alcohol hits with a vengeance, wiping my balance off the stool.

“Fucking hell,” I hiss, wiping my mouth. He hands me the lime and I squeeze it onto my tongue. “What was that?”

“I was going to warn you, but you were too far gone. I’m sorry,” he says, biting back a laugh. “The tonic water was to flavor the drink, not dilute it, per se.”

“Right,” I drawl, slapping my hands on the counter and leaning over. “So when you said it was on the house, you meant you would use me as some guinea pig?”

He raises his hands, stepping back. “My apologies. I’ll get you the rum and coke. You’ll barely taste the rum.”

That's not what I want, though. "Wait." I stop him. "You were right. I'm definitely a vodka tonic woman." I pick up the glass and hold it up in salute. "Keep it coming, will you?"

Left foot.Right foot.

I can barely see what's in front of me as I walk through the living room, holding my heels in my hand. I should've accepted Leo's help, but I stood outside the house, waving him off until he drove away.

"You can do this!" I whisper, encouraging myself as I pump a fist high. "Just gotta put one foot ahead of the other, then another?—"

Why did I let the bartender talk me into having so many drinks? And then shots? He didn't really talk me into it after the first one, but I should've known better than to indulge in a lightweight's biggest weakness.

I need to sleep.

I really, really need to lay my head somewhere before I hit the ground.

My vision blurs until I can only see splotches, but I keep going through the hallway, reaching out to the wall for support and working with muscle memory. I get to a door, juggle the knob, and push it open.

It's pitch-black, and I nearly trip over the rug as I fumble my way toward the bed. My palm slaps the wall, steadying myself as I swallow the yelp caught in my throat.

There it is—bed. I catch the faint outline of the mattress and the crumpled sheet, and relief washes over me like a warm tide. Just a few more steps. I tug the covers back with a heavy sigh, already dreaming of sinking into the warmth, of closing my eyes

and forgetting the day?—

But then I freeze. Not from cold.

Because suddenly, I'm not alone. I'm trapped. A weight pins me down—solid, unmoving. Two hundred pounds of steel-hard muscle and slow, measured breath inches from my ear. And then I feel it.

The unmistakable chill of metal pressed to my temple.

A gun. To my head. And I can't scream because my mouth is covered.

There's an intruder in the house. There's an intruder in the house!

22

ROMAN

I feel it before I hear it—the presence of someone else in my room. It's dark, so I can barely see anything, but my gun is in my bedroom drawer by the bed.

Slowly and carefully, so I don't make a sound and scare them into running away before I can make good use of the gun, I retrieve it.

If I'm shooting, I don't intend to miss.

What do they want?

Isabella. My heart lurches. Is there more than one of them? I can't think about how they got in. I need to make sure she's safe.

But something about the intruder, as they approach the bed, makes my brows furrow. The smell of alcohol is heavy, yet something underneath...floral and intimate, masks the threat.

I wait, poised for them to come closer.

In one swift motion, I clamp my hand over their mouth and shove the cold barrel of the gun to their forehead. “Don’t make a sound,” I growl, low and lethal. “Don’t make a fucking sound.”

A muffled gasp. I inhale again.

Goddamn it.

The scent hits me fully now. Skin-warm perfume and something faintly sweet, like the lotion she always wears after a shower. I glance down, narrowing my eyes as the darkness shifts. A sliver of light from the hallway sneaks through the crack beneath the door, just enough to cut a line across her cheek.

Long lashes. Soft lips.

Isabella.

Fuck.

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I slowly peel my hand away, the gun lowering with it as disbelief knots in my chest. “What the hell are you doing?” I whisper, more to myself than her.

“Roman?” Her eyes are wide like saucers. “Roman?”

I groan, rolling off her and stashing the gun again. I get out of bed, flicking the light switch and flooding the room. She’s in the middle of my bed, wearing the skimpiest dress known to man. Her hair is tousled, and her skin is flushed.

She scurries into a sitting position as the shock wears off, but it only makes the dress hitch higher, showing off her thighs and a peek of her panties.

God. One minute ago, I thought I was going to make an example out of someone, and now I’m thinking about sex.

“What are you doing here?” Isabella demands, folding her arms. “Why are you in my bedroom?”

A short, dry laugh slips past my lips as I shake my head. “What am I doing here? Your bedroom?”

She nods. “Yes. My—” Her gaze sweeps across the room, probably to ascertain dominance, and I watch her expression falter when she realizes she’s in the wrong. “This is your bedroom.”

I nod. “Yeah. It is.”

“Oh shit. Oh shit.” As she tries to scramble off the bed, her foot snags the covers, and she ends up toppling to the floor and dragging the covers with her. Sheets. Isabella. On the floor. I shake my head, sighing in disbelief as I walk over to assess her situation.

She’s crumpled by the side of the bed, half buried. “I’m sorry,” she mutters, lowering her gaze. “I’m going to get up and allow you to go back to sleep.”

Crouching, I wait in silence until she lifts her head, meeting her gaze with a sterner version of mine. “How drunk are you, Isabella?”

Guilt flashes in her eyes, with a nervous lip bite before she shakes her head vehemently. “I’m not drunk. Why would I be drunk?”

I’m not sure which I find more endearing, her ability to lie when she reeks of alcohol or the fact that she’s lying to my face.

“You went out with Leo, didn’t you?”

Her lips press into a tight, bitter line. “How did you know?” she snaps. “Did you have him spy on me? Of course you did.” She scoffs, arms crossing tightly over her chest. “That’s why he’s been hovering. That’s why he returned today after you both vanished like ghosts. You’ve been spying on me.”

“If you’re trying to change the subject, printessa,” I murmur, the word slipping out as I lean close enough to feel her breath on my face, “it’s not working. I don’t need to spy to know what you’ve been up to. You reek of alcohol.”

And she looks like a vivid picture—flushed cheeks, tousled hair, legs for days. She might be a hot, angry mess, but I’d be lying if I said part of me didn’t want to back her against the wall and kiss the venom off her tongue.

At least now I know she didn't spend the night in another man's arms. That knowledge alone settles something inside me. Something I didn't even realize was clawing at me.

She lifts a part of her dress to her nose and gags. "Ugh."

"See?" I gesture, a dry smile tugging at my lips.

Isabella shrugs, eyes meeting mine with a fire that's anything but apologetic. "That's what happens when you have fun," she spits out. "I had fun. Sue me."

That's the story we're telling now?

She uses the bed to lift herself off the floor, wobbling slightly before catching herself and straightening with that same stubborn fire.

Her hands thrust onto her hips, and her chin lifts in challenge. "You've been gone for weeks, Roman. No calls, no texts. Just disappeared, forgetting that you have a captive wife. Forgive me for thinking I deserved one night to pretend I still have a life that doesn't revolve around my husband."

"I'm not judging, Isabella."

"Really?" she bites out, voice splintering. "Because it sure as hell sounds like judgment to me." Then, softer, as she looks away, "But whatever. I'm tired. I'm sticky. And if you don't mind, I'm going to take the hottest shower known to man and pretend this conversation never happened."

"No."

She turns sharply, her nose scrunching and her brows drawn. "No?"

I nod. “No. You’re going to spend the night here. You can use my bathroom, and I’ll give you clothes to wear.”

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Her lashes flutter for a couple seconds in utter confusion, then she clicks her tongue. “I see. You’re trying to get me to sleep with you, aren’t you? This is about the heir thing Leo was talking about. No way.” Isabella shakes her head. “No freaking way. I’m not letting you put a baby in me, Roman.”

I wasn’t thinking about a baby. Or sex, either. Okay, maybe I was thinking about getting her naked, on her knees, her back arched, and her whimpers louder than the walls can carry, but not when I offered the bathroom.

Now...it’s the only thing I can think about.

How easy it’d be to get the dress off her. To slip my hands under it and trail my fingers over her thighs until they end up buried somewhere wet. Warm. Tight.

And if I end up putting a baby in her...it wouldn’t be the worst thing. A vivid image of Isabella, round and mouthy, fills my head.

I shove it out. “Bathroom.” I point. “Now. I’m not going to risk you tumbling down those stairs.”

She folds her arms and plants her feet squarely. “I’m not drunk.”

I raise an eyebrow, unimpressed. “That’s exactly what drunk people say.”

“And if I don’t want to?” she challenges.

I step closer, close enough to feel the tremble in her breath. “Then you’ll make me

carry you. And I don't think you want that. It might end up exactly how you've described it."

As she marches to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her, I wreck my hair by dragging my fingers through until I can feel my scalp. It's been a rough couple weeks.

Leaving the house wasn't because I wanted to get away from Isabella. After the conversation with Leo and the stab of mercy I felt for Marco after finding Isabella outside the kitchen, I knew I had to end things fast.

I couldn't let myself be weak to the point where I couldn't avenge my father. One day turned into two. Two to three, and it grew from there. I couldn't have put her out of my head if I tried, but it was also the reason I didn't call.

She's my weakness. A terrible, dangerous weakness that makes me want to keep her safe from everything that might hurt her...including me.

Sighing, I pick up the sheets from the floor and climb into bed, pulling them up to my shoulders and turning to the wall.

Isabella. I get out of bed, rummaging through my closet for a shirt big enough for her to wear, and drape it on the chair.

In bed again, I close my eyes, shutting my thoughts to the sound of water running in the bathroom.

It's a soothing sound—too soothing. It shouldn't make me imagine her under the stream, droplets rolling down her back, the scent of my bodywash mixing with steam and sinking into her skin.

I grip the sheets tighter.

She'll leave, I tell myself. She'll step out and go to her room when she's done because the last place she wants to be is in bed with me.

Minutes pass, and I hear the door open. Footsteps pad on the floor, and my ears perk up, waiting to hear them walk to the door. Instead, I hear the rustling of clothes and then feel the bed dip gently.

She didn't leave.

Why? Time and again, Isabella's made it clear how much she doesn't want me. How much she would rather be free of me. Why would she choose to remain here of her own free will?

She's so close too.

I can feel the part of the bed where her body takes up space. It's mere inches behind me, and all it would take is a turn. The shirt wouldn't stand a chance. Knowing that, I shut my eyes even tighter, forcing my body to focus on sleep.

"Roman?"

No.

"Roman?" she whispers. "You're probably sleeping, but if you're not, thank you for not shooting me."

That's it? That's what she's thankful for? Just when I think I have her all figured out, she goes and surprises me.

“I don’t think I’d like a bullet through my head. Not that it’d matter if I died.”

My chest rumbles with a chuckle, but I still say nothing.

“Would you have shot me, though?” she persists. “If I’d come in smelling like something foul and you didn’t realize it was me, would you have killed me? ...Roman?”

I turn so fast she doesn’t register it until her hands are pinned over her head, and I’m staring down at her, my body partially covering hers. “You weren’t stealthy, to begin with,” I drawl, my voice dragging in a rasp. “But even if you smelled like filth—” I let one hand go, holding her wrists with the other.

My finger trails down the side of her face, and I feel a slight tremor run down her spine. “I would’ve known it was you. Your skin...” I murmur the words in her ear. “It hasn’t seen a day of hardship, mydarlingIsabella.”

“You’re making fun of me,” she whispers.

“Fun?” I lift my head, gazing into her eyes. “No. If you’d been an intruder—” My hand drifts lower, fingers grazing her collarbone. “Your body wouldn’t have responded the way it is now.”

“It’s not responding to anything,” she argues, but her words have no weight.

My mouth lifts in a smile. “Really?” Splaying my palm over her chest, I cup her breast, teasing her nipple between my thumb and index finger. She gasps as her back arches off the bed.

Realizing her mistake, she pulls at her hands—to cover her mouth, no doubt. Her struggle is useless, and my palm drifts to her other breast, cupping and squeezing lightly. Her eyes roll back as she bites down hard on her lip. It only urges me on, to the hem of the shirt and under it.

“Fine!” she exclaims as I hover over her inner thighs. “You win.”

Win? I stopped playing her game the moment I touched her. This—this is more. “What do I win, Bella?” I whisper as my head tilts and my lips graze her neck. She whimpers, then curses under her breath, chastening herself.

“The argument,” she replies. She chokes on the words and the rest tumble over one another. “The argument. You win. You’re smarter than I am. You know me better than I know myself. Can you please let me go now?”

“You could’ve let me sleep,” I say.

“God forbid a woman wants to be thankful that she didn’t die.”

That gets me. I lift my head as my brows furrow. “What?”

“What?” she repeats.

I shake my head as I roll off. “You’re something, Isabella.”

Thanking me because I didn’t kill her? I thought she’d have a sharp remark with reference to how I kidnapped her from her wedding, forced her to marry me, and made several comments about killing her father.

The last thing I expected was gratitude.

“I don’t think it should be weird that I don’t want to die,” she mutters. “I’m not my father, if you haven’t gotten the memo.”

True.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned since I tossed her over my shoulder, carrying her screaming out of the cathedral, it’s that Isabella isn’t Marco. She’s strong, fierce, frighteningly brazen, but nothing like him.

It should be a comforting thought, knowing that she’s less likely to stab me in the back.

Why then...does it bother me so much?

When I wake the next morning, she’s still curled up in my bed, fast asleep.

One arm is flung above her head, the other curled to her chest. One knee is bent awkwardly, sticking out from the sheets in what might be the strangest—and somehow still endearing—sleeping position I’ve ever seen.

Her lips are parted, breath soft and even, lashes resting against flushed cheeks. My gaze lingers longer than it should as I remember last night.

I came close. Close to breaking the wall I crafted over days.

Carefully, I peel myself away, lifting the sheet and sliding out of bed with practiced quiet. Once I’m out, I crack the door open and step into the hallway, only to find Leo leaning casually against the opposite wall, arms crossed, ankles lazily stacked.

“What are you doing here this early?” I ask, my voice a low growl.

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He waves like we're old friends at brunch. "Good morning to you too, sunshine. I came to check on Isabella. Wasn't expecting you back so soon."

I arch a brow, sliding my hands into my pockets as I walk toward him. "So soon?"

He nods, smiling like a man who knows exactly what button to push. "Yeah. You know...the whole self-denial arc? 'I don't have feelings for my wife. I'm just keeping her here for leverage.' That bit? I was wondering how long that performance would last."

I exhale through my nose, calm but cold. "And so you took her to the club," I counter smoothly, "without telling me."

Leo shrugs, his smirk unwavering. "She needed to let loose. Blow off steam. I didn't plan for her to get wasted, but I wasn't about to lecture her, either. It's not my fault you ditched her mid-storm. You should've thought about that before you took your little sabbatical."

I tilt my head. "Is this a confrontation?"

He shakes his head with exaggerated innocence. "Nah. I know how your brain works. So, I'm answering the questions before you ask them. Where did she go? Why was she drunk? Why didn't I call you? All that." He grins. "Don't tell me you didn't see her come in last night?"

My jaw tightens.

“Where’s Isabella?” he asks.

I shoot a glance over my shoulder, a deflection that he doesn’t miss. When I turn, Leo’s grin widens. I start to defend myself, but I don’t get the chance because the door creaks open behind me, and the truth walks out.

Barefoot, with tousled hair and wearing my shirt, Isabella enters the hallway. Sleepy, blinking hard at the light, and completely oblivious to the world.

“Leo?” she murmurs. Her voice is rough with sleep, eyes squinting. “Hi!”

The smug silence that follows is deafening. Leo looks past me, then back at me, practically glowing. I don’t bother turning around. I already know what he sees.

And I hate that I want to see it too.

23

ISABELLA

My eyes flicker between Roman and Leo, all of us seated at the dining table. They look like they just stepped out of a wrestling ring, with the victor being painfully obvious.

Wearing a gloating smile, Leo slides a forkful of eggs into his mouth. Roman glares at him while stabbing the eggs.

I shouldn’t have asked them to join me for breakfast. I just thought it was a nice gesture—repaying Leo for being a chauffeur and Roman for not killing me last night.

“Okay.” I slam my fist on the table, earning their attention. “Are you two going to be

cordial, or do I have to stage an intervention?”

“Depends on what cordial is,” Leo says.

“No,” says Roman.

“Fine.” I shrug. “But if you’re going to keep looking at him like that, Roman, and if you’re going to keep gloating, Leo, then I think I should look for somewhere else to eat.”

As I grab my plate, Roman stops me. “I’ll leave,” he says roughly.

My hand stills on the plate as Roman pushes back his chair with a harsh scrape against the floor. The muscles in his jaw twitch, and his eyes don’t meet mine, not once, as he stands.

Just that low, clipped voice: “I have things to do anyway.”

I stare at him as he walks away, puzzled. My intention was to de-escalate the tension, not turn him into a storm cloud with legs.

My gaze trails back to Leo, but he’s already watching me. “What?” I snap, more defensive than I mean to be.

He lifts a shoulder, chewing another bite of eggs. “Nothing,” he says with maddening nonchalance. “Just wondering how long it’ll take you to go after him.”

I scoff. “I’m not going after him.”

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“Mhm.” He sets his fork down, folding his arms. “You sure? Because you were staring like he left carrying your soul with him. And you slept in his bed.”

“I was drunk,” I argue.

He grins. “Exactly my point. You were drunk, and you went for what felt the most comfortable. What felt right. It turned out to be his room. That says something, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t think of it like that. It was muscle memory that walked me down the hallway and into Roman’s room, but I never thought it was because it felt right. Much like when I almost died from the rain, and he brought me to his bedroom. I felt warmth, like I never knew I needed, in his personal space.

Still, hearing it from Leo is infuriating. I toss my napkin on the table, irritation pricking my skin. “You’re annoying.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

I exhale, dragging a hand through my hair and resting my elbows on the table. I didn’t mean to push Roman away. I just wanted breakfast to not feel like a war zone.

“Go,” Leo says suddenly, softer this time. “Before he broods himself into another vendetta.”

“I wasn’t the one who got him worked up, was I?” I retort, narrowing my eyes. “He was in a mood when I woke up. If anything, you should be the one going after him.”

After all, he is your best friend.”

Leo clicks his tongue. “Nope. I only pointed out that he’s in denial. He might’ve cheered up if I left, but you asked me to breakfast. It’s on you.”

Denial? What the hell is he talking about? The eggs in my stomach suddenly veer off, making a U-turn to my throat. I push against the table, scrambling to my feet and away from the dining area.

“Tell him you invited me because of my amazing sense of humor!” Leo calls out as I run, dashing up the stairs.

I barely make it into my bathroom before hurling my entire breakfast and the contents of last night into the toilet bowl, along with everything else I’ve eaten over the past week. My knees weaken, and I fall to the floor, gripping the toilet seat as I dry heave until I can barely breathe.

Then I pull myself up, turn on the tap and splash water on my face. When I look up in the mirror, my reflection is a pale ghost. Pale skin, scary white eyes, and darker lips.

“Food poisoning?” I mutter.

It’s impossible. Unless the bartender slipped something into my drink last night, I’ve been eating the same food from Polina for the last couple months.

Maybe stress.

I glance at myself in the mirror, catching the pallor in my cheeks and the faint smudges beneath my eyes. “That could be it,” I say aloud, though the words don’t comfort me. I haven’t slept in days. My appetite’s been nonexistent.

All because I let a certain someone get into my head.

The worry I felt at breakfast vanishes as I walk out of my bathroom, perching at the edge of the bed. I shouldn't have felt grateful—he never even offered an explanation for his absence.

He didn't think he owed me one, either.

So, if something did happen to him while he was away, I don't care.

My stomach growls, reminding me I left a half-empty plate at the table. But as I get up, nausea rushes to my throat again, forcing me into the bathroom for another spell of dry heaving. There's nothing left in my stomach, but my body doesn't seem to know that. Each retch burns my throat, leaving a bitter taste of bile and frustration behind.

When it finally passes, I press my forehead to the cool porcelain, breathing heavily through my nose.

This isn't just stress.

It feels...wrong. Like my body is trying to tell me something I'm not ready to hear.

I stare at the envelope in my hand as if staring hard will change the contents of the paper inside. My palms are sweaty as I stand outside the hospital, and my heart feels like it might give out at any moment.

Pregnant.

That's what the paper says. That's what the doctor repeated when he smiled at me and proceeded to assume my silence was out of happiness. Like I was too happy to

process the news, and the ring on my finger was proof of a happy family.

I'm pregnant with Roman Volkov's baby. It feels like a cosmic joke, something the universe concocted after hearing me say I would rather do unsavory things than give him a child.

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Ahead of me, parked right where I can see the car, is Leo. I couldn't tell him why I had to leave the house so quickly, but I needed someone to take me—so I lied about having food poisoning.

Even then, I knew it was something else.

Turning in the other direction, I wonder how far I'd get if I decide to make a run for it. Something tells me it wouldn't be very far.

"Isabella?" Leo steps out of the car, waving at me. "Are you ready to go?"

No. I can feel bile at the back of my throat, and my head is spinning. I'm pretty sure if I take another step, I might faint from the shock.

"Isabella?" Leo repeats, this time with worry in his voice. Shutting the door, he makes his way toward me. I shove the envelope into my bag, pressing my fingers to my face and schooling my emotions before he reaches where I stand.

He tilts his head, observing for a moment. "You look pale," he says softly. "Did you get to see a doctor? What did she say?"

"I—" My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. "I need to go home," I mutter.

"Okay." He nods. "Okay. Let's go."

My mind barely registers my steps, and the trip home passes like a blur. I hear Leo asking a question as I walk in, but I don't answer. I can't. I need to lie down. I need to

lie down before my head explodes.

The walk to my room is the longest I've ever taken, and when I get there, my knees are an inch away from giving out. I crawl into bed, pulling the blanket over my head and closing my eyes, too tired to deal with anything else.

A soft knock on the door pulls me from my sleep, but I'm reluctant to respond, so I curl even tighter, placing a hand over my head.

"Bella?"

My eyes fly open. It's Roman, and for some reason, he's calling me Bella.

"Isabella?" he says, knocking again. "Can I come in? Leo said you had to go to the hospital for food poisoning."

My fingers instinctively drift to my stomach, brushing over the place that feels like a fragile secret now. Not food poisoning. Something far worse. Marriage was already binding, but this...a baby? It ties me to Roman forever.

I'm not ready to face that reality yet.

"Isabella?" His voice grows more insistent, threaded with worry this time. There's a tense pause, and then: "I'm coming in."

Something about how he says it—low, steady, maybe even a little threatening—snaps me into motion.

My heart lurches, and I shoot upright, nearly tripping over the covers as I leap from the bed and sprint toward the door. I reach for the lock, only to remember that the door, tragically, doesn't have one.

I never got around to fixing it.

“Shit,” I hiss under my breath, slamming my shoulder against the wood just as the doorknob begins to turn.

“I’m fine!” I say quickly, trying to sound calm, controlled, anything but what I actually am, which is terrified, disoriented, and fraying at the edges. “It was nothing.”

For a moment, there’s silence on the other side. A long, breathless beat where I almost convince myself he’s walked away.

Then the knob jiggles again, slower this time, like he’s testing my resistance. Or my resolve, I’m not sure which.

“I said I’m fine!” I snap, both hands pressed against the door, my entire weight anchoring it shut like that might somehow keep the truth from slipping through the cracks.

There’s another pause, quieter this time, and his voice returns, softer but steadier. “You don’t sound fine, Isabella.”

“I’m fine,” I repeat as my eyes tear up. “Leave me alone, Roman.” My words sound like defeat, and my shoulders sag. “Please.” I can tell he’s still there. “You’ve never cared about what I did. You took me from the cathedral. You forced me to marry you. You left without a word. I don’t think now’s the time to start caring.”

My words are harsh, but they’re the truth. To Roman, the baby is a conquest—another middle finger to my father.

To me, it’s more.

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And I don't think I could survive him not seeing it my way. Seconds pass, and I hear his footsteps retreating. My eyes snap to the doorknob, heart pounding, half expecting it to turn again, half hoping it will.

Because despite my fears, a part of me wants him to find out.

But that part of me also wants roses and love—two things I'll never get from Roman.

A minute passes. Then another. And the weight in my chest presses harder.

Finally, my knees buckle, giving out beneath me, and I slide to the floor, back against the door, as the dam inside me breaks. I slap a trembling hand over my mouth, desperate to muffle the sob that claws its way up my throat, raw and violent and aching.

I drag myself to bed again, but the covers remain on the floor as I curl into a tight ball, my shirt wet with tears.

This time, it's impossible to close my eyes. I stay awake for hours until my stomach begins to grumble. Food.

"No," I sniff. "No, you don't want food. You want a solution to your problem, Isabella. You want it to go away magically."

My stomach rumbles again, louder this time. Right. I barely held down my breakfast, and I haven't eaten for hours. If I'm going to really find a solution, I need some food first.

Summoning my last shreds of strength, I swing my legs, wobbling as I try to stand.

“One after the other, Isabella,” I murmur, offering myself a pep talk. It gets me to the door, and I open it, stepping into the corridor, only to find Roman leaning against the wall, one leg bent at the knee and his arms folded.

“What are you hiding?” he questions, pushing away from the wall.

“H-hiding?” I stutter as I take a step back.

“Yes.” His voice is calm—too calm. “Hiding, Bella. You’ve been cooped up behind that door for hours, and I could hear you muttering to yourself.” He takes a step closer. I take one back, glancing over my shoulder to see how far I’ve gotten from my room.

Only a couple of steps.

I shake my head. “I was tired. Is that so hard to believe?”

Roman tuts. “Have I ever told you that you have a tell?”

“Tell?” My brows scrunch.

“When you lie to me, Isabella, I can tell. It’s almost as if it’s written on your face.” He walks even closer, and I forget how to move as his eyes darken, pinning me to the spot. “What is it? Did you finally get in touch with your father? Are you planning on running away again?”

Why didn’t I think of that? Running away.

Oh,wait.I snort loudly, earning an arched eyebrow from him. I did think about it,

when I stood outside the hospital, but I was too much of a coward to do it.

Perhaps I should've toughed it out on that farm. It was only a couple hours of heat and the worst rain I'd ever been caught in, but I might've survived.

"Isabella?"

My room. I turn, bolting as fast as I can, but Roman has his foot stuck in the doorway before I can close the door.

"Move your foot," I hiss, leaning into the door with all my weight.

"I'm not going anywhere until you talk to me," Roman says from the other side, his voice still maddeningly calm but edged with something intense. He's not about to take no for an answer. "Leo said you were sick. Are you?"

Fuck. "I'm pregnant," I blurt out. "I'm pregnant, okay? I felt nauseous at breakfast, and I had Leo drive me to the hospital to get a blood test because I suspected that it was something more than the food. So yeah..." I move away, letting the door swing open.

I face him, directing my anger straight to the source. "I am pregnant with your baby, Roman. Just like you wanted. Are you happy now?"

My chest heaves as the words leave my mouth, and I wait, crossing my arms, for his reply. "What?" I bite out. "You've got nothing?"

"My baby," he breathes, taking me by surprise. "You're pregnant."

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Where's the victory declaration? The waving flag to let everyone know he's won?

Roman walks into my room, his hands stuck firmly to his sides. "Solnyshko," he whispers as he stops in front of me. Slowly, almost reverently, his hand cups my face. "You have no idea what this means."

"I do," I say tightly, though my voice wavers. "You wanted an heir. Proof that my father's bloodline would end with him or me. You got what you wanted."

"Revenge?" His voice deepens, rich and low, threaded with a hint of something tender. "You think that's all this is?" He leans in closer. "You became mine the moment I took you. Don't pretend I needed a child to keep you."

"Then what is it?" I whisper, trying to hold his gaze even as it scorches me. "What is this?"

Love? I doubt it. He wouldn't fall for a traitor's daughter.

Roman doesn't give me words. But when his lips touch mine, it feels like a promise. A lifeline that I cling to, wrapping my fingers around a fistful of his shirt as his mouth devours mine—ravenous, possessive, aching with a feeling deeper than lust.

When he finally breaks away, his lips don't stray far. They trail down my jaw and across my throat, hot and commanding. "You're mine," he breathes against my skin, his voice rough, like gravel. "You've always been mine."

I feel it vaguely when my back hits the wall because he's right there with his arms

around my waist, pulling me close.

“Moya,” he murmurs. Words I barely know the meaning to, but each one sends a flutter through my stomach. He pulls my shirt over my head, tossing it to the floor before his lips capture mine again—his tongue thrusting into my mouth.

I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing into him as his hands slide lower, gripping beneath my thighs. With one swift motion, he lifts me, and I gasp, legs wrapping around his waist on instinct.

My back brushes the wall again before he turns, carrying me through the room like I weigh nothing. Each step is deliberate, his mouth never leaving mine, lips dragging across my jaw, my throat. The low sound in his chest vibrates against me, awakening something primal and hungry.

Then the bed catches me, soft and cold sheets against my back as he lays me down, moving over me in a blur of heat and strength.

“How long did you plan on hiding it?” he asks as his thumb strokes my cheek.

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“Printsessa.” He shakes his head. “It’s not a good idea to hide things from me, you know. I’ll always find out.”

Whatever response I could’ve had to that vanishes as he slides down my body, his mouth traveling over my skin, leaving kisses on every inch...until it feels like my body belongs to him.

Truly.

And when he makes love to me—my arms wrapped around his chest and my legs curled up, pulling him closer, it feels gentle and firm, almost like a promise etched in my mind.

“Roman.” His name falls from my lips with a cry.

He kisses me fiercely, his hips bearing down on mine. “Come for me, my love.”

It feels so good, so intense that it brings me to stillness before I fall, feeling my body and mind shatter into a million pieces.

All of them belonging to him.

24

ROMAN

The glass of wine in my hand remains untouched, sweat beading along the crystal stem. I stare blankly into the dark liquid, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, until Leo’s voice cuts through the silence.

“Rough night?” he asks, stepping in like he owns the place. He plucks the glass from my hand and takes a casual sip. Setting it on the counter, he cocks his head. “Did you find out what’s wrong with your wife?”

Yes. She’s pregnant. Carrying my child.

I’ve said it a hundred times in my head and still can’t wrap my mind around it.

Leo sighs when I don’t respond, louder this time, irritation creeping into his tone. “I was the one who drove her to the hospital, Roman. I think I deserve an answer, don’t

you?”

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I reach for the glass again, instinctively, but it's empty. I blink at it like it betrayed me and glance over at him.

He just shrugs. "I was thirsty. And now I'm asking—is Isabella okay?"

When I said I wanted an heir, it was to spite Marco. It was about control, power, and leverage. I didn't think I'd get attached to the reality—that it would feel like the world has shifted under my feet, making my chest pound so hard it feels like it might explode.

Leo's fingers snap in front of my face. "Roman?"

"She's pregnant," I finally say.

He blinks. "Who's—wait. Isabella's pregnant?" His mouth hangs open for a moment before the shock smooths into something like acceptance, maybe even amusement. "Well, she is your wife. It's not exactly breaking news."

He adds, "But I see what you mean. At first, it was just a plan. You were detached, you didn't care about how it would happen, just that you wanted it to happen. Now..." He gives me a meaningful look. "You feel something for her. You care for Isabella more than you ever thought you would."

Yes. I do. But I never knew that caring for someone came with this type of fear.

I feel Leo's hand on my shoulder. "You might not believe me, but I know you'll be a great dad. You didn't have the best role model, but Isabella's had it worse, and I

know she will be a good mother too. So, maybe trust yourself more?”

He moves to leave. “I need to get going now—some things I have to check out—but you should spend more time here. With her. It’s not a crime to be in love, Roman Volkov. If anything...” He shoots me a smile by the kitchen door. “I think it looks good on you.”

I never felt the need for my father to be a better dad. He did right when it came to the things he thought mattered—showing me the ropes, teaching me how to read people and deal with difficult situations.

He spent his years training me to take over from him.

But with Isabella, I want things to be different. She makes me yearn for something more—like looking into our baby’s face and seeing her smile.

It’s not a crime to be in love.

It’s not love. No. It’s far from indifference and being tolerant, though.

My fingers reach for the empty glass again, and I sigh when I remember it’s empty. The sound of the tap running as I take it to the sink is the only thing louder than my thoughts.

After returning it, I walk out of the kitchen quietly.

“Polina—” I find the housekeeper in the kitchen the next morning, making breakfast. Isabella is nowhere to be found, though. “Where’s my wife?”

She takes a break from the stove, gesturing vaguely at the door. “She’s getting ready to go to the hospital.”

“Hospital?”

Polina nods. “Yeah.” Then she gives me a look, like I’m supposed to be privy to the information, not her.

“Thanks,” I mutter as I turn, heading for the stairs. When I reach her door, I pause with my fist raised, taking a deep breath before knocking.

“Polina,” Isabella calls out from inside. “I’m really not hungry. I’ll eat when I come back. Thank you!” She sounds chirpy, like she didn’t spend the entire night in thought.

The way I did.

Do I walk away? The door opens before I can decide, and Isabella appears, looking a little frazzled. “I knew it.”

“You knew it?” I echo. Her hand is on the doorknob, and her body’s blocking most of the open space, so I can’t see what’s happening in the room, but it looks like she just ran a marathon.

Isabella nods. “Yeah. Despite what I said, Polina would’ve walked in because she’s very strict with meals. When the door didn’t open and I didn’t hear anything, I knew it was you.”

I hear her words, but I’m too focused on the strands of hair glued to her forehead from sweat...and the outline of her nipples showing through her camisole.

“Roman?”

I blink, refocusing. “Polina said you’re going to the hospital?”

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“Yeah,” she replies. “It’s nothing,” she adds as she chews on her bottom lip. “I was told I didn’t have to come back for six more weeks, but—” She exhales, and I catch her hand lifting in worry. “I thought I’d just go and make sure everything’s okay.”

“Okay.”

She chews her lip harder. “Okay.”

I slide my hand out as she closes the door again, catching it before it shuts.

“I’m coming with you.”

She pauses, eyes flicking up in surprise. “You’re coming with me?”

There’s hesitation in her voice, but the soft sigh that escapes her sounds a lot like relief.

“Yes. I am,” I say, my voice low and steady. “You’re my wife, Isabella, and you’re carrying my child. Did you really think I’d let you go alone?”

“It’s not a big deal,” she mumbles, her defenses flimsier now. “It probably won’t even take an hour.”

My hand stays firmly on the door. “Then I’ll sit with you for that hour. Every second, if I have to.”

“It’s really not?—”

“Bella.” I step in, close enough to see her lashes flutter. My voice softens, but the weight behind it doesn’t budge. “You’re mine. And we’re doing this together.”

She looks over her shoulder momentarily, then back at me with a sigh. “Can you give me a couple minutes, then? I just need to sort out a few things.”

I shake my head slowly. “I’ll help you sort it.”

Her brows lift. “Roman?—”

Before she can finish, I press gently on the door, slipping inside like it was never up for debate. “Let me in, printessa.”

The room is a mess. Clothes are strewn everywhere—on the bed, across the back of the chair, even on the floor. A suitcase is half-zipped as if she gave up midway through. She turns away and throws her hands up, exasperated.

“I’ve been panicking, okay?” she says, pacing in a small circle. “I know it’s ridiculous—I’m not even showing yet—but I feel like nothing looks the same on me anymore. Like my body already knows, and it’s just...changing without me.”

She gestures wildly toward the pile of clothes. “None of this feels right. I don’t feel right.”

Before she can spiral any further, I cross the room in three strides and cup her face in my hands, forcing her to stop and look at me.

“Hey,” I say, voice low, almost rough with how tightly I’m holding it together. “You’re allowed to panic. But you’re not allowed to talk about yourself that way. Your clothes don’t look right? We’ll throw everything away. We’ll get new clothes. Just tell me what you need.”

Her lips part, the fight leaking out of her slowly. “To breathe,” she whispers. “I think the air thinned out after you left last night. It’s been hard to breathe all morning.”

My thumb presses against her cheekbone, exerting light pressure in a caress. “Feel that?” I murmur. She nods. “Good. Focus on my thumb. Focus on the feeling and breathe.”

She hesitates for a moment, almost panicking again, but I pull her closer with my other arm around her waist. “Breathe, printsessa. Breathe.”

“Why do you still call me princess?” she asks. “I know you were making fun of me initially, probably because you thought I was sheltered, but I think I’ve been through enough to show you that I’m not fragile.”

“It was never about being sheltered,” I say, locking eyes with her.

“Why then?”

“Your eyes,” I whisper roughly as I dip my head, pressing a kiss there. “They were the darkest shade of brown I’d ever seen. When I walked into the cathedral, I could feel them following my every move. Everyone else cowered, but not you.”

My other hand slips under her camisole, stroking her back. “You held your head high even though you were frightened. You weren’t fragile, Bella. You were almost untouchable.”

“If I wasn’t in shock, I would’ve found a gun and probably shot you,” she says with a smile. “I wouldn’t have missed.”

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It should anger me—that she still thinks about putting a bullet into my body. Instead, it makes me proud to know that she can hold her own.

My palm rounds her body, settling over her stomach. “Our child will have your defiance.”

“It won’t be useful,” she replies, “unless they meet a man like you.”

My hand falls away. I’m unsure if she said it in jest, but it fills me with a sudden realization. I wouldn’t want my daughter to meet a man like me. I’d want her sheltered from my life, from the men I’ve met and the sons they’ll have.

Fuck.

“What’s wrong?” Isabella asks as I turn away, threading my fingers through my hair. “Roman?”

“I’ll be outside,” I say as I march out of her room, closing the door to put a physical barrier between us.

What the hell am I doing? I should’ve never even thought about putting a baby in her.

Because she deserves better—so much better. A man who brings warmth into her world, not war. Someone who holds her with peace, not power.

But that man isn’t me.

And no matter how many sweet lies I feed her or how many promises fall from my lips, I'll never be the kind of father I wish I could be. Or the type of husband who gives her the softness she aches for. That kind of life just doesn't exist for someone like me.

The ride to the hospital is quiet, and I sit in front, keeping my gaze averted from the mirror so I don't lock gazes with Isabella. I know she'll see it...the chaos unraveling inside me. And for the first time, I don't want to see her disappointed.

As we walk through the doors, my phone buzzes. She's ahead, but she pauses when she hears the sound. "Do you need to take that?"

I shake my head. "No. We're doing this together. Let's go."

She nods, and I step into pace with her, but we barely make it to the nurses' station when my phone begins to ring. "You knowwhat?" she bites out before I can speak. "I think you should get that. It could be more important."

I see the pain in her eyes, but ignoring the call won't erase it. I shouldn't have abruptly ended the moment in her bedroom and deprived her of an explanation.

I'll find an excuse.

My phone's screen flashes with a number I never expected to see. Igor Sokolov.

"Hello, old friend," he greets.

"What do you want?"

"Relax," he chuckles. "Can't a man check in on an ally? We are friends now, aren't we?"

Never.

I cut through the pleasantries. “Do you know where Marco is?”

There’s a pause. I hear a faint rustle on his end like he’s leaning back, savoring the moment. “Hmm. Maybe I do. Maybe I don’t. Or maybe I’ve got a lead so solid, you’ll want to kiss my damn feet when you find him. But I’m not in the business of giving away gifts, Roman, like I know you’ll never give me a handout. So I’m thinking we make a trade.”

My gaze flicks ahead, and I see Isabella’s silhouette disappear into a corner.

I’ll catch up.

My voice hardens. “What do you want?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Isabella Ricci.”

For a moment, it’s as if I didn’t hear correctly. As if the words didn’t register—because surely, Igor didn’t just say that. The last time we met, I made it crystal clear that Isabella isn’t a bargaining chip. That she belongs to me. I know I should’ve left a permanent reminder.

“I’m going to assume you just misspoke,” I say quietly, dangerously. “Because if you didn’t?—”

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“I didn’t,” Igor cuts in, smooth as ever. “I know she’s pregnant, Roman. And I know the child is yours. Which only makes her worth more to me. Come on now,” he drawls. “Which do you want more? The woman or Marco? You can get some other woman to give you a child. I doubt the daughter of a runaway coward would win you any favors.”

My teeth grind hard as my blood roars in my ears. If he said these words in front of me, I would slit his throat from ear to ear.

“Stay away from Isabella,” I warn. “If you come anywhere close to her, you’ll be lucky if I let you go with half a life.”

He doesn’t respond immediately, and I’m reaching for the end call button when I hear him whisper, “Too late.”

What the fuck did he just say?

“I’m here,” he says. “At the hospital. You didn’t think I would sit back and let you call the shots, did you? I already figured you were going to say no, so I decided to take her myself.”

Isabella! The phone falls to the ground as I break into a run, pushing past people as I scan the hospital corners frantically. I left her alone. I shouldn’t have answered the call.

Fuck. I drag my fingers through my hair and over my face, cursing under my breath. The hospital is too large to cover the first floor alone when she might’ve entered the

elevator.

I need backup. I reach for my phone blindly before remembering I dropped it.

God. I need something. Anything. After running back to grab my phone, I step in front of a doctor. “My wife,” I say. “My wife walked into this hospital. She’s pregnant, and she needs to see a doctor. What floor?”

“Your wife?” he repeats with a frown. “Why don’t you come with me first? I’m sure we can?—”

“No,” I snap, slapping his hand off as it reaches for my arm. “I need to find my wife, and you’re going to give me an answer, or I swear I’ll burn this hospital to the ground.”

His eyes widen in alarm and I catch them dart in the direction of a nurse passing by.

“Don’t,” I say, barely keeping my voice calm. “Don’t do that. You might think I’m someone suspicious, but I promise you that if anything happens to my wife, you’ll regret not pointing me in the right direction for as long as you breathe.”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “The second floor. The department is on the second floor.”

“Good.” I nod, already moving. I take off down the corridor, my footsteps echoing. The elevator doors begin to slide shut just as I reach them—I shove my hand between them, barely catching the edge. They jolt open again.

I punch the button for the second floor, chest heaving, pulse pounding in my ears. When the doors slide open, I enter a waiting room thick with the smell of antiseptic and soft murmurs. Dozens of women, some visibly pregnant, some holding clipboards, glance up. But not her. No sign of Isabella.

Then I see it—a door halfway down the hall, marked on the frosted glass with “Obstetrics & Gynecology—Exam 3.”

My hand closes around the handle, and I shove it open without knocking.

She’s there. Sitting on the exam table, back rigid, hands curled around the edge of the paper sheet. Her head snaps toward me, eyes wide.

The doctor looks up, startled. “Who are you?”

She’s safe. She’s safe. The words ring repeatedly in my head, echoing over the sound of my heart pounding and my choppy breathing.

“Who are?—

“He’s my husband,” Isabella responds. “My husband.”

The doctor clears her throat. “Oh. Okay. I wasn’t aware we were expecting you, Mr. Volkov. You look...well, you can have a seat while we conduct the exam.”

“What happened to you?” Isabella asks as we walk out of the office. I remain close by her side, scanning the area. While we were still in the exam room, Leo messaged me that he’d arrived, alongside Sergei.

They’ve searched the entire hospital perimeter without any sign of Igor, but I’m not about to let down my guard—even if it turns out that he was bluffing. Once I’m sure she’s safe at home, I’ll pay him a visit. And have a casket, or better yet, a cremation service, ready beforehand.

“Roman?” Isabella taps my arm. I jolt, not caught off guard but tense. “Did something happen?”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to worry about it.”

“But I do,” she argues. “It was the phone call, wasn’t it? My father? Did he reach out to you?”

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“No,” I say tightly, my muscles still tense and my eyes on alert as we step out of the elevator onto the busy ground floor of the building. “It’s something I can handle. Don’t worry.”

She sighs. “Sure. It’s not like my contribution ever mattered anyway. I’m still Marco Ricci’s daughter to you, and you’ve got what you?—”

I swing on her so fast the words die on her tongue. “Don’t.” The word feels like sandpaper on my lips. “Don’t you dare cheapen yourself, Isabella. You’re not just his daughter. I made that clear the second I made you my wife.”

“So I’m just your wife, then?” she retorts. “If you think that makes it any better, then the answer is no.”

Not just my wife. Mine. God—mine, in the way that I’ve become hers. But I understand what she means. “I doubt anyone could lay claim on you, printsessa,” I say with a small smile. “You’re the most stubborn, strong-willed person I’ve ever met. I’m barely holding on to you at this point.”

Her mouth twitches in a smile, and she tries to conceal it and fails. “You’ve gotten better at being coy, Roman Volkov. I don’t know whether to be impressed or wary.”

I take her hand in mine, holding it securely. “Let’s go home.”

As we walk closer to the doors, my phone vibrates. I can guess that it’s a text from Leo, but I ignore it. I made that mistake the first time—putting something else in front of my wife.

Not anymore.

We're only a few steps from the exit, and I see Leo crossing the drop-off area. Then, we hear the sound of sirens and stretchers being rolled in. I pull Isabella to the side, tucking her close and out of the way. Doctors rush to the scene, and everything descends into rushed chaos.

"Sometimes I think I'll get a call, and that'll be you," she whispers beside me as instructions are shouted and nurses hurry in all directions.

I turn, and her eyes are sad, brimming with fear.

"Isabella, I?—"

The sound of a gun clicking, faint but distinct, makes my blood run cold. "Isabella," I whisper, reaching subtly into my waistband for my weapon. "I need you to leave. Okay? Walk out of the doors without turning around."

"Wh—"

"No." I shake my head as she tries to turn to assess the danger I've already marked. "Just go. Tell Leo I said Igor slipped through. Tell him to take you home. Sergei will know what to do."

Her bottom lip trembles as she protests quietly, but I squeeze her hand firmly, my composure steady. "Go. Iyubov moya."

She nods, and I let her go, watching as she takes tentative steps ahead. I keep my eyes trained, looking for any potential threats around her. I don't breathe, not until she gets out. Then I turn and tuck into a corner with the chaos as cover.

I see Igor.

Bastard. He grins. I wait for his move while my hand remains nestled on my gun—half concealed. He tucks his gun away and walks toward me.

“How did you know?” he asks.

“You just signed your death warrant, Igor Smirnov,” I growl.

He shrugs. “Maybe, maybe not. You’re not going to shoot me in a hospital, are you? Meanwhile, I have people outside who, on my command, are ready to kill your wife and your loyal dog.”

Isabella. Leo.

Fuck. Fuck! He was a diversion.

“Just give me the woman, Roman. And I’ll let him go. Maybe I’ll even give you your child after she gives birth. Who knows?”

“You’re a dead man, Igor,” I repeat as my jaw grinds so hard it almost turns to dust, and my fist curls till my knuckles turn white.

Igor clicks his tongue. “Not when I have the upper hand.” He looks at his watch. “You have a minute to decide, Roman. Or they all go boom.”

I could shoot him.

At this close range, I could put a bullet between his eyes without hesitation. But I don’t know what orders he has—and I could be putting the lives of innocents in danger.

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So, I do the only thing that comes to mind. I turn and run through the doors that swing wildly into the parking lot. Leo is standing by the car, but Isabella's nowhere to be found.

“Leo!” I yell. “Where’s Isabella?!”

He starts to speak when I hear the sound of a gun safety going off. I spin, my gun in my hand, but before I can fire, another gun goes off. Igor falls to the ground with a thud. And behind him?—

Isabella.

Holding a gun.

25

ISABELLA

I heard it the same time he did. The sound of the gun clicking. I wasn't sure who it was—someone my father sent or someone else with a grudge against Roman.

But when he sent me out to meet Leo and tell him that Igor had escaped, I realized it was the man my father promised me to. The person Nico said I would marry after they killed Roman.

The man who tried to kill Roman once and failed. I stopped it the first time, and I wasn't about to let him finish the job.

“Isabella?” Roman rushes to my side while I stare at the body on the ground, feeling nothing. He gently takes the gun from my hand and pulls me into his arms, his warmth barely penetrating the numbness that fills me.

Leo holds the car door open, and Roman ushers me into the back seat, sliding in after me. The door closes, and Leo steps into the passenger seat, with Sergei taking the wheel.

The ride back home is silent, but I can feel Roman’s anger radiating through the air, making it thick. I’m not sure if he’s angry at me for taking a risk, but I know if I had the chance to do it again, I would.

Without hesitation.

When we get into the living room, he turns to Leo and Sergei and says, “Give us a moment.”

“I’ll head back to the scene,” Leo says. “The cops will want a statement, and it’s best they don’t come here to get it. I’ll take Sergei with me.”

Once they’re gone, Roman breaks the silence with something I don’t expect.

“I didn’t know you could shoot like that.”

I blink, stunned. “What?”

“Igor,” he says, stepping closer. “You didn’t flinch. Not even when he hit the ground. Most people would’ve frozen up. Dropped the gun. Panicked. You just...stood there. Ready for the next move.”

That’s it? I wasn’t expecting praise—not for pulling the trigger—but the warmth that

spreads through me at his words is undeniable.

“Where did you get the gun?” he asks next.

“Leo,” I say, a small, wry smile tugging at my lips. “Told them I needed privacy. Found it in the glove box. He had no idea it was gone.”

Roman drags a hand down his face, then shakes his head like he’s trying to clear it. “Heavens,” he mutters. “What the hell do I do with you?”

“I saved your life,” I remind him, lifting my chin.

His eyes darken. That calm in his voice disappears. “And you nearly lost yours.”

There it is.

“You were reckless, Isabella,” he says quietly, but there’s nothing soft about it. The quiet is restraint. “I gave Leo instructions to get you out. Instead, you stole a gun. You went looking for danger—with my child inside you.”

My mouth opens, and I force the words out before I can second-guess myself. “How exactly was that reckless?” I challenge. “It was one man. Just one.”

His eyes narrow, and for a second, I can see the war inside him between pride and fury. Between wanting to pull me close and wanting to shake sense into me.

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“You don’t get to be this casual with your life anymore,” he says. “Not when it belongs to me. And not when it carries something more.”

Belongs to him? I fold my arms, putting some distance between us because I know what his presence does to my rational thinking.

“I could’ve sworn that while we were in the hospital, you said you couldn’t make me do anything. And now I’m supposed to do everything you say because I’m your wife?” I shake my head, and the quiet laugh that follows carries no humor. “You contradict yourself every time, Roman Volkov.”

“Do you want to die, Isabella?” he asks.

I purse my lips for a moment, assessing his question. “You’re assuming I can’t hold my own. I can, Roman. I haven’t become an invalid just because I got knocked up. You can’t just take everything I’ve been through and sum it up like that.”

He’ll be no better than my father.

“Fine,” he exhales. “I won’t tell you that you did wrong by killing Igor. But I need you to trust me from now on. Trust me, I value your life more than anything.”

I do believe him. I saw the fear in his eyes, for a moment, when I ran out of the car toward him. I could hear it in his voice too—the desperation that rang in the air.

“I trust you,” I whisper. “As long as you trust me too.”

His lips peel back in a short laugh. “You’re something, Isabella. Your father was a fool for not seeing that. If he knew better, he wouldn’t have promised his company to some other idiot.”

Wait. “What?” My eyes widen in surprise. Or shock. I’m not sure which. I already know that Marco Ricci is a selfish, narcissistic man who was planning to use his only child as a bargaining tool, but...this?

“You said he promised it to someone else,” I repeat as my pulse thunders. “What did you mean by that? Did my father plan to give away everything I worked for?”

Roman sighs. “We both know he’s a bastard. Besides, nobody would take it at this point. Doing so would be aligning with a coward and becoming an enemy of the Volkov brotherhood.” His voice drops to an unforgiving depth. “They wouldn’t dare.”

I know.

I know what he’s trying to say, but my head is full of noise that I can’t escape. It seems like the more I discover about my father, the more despicable he turns out to be.

But this time, I can’t help but feel foolish. I should’ve known. Somehow, somewhere, I must’ve seen the signs and chose to ignore them for the sake of duty and responsibility.

“Don’t you dare.” Roman cups my chin, his grip not so gentle as he forces me to look at him. “You’re not going to beat yourself down because of a man like that,” he grunts. “He might’ve been your father, but everyone knows how fickle blood can be.”

“Your father didn’t sell you off, did he?” I question, my voice wavering. “He didn’t

promise you one thing and then blindside you for his own gain.”

His eyes soften as his thumb caresses my chin. “That’s because I knew before I could even speak what my role was in life. You wanted something else, Isabella. And he knew it. I never had other plans. You did. It shouldn’t have been taken from you if he had no plans of honoring his promise.”

I hate my father.

I was indifferent before, but now I hate him. God—I do, with every fiber of my being. A tear rolls down my cheek, and Roman wipes it away. Another tear follows, and no matter how much I fight them back, they refuse to stop.

Roman gathers me into his arms, offering his shoulder as support. “You can let go,” he murmurs, stroking my hair. “It’s alright, my love. It’s alright.”

For the second time tonight, I cling to him like a lifeline, holding on tight until it doesn’t feel like my heart is about to burst.

“You look radiant this morning, Mrs. Volkov,” Polina greets as I walk down the stairs the next morning, smiling.

It escapes my gaze at first, and then I realize. “You’re smiling!” I point out as I make the rest of the stairs in a quick run. “I saw you smile, Polina!”

She stops and turns, all evidence of the smile tucked into her usual demeanor. “I don’t think I did, Mrs. Volkov. But if it makes you happy to think so, I’m glad.”

Itsk. “You’re hiding it. I know what I saw.”

Polina shrugs. “Mr. Volkov is waiting for you in the dining area. I believe he wants to

have breakfast with you. Although...” She purses her lips. “I’d say it’s more lunch since it’s almost two pm. But he’s been at home all day?—”

“I get it.” I wave, cutting her off. “I get your point. I will eat.”

The smile flickers again. “That would be good. I’ll get going now.”

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As she walks off, her arms neatly folded in front of her, I yawn, stretching out my arms. I had no idea I slept for that long, but after days without sleep, I'd say I deserved it.

Memories of last night trickle back to my mind as I head for the dining room, and warmth blossoms in my cheeks as I remember Roman kissing me.

That was all we did, even though we slept in the same bed—until I dozed off—but it felt like the sweetest thing ever.

“Sweetest thing ever?” I echo, surprised at my thoughts. When did that become a thing?

I've thought of Roman as gentle, tender, oddly funny sometimes, but never sweet. And yet, it seems like the only word fit to describe how he held me in his arms, my back against his chest. It's the first night we've slept together without having sex.

“Isabella.” He stands up as I walk in, circling the table to hold out a chair. Huh. “Sit.” I do, and he guides it closer to the table.

“I thought you'd be gone by now,” I say, watching him as he returns to his seat.

He nods. “Yeah, I was. But I wanted to show you something first.”

I tilt my head, temporarily forgetting the food in front of me—even though it smells amazing. “Show me something?”

“Yes.” He gestures to the plate. “Eat first. Then we’ll leave.”

Clearly, the man has never heard of anticipation anxiety. “Do you know how annoying that is?” I mutter. “I’m not a horse.”

Roman’s eyes narrow, faint amusement tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Why would you be a horse?”

I fold my arms and lean back. “Because you dangled something in front of me and told me to do something else first. It’s like waving a carrot in front of a horse and saying, ‘Win the race, and maybe I’ll let you nibble.’”

He chuckles under his breath. “You’ve got quite the imagination.”

“And you’ve got terrible timing,” I shoot back, though my lips twitch despite myself.

“You need to eat first,” he says, stern yet gentle. I roll my eyes, but I oblige.

A yacht.

When he said he wanted to show me something, I thought maybe it was tucked away somewhere in the house. A room I hadn’t seen, some rare collectibles, or perhaps news.

Then he said we were leaving the house, and I thought about shopping—for designer bags and shoes.

I didn’t think I’d end up on a private dock, staring at a sleek, multi-deck superyacht gliding gently in the water like it owns the sea.

“That’s...huge,” I manage, eyes wide, lips parted in awe. The thing looks like it

belongs in a movie. Or maybe a villain's fortress.

Roman slips his fingers through mine. "A beauty, isn't she?" he says quietly, like he's talking about a lover, but when I turn, he's staring at me. He smiles and points with his other hand. "I bought her years ago. Thought I'd use her more, but I'm not much of a sea man. She's just been waiting here." He tugs my hand gently, eyes glinting. "Come. I'll show you."

We walk down the dock and climb onto the deck, my sandals clicking against the wood as I take it all in. Every line is pristine. Polished chrome blends with white leather and dark wood.

It's the kind of luxury that takes your breath away, and not in a flashy way.

"Roman," I murmur, glancing at him as he leads me across the deck. "This thing is ridiculous."

He smirks. "Good ridiculous or bad ridiculous?"

"I haven't decided yet."

He laughs. "That's good because it'll give me enough time to convince you that it's the good kind so you can name her."

I lift an eyebrow as I look at him. "You want me to give your yacht a name? That's something the owner would do, right?"

"She's yours as much as she's mine," he replies smoothly.

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My lips part, but I don't say anything—not because I don't have thoughts, but because I do. Too many. About how easily he says yours and how the ground under me seems to tilt a little every time he does.

And how I feel like the ground might give way soon enough and plunge me into a place where I can't deny what I feel any longer.

Where I'll be forced to confront the truth that I'm falling for Roman Volkov.

Falling in love.

“For now,” he continues, lacing his fingers through mine again, “come.”

He leads me toward the yacht's stern, his steps quiet but sure. We pass a glass-encased lounge and a sleek outdoor bar, and finally, he guides me up a short flight of steps to the upper deck. The breeze is stronger here, rolling off the ocean in soft, salt-laced gusts.

At the very edge is a cushioned seating nook built into the curve of the deck, designed to face nothing but sky and water.

Roman gestures to it. “Sit. You'll like it.”

I lower myself onto the seat, sinking into the comfort as the wind tousles my hair. The sea stretches endlessly in front of me with shades of other colors mixed into the vibrant blue.

“How does it feel?” he asks.

I nod, lifting my gaze to his. “Good.” He continues staring, and I get the feeling that there’s something else. “Is there something you want to say?”

He shakes his head. “No. Not really. I wasn’t sure you’d like it up here, but I read somewhere that some pregnant women like the sound of the sea and find the breeze relaxing.”

“You—” My lips tug into a smile as he glances away like he’s suddenly fascinated by the view. “You were doing research for me? When? I only told you about the baby two days ago.”

Roman gives a slight shrug like it’s nothing, and I burst out laughing. His head turns, brows slightly drawn like he’s trying to decide whether I’m amused or losing my mind.

“I’m sorry.” I wave my hands. “It’s just...funny. When I found out I was pregnant, all I could think about was how the very thing I didn’t want to happen had happened. I couldn’t stop thinking about how you got exactly what you wanted—me and my baby.”

His jaw tightens slightly, but he doesn’t say anything.

“I never thought you’d be the kind of man to end up on the internet,” I add, grinning, “looking up ways to make me feel better.”

He clicks his tongue. “Anyone hearing you might think I’m the worst person you’ve ever come across.”

“That used to be true,” I say, watching him carefully. “But I’m starting to think?”

That you love me.

The thought hits me so hard it knocks the breath from my lungs. It's not possible, is it? I could see us becoming cordial, but love? It sounds far-fetched, but everything he's done so far has created dots that are itching to be connected.

"Think what?" he asks.

I shake my head abruptly, dismissing the thought. "Nothing. The view is lovely," I say. "Thank you for bringing me here."

He nods, and silence settles between us, punctuated by the sounds of seagulls and the occasional splash in the sea.

Love, I muse. Would it be so bad if it were true?

26

ROMAN

I brush back a lock of hair from her face as she sleeps while Sergei drives, savoring the look on her face. It's peaceful, unlike everything happening around us.

It almost makes me want to take her far away...from here. My chest hurts as I sigh, and I turn away, resisting the urge to press a kiss to her forehead.

My phone buzzes, and I quickly reach for it in my pocket as she stirs. However, my thumb pauses over the decline button when I see Billie's name flash on my screen.

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I haven't seen him since he gave me the information on Igor.

"Billie," I say sternly. "You better have a good reason for calling at this time."

"Yes, sir." I frown slightly when I hear him whisper. "I do. You said to tell you if I heard anything about Marco Ricci. Well, I think I know where he is."

I sit up straighter, but my voice doesn't reflect the urgency. "How helpful do you think you can be, Billie? Because if your intel doesn't pan out, I'll have to cut you off. And you know what happens when I cut you off, Billie Russell?"

He doesn't respond. Fear or caution, it's impossible to tell over the phone. But whichever it is, it's keeping him alive.

"Tell me what you have, Russell."

He clears his throat. "Well, I heard from a source?—"

"The same one who told you about the money?"

"No."

I shrug, and Isabella stirs again, muttering something incoherent. Her head slips off my shoulder, and I place my hand underneath it, holding it there. "Go on," I say.

"I got in touch with one of the men who used to work for your father. They had a falling out, and he cut him off, but it turns out that Marco recruited him."

Another bastard. “Okay?”

“He said that Marco Ricci contacted him a week ago, asking if he could use one of his safe houses. It’s not a safe house per se,” he explains. “It’s a laundromat with a secret extension. There are tons of them in the city—no longer in operation—but Marco wouldn’t tell him which. Just that he needed one, and he would contact my source when he was ready.”

Ready for what?

“And what does your intel want in exchange for telling you the exact location?” I ask after a beat.

Another silence. I wait it out, tapping my fingers on my thigh. I’m not surprised that Marco Ricci is planning something, but it feels like I’m running out of time.

So, as much as I don’t want to admit it to Billie, I’m also running out of patience. “What does he want, Russell?” I ask again, my voice tinged with irritation.

“He wants to work for you, Mr. Volkov. He’s hoping you can reinstate him into the position he had before your father cut him off. I told him I’d ask you,” he stutters, “but I also said he shouldn’t get his hopes up.”

“I see,” I murmur.

I have no desire to bring people I can’t trust any closer than my father did. But I also don’t have a problem getting what I want from them through any means possible.

“Tell him to keep you informed. When Marco calls, I want to be the first person to know. If he proves to be useful, then we’ll talk.”

“Yes, sir.”

I drop my phone as the call ends, my fingers curling and digging into my palm. Marco Ricci. He’s taken a lot from me—not just my father, but Isabella’s trust—and forced me to deal with people I would’ve cut off without a second glance.

It has to end. Sooner or later.

As the car pulls up outside the house, I gently shake Isabella’s shoulder. “We’re home,” I murmur.

She blinks slowly, taking seconds to adjust to her surroundings. “When did we get here?”

“Come.” I hold out my hand. “You should get some more sleep.”

We run into Leo and Polina in the living room—I hand Isabella off to Polina while Leo and I head outside. “Does she know?” he asks before I can say anything.

“Know what?” I ask as my brows dip in slight confusion.

“That you’re in love with her.”

“Love?” I echo.

He nods. “Yeah. You’re in love, Roman. I know you don’t know what it looks like, but you are.”

I don’t answer right away—not because he’s wrong, but because the truth settles too heavily on my chest to refute it. Because, somewhere deep down, I know he’s right. And maybe I’ve known it longer than I’ve been willing to admit.

He chuckles heartily, patting my shoulder. “It’s fun to see, I have to admit. Before Isabella, you were the most rigid person I’d ever known. Now, you’re a lot more human. Prone to sympathy and mistakes too.”

Is that why I haven’t found Marco?

I’ve never strayed off course until I met Isabella. Before I walked into that cathedral, the plan was simple.

Find Marco Ricci’s only child. Take her as my wife. Use her to find her father. Make her the mother of my child so his accursed bloodline ends with him.

It was simple, like every other plan I’ve made before, until I started thinking about all the ways she made my blood run hot and my emotions bleed into logic.

“It only sucks when you fight it,” Leo comments. “Embrace it, Roman. It’s my advice to you as your best friend. Embrace love.”

Not when it makes my chest feel like it might explode.

“I might have a lead on Marco,” I say gruffly, changing the subject. “Billie called on the way back. He said something about a safe house disguised as a laundromat. He’s not sure which,” I add before he can ask.

“Is the source reliable? We both know what Billie did to your father. What’s to say he’s not screwing you over the same way?”

“Because my father would’ve spared his life,” I say coldly. “But I won’t. If he fucks me over, he won’t find the sympathy you seem to think I have.”

“Fair.” He purses his lips. “What’s your plan, then? I could have someone look into the source if you want. Keep an eye on him and Billie in the meantime.”

“Do that.”

“You got it.”

I start to walk back into the house, but I stop a couple feet away from the door, turning to Leo again. “What are you doing here, by the way? Since Isabella got here, I’ve seen you in my house more than I have my entire life.”

His shrug is nonchalant. “Maybe you weren’t fun to be around? You happened to marry an amazing woman, and for some reason, Polina’s meals improved after she showed up. So maybe your housekeeper didn’t like you that much either.”

“That’s it,” I say, pointing in the other direction. “You can go home now.”

Leo crosses his arms. “I think I’ll hang around and see what’s for dinner. I’m getting a little tired of takeout. And if Isabella?—”

“Nope.” I give him a shove. “Home. I won’t let you spend more time with her than I do. Goodnight.”

His laughter follows me as I walk away, and the implications of what I actually said dawn on me as I walk through the door.

I sounded possessive. Like a man ready to defend something he can’t bear to part with. My steps slow down as I reach the stairs and pause at the bottom, lifting my eyes upward.

Leo was wrong about one thing. I might not have experience with love, because I never thought it existed for me, but I can tell what it feels like.

Because I’m falling in love with Isabella.

I lean back, my eyes narrowed and trained on him as Billie walks into my office the next morning.

“Wait,” I say out of the blue, and he halts abruptly. “Where’s your confidant? Your source of information? The deal was that you had to bring him to me.” I tap my fingers on my desk. “Where is he?”

He shakes his head, eyes wide. “I don’t—I don’t know.”

“Don’t know?” My mouth tightens into a scowl. I let out a sharp breath. “Of course. You picked an unreliable source who bailed at the last minute. So why are you here? To tell me how hard you tried to convince him?”

Billie’s hands shoot up defensively. “No. It’s nothing like that. He was desperate to come with me, I swear. I called him this morning and was supposed to pick him up from his apartment, but he was gone when I got there. Place was trashed.”

Marco.

I don't need to connect the dots. Marco got there first. Or someone did. And odds are, the source is dead.

"Fuck," I mutter, jaw clenched as my fist curls. It takes everything in me not to slam it through the desk. "So we're left with a needle in a fucking haystack, aren't we? How many laundromats do you know that double as safe house fronts?"

Billie drags a hand down his face, mumbling something under his breath. When he looks up again, he exhales. "Shit," he says. "Twenty. There are twenty that I know of."

Twenty.

Out of those—assuming the intel's even real—one of them holds Marco.

And I'm running out of time.

"You're going to make yourself useful, Billie," I say as I stand, rounding my desk. He takes a tentative step back, but I don't move toward him. "You've been useless so far, but I'll give you a third chance."

His head shoots off in an eager nod.

"First off, you're going to keep your mouth shut. I don't want anybody finding out what you've told me. Unless you want to go the same way your informant did.

Two—” I hold up my fingers. “You’ll keep your ears peeled. I can’t trust you to watch the safehouses, so I’m asking you to keep your ears peeled. You hear something, you report to me. You hear?”

“Yes,” he says quickly. “I understand.”

I sigh, leaning against the desk and bracing my arms behind me. “You can go.”

As the door closes, I reach for my phone. “Sergei,” I say as he responds. “I need you on something.”

I don’t care how long it takes for Marco to show up. The moment he does, at any of the laundromats, he’s as good as dead.

27

ISABELLA

“May I help you with something?” I turn away from the rows of onesies to the employee wearing a polite smile.

I shake my head, chuckling softly. “No. I’m fine. I just thought I’d do some window shopping. Thank you.”

She nods. “Alright, ma’am. I’ll be around the corner if you decide to get anything or if you need help.”

She walks away, and I turn to the display again, lifting my hand to the vibrant green onesie in front of me. Shopping for baby things.

I didn’t think I would be doing any of that for a while, but when I woke up this

morning, unable to sit still, it was the first thing that came to mind.

“I suppose I could get one thing?” I mutter, my hand drifting to my stomach. I’m not even showing, months away from that, but I’ve never been one to show up unprepared.

And a baby—well, that’s a big responsibility.

I walk out of the store with two bags and a pleased smile on my face. As I near the car, I notice the driver’s seat is empty. My gaze pans my surroundings, but Sergei is nowhere to be found.

Panic floods my chest as my grip on the bags tightens, and I immediately think the worst. He’s been kidnapped. While I was inside, shopping, someone took him.

“Or maybe he stepped away for a moment,” I say, arguing aloud with my thoughts, even as my pulse races. I spent my whole life always thinking about the worst-case scenarios. More than half of them never happened, and I also managed to miss the most obvious ones.

I might also be wrong here.

My senses are on alert as I circle the car, checking the driver’s side to see if the key is still in the ignition. It seems logical enough—if they had kidnapped him from the car, he wouldn’t have had time to take the key.

It’s not there. The door’s locked too.

I was wrong. I sigh in relief as I reach for my phone to locate him, but my fingers never make contact with my pocket. From behind me, I see someone, but I’m too late—a gloved hand clamps over my mouth as a black van pulls up.

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“No!” I yell as my bags drop to the ground, kicking my legs out and clawing with my fingers, trying to break free. “Let me go!” I scream, biting hard on the rubber glove. “Let me go!”

I’m shoved into the van, a sack shoved over my head, and it speeds off.

But I don’t stop fighting. I yank the sack off my head, whirling around to face the men behind me. Two of them—one larger than the other.

“Let me go,” I snarl. “Or I swear you’ll regret it. Do you know who I am?” I hiss when they don’t answer. “I’m Isabella Volkov. I’m married to Roman Volkov, you pieces of shit!”

“Quick to abandon your father’s name, are you?” the smaller one with a rugged face sneers. “How typical. I wonder if he’ll be disappointed.”

My father? I frown. Why would they care about my father? How do they know who I am?

“Your father sent us,” the larger one explains as he leans closer. The smell of rank sweat and bleach makes me gag. “You can stop fighting.”

I scoff. “My father would never do that. He abandoned me the moment he sold me off to be married. I don’t know who you’re working for, but I suggest you let me go right now. If you want to keep your tongues in your mouths.”

The smaller one bares his teeth, and I see a row of cheap metal. “Try it, printessa. He

said to bring you. He never specified what condition.”

Printsessa. My ears burn with rage. How dare he? Only Roman gets to call me that. “Try it.” My lips spread in a thin smile. “And see what happens. Even if my father sent you, you’re no more useful to him than a subdued dog. He’ll put you down the second he sees you’ve outlived your usefulness.”

That takes the smugness from him real quick.

But it also confirms what he said—that my father sent them. I turn back, puzzled. Why would he want me, now of all times? He wasn’t present when I almost got married. It didn’t matter to him when I got kidnapped, and he didn’t care when I got married to Roman.

It feels like an ugly setup.

Whatever he wants, he’ll find that I’ve become a much different person since we last met.

He looks the same. Much leaner, a lot scruffier, and less respectable, but my father looks pretty much the same as he walks into the room where the men left me.

“What is this?” I ask, mocking him. “You couldn’t pick a better place—it had to be a laundromat?”

“Good to see you, Bella,” he says with a throaty rasp. “You’ve changed.”

Yeah, no shit. “I went through some life-changing events,” I retort. “And you ran underground, cutting off your only child when she needed you the most.”

He pulls up a chair and sets it before me, lowering himself onto it. “I had no other

choice. It was the only way to protect you. To protect our family.”

God. I grit my teeth at his speech. Months ago, I might’ve believed his crap. Now, I roll my eyes. “Spare me the excuses, Dad. We both know it was all for you. You’ve insulted my intelligence long enough, but don’t do it anymore. I’m not the same person you abandoned in a cathedral because you found me to be the perfect pawn.”

My father sighs as he shakes his head slowly. “You don’t understand how these things work, Bella,” he says gently, but it sounds like he’s explaining it to a toddler. “Why would you think I’d abandon you? Can’t you see? It was all part of my plan.”

His plan.

I might put my fist through his mouth if I sit here any longer.

“Roman Volkov is a threat against our family. I needed him gone, and I knew you could do the job.”

I pinch my fingers to the bridge of my nose as I exhale. When I lift my head again, every trace of civility is gone. The pretense, the tolerance...all gone. “Is he a threat against our family, or did you kill his father, and he’s only retaliating?”

“What did he tell you?”

“What did you do?”

“He’s a liar,” he argues as his face turns ugly. “Just like his father. These people only care about themselves while they use us as pawns.”

“Don’t!” I yell as I stand, my shoulders trembling in rage. “Don’t you dare gaslight me. You ran from Italy, begging his father for help. And yet you turned around and

killed him.”

Disgust pours through my words, and I jab my finger at him so he feels every single one. “You’re everything you taught me not to be. You tricked me into agreeing to marry someone I barely knew. You told me you were training me to take over from you, but you never planned on doing that.”

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“Bella, listen to me.” He stands and steps closer, but I flinch when he tries to touch me. “Don’t be foolish,” he hisses. “You think getting married to a man means you know him? Because he showed you a slice of affection, you think he’s the good guy, and I’m the bad one?”

My chest heaves as he speaks, but the fact that he could read the truth, to some extent, throws me off a little.

And he sees it.

“My Bella,” he murmurs. “You’re a smart girl. Do you believe he has your best interest at heart—a man trained to kill?”

“Yes,” I say, refusing to let him sink his fingers of doubt into my head. “Yes, he does. Because Roman has never once lied to me. He didn’t try to deceive me either.” My eyes sting with tears. “You, on the other hand, are the worst human I know.”

Quietly, I add, “I’m leaving. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

He grabs my hand before I can turn, pushing me against one of the washing machines. I hit my back with a thud as his fingernails sink into my wrist, punishing me.

“You will do as I say, or the consequences will be worse than anything you’ve ever seen.”

“Where have you been?” Roman asks as I walk into the house hours later, his voice

filled with restrained frustration.

He was pacing the living room a second before I walked in, and I could see his muscles tensed so hard they could've snapped if I had delayed a second longer.

I shake my head, too tired...too drained from my conversation with my father to summon a word.

As I try to walk past, he steps in front of me, his hand shooting out to hold my wrist. The feeling—the mere brush of his fingers against my skin—has me jerking back.

My body responds the way it did when my father shoved me against the washing machine with fear. Roman's eyes narrow and darken, but his hand falls away.

“What happened?” he asks. There's heat in his voice, and his frustration bleeds through clearly, but I know it's not directed at me.

And that's why I can't tell him the truth.

Because I know he's going to go charging after my father. Blindly.

“I will kill him, Bella. You think I don't have the resources? I've been underground for months. Gathering resources. Do you know how many people are willing to take a stab at Roman Volkov? So many.”

He smiled as he said it. Grinned, even. I could tell he meant every word. If it was his delusion or the truth, I'm not certain.

But I can't let Roman walk into a trap for my sake.

“I just—” I sigh, masking the ache that threatens to rip tears from my eyes. “I got

lost. I don't know how it happened or what I was thinking. I'm sorry if I got you worried."

"Worried?" he replies with clenched teeth, and I see his fists curling at his sides. I know he wants to touch me again, but he's holding back. And somehow, it breaks me even more.

Roman runs his fingers through his hair, letting out a drawn, harsh breath. "I thought something had happened to you. You disappeared for three hours, Isabella. I had Leo, Sergei, heck—every last man under my command searching for you until you called to say you were okay."

My father would never do the same.

"I—" I bite my cheek, turning away to blink back tears. "I'm sorry." My voice is a near whisper, because any louder and Roman will see what I'm trying to hide. "I didn't mean to make you worried."

He sighs. "It's fine. You're here now." He steps closer and reaches for me again, but I flinch. Not because of my father this time.

I'd break. If he touched me, I'd break without a doubt. "I should get some rest," I murmur, running off before I can change my mind. I run up the stairs, not stopping until I'm behind the door and far away from him.

Then I let it fall. The tears. The sting from my father's lies and betrayal.

I let them pull me to the ground, tearing sobs from my chest and ripping my heart into pieces.

ROMAN

Something's wrong.

The moment she walked in, I could tell she'd convinced herself to hide the truth from me. It showed when her lips quivered and her shoulders stood rigid.

My hands dig into my pockets as my frustration brims with anger. I should respect her reasons and wait for her to open up, but seeing her like that, struggling not to fall apart, makes it impossible to stay away.

"Fuck," I curse under my breath, turning and heading for her room. I'm close to the stairs when my phone begins to ring. I reach for it absentmindedly, but Leo's name flashing on the screen halts me.

"She's home," I say.

"Yeah," he replies. "I know. That's not why I'm calling, though. The intel—" He pauses, then hisses, "It's real. I have visual proof of Marco Ricci. He's in one of the laundromats. It's an hour from your house. The fucker came out of his hiding place alright."

For a couple seconds, I forget to breathe. It feels like the moment I've been waiting for is so close—so close that if I blink, it'll disappear.

"Are you certain?" I ask.

"Yeah," he replies. "I'm sending you pictures now. You might want more backup because he managed to get every last gangster money could buy, guarding the place

and watching the buildings around.”

My phone vibrates, and I open the message. Sure enough, it’s Marco, with the same ugly smile on his face, standing by the exit of the laundromat with another man.

I place the phone to my ear again. “Where are you?” I ask Leo.

“A couple blocks away. Didn’t want to spook them. But...” He clicks his tongue. “I have a feeling they’re preparing for something, Roman. Maybe he knows, you know.”

It doesn’t matter. As far as I’m concerned, Marco Ricci doesn’t get to leave the building alive.

I meet Leo two blocks out, just like he said. I slide into the passenger seat, gun holstered but hand twitching to draw.

“What’s the update?” I ask, eyes already scanning the street.

Leo nods toward the cracked windshield. “Four men outside. More are circling the block, probably lookouts. The lights are still on inside. The car Marco came in is parked two shops down—a black sedan with no plates.”

I grunt. “And inside?”

“Two confirmed guards posted by the back exit. One on the second floor. Marco’s in the office, far right, behind the wash bay. The room has a reinforced door and no windows.”

Of course it does. He’ll use his men as bait.

I inhale through my nose and hold it for a second. Then I nod. “We move now.”

He whistles once, and the SUV parked half a block behind flashes its lights in response. My men spill out, dark clothing blending with the fading sunset, weapons ready. We go on foot—quiet and deliberate, sliding through the alley beside the bakery next to the laundromat.

The door creaks open.

The heat inside is suffocating, and the air is wet with the sour-sweet stench of sweat, bleach, and cheap cologne. The buzzing fluorescent lights overhead give the space a sickly glow.

Then I see them.

Two men in black coats stand by a stack of dryer units at the far end of the hallway. One is leaning back, smoking, while the other is watching something on his phone.

This is what he murdered my father for. So he could hire cheap gangsters.

Leo raises his silenced pistol and fires once—then again. The first man crumples against the wall with a dull thud. The second slumps forward onto the floor, legs folding underneath him like a broken puppet.

We keep moving past the coin dispensers, rust-stained sinks, and out-of-order sign taped crookedly to a broken machine. A third man steps into view, clearly startled. His mouth opens to shout, but it's too late. I lunge before he can raise his weapon, my gun slamming on his elbow.

His gun goes off in the air.

Somewhere deeper in the building, a voice yells, "Move! We've got company!" followed by the sharp metallic slam of a door being thrown open.

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Gunfire tears through the quiet, and I duck behind a vending machine as tiles shatter behind me. My men return fire, resulting in more muffled shouts echoing from within.

I hear a man fall before stepping out and cleanly dropping the other. Another one tries to run, but a bullet to the leg and another to the head stops him in his tracks.

“Keep pushing!” I yell. Marco. That’s the only thing I care about. And he’s in here somewhere.

My shoes trail on blood smeared across the pale linoleum, and I walk past shell casings scattered everywhere. Leo is way behind me, covering my exit and ensuring nobody else gets in.

I walk quietly to the end of the hallway where the office is. Two men armed with guns jump out of nowhere, raising their weapons, but I’m faster. One round slams into the first man’s shoulder, spinning him into the wall. The other fires, narrowly missing me. Leo appears and takes him down with a single shot.

They drop, motionless.

Leo wipes sweat from his brow, his breath ragged as he turns to me. “You ready?”

I nod once.

The door opens without much coercion, and I step into a dimly lit room cluttered with cigarette butts and a half-empty bottle of bourbon. I hear a safety going off just as I

see him—Marco Ricci.

His voice comes out dry as he smiles. Smugly. “Well,” he mutters, pointing his gun at me, “you finally made it.”

“You’re a dead man,” I rasp as my thumb hovers over my trigger. I could put the bullet between his eyes and end it here, but I need him to admit it. I need to see the look in his eyes when he realizes he has nowhere else to run. “A dead man who has been running like the coward he is.”

Marco shrugs. “Maybe I am a coward, but I doubt you’ll be leaving here with my body.”

I shake my head as rage turns my blood into molten lava. I grit my teeth as I speak. “You still think you have a card to play here?”

“Yes.” He nods. “You see...” He waves his gun around. “I knew she would tell you where I was. That’s why I had her brought to me—not because I wanted to use her to find you.”

My brows furrow in confusion. What is he talking about?

“She was bait,” Marco says. “All I needed was for her to lure you here so I could send my men to your house. Right now, they should be there”—he steps closer, eyes glinting, lips curving into a wicked grin—“with a gun to her forehead.”

Isabella.

A crack opens in my chest. That’s what he means.

That’s why she looked like she’d already cried before she walked into the room. Why

she kept glancing away. Why she wouldn't say what happened.

He took her.

"You mother—" I surge forward, fury turning my limbs to fire, my only instinct to wrap my hands around his throat and crush the smugness out of him. But he sidesteps, laughing under his breath like this is a game.

He's enjoying it. Shooting him would be merciful. And I don't want mercy.

I want to watch the panic flicker in his eyes. I want him to feel every second of dread like I'm feeling it now before the life drains from his eyes.

Marcotsks, raising a hand. "Careful," he says. "You don't want to do that. Because if I don't make a call to stand down in the next twenty minutes..." He draws an invisible line across his throat. "They kill her."

My fists curl so tight I feel my skin split.

"So," he says, tilting his head with mock curiosity, "what's it going to be, Roman Volkov? Will you let me walk out of here...or will you let your wife die?"

My voice tears out, raw. "She's your daughter."

He doesn't flinch.

"She's your blood. How the fuck can you do that to your own?—"

"She chose you!" he roars, his composure fracturing like glass. "She chose you over me!"

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Silence. Then, a cold breath leaves his nose.

“That’s how I knew,” he says, quieter now. “That you’d fallen in love with her. Because the only way my daughter would love a man like you...is if you made it possible for her to trust you. And you were so blinded by it that you couldn’t see there was a mole in your own house. You’re weaker than your father was, Roman. At least he saw through my act way before I killed him. You thought you were one step ahead, even though I led you on.”

Leo.

Sergei.

The two men I’d trust to protect Isabella are here with me. There’s only Polina—and I don’t know if she’s held a gun before.

My hands are tied. God—I have him right here, yet I feel so helpless.

“Walk away, Volkov,” he taunts. “Walk away like the weak man you are. It’s pathetic, really. How you came so close to killing me, but you have to walk away with your tail tucked between your legs because of a woman. You should’ve never taken her.”

A month ago, I might’ve agreed with him. But Isabella has come to mean more to me than anything else. And walking away now—as painful as it might be—doesn’t mean Marco gets to keep his pitiful life forever.

“I’ll find you,” I say calmly. “I will find you, no matter how far you run. And you’d better run, Marco.”

The slice of fear that flashes through his eyes is enough to show me just how weak he still is. My gun drops as my hand falls to my side. I gesture to Leo, who refuses for a second, then turns and leaves the room.

I hesitate, and my fingers tremble, itching to finish the job before I turn.

“Good boy,” Marco says. “For obeying, I’ll tell you one thing you never knew. I was there when your father died. I saw the moment he realized he’d underestimated me. I savored?—”

My gun goes off before he can finish his sentence, and his eyes widen in shock moments before his body hits the ground.

Leo rushes into the room again. “What did you do?”

There’s no time to ask questions. “Get the car,” I order, already racing past him and out of the building. “Call Polina!” I yell at Sergei.

Please. Please let her be alive.

I kick down the door, my heart pounding like a war drum, my voice ripping through the silence as I race inside. “Isabella!” The bodies sprawled by the entrance—my men—are lifeless, and cold dread claws at my chest.

“Bella!” I scream again, voice ragged, raw with panic.

My skin prickles with icy fear, and my throat tightens until it feels like I’m choking on my heartbeat. “Proshu...” I choke out, voice breaking. Desperation pours from

every word as I slam up the stairs, every step fueled by terror. “Please, Isabella.”

“Roman?” Her soft voice cuts through the chaos like a lifeline, and I nearly stumble to a halt, spinning around.

There she stands—wild-eyed, hair untamed like a storm, tears glistening in her gaze.

“Isabella.” My voice is hoarse but fierce, a growl of relief and rage mixed.

I crash into her, pulling her close with trembling hands, desperate not to let go.

“You’re alive.” The words break free in a shaky whisper, repeated like a prayer. “You’re alive.” I cradle her face, eyes burning as I search hers for any sign of pain or loss.

“God—I thought I lost you.” My throat seizes, thick with tears I refuse to shed. Every breath is a battle, ragged and shallow.

“My father is dead?” she whispers, her hand trembling as it cups my cheek.

I nod, voice barely a whisper. “Yes.”

A shaky, almost bitter laugh escapes her lips. “They got into the house. But I finally got to put the skill he tortured me to learn to good use. Joke’s on him—being locked in a gun range before I turned thirteen actually worked out for me.”

My fingers find hers, and I lift her hand to my lips, pressing a desperate kiss. “He kidnapped you,” I say, voice thick with guilt and fury. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

Isabella shakes her head, her smile fierce and honest, reaching her eyes. “You dealt

with him. I couldn't. That's what matters."

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She knew he was dead. I didn't even have to tell her.

"Yeah," I confirm quietly. "He's gone."

"Come," she says, taking my hand and, for the first time, taking the lead without a stumble in her step. I let her lead me to the couch, where she brings me into her embrace, guiding her head to my chest. "Thank you." She kisses my hair. "For saving me."

"No," I refute gently, lifting my head. "I didn't save you. It was revenge. He said that if I killed him, you'd die too. And I killed him because he spoke about my father."

I allowed my rage to take over. Not because it was the only way to protect Isabella, but for selfish reasons. The reality of my action slams into my chest like a freight train, and the truth has me pulling away in guilt. "I—" I shake my head. "I almost had you killed."

"But you didn't."

"It doesn't matter," I rasp. "You protected yourself, Isabella. I took every form of defense that I could trust with me, underestimating the danger I exposed you to."

Oh.

Oh.

It was all for me. Leaving when I got the call, even though I knew something was

wrong with her. Taking that shot without hesitation...I was thinking about myself.

“Roman?” She calls my name as her brows furrow.

I might not be as despicable as Marco was, but I’m not good for her either. Not good for her loving gaze and her forgiving arms. I might promise the world, but when it comes down to it, I’m no better than the lessons my father instilled in me.

“It’s over,” I say flatly.

“What’s over?”

“This,” I explain, turning away from her. “Us.”

“What do you mean?” Her voice rings with impatience as she steps in front of me, not willing to be dismissed. “You can’t just sayuslike it’s a contract you’re voiding. We’re married.”

My jaw grinds so hard it almost shatters, and my fingernails dig into my skin. “I can,” I say coldly. “Because you were part of a revenge plan. Now that it’s over, I have no need for you.

She stares, blinking like I slapped her. “Of course,” I add, my voice now deliberately cruel, “I’ll provide for the child. As much as you need.”

“Stop,” she says, voice cracking. “That’s impossible. You can’t say that and expect me to believe it. You don’t get to push me away like this.”

“You should,” I reply quietly. “You should remember who I am, Isabella. A brute,” I say, reminding her ofherwords.“Ruthless. Cruel. Whatever you saw the past couple weeks was all a lie.”

She folds her arms. “It’s a lie. I refuse to believe it.”

I see. “Then I’ll tell you this.” Don’t. Don’t say it, Roman. “Your father killed your mother. I knew about it, and I hid it from you.”

That does it.

I twist the knife so hard it brings a gasp from her lips. Isabella staggers back. “No.” She shakes her head, tears streaming down her face. “You’re just saying that to hurt me. You’re lying.”

Yes, I am. I want to take back my words, but this is the only way I know to stop myself from hurting her any further. She’ll get over me. It might take a while, but I’ll become a memory. She’ll meet someone else and live the life she dreamed of as a child.

And I?—

I’ll carry the memories and the guilt for as long as I breathe.

EPILOGUE

ISABELLA

Two Weeks Later

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It feels like it's been forever—not two weeks and fourteen hours, but a lifetime since I last saw him. Neither of us says anything as I stand by his office door, my heart beating so fast I can hear it in my ears.

“Printsessa.” Roman finally breaks the silence.

“I didn't think we were back on a nickname basis,” I tease as I walk toward his desk, my mouth curling into a smirk.

“Why are you here?” he asks, pushing the pile of documents in front of him away as if making room for me.

I knew it. It's an unconscious action on his end, but it tells me everything I've been brewing over for the past fourteen days.

“To confront you with your bullshit,” I reply, settling down on the leather chair in front of his desk. His lips part, but he doesn't say anything. “Good.” I nod. “Because I'm doing the talking today. That night, you had a lot to say. Today, you're listening to me.”

He nods slowly.

I take a deep breath. “You love me. You didn't expect to, but like almost everything else in life, love rarely happens when we plan for it.”

“I—”

I hold up a finger. “But you’re a coward, Roman Volkov. You’re a coward with good intentions. You hid the truth about how my mother died because you wanted to protect me, and then you used it to hurt me.”

He drags a hand over his face. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” I say. “That’s why I’m here. Because I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. Like before, you thought you were protecting me. The only thing you didn’t get right was not running your decision by me.” I lean forward, placing my hands on his desk. “I don’t need protecting, Roman. Not from you.”

“I almost got you killed.”

“Oh, you egoistic man,” I roll my eyes. “I made it through unscathed. Doesn’t that tell you everything you need to know? I’m not angry that you avenged your father, but you ran straight to me. You came for me, Roman. Can’t you see? For me.” I touch my chest.

Roman’s eyes soften momentarily, but it shuts off almost immediately.

I sigh. “Fine. If you want to do it this way.” I stand and step around the desk, closing the space between us. “Roman Volkov, if you want me to walk away, say it. But don’t lie and pretend it’s because I’ll be safer. Don’t use my protection as an excuse to run.”

He doesn’t speak right away. His throat bobs with a hard swallow. Then, finally, in a voice so low it feels like it was scraped from the bottom of his chest, he says, “You scare the hell out of me, Isabella.”

My lips peel back in a laugh. “I should scare you. I’m not the type to give up easily. You’re certainly not a quitter either.”

“I love you,” he murmurs, touching my face tenderly as if too much pressure would break me. “I love you so much I would never forgive myself if I lost you.”

“Then work harder.” I shrug. “Work harder to keep me.”

His chest rumbles with a hearty chuckle, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and he rises, pulling me closer for a kiss. His lips slant against mine, and I throw my arms around his neck, all too eager for him.

“Lyubov moya,” he murmurs. I know what that one means. My love.

His teeth tease my lower lip as he edges back a bit, and then his tongue slides into my mouth, and I moan, curling my fingers around his hair. He hoists me onto the desk, stepping between my legs with his mouth still pressed to mine.

When the kiss ends, I’m breathless, smiling and clinging to him. “Does this mean I get to come live in your house again?” I tease.

“It’s yours,” he says without missing a beat. “Your house, printsessa. And the baby. I just live in it.”

My shoulders shake as I laugh. “You have a good sense of humor, Roman Volkov. I’m impressed.”

His fingers dip under the hem of my dress, caressing my thigh. I moan softly as his thumb skims the bow of my underwear. Roman leans in, his lips brushing the shell of my ear, his voice a dark promise that skates down my spine.

“If you’re impressed by that, wait until you see what I have in store for you.”

“Oh,” I whisper as he guides my back to the polished wood, my arms around his neck. “You’re about to make your wife a very happy woman, Mr. Volkov.”

A very happy woman indeed.

The End