



Arseni (Las Vegas Petrov Bratva #5)

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Category: Romance

Description: What's worse than being stalked by a sociopathic nutjob?

I used to think nothing. For years I've lived in fear of a man I know to be cruel, possessive, and violent. Weaving through terror has become second nature.

Then Arseni shows up.

My old foster son was a mistake I thought had stopped haunting me, but I was wrong. He's back with a thirst for revenge.

He's even crueler. Even more possessive. Even more violent.

And he has no idea I've already been claimed.

So what's worse than being stalked by a sociopathic nutjob?

Being stalked by two.

A note from Nicole:

Arseni is an 18+ DARK captive mafia romance set in the world of the Las Vegas Petrov Bratva that contains graphic scenes of violence and dubious adult situations. A full list of content warnings can be found inside the book. No other books need to be read to enjoy this age-gap standalone. Enjoy!

Total Pages (Source): 39

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

MARGOT

Six years prior

The boy's name is Arseni.

He's seventeen years old, was abandoned at birth, and has been through every group home in Vegas, as well as two stints in juvenile detention.

At one time or another, he's been charged with vandalism, theft, and assault.

He doesn't respond well to authority, especially from men, and has provoked fights with his last five foster fathers.

And he's on his way to my house.

My heart beats rapidly as I make his bed for the fifth time, practicing the pronunciation of his name again and again.

The colors in this room, in his room, are neutral, but I secretly hoped I'd be placed with a girl.

Someone between the ages of eight and twelve.

I told the agency none of this. When they asked if I had a preference, I felt too guilty to say, so instead I let fate decide.

I could picture the daughter I'd one day adopt so clearly in my mind—blonde hair, a freckled nose, looking for love the same way I am. The same way I was when I was in her place.

Instead, they're placing me with a son.

I stand up straight when I finish with the bed and look around at the blue walls covered with posters of cars and old rock bands. I lift my thumb to my mouth to chew on the nail.

When I was putting the posters up at one in the morning after panic buying everything boy-related I could think of, they seemed to give the room the masculine feel that would bring comfort to a seventeen-year-old boy.

I paired it with a peach candle and sheer curtains that I felt added balance and a pleasant smell.

Now with the morning light leaking through said sheer curtains, the room looks like a gross mashup of feminine and masculine energy.

When the doorbell rings, I jump, my nail ripping from my mouth. I spin toward the doorway but go to the candle instead to blow out the flame. Candle wax sloshes onto my finger as I jerk the jar too quickly off the dresser, and I end up dropping it on the floor, hot wax melting into carpet.

"Fuck," I hiss, trying to shake the burning wax off my hand, but it's already hardened.

The bell rings a second time as I stare wide-eyed at the carpet. I kick the candle beneath the bed and furiously wipe wax onto my jeans while hurrying to the door.

I throw it open with a smile on my face that feels too wide, my tight skin stretching to accommodate it.

My face almost droops when I register the far-too handsome kid standing behind the social worker I spoke to on the phone last night.

A garbage bag is thrown over his muscular shoulder, his chest expanded.

But it isn't his toned body that stands out.

It's his face, clear of any blemish or facial hair, a chiseled jaw and strong chin the only thing breaking an angelic look.

He looks caught between a boy and a man, long lashes framing the deepest chocolate brown eyes I've ever seen, as empty as they are deep.

He doesn't return my smile.

"Hello!" I say, my voice embarrassingly high. "Angela, nice to see you again." I hold my hand out to the social worker. The woman takes my sweaty, wax-caked palm as she smiles grimly. When she pulls away, she wipes her hand on her slacks and opens her mouth, but I interrupt before she can speak.

"And you must be Arseni." I make sure to put emphasis on the second syllable of his name. It comes out slow and accented. Forced. I hold out my hand—my left this time—and am partially relieved when he chooses not to take it. His brows pinch together as he eyes me warily.

"May I speak to you in private for a moment, Ms. Stevens?"

My smile falters, but I recover it and nod. "Of course."

Angela steps past me inside while Arseni stands in silence.

An awkwardness comes over me when I'm not sure if I'm supposed to just leave him on my porch or if I should invite him inside to check out his room.

I thought my memories were crystal clear, but I can't remember a thing about adult procedures from when I was young. Did they leave me outside?

"Ms. Stevens?"

I shuffle backward and shut the door.

Angela stares at me with her lips puckered in a lemon-sucking way when I turn around.

"Ms. Stevens, I want to thank you again for allowing Arseni into your home. During your training, you learned that being a foster parent can be tough. They'll test you beyond what you think you can handle.

But as I've said before, Arseni is a special case.

If he had anywhere else to go, anywhere at all, he'd be there."

My smile falls completely at that. I don't think she meant it as insulting, but it curbs my enthusiasm, nonetheless.

"You're going to want to regularly attend a support group with your fellow parents," she continues. "Do you still have the information I provided?"

I nod. "I do, yes, and I appreciate your concern. I think I've mentioned that I'm familiar with the system?"

” I wait only a moment to see if her memory will jog.

I don’t know what I expect. Maybe for her eyes to light up and for her fingers to snap.

Ah, that’s right. You’ll be just fine. I see now the boy is in good hands .

“I’ve seen it all,” I go on. “Some kids just need proof that you’re not going to abandon them. Trust me, I can handle a little boundary pushing.”

It’s fucking up his room that I can’t handle.

Or not being what he needs. Him sleeping in constant discomfort under a roof with yet another person who doesn’t understand him. Me creating the same environment that made me feel so utterly alone.

I don’t tell Angela any of this. I’d never admit my fears aloud.

Angela blinks but says nothing else. She walks to the front door and opens it up for Arseni. I don’t hear what she says when she speaks low into his ear, but I watch his blank expression to see if it’ll break. It doesn’t. Not until she says her goodbyes and leaves.

As soon as the door shuts, Arseni drops his trash bag of stuff by the entrance and tucks his hands into his pockets. He roams the room curiously.

“I’m so happy to have you here,” I say, my awkwardness returning. “I don’t know if Angela told you, but I’m Margot. I’ve heard so much about you.”

His lips lift into a smirk as he turns his head toward me. Like he knows exactly what was said. And not a thing was positive.

I've heard so much about you. Why the fuck would I say that?

He wanders over to the standing shelf next to the kitchen entrance.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, fidgeting with my hands. "I could make you something to eat. Or would you like to see your room? I wasn't sure what you liked decor-wise, so it might not be your taste, but maybe later we could go to the store to?"

"You said your name is Margot?" he interjects. His voice is perfectly balanced. Smooth. It makes my chest flush from embarrassment at how nervous I am. I'm supposed to be the source of calm, not him.

I take a moment to even my breathing before I respond. "Yes."

He picks up the framed drawing of my mother's from the shelf, and I bite my tongue to keep from asking him to be careful. I should've put it away before he arrived.

"Mar-got," he repeats, my name slow and enunciated coming off his tongue.

My earlier struggle with his name feels so ridiculous now that my shoulders hunch.

It strikes me that he has no trace of a Russian accent because duh, he wasn't raised by Russian parents, but still, I don't know what I expected.

"Are you an artist?" he asks.

"No, that was my mother's. I'm an engineer."

He sets the frame back on the shelf, relaxing tension in my shoulders.

"Can I tell you something personal, Margot? Would that be all right?" His words are

timid, but his voice is silk. He has this glint in his chocolate eyes that makes my lungs pause.

“Of course. You can tell me anything. I want...” I shift my weight while thinking of the right words. “I want this to be a safe place for you.”

He looks around and nods. “I’ve never called anyone my mother before, but I don’t know, you seem ... different,” he says, his voice low. Now he sounds timid. “You just look like you get it , you know? So would it be all right if I called you Mom?”

My mouth drops open, and I stumble on words before answering. “Y-yes. Yes, of course . I’m so happy you can see it because I really do understand what you’re going through. Before I was adopted, I spent years in the system, and I know what it’s like to?—”

“Can I give you a hug?”

A hug?

Already?

Suspicion settles in. This feels too soon. But I still nod.

“Of course.”

When he comes toward me, I get the urge to back up. His strut is a little too confident, his eyes run a little too low. I’m not sure if he’s staring at my breasts or my blouse. I glimpse down at my chest and spot an orange, waxy splotch. Small but noticeable.

When Arseni wraps his arms around me, I stiffen but manage to hug him back.

Part of me hopes he feels the discomfort I feel.

Hopes this is the last hug for a while. His palms run over my back as he sighs, and when his hands lower to my waist, I try to ease away.

Strong arms hold me in place and bring panic to the surface of my mind.

I try to pull away more forcefully but then freeze as his full lips press against my cheek in a hot kiss.

“Thanks, Mommy,” he whispers, the word charged with sexual energy.

He lets me go and steps back, a slow, evil smile lighting his face. It feels like our roles have been flipped because it’s me who doesn’t smile back this time.

I cross my arms over my chest and try to ignore my blistering cheeks.

The spot that he kissed me stands out among every other inch of flesh.

“I’m happy you’re comfortable, Arseni. I so badly want us to be comfortable with each other.

But as with any relationship, boundaries are important.

I think maybe just mom would be best, or if you aren’t comfortable with that, you can call me Margot. And as far as kissing goes?—”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

“I’ve been here five minutes, and you’re already giving me the boundaries talk? Come on, Mommy. I thought you were cool.”

“I’m...” My mouth hangs open a moment. I clear my throat and try again. “I’m not supposed to be cool . I’m your foster mother.” I nearly cringe at the word ‘mother.’ I never considered it to be dirty before, but suddenly, I don’t like it. “My job is to keep you safe, and?—”

He laughs. “I’m a good six inches taller than you. Who are you protecting me from?”

I don’t answer. I don’t have an answer.

“Look, it’s okay,” he says as he creeps toward me. I don’t fight the impulse to back away this time. “You don’t have to protect me. You didn’t order a teenage boy so you could protect him, anyway.”

Goosebumps break out over my flesh as the distance between us shortens. I stand still and try to make sense of his words. He can’t be insinuating what I think he is.

“I didn’t order anyone. That isn’t the way it works.”

“Really?” He humphs. “I guess you got lucky then.”

“Lucky?” The word nearly catches in my throat. I don’t know that I want to hear his answer. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

He tilts his head as he smiles. “Yes, you do.”

Hairs raise on my arms, and I fight the urge to rub the bumps away. He's scaring me. I shouldn't show him that.

"I'm thirty years old, and you are a child . What you're insinuating is not appropriate nor?—"

"Thirteen years isn't even close to the biggest age gap between me and one of my rapists."

When my eyes pop, he laughs.

" Kidding . You're my first. If that makes you feel special."

" Excuse me?"

He holds up his hands. "I'm not complaining."

I blink several times before answering. "I don't know what would give you the idea that I would?—"

"That big sign on your forehead that says Down to Fuck ." He points to the invisible sign.

"I am not ... I would never... Jesus, I'm not a pedophile . I didn't even want a boy, let alone a teenager. I was hoping for a young girl I could help , not..."

He puts his hand over his heart. "Are you saying you didn't want me?"

I uncross my arms. "No. No , that isn't what I meant. I just meant?—"

"Oops, now you're backtracking. Lying doesn't cultivate trust, and the most

important part of making a foster feel safe is proving to them that they can trust you. You took the classes. You know that.”

His lips, lifted on one side of his devilishly handsome face, both settle me and make me squirm. They settle me because, finally, I realize he’s just fucking with me. They make me squirm because I shouldn’t be considering him devilishly handsome.

“I think I need to call Angela,” I say before brushing away the cold sweat on my forehead. I turn to go to my kitchen where I left my phone but gasp when Arseni grips my shoulders and forces my back against the wall, caging me in with strong arms that make me question who the adult is.

My breaths come out erratic, my chest rubbing against Arseni with each inhale.

His body heat makes my skin feel impossibly hot, as if he’s on fire, and the whole thing feels so terrifyingly erotic that I stare at his lips, certain they’ll move to kiss me.

It’s strange and wrong, so wrong, but it makes me think about the last time I was with a man, eight months ago.

Arseni is not a man. He’s a boy.

I close my eyes and swallow while he chuckles, warm gusts of air hitting my face.

“I’m just messing with you, Ms. Stevens. I know you don’t want to fuck me.”

I open my eyes and melt with relief at the amusement dancing in his irises.

“If I promise to be good, will you not call Angela?”

For several seconds, I just stare. He’s still caging me in, imploring me silently like he

isn't the predator making me his prey.

I don't know what to say, but I nod, unsure if I mean it.

Arseni smiles and pushes off the wall, backing up until he's several feet away. "Cool if I take a shower?"

Letting out a shaky breath, I run my hands over my arms. I point to the hallway leading to the bathroom. "The towels are in the hall closet. Bathroom is on the left."

He nods. "Thanks, Mom."

I wait for him to leave, sure I won't be able to relax until he's gone. But he doesn't move his feet. Facing me, he pulls his shirt over his head, revealing muscles a boy shouldn't have.

I turn my head while my breath hitches. "Undress in the bathroom, please."

"I would, but I have a phobia of cameras recording me strip. I found one in a bathroom once; you know how it is. There are sick, sick people out there, Ms. Stevens." The sound of his zipper makes me swing around to face the wall.

"Your room then."

"You never showed me my room."

Staring up at the ceiling, I put my thumb to my mouth and nibble the nail while the sound of Arseni undressing makes my skin crawl. There's this part of me, a sick, fucked up part, that wants to turn around, just to show him I'm not affected by his twisted game. That I can play too.

But I'm the adult.

Arseni's footsteps carry him away while he whistles, the sound fading once the bathroom door shuts. I still don't turn around. My throat thickens at his accusation.

As I stand, stricken by this boy—my first and last attempt at fostering—I know I've made a grave mistake. I wish I could see what happens next so I could know how to handle this.

As my two months with Arseni pass, it becomes obvious. I should've called Angela. I should've reported the incident so nothing else could follow.

Instead, I make the greatest mistake of my life.

And I pray to never see Arseni's torturous face again.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

ARSENI

Present day...

Nothing in this world feels more ironic to me than my hatred for junkies.

I know the escape drugs can grant. I've done things I'm not proud of just to leave my mind for a while. Even so, I feel bathed in hatred as I let the junkie plead behind my gloved hand. His struggle, his fear for his life, makes me so dizzy with power that I don't want it to stop.

But, of course, it has to.

Closing my eyes against my reluctance, I slice my knife across his throat, ending his muffled pleas. Blood squirts onto the dumpster he hid behind like a coward. When I drop him, a puddle forms on the concrete ground.

No one will miss him. No one will search for his body. He'll disappear as if he never existed because he was weaker when he was alive than he is now as a corpse, and the world doesn't tolerate weakness.

I stand over his lifeless body with so much disgust, it fills my mouth with a bitter taste. I gather saliva to spit, but swallow before it passes my lips. My DNA is in the database.

Rolling my neck, I emerge from the alley to grab a body bag from the SUV but falter when I spot my boss, Nikita Petrov, leaning against the vehicle. His arms are crossed,

but I can't tell if he's annoyed at my inefficiency or if he's merely observing me. It's strange for him not to wait in the SUV.

"All done?" he asks.

I nod as I open the back hatch. "He didn't have any money to recoup the loss."

"Junkies never do."

I grab the body bag but halt when Nikita clucks his tongue.

"Leave the cleanup for the cops. Maybe this will enlighten his friends on what happens to those who steal from the Bratva."

I toss the body bag back without a word and shut the hatch. As I'm stuffing my gloves into my hoodie pocket, Nikita tips his head toward the sidewalk.

"Come... I want to show you something."

It feels risky to just leave the vehicle parked here with a dead body twenty yards away, but I'm convinced my boss likes the danger. He gets off on pushing his luck. And something I knew before ever working beneath him is not to challenge him. Ever.

Rubbing at my forehead, I step onto the sidewalk and walk to the pace of Nikita's cane tapping.

His limp barely slows us down, but I often wonder if he's in more pain than he lets on.

He refuses to show his vulnerabilities or admit that he has any at all, and if you ever

point it out, if you ever ask if he needs to sit or slow down or anything of that nature...

I've seen more than one person lose their life over it.

Obnoxiously loud voices sound when we turn the corner at the end of the block, and two tweakers come stumbling toward us. One is walking backwards while he talks to his friend in a fur coat too warm for Vegas, even on a fall night like this one.

"Watch it," I growl, subtly shifting in front of Nikita so the man doesn't bump him. When his back connects with my shoulder, the guy spins, his hands held out like he's going to fall or something.

"Oh shit, my bad." He chuckles, an acrid smell coming from his mouth. I don't guess it's from food. The guy is so skinny he looks as though he's on the brink of starvation.

My annoyance sobers into dread as I recognize the man in the fur coat. His face looks like it's aged thirty years since I last saw him. It's only been four, but it feels like a lifetime since the Bratva pulled me from the cesspool of men like Titan.

I feel the blood drain from my face, and for half a second, I'm stuck. I push around the guy who bumped me and lower my head to pass, but I'm not so lucky.

"Baby?" Titan grabs my arm. I jerk from his hold and keep walking. "Holy shit, it's Baby Ruth." He laughs and jogs to catch me. "How the hell are you doing, man? I haven't seen you in... Fuck, how long's it been?"

"I don't have a clue who you are, but get the fuck away from me."

"Dude, it's me, Titan ." He laughs and swats my shoulder. "What, you don't

recognize me in my fancy getup?" He twirls.

When he puts his arm around my shoulder, I swing toward him with my fist raised. "Get the fuck back, you fucking junkie. I don't know you."

Titan stumbles backward with his hands raised. "Woah, my bad, dawg, my bad. Shit, don't go swingin'."

I face forward and resume my strides.

"Hey, man, you got any change?" he calls to my back. I shove my hands into my pockets and keep walking.

The two linger only a few more moments before they start the other way. The skinny guy howls like a fucking wolf as they jog across the road.

"Arseni," Nikita calls behind me. Too far behind.

I stop and turn to see him standing still with his cane cocked the same direction his head is. Slowing my breaths, I walk back to him with my head high. It's forced. I'd be in a fucking corner hugging my knees in shame if he wasn't staring at me.

"There a problem, boss?"

He looks back at the two men entering one of many tunnels the city built for Vegas's once a year rain. Here, when it rains, it floods. It's a fucking nightmare for the homeless who live underground. People drown beneath the feet of thousands of tourists who never knew they existed.

When Nikita faces me, he gives me a knowing raise of his brow. "Former roommates?"

I don't blink. Don't react. Even as shame slams its fist into my gut, I just shrug. "Guy was high, boss. Probably a fucking schizo."

"Why did he call you Baby Ruth?"

Again, I shrug, though now oncoming anger returns the color to my face. "Don't have a clue. Should we keep walking?"

Nikita taps his cane while he stares at me for a moment. Finally, he breaks eye contact to gesture to the building across the street. "We're here."

I follow his gaze up the tall office building, at least twenty stories high.

"My nephew came here the other day to meet with an engineer for one of his good citizen projects. He was practically shoved out the door."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I wait for him to elaborate. Whatever he's wanting isn't for Vitaly's benefit. He hates his nephew even more than I do.

"A year ago, no one in this city would have dared say no to a Petrov. They think he's weak. And they're right. But Vitaly looking weak makes the Bratva look weak, and I will not stand for everything I've ever worked for to be chopped down by cowards who won't do what is necessary."

When his head turns toward me, I meet his fiery eyes. It's a cliché to say the eyes are the windows into the soul, but I've never felt it truer than with Nikita. He's quiet but enraged.

"What should we do?" I ask, hesitant to even open my mouth.

When he turns back to the building, his jaw is clenched. "The engineer's name is

Henry Duncan. His office is on the eighteenth floor. I want you to go in there and make sure no one in that building ever says no to the Bratva again.”

“Now? Are we sure he’s in his office?”

Nikita angles his head at me and says nothing, just stares at me with those blazing eyes. I take the hint.

I pull up my hood and put my gloves back on. “I shouldn’t be long.”

“Take the bus home,” Nikita calls to my back as I start across the street.

I don’t respond, instead jogging the rest of the way to the building.

There’s a security guard behind a desk in the lobby who’s enraptured by a newspaper when I enter, but he lowers it to lock eyes with me.

Hands in my hoodie pocket to conceal my gloves, I give him a subtle nod and carry on past the elevator to the camera-free stairs.

By the time I make it to the eighteenth floor, I’m breathing heavily and sufficiently irritated.

Irritated by who, I’m not certain. Nikita maybe for not telling me about this when we left the mansion.

I’m not so sure that first kill was even necessary.

Nikita pointed him out from the car, claiming he was the man we were after, but fuck, maybe that was a lie.

Sometimes I wonder if he gets off on this shit.

But I don't think it's really Nikita who has my blood pumping with hot anger.

I consider this as I push through the stairwell door and begin scanning the name plates on the offices lining either side of me. Within seconds, I find the source of my contempt. It's the guy who should be doing this job.

Luka . The brother-in-law of the new Pakhan. Once Nikita's power was ripped away, Vitaly claiming it as his birthright, Luka was quick to settle in next to the snake.

He's Vitaly's lackey. He's the one who should be here. Instead, I'm cleaning up his mess while he kisses my replacement's ass.

At one time, Luka and I were brothers. Now I don't even recognize?—

My feet stop when I pass a door on my right that catches my eye.

I've been scanning the plates for solely Henry's name, but now the job shifts to the back of my mind.

I backpedal a few feet and slowly turn my head, reading the name on the plate carefully, as if I'm hallucinating.

As if all my thoughts of betrayal are making me see shit.

But no, it's her.

Margot Stevens.

My memory of her comes flooding back. Her silky, brown hair. The tattoo on her

right shoulder blade. The way she sleeps with her limbs tucked together like she's freezing in the middle of summer.

Other memories come as well, charging my anger.

I lower my gaze to the bottom of her door, finding only darkness. My teeth grind with disappointment, but it's for the best that she isn't here. I'm not here for her.

Shaking my head, I face forward but can't get my feet to budge. I haven't thought about this woman in years, but now that her existence has crossed my path, it's too difficult to walk away.

There are many ways to get this job done, the most direct being threatening the engineer, maybe smacking him around a bit. And maybe if I hadn't run into those tweekers outside, if I hadn't had such a shameful reminder of my past, I could move on to Henry's office and leave this one behind.

But I don't think I will.

My head turns once again toward Margot's name on the door. Despite the anger heating my blood, I find my lips curving into a smile.

I have a better idea.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

MARGOT

I'm two bites into my sushi roll when a quick tap sounds on my office door.

Setting my chopsticks down and covering my sushi-filled mouth, I call out for the person to come in. It's after eight, so most have gone home for the night, but there's always one or two workaholic stragglers left until nine or so.

Austin King, a man fifteen years my senior with thick, salt and pepper hair many women in this building find irresistible, opens the door and props himself against the frame.

His pinstripe suit reminds me of something a mobster would wear, but he manages to pull it off.

It shouldn't be surprising. Everything this man touches feels somehow classier, everyone he smiles at more important.

Everyone but me.

"You didn't tell me you were having dinner. I would've joined you."

My hand still covering my mouth, I hurry to swallow. The taste of cold salmon lingers on my tongue.

"I'm actually still working." I point to my computer monitor. Nothing but my email is pulled up, so if he bothered to check, he'd see through the lie. But I don't think

people lie to Austin. He walks through life with beaming confidence that makes me think he's never felt rejection.

"Nonsense," he says, strutting into my office and taking up the chair across from me. "A beautiful woman like you should never eat alone."

"Ah, my knight." I force a smile. I don't mention how I've spent the majority of my adult life eating dinners-for-one in silence at my optimistically large kitchen table. I swear to God, I regularly have to dust the unused chairs.

I click onto my work program and type in my credentials to look busy while he stares at me, not taking the hint. Never taking the hint.

"What are those for?" he asks. My eyes follow his narrowed gaze to the pillow and blanket on my sofa—the black leather all looks and zero comfort.

My words get caught in my throat for a moment before I recoup my composure.

"It's because of yesterday. Remember, I had that monstrous migraine?"

"I lift my brows as if I'm waiting for him to confirm the false memory.

His forehead wrinkled, he opens his mouth like he'll question it, but I continue before he can get a word out.

"Anyway, I figured I'd just keep those here in case I needed another impromptu nap."
"

I don't look at Austin's face, instead pretending to read something on my monitor. But his disapproval makes the room feel hotter. I tug the collar of my shirt when I feel it hugging my neck too tightly.

“Margot...”

I look up from my computer at him, keeping my face as neutral as possible.

“Are you sleeping here again?” His eyes dance between me and the couch.

“What?” I pick up another slice of sushi and laugh. “No. I’m leaving as soon as I get this report finished. Suzette has been hounding me all?—”

“Is he back?” Austin’s voice is low, full of foreboding.

Tingles spread throughout my tense body while my throat closes up. I shake my head and nibble on the sushi to avoid having to speak.

“Shit.” Austin leans back and runs his hand through his hair. “Why would you not tell me? You are always welcome at my place, Margot. You know that.”

I swallow and set down the food. “I know. And I appreciate it. I really do, but I’m not sleeping here. I’m going home just as soon as?—”

“Then let me come with you,” he says, a little too assertively. It sounds more like a command than a request. “If you’re not going to call the police, then you need some sort of protection.”

“I’ve spoken to the police many times,” I lie. I haven’t called them once. They can’t save me from my own mistakes. “They don’t have the resources to give me 24-hour surveillance for some stalker who’s never actually harmed me.”

“He’s terrorizing you.”

I close my eyes and place my palms flat on my desk. My eyes begin to sting, but it

isn't out of fear or sadness. It's out of pure frustration. For Austin, for myself .

My mind takes me to the night I told him I had a stalker, and I wish so badly I could go back in time and strangle myself.

We had just gotten back to my place after a date, and I was ready to kiss him goodnight, retreat inside, run off the three martinis he'd insisted on buying me, take a shower and go to bed.

The entire date, I sat focused on him, listening to him go on and on about everything happening inside his mind.

One drink in, I began searching for an escape.

I wanted to see this man as attractive as the women around me do. I wanted to be flattered by his attention. I wanted to feel giddy when he opened the door to his Mercedes for me, and I wanted to awe at his taste in fine wine. I wanted so badly to fall in love with this man. But I couldn't.

Every time I'm with him, I wonder when he'll see me for who I really am.

Every time he talks about his travels, I wonder when he'll ask how I spent my youth.

What private school I went to. What vacations I took as a kid.

What prom dress my mother took me to buy, and what boyfriends my father ran off.

I've spent the last year terrified of those moments.

I've fabricated lies in my head, studied old literature and world history, and all the while never spent a moment admiring the man I've been fooling.

I was ready to break things off for good, but the night he took me home after our date only glued me to his chivalrous side.

He had been inside. The man tormenting me for the past seven years had destroyed my living room, leaving only my mother's flowery doodle mercifully unbroken. Like even in his rage, he knew that would be the thing that ruined his delusional chances at winning my love for good.

As soon as I'd stepped inside, I screamed in terror.

Not from what he'd done but from the possibility that he might still be there.

Austin ran in after me, ready to be the knight to come to my aid.

He grabbed a golf club from his car and went searching the house.

When he was finished, he held me while I cried on the couch. Then the words flowed.

At that point, it had been six years that I'd gone without telling a soul about the horror I lived. That night, I told Austin everything but the beginning of the story. And I've regretted it ever since.

"It's probably nothing."

"Whatever it is, it isn't nothing," Austin counters.

I lift my hands while opening my mouth, letting out a sigh before speaking. "There were some cigarette butts on my back patio. I don't even know that they were his. I don't think he smokes."

"How would you know?" Austin shifts in his chair like he's flustered.

I pause for a moment while I think through my response. “Because I’ve never seen him leave cigarettes behind before. It could’ve been anyone.”

“It was him, and you’re staying with me tonight.” Austin raises from his chair like it’s settled. Like I’m just supposed to push aside my imaginary work and follow him like the helpless woman I am.

He doesn’t get it. He’s so wrapped up in himself and has been too nurtured his entire life to see the danger he puts himself in when he assumes I need a savior.

My tormentor only trashed my house that night because he knew I was on a date.

It enraged him. What does Austin think would happen if we were followed to his home?

Does he think the psycho would just snap his fingers and curse me, vowing to come again when I wasn’t in the company of such esteemed masculine protection?

Give me a fucking break.

“Austin.” I sigh. “I appreciate?—”

“This is not up for discussion.” He shakes his head. “I’m not going to wake up and see your photo on the news after he pushes things further than vandalism. I care about you, Margot.”

“I know.” I nod. “And you know what? As soon as I leave here, I’m going to the police station to make another report.”

“I’ll drive you,” he insists.

I show my palms in defeat. “Sure. Just give me another hour to finish up.”

Austin hesitates for a few moments, like he isn’t sure it could be that easy. Finally, he stands like he’s satisfied and tells me to come by his office when I’m finished.

As soon as he’s gone, I let out a sigh of relief. I massage my temples, a genuine headache coming on, then go back to my email.

There’s one from him , hiding behind the pseudonym , but when I skim it, I don’t spot anything unusual.

Just his daily ramble. He mentions looking forward to seeing me at ‘the drop’ in a few days, and there’s an invite to have Thanksgiving with him next week, but nothing about being at my house.

If he was there, he must not care for me to know.

My lips pursing, I hit reply and almost begin typing. I want to remind him of our deal. I want to threaten to block him again, withhold the money he blackmails from me, refuse to play his games.

He’s supposed to stay away from my house. He promised he’d stay away. Maybe it’s outrageous to hold the words of a lunatic to a high standard, but I’ve wanted to scream at him for so long, it’s tempting to unleash the resentment I feel now. It would only be the second time.

Five years or so ago, I expressed my hatred for him by yelling into my backyard one night, my newly purchased gun jerking around each time I swiveled.

I felt like I was going mad hearing the light taps on my windows, finding flowers left for me on my porch.

I'd blocked twenty different phone numbers and seventeen different email accounts at that point.

He responded by roasting a cat over the bird bath in my backyard. I didn't let Molly—my calico companion—outside for a month. And from then on, I've endured his messages without open complaint.

My eyes closing, I pull my hand from the mouse and sigh.

This never ends. It never fucking ends.

I rub my eyelids before blinking through blurred vision. Then I delete his message and carry on.

I find three new emails regarding the tutoring services I give to the undergrad physics majors at UNLV. Two are from girls I've tutored in the past, and one is from a student named Taylor.

I try to tell from the writing if Taylor is male or female but give up after only a minute and type their name into Facebook. Several Taylor Peters pop up, but only one is enrolled at the University of Nevada. I click on the boy's image and study his handsome features before typing up my email.

Hi Taylor,

I'm very sorry, but I'm all booked up for the semester. Good luck with your studies!

After finishing up with my emails, my sushi devoured, I shut down my computer and grab my bag. I'm just about to sneak out of the office and hightail it to my car when another knock sounds on the door.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

MARGOT

“S hit,” I hiss under my breath, my shoulders slouching. I hurry back to my desk and flop down in my chair before giving the person the go ahead to “come in.”

I’ve already got lines prepared for Austin when the door opens, but he isn’t the one to walk through.

My stomach falls to the floor as a masked man steps inside my office.

My very first thought is that he must’ve read my mind. Somehow, he knew I considered sending him a nasty reply, considered shattering his delusions. And now he’s here to punish me.

I don’t move. I don’t speak. I don’t even cry as the man comes toward me, a knife pressed to his lips. I’m frozen in utter terror.

“Look at you being such a good girl,” he says, his shoulders swaying with confidence I don’t remember him having.

Because it isn’t him .

That isn’t his voice . I almost think I’ve heard wrong until the man speaks again.

“I didn’t even have to slice that old fuck’s throat to get you to shut up.”

I blink at him, not quite understanding what’s happening. I feel like a rabbit facing a

dog when I was expecting a wolf.

Danger. Danger. Danger.

My sensors ring, but they're muffled by shock. It's like I'm hearing them under water.

As the man reaches me, I get a good look at his chocolate eyes, warm unlike the cold gray I see in my nightmares.

It really isn't him.

The man's gloved hand takes my chin and lifts to shut my mouth. My breathing sounds so loud in the room, so panicked. It only makes him smile, the hole in his mask displaying his enjoyment.

"I want you to listen very carefully to me, Margot. Your life depends on it."

I slowly roll the chair backward until it bumps the wall. His voice sounds vaguely familiar, but I can't place it, and I can't get past my confusion.

"Who are you?" I whisper.

The man's smile falls as that same gloved hand wraps around my throat. My eyes bulge as he squeezes, and I claw uselessly at protected flesh while he leans into me until I'm so far back I think the chair may tip. I hope it tips. Because something occurs to me.

If it isn't him, then I can scream. I can fight. I can escape .

Hell, I can even go to the police.

My eyes find the knife secured in the man's other hand. Lack of oxygen makes it impossible to form a plan, but I know for certain that I want that blade. When I go to reach for it, my weak grasp pathetically trying to pry it from him, the masked man laughs and pulls away.

I suck in the largest breath I can ever remember taking and gasp as I hold my throat. I choke on sobs while struggling to get in air.

“Now ... I have a favor to ask. In your building is?—”

“Help!” I croak, sloppily standing from the chair.

The man's knife is to my throat before I can so much as stumble. He shoves me back into the chair, the blade pressing against my neck. Not enough to break skin, but enough to make his point.

“Really?” The man snickers. “You're going to risk your boyfriend's life like that? That's cold.”

“There are cameras in this building,” I say through sharp breaths. “An-and security.” I close my eyes as the knife digs into my skin.

The man presses his mouth to my ear. “I guess it's good I'm wearing a mask then.” He chuckles lightly, warm breath tickling my neck. The knife against my throat is the only thing that keeps me from jerking away.

It's the oddest, most delusional thing, but I feel a surge of therapeutic hope mix in with terror. I'm scared for my life. There's no doubt about it. But one call from Austin to security will make this man disappear. This problem disappear.

I can seek help. Join a support group. Talk to a counselor.

Am I really this fucking broken?

When the man's tongue flicks my earlobe, I gasp, pressing my hands against his hard chest.

"You know what?" He inhales like he's smelling me. "You're right. We need more privacy."

My eyes bulge at the enthusiasm in his voice. The knife leaves me, but I'm only awarded a moment of relief before the man grips my blouse and yanks me to my feet. He shoves me in front of him and presses himself against my back, his erection evident through his jeans.

He leads me by the back of my neck out of the office, into the hallway and down toward the stairwell.

With every moment that passes, he morphs into a more vicious breed of dog.

The security I feel begins to slip away, making me feel crazy for ever feeling it to begin with.

There's one increasingly real possibility I didn't give enough thought.

What if he kills me?

What if he came here to kill me?

What reason could he have?

"I'll do whatever you say," I push out, making my voice as loud as I think he'll tolerate. "J-just don't hurt me." My eyes dart around as we move, praying for

someone to appear. Maybe it makes me selfish. I don't know.

"What are you looking for?" the man asks while my head swivels.

"Nothing."

"Here, let me help... Hey, Austin! Margot needs you!"

I grind to a halt and dart my eyes frantically. The man's confidence sounds both reckless and terrifying.

He isn't afraid to get caught.

He won't hesitate to slice Austin's throat, just like he promised.

Which means he isn't hesitant to slit mine either.

Oh my?—

My thoughts halt at the man's loud laugh, and I stumble when he shoves me forward.

"Jesus, you really thought I'd walk you through here with your boyfriend waiting like a protective rottweiler in his office?"

My veins freeze over. I know Austin. He wouldn't have just left without saying anything.

"What did you do to him?" I ask, my voice warbled with terror.

"Walk and maybe I'll tell you."

A new wave of dread stiffens my limbs as I let him guide me to the stairwell and up

to the roof. Chilly air spreads bumps on my exposed flesh when we step outside, and I cross my arms over my chest, streaks of tears cooling my face.

“There, I came where you wanted.” I dig my heels in. “N-now tell me what you did to Austin.”

“Walk to the ledge.”

I struggle to stand in place as he tries to push me. When I speak, it’s nothing but a chilled whisper. “Why?”

“Because I’ll kill you if you don’t.”

Lips trembling, I do as he says, but I’m not so sure he won’t just kill me anyway.

“I-I have money in my purse, and I can get more from the ATM down the block. There’s a petty cash fund?”

He shoves me so I fall flat on the ledge, my hands pressed against cold concrete to brace myself. My body is stiff as iron, but it must not weigh as much because the man easily lifts me by my waist.

I shriek as he hauls me over the concrete barrier, my belly sliding forward until my midsection feels nothing but air.

As I look down twenty-one stories at the sidewalk below, I scream so loud and so long that my throat begins to burn.

He has me by my ankles and slides me farther off the ledge until I’m dangling, the only thing keeping me from splatting on the concrete below is his grip.

Panic tears at every cell in my body while I flail and screech into dead air that swallows up my protests. If there are people below, they can't hear me. They certainly can't get to me in time.

"Please," I cry, trying to keep my body still while closing my eyes. Tears slip through the closed lids and fall to their death. "Please, please, please, I'll do anything you want. Anything!"

When my weight shifts in his hold, I scrunch up my body in anticipation for the drop.

I've never spent a second more horrified.

All I can think, my last thought presumably, is that I'm a damn fool.

He's ruined me to the point where even at my death, it's him I stupidly feared.

Him who made me underestimate real danger.

This man is no dog. He isn't even a wolf. He's the fucking devil.

The man drags me back onto the ledge, back to the delusional sense of safety.

When my cotton-covered belly flattens on concrete, I'm flipped over, my knees spreading as far as the pencil skirt will allow at the insistence of the man's brutal hands.

He uses his knife to tear a slit up my skirt so he can situate himself against my lacy-covered opening.

I can feel his erection bulging through his pants, mere cloth protecting me. I can't even feel disgusted by it. Can't feel anything but the quaky fear of him throwing me

off this ledge.

“Are you ready to listen now?” he asks, leaning so we’re face-to-face. His breath smells like cigarettes, and it makes me think of the butts I found on my back patio.

I nod profusely. “Y-yes.”

He smiles while taking me in, his head tilting. He’s enjoying every second of this, and I don’t know what that means for me. If I should be more or less afraid.

“There’s a man in your firm named Henry Duncan.

Recently, he turned down work for someone very dear to me, and you’re going to convince him to make it right.

I know where you sleep. I know where you park your red coupe.

I know everything I need to know to come back and hurt you if you don’t get this done. ”

He shows me his knife then flips it around so he’s holding the blade. When he pushes my panties aside, I gasp at the sudden cool air, but it’s a butterfly kiss in comparison to what he does a moment later.

My core tenses as the man inserts the rough surface of the knife’s handle into me, not stopping until he’s assaulted every inch of me possible without the sharp metal cutting. My mouth opens, but my cry is so strangled, hardly anything comes out.

“Can you guess how I’ll choose to hurt you, Margot?

” he asks while he saws the handle inside of me.

My thoughts of falling fade until all I can think about is his assault on my body.

The idea of the man turning the knife around and fucking me with the blade feels like such a real possibility that I lie perfectly still and don't utter a breath of protest.

When he pulls the handle out, I still can't breathe. I'm paralyzed as I watch him bring it to his open mouth. He licks the handle with a savage groan that feels personal. So much bigger than a job his friend wants Henry to do.

He winks at me as he clicks the knife shut.

"You have twenty-four hours."

The promise of tomorrow doesn't register in his words until he turns and heads back to the stairwell, leaving me on the ledge fear-stricken and violated. I slowly sit up and wrap my arms around myself. Tears and snot run cold on my face while I try to pull myself together.

Henry .

They want Henry .

He'll do it. I have no question he'll do it, even if I don't tell him about what just happened. The man is a sweetheart. He'd do whatever you asked just because you said please.

After giving myself a few more minutes to cry, I hop off the ledge and tread back down the stairs to Austin's office, shaking at what I might see. I close my eyes while I work up the courage to open his door.

Holding my breath, I turn the knob and peek inside to find it empty. When I go back

to my office, I find my phone and see a picture Austin texted me. Somebody smashed his car windows. He's with the police now.

I sink until I'm a sobbing mess on my office floor, my skirt ruined, my makeup smeared.

It's minutes before I realize I'm not crying anymore because of what the man did. Or even because of what he might do. I'm crying because I'm tired. After seven years, I'm so, so tired. Suddenly, it feels terribly naive that I planned to sleep here tonight.

As if there's anywhere I could be safe.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

ARSENI

I thought I'd be satisfied.

I thought all I'd needed was to see her again, to scare her, to remind her I exist.

But I'm not satisfied. If anything, I'm wilting with deprivation.

Screeching to a halt outside my house, I throw my car in park and close my eyes.

The Mustang reeks of overly greasy pizza and invades my nostrils when I take a long, slow inhale.

But it's no use. I haven't gotten Margot off my mind since I left her on the roof.

Some deep breathing isn't going to do it now.

I should've killed her. The moment I saw the lack of recognition cross her expression, I should've known killing her was the only thing to calm this rage she conjures inside of me. I could've cut my losses, pushed her from my mind for good. Forgotten her memory as easily as she's forgotten mine.

Maybe it was unfair for her that I wore a mask, but I remember so clearly her claiming my voice was one she could never forget. And yet...

Shaking my head, I grab the pizzas from the passenger seat and start across the yard to my front door, my feet kicking up dirt. There was a patch of grass around here at

some point that my roommates and I have since let die.

When I reach the door, a faint, familiar clicking sound turns my head. The neighbor kid locks eyes with me while he taps his stick against the wooden step to what I guess is his door. The house has been vacant and decrepit since I moved in. Now the homeless have claimed it.

For a moment, I just stare, my head tilting. I wait to see if he'll walk over here, but I know he won't. This is the first time he's intentionally sought my attention. If I hadn't been distracted by my thoughts when I walked up, I would've seen him on my own, my eyes naturally gravitating that way.

I walk to the end of my porch and open up the top pizza box.

I wrap one of the slices in a napkin and go to place it on the ground but then pause when I'm halfway bent.

A man's shout followed by glass breaking pulls my eyes up to the second story window of the squatter house.

When I look back at the kid, he doesn't appear to have flinched.

With a sigh, I toss the slice back inside the box and set the whole thing on the ground. I carry the remaining box inside, the smell of pot hitting me in the face the moment the door opens.

My roommates, Zinovy and Fox, lounge on the couch with an Xbox controller in each of their hands. Their bloodshot eyes are fully concentrated on the TV, but when I drop the pizza on the coffee table, Fox looks up.

“What the fuck, man? Where's the rest?”

I hike a shoulder and head for the fridge.

“How do you always fuck this shit up?” Fox asks, exasperated. “Seriously, it’s every time.”

Zinovy hums in agreement but doesn’t take his eyes off the TV.

I pull a beer from the otherwise bare fridge and use the counter to pop the cap off.

The bottle doesn’t make it to my lips before someone steps from the hallway, wiping his hands on his pants like the courtesy hand rag is too dirty for him.

It’s typical for Luka. Nothing is good enough for the prick.

My eyes narrow to slits as I clench the glass bottle, cold condensate wetting my hand.

“Hey, I’m not sharing with your guest,” Fox says around a mouthful of pizza. “That shit comes out of your portion.”

“Luka isn’t staying.” Zinovy finally tosses the remote down and gives me an apologetic look. I ignore it, moving my gaze back to Luka as he walks toward me.

I take a swig of beer and lean against the counter.

“Hey,” Luka says with a nod.

I lift a hand while raising my brows. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“We need to talk.”

We need to talk . So confident. So commanding. So predictable .

“Oh?”

He sighs, folding his arms over his chest. The confidence he oozed a moment ago begins to fade, and his hardened face cracks with a frown. “Five minutes... Please .”

“No.”

A huff blows past his lips as he drops his hands to his sides. His frown flattens. “You love this shit, don’t you? Watching me grovel. How long is it going to be before you get over yourself?”

How long will it be before I get over myself?

What level of arrogance does it take to be unable to comprehend that somebody might not want to be around you?

I shake my head. “It isn’t you I’d like to see grovel. If you want results, you should send your sister over... Or Lucia.”

His eyes pop at the mention of his wife, his face reddening. I don’t even bother smirking at the reaction. Nothing used to get to him. Now, it’s too easy.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” he says, knocking my beer out of my hand when I go to take another drink.

The bottle shatters on the kitchen tile, soaking the bottom of my shoes in beer.

I laugh when Luka grips me by my shirt and shoves me against the counter, towering over me with so much anger, a jolt of excitement puffs my chest.

I wish he’d hit me. For months, I’ve wished he’d hit me. Anything to give me a

reason to hit back.

“Do we have a problem?” Zinovy asks, walking up behind Luka. Fox hovers behind him.

“Whoops,” I whisper to Luka, my smile pulling wide. “You forgot you were in my house.”

His hand shakes with anger as he lets me go and takes a step back. He runs a hand through his hair while closing his eyes.

“Pussy.”

He doesn't react to the remark. My smile falling, I grab another beer from the fridge and head to my room. Like a fucking dog, Luka follows.

No, not like a dog. I like dogs. He's more of an ugly duckling.

Roscoe, Fox's pit bull, is laying on my bunched-up comforter when I walk in. He perks his head up, and when I cluck my tongue with false disapproval, he hops off the bed and goes to me. I set my beer down to scratch behind Roscoe's ears while Luka stands in the doorway.

“This place is disgusting,” he says. I can just see him scrunching his nose.

I hum as if I've just noticed. “Maybe If I had a sexy little Latina to pick up after me?—”

My words cut off as Luka jerks me by my shoulder and shoves my back against the wall.

For a moment, I'm certain he's going to throw a punch.

His fist is clenched and reared, his lip curled with a snarl.

I lift my chin and wait for it, beg for it, but the coward just shakes his head and lowers his fist.

"I love you," he says through gritted teeth. "You're my brother... But if you keep talking about my wife like this, I swear to God, you'll regret it."

"Too vague." I lift my chin, my voice low and mocking. "Tell me what you'll do, big man. You gonna sick your brother-in-law on me or do you think you'll finally grow a pair?"

Luka rears back and stutters out a taunting laugh. "You think I'm the one hiding behind power?" He scoffs. "You think I don't know what you're doing with Nikita?"

I show my palms. "Enlighten me, oh wise one. What have you heard?"

"Doesn't matter what I've heard. I know you. All the guy had to do to get you by the balls was tell you that you're special."

Fire flickers in my veins, heating my ears. I open my mouth, but Luka continues before I can tell him to fuck himself.

"I bet he makes you feel real important," Luka drawls. "Probably tells you how different you are. How much smarter you are than the rest of us. Meanwhile, you're such a fucking idiot you can't see he's lubing you up before he fucks you."

I nod, my lips puckering. "Nice metaphor."

“Goddamn it, Arseni. I’m serious .” Grinding his teeth, he rubs at stubble on his jaw. When he drops his hand, he sighs. “If you’re not careful, the guy is going to eat you alive. You don’t mean anything to him.”

I shrug. “Well, it’s convenient then that I don’t mean anything to anyone . What do I have to lose?”

“Your life.”

I mock gasp at the drama in his tone and flatten my hand on my chest. “Should I be scared?”

“Yes,” Luka growls. “The engineer Vitaly tried to hire just ordered a restraining order against him. I know that shit was because of you.”

“Okay.”

“Vitaly is in charge now. Get it through your boss’s head before he gets you killed. If you keep running side jobs for Nikita, it’s you who’s going to end up paying for his bullshit.”

I open my mouth but hold the words in while I study Luka’s expression. He’s angry, for sure. I obviously botched the job with the engineer.

But he also looks worried.

“Well...” I tip my head to the side. “I guess it’s a good thing I have the Pakhan’s brother-in-law to look out for me, huh?”

Luka lets out a frustrated burst of air. “There’s only so much I can do.”

My lips curve into a bitter smile, and I just stare at him. I could stab him right now, stab those self-righteous eyes right out of his skull.

The sad part is, he actually believes that we're brothers. That what he feels is love . But the thing about Luka, the thing his wife would be devastated to realize... He isn't capable of loving anyone but himself.

"I get it." I nod. "You gotta do what you gotta do to thrive, right?"

He closes his eyes and looks up at the ceiling. Always frustrated. Always disappointed. He can't bear it when someone won't do what he wants. He can't bear the idea of me no longer being under his thumb, no longer following his orders.

"This isn't about me," Luka finally says. "I've been going to bat for you. But tensions are growing between Nikita and Vitaly, and everyone knows you're the lap dog. You have to stop."

"I never started."

Luka's face flushes. "Don't?—"

"I didn't lay a hand on that engineer," I say, palm-to-bible while staring carefully into Luka's eyes. "I've never even seen his face."

Luka stares at me warily like he's searching for the truth, but we both know he's already made up his mind that I'm lying. He's only half wrong.

A minute passes before he steps back and shakes his head. After another disgruntled sigh, he turns. "I gotta go."

As he leaves my sight, I poke my head out the door. "Say hi to the missus for me!"

The front door slams moments later.

I turn and look down at Roscoe wagging his tail, his tongue hanging out of his mouth.

“Aren’t you supposed to be an attack dog?” I ask, tscking at him. I crouch to pet his head and pull my face away when he tries to lick me.

It’s funny. Luka’s presence almost always spoils my mood, but this time feels different in spite of his ominous warning. He’s finally brought me some good news.

“You know what this means, right?” I ask Roscoe, scratching behind his ears. He hits me with his paw while panting.

“It means Ms. Stevens didn’t do her job.”

My lips curve with a smile when he manages to lick my nose.

I bring his head to my chest and ruffle his side.

He laps up the attention until we both hear a mouse squeak.

Roscoe barks and snarls as he rushes to my dresser, pressing his snout to the bottom and sniffing.

He snarls and claws while the mouse squeaks louder, its fear audible between species.

I stand and watch Roscoe with interest, knowing he won’t stop until he catches his prey. He’ll go at it for hours if I let him. He’ll refuse to eat, not allow anyone in this house a wink of sleep, and irritate the squatters so much they’ll wish they could call the cops.

Maybe some would call it overly aggressive or annoying, but I get the obsession. Hell, I feel the same way.

I shut my door when Fox yells his dissatisfaction, then go to my dresser. After patting Roscoe away, I get on my belly and shine my phone's flashlight beneath. The scared little thing is trembling at the back corner.

Turning my head to the side, I reach in and grab the rodent, groaning when it bites the shit out of my hand. Standing, I grab its tail and dangle it above Roscoe. He barks and jumps, but when it's clear I'm not going to let him snatch it, he sits and wags his tail like a good little psycho.

He catches the mouse when I drop it for him, and I sit on my bed and watch the violence unfold, feeling the first bit of ease since last night when I left Margot. It's unfortunate for her that I'm a man of my word.

Maybe this time, she'll remember me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

ARSENI

Margot's bedroom light was on for hours, so long I wondered if she used it to sleep. Like she developed a fear of the dark since last night. It's a silly fear considering I'm coming in regardless.

Creeping across the roof of her house, I stop outside her darkened bedroom window, cigarette dangling from my mouth and crowbar in hand.

It's been an hour and a half since she flipped the switch, so I'm crossing my fingers that she's asleep.

Not that it matters much. I just like the idea of surprising her.

Ash from my cigarette drifts to her roof as I wedge her bedroom window open with the crowbar. I half expect her alarm system to start blaring when it gives, but there's only silence.

Once it's fully opened, I toss the smoke and creep through the window, pushing the curtain aside. My feet cautiously plant on her bedroom carpet as I search her bed.

It's dark, but in the light of the window, I can see her form bundled underneath the covers. I stand erect and roam my gaze around the room. I can't make out much, but it smells the same. I forgot what her house smelled like until now. Bitterly sweet like those candles she was always lighting.

I find one on her bedside table and pull out my lighter. She doesn't stir as I ignite the

flame and light the three wicks of the candle.

I just wanted to see clearer, but when it strikes me how romantic the low flickering flame sets the scene, I smile.

Is that why she keeps this here? For the sweet, gentle cock she takes?

My mind drifts to the fifty-some-year-old she must be dating, if their text thread is any indication.

I bet he's a real chivalrous dude, fucking her nice and slow atop rose petals with Marvin Gaye playing in the background. He looks like a big enough pussy.

I pick up the pill bottle next to the candle and read the label that says to take one for sleep. There's a glass of water half empty that makes me think she's done exactly that.

Blood rushes to my cock, and I set the bottle down with a shaky breath, full of lust.

I walk to the side of the bed she's facing and run my eyes over her sleeping form. She looks like an angel with hair she likes to wear up framing her almond face. A lock lays on her cheek, partially shielding her from me. I carefully sit on the bed and push the lock over her forehead.

Her parted lips don't twitch. Her deep breaths don't lose their rhythm.

She's out .

Licking my bottom lip, I drag the comforter down her body, letting it bunch at her ankles. I watch carefully to see if she'll stir, but she remains as still as a doll. A very sexy doll.

I unbutton my pants when my cock strains and drag my eyes down her body as I lower my zipper.

Her hands are pulled up to her neck while she lays on her side, hiding her tits from me but giving me a great view of her milky thighs.

The silk bottoms she wears hike up to her ass, even juicier looking in this position.

I wonder what that ass would look like if it was up in the air, jiggling with every thrust of my hips.

I grab my cock through my boxers and squeeze, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip. Despite my intentions to remain silent, a soft groan rumbles my chest.

Her memory comes back so clearly now that it feels strange I could go so long without thinking of her. I don't think she was as hot to me back then. Attractive, of course, and I would've fucked her every opportunity she gave me. But I don't remember my cock feeling so full, making me so weak.

I stood over her bed then just as I'm doing now, but back then, I wanted her to wake up.

I wanted her to be uneasy. That was the entire purpose.

As nice as fucking her would've been, I didn't have the same appreciation for pussy as I have now.

I was more turned on by control than I was by a sexy body, and her waking up back then to find me standing over her, the sharp gasp she'd take in when frightened, kept my cock rock solid through the night.

Now I'd prefer she stay asleep.

My fingertips lightly graze the soft skin of her leg as I trail my way up her thighs. I continue to her ass and splay my whole palm over one cheek, only allowing myself a light squeeze. She's got to be nearing forty, but she's as tight and perky as I remember.

Making a path from her ass, I run my fingers between her inner thighs and inhale sharply at the reminder of her pussy on my knife. I'd tasted it then to taunt her, but I couldn't have predicted how much I'd enjoy it. How much I'd want to taste it now that I have her again.

I flex my hands before laying her on her back with as feathery a touch as I can manage, her arms moving to rest on either side of her. She shifts in her sleep, her face scrunching slightly, before stilling.

The sight of her cleavage spilling from the top moves me up her body until my lips are hovering above a nipple.

I want this to last. I do. I know it's only a matter of time before she wakes up, but I'm enjoying the vulnerability of her sleeping form so much that I try to resist pushing too hard too fast.

But I just can't help it.

I flick my tongue against the silk top, feeling her budding nipple beneath. It hardens with each lick until it's pronounced enough that I can take it in my mouth and suck it through the shirt, wetting the fabric.

When Margot stirs, I pull back, but then go to the other nipple, my patience waning. She lets out a soft moan as I suck, squeezing her other tit with an open palm she fills.

Her hips wiggle, bringing my attention to her lower half.

I move down her body until my nose is between her legs. My eyes closed, I take a deep inhale and slowly part her thighs with a gentle grasp of her knees. I press my nose against her covered pussy while rubbing my cock.

My boxers feel so tight, they make my teeth grit, but instead of freeing myself, I just rub harder, faster. I lick between her legs, but all I taste is the material of her shorts, and it just isn't good enough.

I run my tongue along her thigh, my hand snaking its way inside her shorts until I feel the warmth of her cunt. With the first thrust of my finger, I finally push my luck.

I feel it the moment she gains consciousness. Her body tenses. Her breathing stops.

A high-pitched squeal that I think is actually a gasp fills the room as she jerks her knees up to get away, but she's trapped when I grip her thighs and squeeze.

"Help!" she screeches, trying to break free of me "Hel?—"

I clamp a hand over Margot's mouth and slide up her body, my throbbing cock pressing between her thighs. It's eager, so eager I'm not even disappointed that she's awake.

I rip my knife from my back pocket and shove her head back so her neck is exposed. She screams into my palm while uselessly writhing, and it isn't until I flick the blade open and press it to her throat that her movements ease.

She takes hurried, panicked breaths in through her nose, so fast, her tits jiggle. I latch onto one of the buds again and suck while her whimper vibrates my hand. She sounds sweet somehow. Innocent. Not at all like a woman who was once my superior.

She bucks when I move to the other nipple, her hips knocking against me, riling me up even more.

I knew I'd want her. I did. And I knew I'd fuck her.

But I did not know what these hips pressed against my cock would feel like. I didn't know the buzz that would run up my spine. If I had, I would've fucked her a long time ago.

Ripping my mouth from her tit, I remove the knife and flip her over. She barely gets out a scream before I shove her face into the pillow and shift onto my knees, my cock pressing against her ass. Her hands grasp at the sheets, her legs trying to kick under my weight.

"You're sexy when you struggle," I say, running a palm down her back before slapping her ass. She freezes for a moment before continuing her cries.

"You didn't think I'd forgotten about you, did you?" I run my hand beneath her hips and lift so she struggles onto her knees, her thighs spreading nicely with my assistance. "You didn't do what I asked."

She yells her needy reply into the pillow, probably telling me how hard she tried. How little she is to blame. I wonder if she thinks it matters.

Her pleas cease when I press the blade to her silk-clothed cunt. I don't insert it, but I'm certain she feels its sharp tip at her entrance. "Do you remember what I said I'd do if you didn't convince your buddy to change his mind?"

She trembles but keeps quiet. Like she thinks if she's a good girl she can escape my wrath. She's lucky she's right. She's really fucking lucky. My desire for her pussy is the only thing keeping me from shredding it.

“I’m going to take my hand off your head now, but you’re not going to scream. If you do, I’ll fuck you with this blade and use your blood as lube for my cock. Understood?”

Her trembling intensifies, but she doesn’t otherwise respond.

I press her face more firmly into the pillow. “ Huh ?”

She whimpers and tries to nod beneath my hand. After a few moments, I pull it away.

Her head turns to the side carefully, like she’s trying to avoid her shifting hips putting any more pressure on the knife.

“Please,” she says, her voice a soft whisper. Careful, so careful. It’s sweet. “Please don’t do this.”

“I told you I’d hurt you, Margot. Do you think I’m a liar?”

“No,” she cries. “B-but I spoke to Henry. He said he’d take care of it.”

“Well, he did take care of it.” I slowly pull the blade away so I can palm her ass without risk of blood ruining the delicious taste of her pussy. “But not in a way that gets you off the hook.”

She sobs while reaching for something off the bed. When she gets a drawer open, I laugh. “Getting the condoms for me, baby?” I snake my hand inside her shorts and stab a finger inside her. She’s slick, but she was much more into this in her sleep. “We certainly don’t need any lube.”

“I-I have money,” she says, her hand fumbling for what I’m guessing is a stash of cash. I peek inside the shadowed drawer but see nothing.

“Ten thousand dollars,” she says, straining. “It’s yours. Just please?—”

I jerk her hips into me, shifting her down the bed until she quits her struggles with the drawer. She yelps when I tear at her shorts with the knife, slicing the crotch out of the silk.

I flip the remaining material onto her back to bear her to me, spreading her folds with my fingers.

It’s too dark in here to fully appreciate it, but the slickness coating my fingertips makes my cock jump and my blood heat.

I shove my pants and boxers off my hips before pressing my cock to her entrance.

I’m just about to thrust when she distracts me with a question.

“Who are you?”

She doesn’t sob nor whine the question. Her voice is soft, scared , like the answer somehow matters.

“Do I…” She pauses when her voice wobbles. “Do I know you?”

My heart slows, the tension in my chest loosening. I don’t know why it matters so much that she recognizes me. It’s terrible news for her if she does, and it isn’t as if it changes things for me.

I turn my head and close my eyes at the thought. I’m lying. Of course it matters. It changes everything , as pathetic as it is to admit that I’m hung up on some old bitch remembering who I am.

“I don’t know,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “Do you?”

“D-did I hurt you?” she asks.

My lips thin as my arms tense. She whines when my fingers dig into her hips.

“ Please, ” she cries, her legs shuffling at the pain from my grip. “If you’re going to do this, at least let me turn on the lamp so I can see your face.”

My jaw tightening, I scoot my knees closer to her, the tip of my cock pressing in. But I don’t push. I want to. I want to convince myself that her memory doesn’t matter, but I try and fail the same as before.

I want her to see my face. I want to see the fear in her eyes as I enter her for the first time.

If she doesn’t remember me now, I’ll make damn sure she never forgets my face again.

I roll my neck as I release her. “Go ahead.”

Margot crawls forward and reaches out her hand, but instead of turning on the lamp, she lunges for the drawer. I grab her ankle and start to drag her backward but widen my eyes in shock when she spins around with a gun in her grasp.

I dive to take the weapon, jerking my head from the line of fire in case she pulls the trigger.

A blast rings in my ears before my hand can touch metal.

Page 8

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MARGOT

“F uck!”

The man catapults off the bed, but I don’t think I hit him. Not yet.

I scramble to turn on the lamp, my gun pointed the man’s way, waiting for his head to pop up.

He fucked up. He really fucked up because if he’d done his research, he’d have noticed how often I whip behind me to see if I’m followed, how many times a day I check the security feed on my porch.

He’d have noticed that I’m a woman shaking at the idea of a stranger harming me.

I’m a woman who’s been terrified for years.

For the first two years, I slept with a fire poker beside me. Then I got a gun. I’ve been to the shooting range every other weekend since.

“Show yourself, you fucking coward!” I screech, darting my eyes around like the guy turned into a spider and might crawl up my feet.

My finger is poised on the trigger when the man stands, chocolate eyes hard and hollow. I saw them clearly last night and have tried to recall where I know them from every minute since.

Now they're attached to that face. And that face is one I could never forget.

"Arseni," I whisper like his name is cursed. It might very well be.

He walks around the bed toward me, his gait confident, relaxed . His pants are at least pulled up, but he hasn't bothered to button them, so they sag around checkered boxers that shouldn't draw my eyes.

My face inflames, but every step he takes toward me presses against the immediacy of the situation, claiming all my attention.

"S-stop," I say, backing into the nightstand. "Stop or I'll shoot!"

He doesn't. I don't know if he knows I won't pull the trigger or if he just doesn't care.

I look behind me and sidestep to put distance between us, but he closes it easily and yanks the gun from my hand. I yelp and cringe as he takes my jaw and shoves me into the wall, my back thumping hard.

I try to cower, but his arm pressed against my chest prevents me from shrinking. I'm forced to look at him, to watch his hardened eyes as he tosses the gun on the other side of the room and shrugs his pants over his hips.

No, that's a lie. I could close my eyes if I wanted, if he'd let me. I just won't.

"Arseni," I whimper, my eyes stinging.

His arm easing off my chest, he pulls what's left of my night shorts down and lifts my foot to guide me out of them. When he stands back up, I flinch, as if him being face to face with me causes pain. In some ways, it does.

He takes hold of my neck, making my eyes widen and hands raise to his wrist. I'm taken back to last night when he choked me.

I feared for my life then, and I should fear for my life now, but it feels like the world has tilted on its axis.

I see everything differently through this angle, through the eyes of this boy I once knew.

I'm not afraid of him killing me. No more than he was afraid of me killing him.

Maybe that's stupid. Maybe he's become a murderer since I last saw him, but it feels impossible to separate that boy from this man.

"Say it again," he commands, his hand firmly wrapped around my neck while he lifts my leg, spreading me for him. He frees himself from his boxers and presses his bare flesh to me yet again, making me gasp.

He squeezes my throat, not to the point of cutting off oxygen but enough to get my attention. As if it could be anywhere else.

"Say it."

"S-say what?"

His hand squeezes until I'm uselessly trying to suck in breaths and clawing at his hand.

He brushes his lips against my earlobe, and the gentle act contrasts so sharply with his vicious grip that I have no idea what he's feeling.

I struggle for air, trying to kick, though my leg is still raised in his hold.

“Say my name,” he whispers, licking my earlobe before he relaxes his grip.

I suck in a gasp and lift my head toward the ceiling. His ... cock . It feels so wrong to call it that when it's on him, but no other word seems to fit in my mind. His cock nudges against my entrance as it did minutes ago when he was a different person, when this was a different world.

His hand lightly squeezes my neck, bringing me back to his command. I lower my head to stare into his eyes and breathe heavily while he rocks against me, swirling his tip inside my heat.

“This is wrong,” I whisper back, almost as a reflex. Again, I'm transported back in time. Again, I feel my face flush at the perverseness of this.

One side of his mouth quirks, a smile I remember well. It always struck me as evil. Always tipped me off to the malevolence going on in his mind.

“I know,” is all he says.

In one forceful thrust, he spears into me, filling me up until my walls clamp around him in protest. It isn't from lack of arousal.

I turn my head in shame at how smoothly my body tries to make things for him.

He takes my jaw and pulls me back to look at him while he rams me with powerful jerks of his hips.

My lips part in gasps that turn to light moans, moans I promise myself are cries.

This is wrong.

So, so wrong.

His hand smooths over my breasts and down to my neglected clit. I open my mouth to tell him to stop, but all that comes out is a whine. It feels better than it should, better than I wish it did.

I wish he'd choke me some more. That he'd flip me around and fuck me mercilessly with the lights off, that he'd degrade me, spank me, give me all the pain he came to give me. Anything but this.

"Stop," I say, breathless as he rolls his hips into me in a delicious rhythm that has me following it like a he's a twisted snake charmer. "Please stop."

"Say my name and maybe I will," he replies. It's an obvious lie, but I tell myself it's my only option. I need him to stop. I'll hate myself if he doesn't. It's a bitter injustice that I can be an unwilling participant and yet so damn guilty.

"Arseni," I say, lust swirling in each syllable like it's the dirty word he wants it to be.

His mouth opens against my ear, hot breaths pelting me between his kisses as he rubs me faster. I throw my head back as his thrusts come quicker, the force of them knocking my ass against the wall.

"Arseni," I moan, my hands wrapping around his neck. I'm not even lying to myself this time. His name slips off my tongue in a needy plea, and I don't even know what I'm asking for anymore.

He grips my ass and lifts me into his arms, his lips devouring my neck while he carries me to the bed. I feel light in his arms, feel strength that reminds me he's a

man. And that I should fear him.

He drops me on the bed then flips me over before hauling me up onto my knees. There's no caress when he impales me, only a cold, brutal plunge of his hips that makes me grip the comforter.

I cry out as his hand connects with my backside in a slap that ends with a squeeze. His hand finds my breasts next, pawing at me while he fucks me with an intensity I've never felt. An intensity I somehow knew I was lacking. If another man was inside me, it would be nice. Great, even.

But not now. Not like this and certainly not with him.

"Stop," I grind with far more conviction than before when he spanks me, my body cringing at the sting his palm leaves. I try to crawl forward, but he holds my hips steady to lock me in place.

"Arseni, stop, please. I don't want this."

His fingers weave through my hair to yank me upright. He pulls my back against his chest while his cock grinds inside of me.

"I want you to listen carefully, Margot. Try to pay attention." I close my eyes as he pinches my nipple. He lets go of my hair to wrap his arm around my throat, pinning me to him. When he speaks next, he does so with such a lack of compassion that I wince at his tone.

"I do not give a fuck what you want. This cunt..." His hand burns its way down until it's between my legs.

He spreads my hood to tap his finger directly against my clit.

I arch my hips, trying to get away but wind up increasing the pressure.

“This cunt is mine . From this moment forward, every time your striped-suit wearing pussy of a boyfriend touches you, you’re going to think of me.

Every time you close your eyes in this bed, you’re going to wonder if I’ll wake you up with my finger inside you.

” His teeth graze my ear, sending a shiver across my neck. My shoulders bunch in response.

“One day you might forget about me, but just know... That’s the day I’ll be back.” His teeth bite down on my earlobe, pain mixing with the unwanted pleasure. His words are such an ominous promise spoken with enough certainty that I believe them.

“You’re a fucking psychopath,” I say just before he shoves me forward. I land on my elbows and moan as he yanks my hips into him.

“Yeah.” His words are breathy as he fucks me faster. “But your pussy doesn’t care.”

I clamp my mouth and eyes shut while pulling the comforter into tight fists, not quite wound with anger, but with the tension in my core.

Arseni’s finger continues its assault on my clit while his cock strokes my G spot, and it all becomes too much.

Pressure builds until I come undone around his length, my back arching while I cry out like the whore he wants to make me.

His erratic breathing halts with a single groan as he gives one last hard thrust that opens a valve to my shame. I feel his cum spill out of me as he pulls away, the sound

of his zipper somehow degrading.

I crawl forward on the bed before sitting up and pulling the comforter over my chest. I don't look at him, but I can feel his eyes on me. I don't want to imagine what he's thinking.

When the doorbell rings, I tense but don't dare get up. I wait for the air in the room to shift, for fearful tension to spoil his victory. The thought of it gives me strength to peek up at him. He doesn't appear phased.

"That'll be the cops," he says, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

He plucks one in his mouth while staring at me.

"They'll ask about gunfire one of your nosy neighbors called in, and you'll tell them the volume on your TV may have been too loud.

Otherwise, you don't have a clue what they're talking about. "

He flicks his lighter and puts the flame to the end of the cigarette. When it's lit, he takes an inhale and blows it toward me. He plucks another smoke from the pack and tosses it on the bed.

"See you around, Mommy." My mouth opens in horror while I just gape at him, but all he does is smirk and go to the window. He disappears without another word.

The doorbell rings again, and while I pull on my robe, my face burns so hot I consider splashing cold water on it. But there's no time. I go downstairs to find two police officers at my door, neither looking especially concerned.

I tell them exactly what Arseni directed me to. Even if I was brave enough to admit

what he'd done, the police would be the last people I'd confide in. Maybe Arseni knows that, but my shame is only part of the reason.

Arseni isn't the only predator watching. And if he knew what went on...

He'd make sure to remind me I was already claimed.

ARSENI

The smell of lemon-scented cleaner hits me like a punch to the face when I step through the front door of Nikita's eight-bedroom monstrosity. I hold the door open for him and breathe through my mouth.

As I follow him into the foyer, my shoes squeak on the freshly mopped floor. Nikita comes to a standstill, and the sound of scrubbing takes the place of my shoes when they silence.

I follow Nikita's gaze to the frail, old woman on her hands and knees scrubbing a baseboard. The mop bucket with who knows how much cleaner in it sits beside her. The sight makes me think of Cinderella for some reason. If Nikita is the stepmother, he takes things to a new extreme.

"How's your first day, Estelle?"

The woman looks up from the baseboard. Her leathery face looks worn and tired, but that could be normal for her. I doubt it, though. Nikita is vicious when it comes to his help.

"Fantastic, Mr. Petrov. I'm just finishing up." She gives a big, decaying-toothed grin that looks so nervous I feel bad for her. She's gotta be the twentieth maid I've seen at his house, which is saying a lot considering I don't pay close attention to these things.

Nikita walks to a glass side table and leans down to inspect it, his face hovering above the glass. He runs a finger across it then peers down at his fingertip. His eyes

close with a sigh.

“That’ll be all, Estelle,” Nikita says as he stands.

She nods and gets to her feet. After dusting herself off, she looks up with that nervous smile still plastered. Her smile makes me frown. “Thank you, sir. I’ll be back bright and early tomorrow.”

I turn my head to Nikita and watch his eyes narrow. “Are you as deaf as you are blind?”

Her face sinks as her mouth opens and closes.

“I said you’re fired . Get the fuck out of my house.”

The mop falls from the bucket and clacks on the floor after the woman bumps into it, her eyes wide with what I’m guessing is confusion. She goes to pick up the mop.

“ Now .”

Startling, she abandons the mop and hurries toward the front door, not daring to meet either of our eyes on the way out.

Nikita shakes his head when the front door shuts and sniffs. “It smells filthy in here.”

“Really?” I lift my chin like I’m trying to smell it, but I’m just being a smart ass. “I think it smells like someone polished my nose with pine sol.”

Nikita glares at me without saying a word. He knows I get his game with the maids. Or the gardeners. Or really every person on his staff who he deems unimportant.

Once upon a time, Nikita was Pakhan—the ‘boss’ of the Bratva—and could take out his frustrations on whomever he wanted.

Now that his nephew kicked him aside, he’s under strict orders not to harm anyone with Russian blood running through their body.

The guy’s pretty fucking murderous, so his sadism has to have some outlet.

As long as it isn’t me, it’s tolerable.

“Don’t you live in a barn?” he asks with zero humor in his tone.

I tip my head. “I mean it’s a trailer, but?—”

“ Exactly .”

The single word is a bite that conveys the message he’s been sending me all day. Shut the fuck up.

I nod and take care not to allow amusement to curve my lips.

He’s overly crabby today. All he’s had me do was drive him to a meeting at some shady bar where he made me wait in the car.

Normally, I go in with him, he introduces me, talks as if I’m of equal stature to him...

He isn’t always a dick, but when he is, he's insufferable.

But not today. Today I’m in an especially good mood.

When last night’s memory plays in my mind, I blink it away before I do something

stupid like bulge through my pants. I can't even imagine how awkward that would be.

The front door opens and slams shut, both our gazes drawing to it. I expect it to be the former maid, but this woman is way too fiery hot to be her. I can tell that before Mila's pissed off face registers.

"Where the hell were you today?" she asks Nikita as she storms up to us.

"Please, come in." Nikita spreads his arms in a welcoming gesture. "Make yourself at home."

"We were expecting you," she scowls, eyes wide with rage.

Her hands are clenched into fists which are more destructive than you would imagine.

For all my time spent with Luka, I never got to know his sister well, but one thing I know for certain is she can be deadly when she wants to be.

Manipulative. Trained to seduce from a young age.

Being a Pakhan's wife wasn't just her desire, it was her destiny. And I don't mean that as a compliment.

"Was that today?" Nikita mock frowns like he's puzzled.

"We hold our lieutenant meetings at the same time every week. Do not play stupid."

"Mila," Nikita drags out her name. "I would never play stupid with you. You're too savvy to fool."

Her face reddens while he gestures to the mop bucket and goes on. "Honestly, things

have been so busy here, I forgot what day it was. I've been scrubbing the floors since sunrise."

"You've never cleaned a floor in your life," she snaps with her lip curled. She only means it as an insult. No one here believes he'd ever use chores as an excuse.

"That's because I always had you , my love." A savage smile pulls one side of Nikita's lips. "I have to tell you, Mila, now that I'm just a bachelor on my own, I see all the little things you did for me. I wish?—"

She cuts him off with a diamond-clad hand across his cheek, the smack echoing in the vast foyer.

When she bows up to him—her neck craned to look up—her eyes are crazed with so much hatred, I wonder how Nikita doesn't flinch.

He looks bored staring into her eyes, but I imagine that's so she can't see the vengeful thoughts swirling.

He would slit her throat and fuck the gap if he could.

Remember when I said Mila was destined to be a Pakhan's wife? Guess whose dick she was on before Vitaly took over? The woman would blow the president if she felt he could give her more power than her husband.

"Don't you ever bring up the past again." Her voice holds so much anger, it quakes.

Nikita leans closer to her until she must feel his whisper on her nose. " Yes, Mrs. Petrov. "

With that, she steps back, her arms wrapping across her chest like she's suddenly

uncomfortable. She turns to me with a glare and looks me up and down. Her cherry lip curled, she shakes her head. “I’m so glad my brother isn’t friends with you anymore.”

I rear my head back, but Mila turns and marches out before I can respond. When the sound of the slamming door dissipates, I turn to Nikita. “What the fuck did I do?”

Nikita shakes his head in disgust and starts to lead me toward his office, his limp less pronounced. I wonder if he’s walking painfully on purpose just to avoid feeling weak.

“They don’t appreciate us.” He sighs. “To them, you’re nothing but Luka’s charity case. They aren’t capable of seeing your worth beyond that. Try not to read into what they say.”

I follow Nikita into his office and sit down in one of the plush, purple chairs. I’m always in a hurry to sit when I’m around him, mindful of his prideful tendencies, so I’m surprised when he continues to stand.

“I want to apologize for earlier.” He leans against his desk and taps the cane on the floor. “I should’ve told you what we were doing today, but I have this...” He twirls a hand. “Fear, I suppose. I don’t want our business with the Armenians to get back to Vitaly. They have history.”

Armenians?

My mind jumps over it. I don’t really give a shit what he was doing.

“You’re afraid I would rat you out?”

Nikita tips his head back and forth.

“Mr. Petrov, I?—”

“I don’t like the bond you have with Luka,” he says, his voice chilled.

I half expect his breath to fog. “The whole family is a snake pit... I’m not saying you would ever intentionally do something, but I’m concerned that he’s capable of manipulating you.

Despite what the new leadership might think, our work is very important for the Bratva.

I can’t have anything compromising our efforts. ”

I shake my head. “I have nothing to do with Luka. Trust me, I hate them as much as you do.”

“So you haven’t spoken to him recently?” Nikita asks with his head tilted. Despite his naive tone, I can see the test in his eyes. He knows. I don’t know how he knows, but he knows.

“He came to my house yesterday because he suspected I intimidated that engineer. The guy filed a restraining order against Vitaly... I meant to tell you sooner.”

“Which part?” Nikita’s tapping cane finally pauses. He scoots to sit on the desk and places the cane in his lap.

“The job I did with the engineer. Obviously, I messed up, and?—”

“I could not possibly care less about that. I know you do good work. Whatever happened is on Vitaly’s tame reputation, not on you.”

My eyebrows slowly pinch with confusion.

Nikita squeezes the bridge of his nose like I'm just not getting something.

"I don't want to control you, son. In the past, I've made mistakes, and it's cost me the betrayal of more than one of my closest allies.

I want you to understand that you're not just a valued soldier.

You're a valued friend. But if we're going to continue working together, I need to know you aren't communicating with my rivals. "

I shift in the seat, taking a pause before answering.

"I won't speak to Luka anymore."

Nikita smiles, finally satisfied. " Thank you . Now, tell me about what happened with the engineer. Could he have IDed you? I'm not upset, but I'd like to make sure there's reasonable doubt that you were the one who attacked him. There's no sense in denying what the snakes can prove."

"Uh..." I take hold of the arm rests, lightly gliding my thumbs over the smooth edges. "No, he couldn't ID me."

Nikita just stares at me a moment like he knows there's more I'm not saying. "You're positive?"

I nod. "He was preoccupied with a coworker when I found him, but I ran into one of his colleagues. I was obviously very wrong in my assessment, but I thought threatening her to convince the engineer would be just as successful. Plus, I thought it'd be harder to connect us to him."

“ Her ?” His eyes roam me like he can see my motive written in my posture. “His colleague was a woman?”

I open my mouth then settle on a nod.

It was worth it. After last night, I couldn't question if it was worth it. But it's coming back to bite me in the ass.

“Could she ID you?”

I don't respond right away, instead rolling my tongue across my teeth and dropping my eyes to the golden serpent making up his cane handle.

Nikita rubs his temples with his eyes closed like he has a headache. His groan tells me my non-answer is enough.

He drops his hand. “Kill her.”

I don't know why. I really don't know why. But my heart jumps at the command. I uncurl my hands when I notice how tightly I'm clutching the chair and rest my palms on my lap.

“She won't be a problem, sir. I wouldn't have left her alive otherwise.”

“Are you ... arguing with me?” He pins me with a stare so intense, I get a taste of what it was like to be one of his soldiers before he had his power removed. For a split second, before I remember we're partners, I feel glad for the restrictions placed on him. He couldn't kill me if he wanted to.

But he doesn't want to. Like I said, we're partners. At the very least, I'm important to him.

I open and close my mouth before lifting a palm and finally getting something out. “I don’t mean to, sir. It’s just that she’s someone from my past, so I know her well enough to say she isn’t going to talk.”

“Who is she?”

Again, I hesitate but no longer from uncertainty. Now, I’m just embarrassed.

“My old foster mother.”

He doesn’t make any kind of expression, instead choosing to study me like one would a fine painting.

“I see...” He nods, then looks up at the ceiling like he’s contemplating something.

“Kill her.”

Kill her .

The image of Margot’s corpse flashes in my mind, and for some reason, I cringe. I’ve killed so many people, it’s difficult to count, but still, I feel hesitant.

“Is that a problem?” Nikita asks.

Is it?

I think of her with the gun, so ready to fire until she saw my face.

After a breath, I shake my head. “Of course not, sir. I’m sorry. I’ve just been having a bit of fun with her, if I’m honest.”

“Fun ?” He raises a brow.

Fun. Therapy. What's the difference? Either way, I'm lighter.

I planned to walk away and leave her in my past after last night, but the idea of the door to her closing forever... I don't like it. At all.

Is there another way?

I feel my eyes widen at an idea that strikes like lightning shooting through my body. If Nikita sees the lightbulb above my head, he doesn't say, just waits patiently.

"Very." I dip my chin. "I realize I said she was my foster mother, but she's actually not that much older. And quite beautiful. She'd make an excellent addition to your parties."

Nikita's eyes start to narrow. "You want to bring her here?"

I splay a hand and peer away like I'm debating it, but inside, I'm buzzing with excitement.

Why the fuck did I not think of this before?

"You aren't allowed to have the Bratva's whores here, right?" I pause only a moment before continuing. "Is there a rule saying you can't take one of your own?"

He puffs with a laugh. "I don't have that kind of patience."

"Right, but I do... I could train her for you. I'm here all the time as it is. We could keep her in the basement until she's ready."

He blinks at me.

“I mean, think about it, how many maids do you go through per week? That has to be grueling. Even if you just used her to clean , she’d come in handy.”

“She’d also be kidnapped, and I don’t keep any guards here. What happens when she simply runs away?”

“Well, she’ll be trained before she’s left alone upstairs. But if she still runs away, we’ll kill her. She has no living relatives, and if things have stayed the same all these years, she’s a hermit. No one will come for her.”

Nikita’s fingers drum on his cane while he studies me. Eventually, he gives me a tight-lipped smile. “Okay, Arseni. If you want to keep a pet here for a bit, I’ll allow it.”

I release a full breath for the first time in minutes and lean back in the chair, my muscles suddenly relaxed.

“Just don’t get attached,” he says before starting on another topic.

I let him trail off, nodding and throwing a reply out when necessary. But I’m hardly paying attention. My mind is on her and all the fun we’re about to have.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

MARGOT

It only fogs in Las Vegas one or two times a year, but it figures that tonight would be one of those nights.

Walking along the paved trail of the park, I pull my cardigan across my chest with one hand while clenching the envelope with the other.

The tennis court lights have been cut off, so only the lamp posts sprouted along the walkway light my way.

I don't need them. I've marched this same path enough times that I could probably do it blindfolded if I wasn't so terrified to close my eyes.

My phone buzzing in my back pocket makes me trip on my shoe, but I continue on as if I don't notice it. It's him. It's always him.

If I was less of a coward, I might search for him in the foggy shadows, but I know if I saw him, I'd scream. Or do something terribly stupid like run.

Breaking off the path, I start toward the picnic table he chose five years ago for occasions like this. My pace increases with each inch I move out of the light, but I don't know why the trail makes me feel any safer. It's an illusion. A security blanket. False sanctuary.

When I get to the table, I drop to one knee and pull the tape from my cardigan's pocket. My hands shaking, I place the envelope beneath the table and hurry to pull

tape across it. Once it's held in place, I start back toward the trail, resisting the urge to look around.

I make it halfway to the parking lot before a whistled tune cuts through the buzzing of the beetles around the lamp bulbs.

My intellect says to walk faster, but my feet abruptly come to a stop and wobble like they've been given a tranquilizer.

Hairs raise on the back of my neck as I slowly turn my head to look over my shoulder.

Thirty yards or so away, a man walks toward me with his hands in his hoodie pocket.

He whistles a jingle so lightheartedly, I know it couldn't be him .

He's always stiff. Always serious. And for the most part, he follows the rules. He agreed long ago not to approach me.

I turn around and start walking again, convincing myself it's just a guy doing some late-night walking. It isn't crazy for joggers to be out here, even as late as 11PM. But I can't help but think of Arseni. Of the swagger in his walk. The hoodie he wore the night he came to my office.

I pick up my pace while the whistling continues behind me. Once it stops, I look over my shoulder, hoping to see the guy falling behind, but he isn't even there.

I brake.

The lighted path suddenly makes me feel exposed as I search for the man. The fog makes the shadows too hazy to make much out, but I don't have to wait long. His

voice sounds to my left, just a little ways down off the path.

“Margot,” the man sings out, his voice playfully menacing.

Arseni .

It must be Arseni.

“I’m not afraid of you!” I yell into the fog. I’m not sure if it’s a brave or stupid thing to do, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.

Laughter gives away the man’s location as he approaches from the dark. I force myself to stand strong, my phone in my back pocket feeling bulkier than it did before.

I could call the police.

I should call the police.

But then...

My eyes pop as I seek out a second figure. Him .

What will he do if he sees Arseni approach me?

Would he kill him?

I stand still and try to decide if I hope it happens. It would take care of my Arseni problem for good...

“Get the hell out of here, Arseni,” I say, nearly whisper at the black form mere yards from me, hiding just beyond the light of the lamp. I don’t know who I’m protecting

from his wrath, me or Arseni.

The man doesn't say anything, just stands there ominously until I think I've made a grave mistake.

I start to back away on the trail, never taking my eyes off the mysterious figure.

It isn't him . It can't be him. He doesn't break the rules.

But if it isn't Arseni, then who else could it be?

"Wh-what are you doing?" I ask as I slowly backpedal. Swallowing, I make my voice more assertive. "You aren't supposed to show yourself. You swore to me you wouldn't."

I stumble as the man begins to approach me, still keeping to the side of the trail.

When he pauses again, he speaks so ominously, I startle.

"It's time to run, Margot."

My eyes popping wide, I spin and break into a sprint toward the parking lot. My lungs burn as my legs soar over the pavement, panicked breaths drowning out the sounds around me. I think. I don't hear him, but I don't dare waste a moment to turn around.

I barely slow down to rip my keys from my pocket as I reach my car. A frightened cry escapes as I jab the unlock button on the fob, flashing lights my greatest comfort.

I'm moving too fast to control my momentum when I make it, so I wind up slamming my palm on the driver side door to stop, nearly cutting myself on the jagged shards of

glass sticking from my newly busted window. I give it zero attention while I jump into my car and fumble with the keys.

I jab at the ignition with shaky hands I can't get control of and curse when I drop the keys altogether. As I reach for the floorboard, my head jerks to look where I came from. I expect the man to appear at my window, but he isn't there, and I don't hear him.

When I have the keys in my grasp, I pull in what I'm hoping will be a steadying breath but is more of a stuttered sob. I fit the key into the ignition and cry as the car roars to life.

My hand is on the shifter when a gloved hand covers my mouth and yanks me back against the seat. I instinctively slam on the gas pedal and try to scream, but the car whirs in park. Something sharp presses to my throat when I go to move the shifter.

I meet Arseni's gaze in the rearview mirror, his crooked lips an inch from my ear.

"Gotcha, Mommy."

I cry against his leather-clad palm while the hooded man walks up. He throws the hood off his head and leans down to peer inside the car, his reddish hair messed and lopsided grin mocking me.

He holds up the envelope. "What are you, a fucking drug dealer?"

"What is it?" Arseni asks.

"Two thousand in cash. She taped it underneath one of the tables."

My eyes lock onto the envelope as tears spring to my eyes. I try to fight and kick, in

spite of the knife, but the man just reaches in to turn the car off and looks around to make sure all is well.

“I’m keeping it,” he says to Arseni. “Consider it my fee.”

No! I try to screech through the glove, but Arseni’s hold is too tight.

“Good. Buy your own damn pizza.”

The man chuckles while something pinches my neck. My head starts to feel heavy, my body slumping against Arseni’s hold.

The last thought I have before I fall asleep is that we aren’t alone.

He’s here. And he saw everything.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

ARSENI

I wait an hour after Margot's arrival to go to her.

For the first thirty minutes she was awake, she was crazed. The volume on my phone's surveillance feed was kept off to avoid annoying Nikita, but I didn't need it to enjoy her screams. Her mouth opened so wide, I could picture her throat shredding.

Her body jerked every time she stomped far enough to lose all slack from the chain on her ankle, but it didn't seem to slow her down.

It wasn't until ten minutes ago that she sat down on the bare mattress, hugging her knees.

She ducked her face out of view from the camera and has been shaking with sobs ever since.

As I open the basement door, a chill climbs on top of me like the ghosts of Nikita's victims are trying to escape their dreary confines. The cold temperature isn't by design, but it's a nice coincidence that the chamber of horrors is frigid in winter.

Margot appears from her spot on the mattress when I take the last step, her head peeking up from her knees. She says nothing as I approach, just stares at me with bugging eyes that hold her uncertainty.

The mattress lies on the floor without a frame, so I tower over her when I'm a foot away. There are few things kept in this room, and I only brought the mattress down

this morning, just for her. I wonder if she'll be grateful. Eventually.

I gesture to the bed. "Lie down. Legs spread wide."

Her arms lengthen around her knees as she lowers her shoulders. "Why are you doing this?"

"Lie down."

"No." Her voice is soft at first. Unsure. But then bravery washes over her, pinching her lips and pushing her to her feet. "No. If you don't take me home right now, I don't give a shit how badly you think I wronged you, I'm calling the police."

I'm calling the police.

I mimic her bold tone in my mind while ensuring I keep my lips stiff. She is so fucking precious right now. So scared. I'm a bastard, but I'm certain I'll enjoy every moment of her being here.

Staring her down, I say nothing. And I won't until she does what I want.

Her lip quivers ever so slightly until she scrunches her face more, like she's fighting her fear.

She cracks her palm across my cheek once, then goes to do it again but struggles when I catch her wrist. She pants and shoves at my chest until I set her free, sending her stumbling into the mattress.

She waves her hands to balance herself while hunched over, then she steps onto the bed and puts several feet between us.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” she asks, her bravado cracking. “I didn’t do anything to you, you psychopath!”

“I already told you what I want.”

Her eyes widen as her shoulders pull back. “Fuck you! You fucking pervert!”

She bounces on her toes like she’s thinking of attacking me. I wish she would. I almost want to goad her.

But I need to teach the most basic lesson she’ll ever learn here. Do what the fuck I say.

I turn and start toward the work bench I keep a sledgehammer beside. It’s what I like to use first—to take out the knees—so I grab it out of habit. The steam whistling from Margot’s ears puffs like chilly air as I walk toward her with the tool slung over my shoulder.

“What are you doing?” she asks, the chain rattling with her retreat. “Arseni, stop.”

I do, but only because the tip of my sneaker hits the bed. I curl a finger to beckon her to me, but unsurprisingly, she doesn’t move.

When I bring the sledgehammer off my shoulder and step onto the springy bed, Margot holds up her hands. “Wait,” she cries, bowing with her head turned. “Please, just wait.”

She lowers into a crawl and flips to her back on the mattress. Her eyes focus on the ceiling as she spreads her legs, the soft material of her skirt draping the gap between her thighs.

“Wider.”

She closes her eyes as she gasps. Her legs stiffly part as she takes in breaths that make her whole chest tremble.

She’s beautiful like this—raw and vulnerable.

Escaped hairs from her ponytail stand in wild disarray, some sticking to her sweaty forehead.

Her open cardigan reveals a wrinkled white blouse with a button loose.

She’s wearing a looser fitting skirt today instead of her usual pencil skirt, and I’m not sure whether or not I’m disappointed.

“Good girl.” I return the sledgehammer back to its place by the bench. Margot’s eyes must open because she whimpers as I pull off my shirt while strolling back. I toss it on the bed. “You’re such a potty mouth, though. I don’t remember ever hearing you curse.”

Her eyes are clenched shut again, but she twitches at the sound of my belt jingling. I like it enough that I take my time with my zipper, watching her pretty face closely.

“My boss isn’t going to like that.”

Her body jerks as she tenses. She peels her eyes open as I kneel to the bed and shift between her legs. I lay my chest on top of her until we’re face to face.

“Your boss?”

I nod slowly, savoring the fear that enters her eyes. “You didn’t do the job I told you

to. Remember?”

She lifts her chest into me with a breath. “I?—”

I clamp my hand over her mouth and shiver when she whines. “Don’t protest. I already tried to talk him out of this. What’s done is done.”

She wiggles beneath me while her blue eyes plea on her behalf. They’re blue now, but they shift to green sometimes. I’ve never seen eyes so alluring.

“You’re going to be his whore,” I say, pressing my hand more firmly against her mouth. “But first, you’re going to be mine. My job is to break you in, and if you’re very, very nice to me, I might hurt you less. My boss won’t be so kind.”

I press my mouth to her ear while removing my hand. She sucks in a deep breath and places her palms against my chest like she’s going to shove me away.

“He’s watching us right now,” I whisper, my voice urgent as if this is some secret between us. “He wants to know how well you behave. If you fight me, I’ll have to hurt you... Please don’t make me do that.”

Seconds pass while I wait for her to calculate her next move.

Her hands against my chest lower to the bed. When I pull away from her ear, she peers up at me with shining eyes that beg me to save her. As if I ever would. As if anything I’m saying is anything more than bullshit.

When I came down here, Nikita was busy terrorizing the new maid. It’s highly doubtful he gives a shit about any of this. I only wanted to tease Margot in my own way, have an inside joke with myself. Maybe I’m a sadist, I don’t know.

But when my name touches her lips, said with such a soft cadence, my shoulders relax, drooping me over her. I press my forehead to hers before reaching to the waistband of my boxers to free my demanding cock.

When I press my lips to hers, she tenses like she's repulsed. Like she's going to fight this the whole way. I can't tell if I mind it.

I shrug my boxers over my hips then lift her skirt to her stomach.

"Good girl," I whisper, pressing my nose against her neck while snaking my hand between her legs. I slip beneath her panties and rub her clit until she relaxes, her arms moving to lightly squeeze my shoulders.

"Arseni..."

Two of my fingers enter her at the sound of my name while I inhale the scent of her perfume. "That's perfect. Just like that."

"Please don't do this. Just—just fake it." She whispers this like she doesn't want the mic to pick up her words. The woman has a master's from Berkeley but is so adorably gullible.

"I can't fake it forever," I whisper back.

Her arms around my shoulders hug when I give her a forceful thrust of my fingers. She whines like she doesn't like it, but the moisture on my hand says otherwise. "This is wrong."

"I know," I increase my pace, making her eyes clench shut while her legs try to close. But her hips ? Her hips lift for me. "I'm a bad, bad man."

“You’re practically a child .”

My brow furrows at that. It must be an insult, some comment about my maturity. Nothing else would make sense.

But did I hear guilt in her voice?

When I press my thumb to her clit and rub while fingering her, she arches her back, her pink lips parting. She likes this. She wants this.

I circle my thumb around her clit while watching her face twist with ecstasy, her lips pursing with a moan. My neck warms where her heated breaths hit, and the sensation makes my cock jump. It fills with so much blood, I pull my hand from Margot’s pussy to grasp it on command.

Precum oozes from the tip as I squeeze and rub it on her inner thigh.

Her soft skin feels so good against my cock, I think I could get off just from this.

I could slide myself against her thighs as if I’m pretending just like she wants.

Just like she’s begged . I could play the part of the hero so well I’d almost believe it myself. I almost want to.

But I don’t.

I’m too much of a villain.

Pulling Margot’s panties to the side, I push into her slick cunt that gives me such a warm welcoming, it makes me groan. She gasps and lets her arms loosen until her fingers are digging into my shoulder blades.

“See?” I say, my voice breathy as I begin to roll my hips. “This isn’t so bad.”

“Arseni,” she whines in frustration, but she still doesn’t open her eyes. She clenches them, her cheeks pinching like she’s in pain. But I know she isn’t in pain. She’s undulating beneath me like a little whore.

“Why are you fighting this?” I place both hands on either side of her head while I jerk inside of her, hard, just to hear her moan. Like I’m somehow fooling myself, living out some delusion that she wants me. I’ve wanted it badly before. Maybe I can’t see past that.

Margot turns her head away from me but opens her mouth wide with a guttural moan.

Nope, I’m seeing clearly.

I fuck her harder. Faster. Coming alive at the chain around her ankle clacking to my beat, swaying against my hamstring.

I make a mental note to get a headboard just so I can hear it bang against the wall the next time I fuck.

The rhythm has me thrusting so intensely, my forehead beads with sweat and Margot’s underwear chafes my cock.

I grip the lacy things and rip them with so much passion, it finally makes Margot open her eyes.

She searches me like she’s trying to gauge if I’m angry or if I’m just an animal. I end her curiosity with a brutal kiss to her lips, as brutal as my thrusts. I think for certain she’ll try to pull away, but she just stays still, her lips loose, her jaw lax.

I stroke her bottom lip with my tongue as a test, and when she doesn't protest, I push inside her mouth to taste the sweetness of her tongue. She doesn't meet me there. She doesn't kiss me back. But she doesn't fight me either.

Her lips vibrate my mouth with a mewl as I put my hand between us to assault her clit. She's close. I can feel it in her legs embracing my waist, the twitching of her hips, the shudder she breathes into my mouth.

I rip my lips away to put all my attention on rubbing her to Heaven, even after bringing her down to Hell.

I can't explain why I want it so bad. Maybe to prove something to myself.

Prove what, I don't know. All I know is when Margot's chin tips back with a loud, unleashed moan, I feel like I'm floating with her.

Both my hands claw at the mattress as I fuck like I'm nothing but a beast—sweat dripping, arms quivering, grunts wobbling up my throat.

When I come, it feels like every bit of life I have in me sinks into Margot's swollen pussy. I barely keep myself from collapsing on top of her.

I'm exhausted. Spent. And still, I can see when I roll off of her that the porn star I just fucked is long gone. I can feel the tense energy she's putting off even without touching her.

She rolls away from me and curls into herself, little sobs tumbling out her mouth a few moments later.

I stand from the bed on tired legs and work to get my clothes back on. I don't look at Margot as I do. I'm not sure why the sound of her crying bothers me, but right now,

it's unsettling. Maybe even annoying.

"You're all right, Mommy," I say, pulling on my shirt. Her crying ceases as she tightens. I think she's afraid until her voice, quaking with anger, fills my ears.

"Don't fucking call me that."

I tilt my head at her, but I'm too tired to even get any joy out of her displeasure. Wiping sweat off my forehead, I head upstairs. I listen in vain for the sound of her crying as I walk.

When I finish with a shower and flop on the bed in Nikita's guest room, I pull out my phone to watch the surveillance.

I turn up the volume all the way and listen, but I can see from Margot's still face that she isn't crying. She's sitting on the bed with her arms wrapped around her knees, exactly how I found her.

I'm beat. Truly bone tired.

And still, my cock hardens.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

MARGOT

I t's hard to know how long Arseni is gone, but when the door to this hell opens, it doesn't feel like long enough.

I lie facing the wall with my eyes closed as if I have any shot at sleeping. As if every moment I've spent down here hasn't made me tense with either dread or shame. I'm unsure which emotion has been worse.

My tormentor's steps hitting the stairs cause my ears to thump, and when he touches ground and walks this way, I pull my knees up to curl into myself. Arseni's cruelty feels like too much right now. My body feels spent and assaulted, my mind overwhelmed.

And yet, Arseni still isn't my greatest worry. No matter how bad things get for me down here, it isn't as bad as what will happen if He flies into a rage. He isn't getting his money. Someone else has his girl.

He's bound to retaliate.

When something crashes on the floor behind me, I flinch.

"I forgot to bring you this," Arseni says in a voice so apathetic, I will him to disappear. It figures when the sound of his footsteps never comes.

I force my rigid body into a sitting position before turning to see the object Arseni threw on the ground. It's just an empty five-gallon bucket, tipped carelessly on its

side.

I narrow my eyes at it and don't look at Arseni when I speak. I don't want to see his face. "What's it for?"

"What do you think it's for?" His cold voice wraps around me in a vice that urges me to shrink away, but I resist. I study the bucket, searching for meaning, and when I find it, my stomach turns.

It's a fucking toilet.

Arseni begins to walk away, off to terrorize another soul I presume. I move my eyes to his back and wish I could stab his spine. Paralyze him the way he paralyzes me. Torture him while he's immobile.

But I couldn't even if it was possible. I need him.

"Wait." The word sticks in my throat like even my vocal cords object to his presence.

He pauses and looks back at me. His face is blank, but I bet he's pleased with himself. I bet he wants me to grovel. It makes me hate him.

"Please..."

His head tilts while he studies me for several moments, then he walks my way. He stops just in front of the bed and continues to stare.

I look down at my knees. "I have to ask you for something... If you give it to me, I'll do anything you say. No matter what."

There's a delay while he thinks.

“What is it?”

Closing my eyes, I count to three, then I open them to peer up at Arseni’s face, handsome but devoid of feeling. “I need you to take the money your friend stole back to the picnic table at the park.”

His lips curve upward while his brows bunch. “What?”

“Somebody is counting on that money. It’s vital that?—”

“Who?”

Who?

I swallow and resist the urge to look away, even as shame swarms me. “It isn’t important.”

“Then the cash isn’t important.”

“Yes, it... Arseni, please, I’m begging you.” I shift onto my knees and try not to hate myself as I clasp my hands together. “Please. Please . Just put the money back. I will do anything you say. I swear to you.”

His grin starts to slip. Maybe he doesn’t like the groveling as much as I thought.

When his arms cross over his chest, my teary, desperate eyes blur his image.

“Who are you afraid of?” he asks, genuine curiosity raising his pitch. “What could possibly be more pressing than your current situation?”

My mouth stays shut, though the answer comes immediately. I can’t tell him. I can’t

tell anyone the seriousness of this situation.

Arseni wants to hurt my body. He wants to get off on my pain, embarrassment, and shame. He can destroy my body if he chooses.

But Him ? He will destroy my very existence. He'll ensure everyone I've ever known will go to their grave scorning my name.

When Arseni walks away, my tongue aches from biting it. I force my jaw to open and prepare to say out loud for the very first time what I'm afraid of.

"I have a stalker."

Arseni stops but doesn't turn around.

"He—he has things on me that could ruin my reputation if they ever came out. I pay him two thousand dollars every month for his silence."

Hands sliding into his pockets, Arseni faces me. "What does he have on you?"

I shake my head. It was hard enough getting the first part out. Now my tongue feels swollen.

Arseni stares at me for several moments while I pray he's considering it, as if God has any business granting me this reprieve from my mistakes. If there's a God, he's not letting me pass the gate.

Without a word, Arseni turns and heads for the stairs. I jump to my feet, my heart hammering.

"Arseni, please , I need this," I cry out, walking until the chain jerks me back. He

doesn't slow down, taking the stairs until he's out of sight. "Arseni!"

When the door to the basement slams, I stutter out one last plea, heard only by me and the other lost souls once chained just like I am.

I sit on the bed while staring at the cuffs that dangle from the ceiling.

Beneath them is a large stain I can only guess is from blood.

I studied it earlier, and just like then, it causes a phantom pain in my wrists.

My back stiffens at the thought of a mystery instrument in one of the drawers slicing me.

I wish it wasn't the least of my worries.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

ARSENI

My front door is open when I get home.

That isn't necessarily unusual. Sometimes Fox goes overboard with the weed, so it's good to let a little air in every now and again. But I don't see either of their bikes parked along the street, and it's noon on Thanksgiving. They're family people. They wouldn't be here.

I step out of my car and pull my knife from my pocket while walking toward the door. It's splintered like somebody kicked it open.

A whack makes me flick the knife open, but it's only the neighbor kid. He's beating a stick on the house to get my attention but stops when I lock eyes with him. I press my finger to my lips before continuing on, hairs raised on the back of my neck.

"Police, hands up!"

What the fuck?

Turning, I face a uniformed officer with his gun drawn. He doesn't point it at me, but he holds it ready with both hands. His face, hard with suspicion, relaxes when I seem to register. "Arseni?"

I squint at the man in confusion until I recognize the face beneath a blond beard that looks way too aged for my old friend.

“Hudson?”

His face breaks into a grin, and he chuckles while letting the gun hang at his side.

“Holy shit, man. Do you live here?”

I look between him and my front door. He pulls ahead of me, his gun at the ready again as he steps onto the porch.

“You know what, keep quiet if you don’t. Pretend I never saw you.” He pushes the door open with his gun and creeps inside. I follow him.

My first reaction when I make out the destroyed living room is surprise. Quickly, it turns to anger.

“What the fuck ?”

Stepping over loose stuffing spilled from the ripped couch, Hudson observes the smashed TV and tipped-over fridge.

He looks back at me. “How many rooms?”

I just blink at him. I have no idea what’s going on, but the idea of me speaking to a police officer feels surreal.

When I don’t answer, Hudson disappears down the hallway, announcing himself before he checks each room. I follow him to my bedroom where he finally puts his gun away. My lungs stop at the sight of Roscoe lying on his side among my wrecked things.

I rush to him and drop to my knees. He whimpers when I rub his head and carefully turn him over.

“Shit... What happened, boy?” I ask, searching him for injury.

“Is he yours?” When I turn, Hudson’s gun is put away, and he’s frowning.

I face Roscoe and pet him gently. His eyes are closed, his tail still. “Who the fuck did this?” I ask under my breath, my eyes wide with shock. I’m not speaking to Hudson, but he answers anyway.

“We got a call about a break in. Your neighbor saw a man in a black mask leaving through the backyard.”

“The kid?” I ask, breathless.

“You think a kid did this?”

“No...” I close my eyes and try to collect myself. “Did a kid call it in?”

“I don’t have a clue, man. I just get told by dispatch where to go... Look, I have a buddy who’s a vet. I’m gonna call him up.”

Hudson leaves the room and returns a minute later, claiming the vet is on his way. Roscoe looks so sick, I’m not sure it’ll make a difference.

“Thanks,” I say, stroking my friend. His belly barely moves as he breathes.

When the vet gets here, I carry Roscoe to the living room where Hudson has cleared a space in the wreckage. The guy’s name is Steve, and after five minutes of checking Roscoe out, he concludes he ate poison. The fact that he’s conscious is a good sign he’ll be okay.

After loading Roscoe into Steve’s car, he speeds away to his clinic.

“Fuck,” Hudson says, sighing as he rubs the back of his neck. “What a reunion, huh?”

I don’t answer. My shoulders squared and jaw clenched, I start toward the neighbor kid. I must look pissed because he jumps up and runs inside, but I have no intention of letting him get away.

“Stop!” Hudson takes my arm and jerks me back. I swing to glare at him.

“Get your fucking hands off me before I start crying police brutality.” I wave toward his car. “Matter of fact, get the fuck out of here altogether. I’m not pressing charges.”

“What?” he asks, his nose scrunching. “Arseni, the guy almost killed your dog.”

“It’s my roommate’s dog. He probably left rat poison out. Now excuse me.” I turn to walk away, but Hudson follows.

“You don’t want to deal with the police, that’s fine, man. But shit, let me help you as a friend. I’m wearing a uniform. Those people are going to listen to me before they listen to you.”

“I have my ways.”

“What are you going to do, threaten the kid?”

That has me pausing.

No. No, of course not. The kid likes me. We have a thing going. He’ll tell me what he saw.

I suck my bottom lip into my mouth while I stare at the front door of the squatter house. He bolted in there to get away from me. I barge in, every ounce of trust we’ve

built is shattered, and I give him nightmares for a week.

“Come on, Ars.” Hudson lightly tugs my shoulder. “Let’s go back inside. We’ll take a second to breathe, then you can do whatever you gotta do.”

“Are you condoning violence, Officer Hudson?”

He’s quiet for a second, but then he laughs. “That’s the gig, isn’t it?”

Passing by me, he gives me a wink before heading inside.

Of all the people from my childhood, the kid who broke into Ms. Thornberry’s house just to piss in her potted plants would be the one to become a cop. Shaking my head, I go inside after him. He’s sitting on the floor, his feet stretched out, his back against the wall, beer in hand.

He takes a swig when I sit beside him. When he hands me another beer, I take it and twist off the cap.

“Just how crooked are you?” I ask.

He turns to give me a curious look. “What makes you think I’m crooked?”

I gesture to the beer. “You’re a little lax with the rules, don’t you think?”

He laughs and takes another swig. “Yeah, well, not everything changes.”

In spite of my anger, I find my lips twitching. I fan my hand over him. “How the hell did this happen?”

He shrugs, the stupid grin I remember so well plastered on his face. “Met a girl who

digs power.”

“You’re telling me you sold out just to get laid?”

He rests his blond head against the wall. “I’m gonna be honest with you, Ars... I’d put a bullet in you right now if it meant I’d get laid.”

I laugh, my hands sliding down my face as I bring my knees in. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Yeah, well, good to see you too. Thanks for the warm welcome, by the way.”

I turn toward him, my head shaking in light disbelief. “How long has it been?”

He takes another drink and stares at the ceiling while he thinks about it. “I was at Saint Francis, and you were at a...” He snaps his fingers while he thinks, but I already know. My memory comes flooding back. “That hot bitch’s house. What was her name?”

“Margot.”

“Margot, yeah.” His lips purse. “She was fine as hell.”

“Still is.”

He chuckles and rolls his head toward me with his brow furrowed. “What, did she adopt you?”

Jesus, that would be awkward.

I shake my head. “I saw her out about a year ago.”

“Did she remember you?”

I think back to the other night, her face sinking with recognition.

“Yup. We didn’t talk much, though.”

When static comes over his radio, he shuts it off.

I look around my living room at the mess but feel oddly satisfied by his reply. Part of me thought he was going to try to talk me into filing a report. As if I’d ever be okay with the police making my place a crime scene. Hell, I’d get whacked just for thinking of working with the pigs.

Hudson is ... different, though. I actually think he might be a good fit for our payroll.

“So where have you been all this time?” he asks. “I haven’t heard from you since you were with the cougar.”

My ears start to heat, but I keep my face neutral.

Hudson knows about shitty foster homes as much as I do.

We grew up together, crossing through the same group homes with such rapidity we made a game of who could ‘make it to x place’ faster.

He wasn’t wanted. I wasn’t wanted. It kept us tight. Bonded .

I smile bitterly. It feels disgustingly ironic that I have more in common with the cop sitting next to me than I do with my own best friend.

Enemy . Luka is an enemy now.

“They stuck me with a real tyrant after Margot. I didn’t have access to any form of communication until I got emancipated.”

“Ah.” He nods like he understands. Because he does understand. I sigh, but it isn’t from some shitty memory. It’s from the pure relief of speaking to someone from my world. It’s been so long, I didn’t realize I missed it.

I’ve been in Luka’s world. With his people. Speaking his language. Doing his bidding. I never thought I’d want out of the Bratva, and I don’t. But it does feel nice existing outside of it for a minute.

“Then I just lived on the streets for a bit. Got involved with some shady people. You know how it goes.”

“Yep.” He nods. “Happens to all of us, man. None of our hands are clean.” He bumps my shoulder. “Good for you for climbing out of it.”

I look around and laugh. “This is what you call out of it ?”

He shrugs but grins. “I mean, it’s got a roof, right?”

I drink my beer. Nikita’s words from yesterday enter my mind, the derision he felt from where I’m living evident.

In truth, I could get a nice place. I don’t need roommates or secondhand furniture.

But I don’t know how I could ever be comfortable with any other lifestyle. Nikita’s mansion isn’t my thing.

“What about you, Suds?”

He groans. “Nobody has called me that shit in years. Don’t start now.”

My chest rumbles with a chuckle. I can relate to hating a nickname, but Hudson’s is almost as pathetic as mine. He got his mouth washed out with soap after Mr. Carlton caught him kissing his dog’s ass on a dare.

“I was at the group home until emancipation, and after that, I couch surfed for a couple of years. Got lucky and only spent a few nights sleeping on Broadway. You know the old theatre that?—”

“Yup.”

I remember it well. It’s an alley where many newbies sleep. The lady who owns the theatre next to it hands out bowls of soup a couple nights a week.

“Yeah, well, anyway, I was kidding about the chasing tail thing. Mostly. I had a... I guess you could say a mentor who helped me join the force. You don’t have to go to college to become a cop, you know?”

I nod. “I get it.”

He huffs a laugh. “No, you don’t.”

I smile. “No. No, I do not.”

He elbows my arm to give me shit, but then turns the radio back on. A voice comes on mid-sentence saying some police jargon Hudson ignores as soon as he registers it isn’t for him. Still, it’s time to go.

He holds out his hand. “It was good to see you, man... And hey, happy Thanksgiving.”

I take his hand and shake. “Yeah, you too.”

“Now we can say we didn’t spend it alone.” He winks as he stands.

I don’t respond. The holidays don’t even occur to me most of the time, but the only tolerable Hallmark days are the ones I share with no one. Familial cheer is not something I choose to be around. I’m pretty certain Hudson would understand.

He pulls a wallet from his back pocket. “Don’t give anyone too hard of a time, all right? If you need help, call me.” He tries to hand me his card, but I just stare at it. “Fine, don’t ask for my help, but take my number anyway, you prick. I’d like to have a beer more than once every five years.”

I take the card and rest it on my lap.

When he’s at the door, he hesitates and gives me an awkward, pitiful look. “Steve’s the best vet in town... Your dog’s gonna be fine.”

I lift a hand in a little wave and watch him walk out. Once he’s gone, I face forward and take another drink.

As soon as I’m finished with my beer, I’ll call my roommates, see whose fault this is. I can’t think of anyone who’d want to trash the place because of me, so one of those degenerates had to have caused this. Fox is going to be livid when he finds out what the bastard did to Roscoe.

Whoever the son of a bitch is, we’ll find him before the night is over.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

MARGOT

Finally, I find sleep.

At first, the idea of closing my eyes on this place felt impossible.

I fought my tired eyes, staring up at the pipes running across the ceiling while planning my escape.

Well, fantasizing. I've pulled and jerked on the heavy chain to no avail, so while I'm down here, escape seems feeble.

But it was better than thinking about everything else. Better than thinking of Arseni or Him .

How unfair is it that I attracted two psychos?

The thought kept my head spinning for hours, it seemed. Even finding slumber, it isn't peaceful.

I see my captor in my dreams, haunting me without consciousness. His naked, scarred torso is so muscular and so tan, I can't take my eyes off it. It should repulse me, but my mouth waters, and my tongue runs across a raised line on his pec. Even in my dream, I know to be ashamed.

Something tickles my clit, breaking away his image.

He appears again between my legs, watching me as he kisses everything wet for him.

The sensation feels so real, I find myself being pulled from the dream, like the pleasure is so good it's waking me up.

I feel my forehead wrinkle as my head turns, but I'm not quite conscious, and the sensation doesn't stop.

Not until I feel the slice of a tongue at my entrance.

I snap awake, my head jerking up to see Arseni between my legs, just as I'd dreamed. I slam my thighs shut, nearly crushing his head in the process and scramble up the bed to get away from him.

My face burns hot as I hike up my knees and drape my skirt over my legs to cover myself.

"You have a beautiful pussy, Mommy."

I turn my face away and clench my eyes shut, resisting the urge to beg him to stop. He knows I hate him calling me that. I hate it now even more than I hated it back when he was my foster kid. That's his point.

"Are you really going to pretend you didn't enjoy that?"

"I was asleep, you..."

"What?" he asks, his voice deceptively gentle. Playful, even. "What mean name do you want to call me now?"

Deviant.

Disgusting pig.

Satan's pervy nephew.

I keep my mouth shut. He deserves no words, no further acknowledgement of his twisted game.

I promised myself when he left, I wouldn't play it anymore.

I'd take what he forced on me, but I would no longer give him pieces of myself to laugh about.

I shouldn't have even told him about my stalker.

I should've known he wouldn't care. Known it would be just another thing to deprive me of, because my freedom and dignity aren't enough.

"I brought you a present." My stomach pangs at the idea of food, too intensely not to look. But he didn't bring food. A pair of cuffs dangle from Arseni's fingertips.

When I focus my glare on him, he laughs.

"It's so you can go outside, silly girl. Wouldn't you like some fresh air?"

I can't help it. I perk up.

My eyes draw to the chain around my ankle. The only thing stopping me from trying to escape.

When I meet Arseni's gaze again, he smiles knowingly. Even so, he pulls out a key, presumably for the chain.

“Well?” he asks. “Would you?”

Fuck you .

You’re a psychopath .

I’m not playing your games.

I look away while biting my cheek. Whatever he has planned for me, it isn’t for my benefit. I should say no. Just to spite him.

But the chain...

When Arseni stands, I shift my knees, my teeth grinding to hold my words prisoner.

“Suit yourself.” He starts to walk away until, with my eyes closed in resignation, I call to him.

“Yes,” I force out.

I open my eyes as he turns. “What?”

“Yes, I’d like some fresh air.”

“That sounds like a command, not a request overflowing with gratitude. Try again.”

I glare at him just so he knows I see through this. I see the carrot he’s dangling for me, just begging me to reach for it only so he can snatch it back.

“Could I please go outside?”

He tilts his head side to side while strolling toward me. “Better, but still not good enough. Try again.”

Could you please kill yourself? Pretty, pretty please?

“I don’t know what more you want me to say. You’re the one who came down here to offer me something, and you want me to ... what? Beg? I’m through begging you, Arseni. I know you get off on it.”

He stops in front of the bed, his lips twitching. “Are you still bent out of shape over that whole money thing? If I’d known it meant that much to you, I would’ve gladly helped you out.”

I look away when my eyes sting and swear to myself that I won’t fall for this.

He won’t help me. No more asking.

Arseni crouches in front of me and takes my jaw to turn me toward him. I try to make myself look uninterested. Strong . He makes me feel so weak.

“I want you to ask me really, really nicely to take that chain off your ankle. If you can do that, I’ll be nice to you for the rest of the night. Promise.”

Promise. As if I would ever trust his promises.

Still, the carrot looks delicious.

I run five miles on a treadmill every morning, not because I love it, but because a single woman my age can’t let a day pass without thinking about appearance. Beauty is pain, but only when you’re over thirty.

Now, all that pain might actually bear fruit. I might be able to outrun him.

But could I fight him off?

Time ticks while I consider it.

I'll have to take my chances.

"Please, Arseni." I mock pout my lip. "Pretty, pretty, pretty pleeeassse take me outside. Oh, I want to go so badly. Plleeeeaassse with a virgin's cherry on top?"

He grins as he laughs, low and evil-like. I've never forgotten that malevolent smile of his.

"Much better. Much, much better. But there's just one little thing..." He pinches his thumb and index finger together while squinting. "I want you to call me a nice name. Something that makes me feel like you respect me."

I roll my eyes. "Jesus Christ, do you want me to call you sir ? Seriously? Will that make you feel like a man?"

He shakes his head, that evil smile on display. "Not sir. That's too formal. I want you to call me Daddy."

I rear back as my jaw drops. For at least two seconds, I'm stunned. "Oh, fuck you ."

He shakes his head. "There's plenty of time to fuck later. I want this first."

I jerk my head to the side, my hands bunching the skirt at my knees. My lip curled, I sneer. "I fucking hate you."

There's silence for a moment. Good, peaceful silence. Like maybe he'll shut the fuck up. Maybe he'll just go away. This time, I won't stop him.

"The opposite of love is ambivalence, not hate. So, I guess this means we're making progress."

I scoff but when the weight on my ankle shifts, it feels heavier, and my stomach gnaws. If I asked him for food, I have no doubt he'd laugh at me, not letting this go.

I'm hungry. I'm tired. I can't stop thinking about Molly all alone, whining about her missed dinner.

She has kibble automatically deposited into her bowl while I'm at work, but that'll only last a few days.

My hope for her is Austin showing up to my house, but he's never shown an interest in Molly.

He probably wouldn't notice her starving to death.

And Him... He'd set her on fire just like he threatened. Arseni would probably drown the old girl if I brought her up.

I close my eyes and inhale a shaky breath, feeling a new round of crying coming on. I try to stop it, keep everything inside of me, because if I'm going to cry, it won't be in front of Arseni. Not again.

My itching nose settles as I swallow, pushing the emotion down to fill my empty stomach.

"Arseni, please," I whisper, one last shot at mercy.

His fingers snap. “ Yes . That, right there. That’s perfect. Just replace Arseni with Daddy and you’ll be golden.”

The humor in his voice makes me flinch. I can’t hear any humanity inside of him. None. I don’t think I ever have.

I should’ve shot him when I had the chance. Why do I let myself feel pity for him when he’d never show me the same?

Inhaling a deep breath, I look Arseni in the eyes, my tone flat as I speak. “Please take me outside, Daddy.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

ARSENI

S he really does have a beautiful pussy.

Leaned back in a patio chair, I stare at the pink flesh, shadowed by Margot's skirt that bunches above her waist. Her knees are pulled up and spread on the glass tabletop to bare herself for me like a good little whore.

I think I'm having too much fun.

Roscoe's whine pulls my eyes beside the chair, and I grab the tennis ball from his mouth to toss it.

He's slower than normal but lucky to be alive.

If Nikita finds out I'm keeping him here, he might not be as lucky.

Nikita won't be back tonight, though. It's Thanksgiving night, and as ill-fitting as it seems, the guy is a family man.

He left after his big lunch for the annual three-day camping trip he takes with his nephews.

That just leaves me and Margot... And Roscoe, for now. Fox and Zinovy think the guy who trashed our place is an old friend turned enemy of Fox's. They're out searching for him now, and until they take care of the guy, Roscoe is with me.

I throw the ball once more then pull out a cigarette and light it up, the flame giving just the tiniest bit of extra light. Enough to see Margot flinch, her erratic breaths skating with a sob she fights.

She looks pissed, her eyes staring off into the dark of the garden, anywhere but on me. She's proud . But smart. I like her fight. It's cute.

Pulling the cigarette from my mouth, I puff out smoke and stare at the orange glow on the tip of the stick.

“Did you know the foster dad you booted me to put a cigarette out on my stomach?” I finger my shirt. I can't feel the marred flesh beneath my touch, but the phantom burn could never let me forget its exact location.

The guy's image coming into my mind makes my gut twist. With what, I don't know.

He's dead. I killed him years ago, so I don't think I can say it's fear.

More like ... shame, maybe. Shame I let a pussy hold me down.

Shame I was weak enough to sneak food to begin with. I should've let the fucker starve me.

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” Margot deadpans.

I blink. For a moment, I forgot she was even here. Forgot my point.

“Feel sorry for me?” I pause as if I'm pondering that. “No. But you should know the consequences of your actions.”

I take a drag of the cigarette and lean forward to put my lips close to Margot's pussy.

The baby pink ripples as she clenches, and if I leaned any closer, I could feel it. It's chilly outside, but I bet she's warm.

I blow smoke against her hole, watching it dissipate against her.

Her thighs quake, but she doesn't close them.

She's been especially obedient since I told her I'd kill Roscoe if she acted up.

I'm a little offended that she believed me so easily.

"Truth is, it was so long ago, I hardly remember what it felt like," I lie, lifting my gaze to her face.

She doesn't look at me, just keeps her head turned watching nothing. Roscoe whines again, but I ignore him.

I flick hot ash against Margot's thigh, watching her face as she gasps and twitches. "Do you know what it feels like?"

Her chest shakes, but she doesn't look at me nor say anything. I don't want to burn her. Not really.

But I want her to beg. My face feels harder than it did, my shoulders wound with tension. I don't want her to feel sorry for me. That would be pathetic, especially under these circumstances.

But I do want her to be sorry.

"You think I don't know what pain feels like?" she asks, her voice wobbly. "You talk like you're the only person in the world who's ever been wronged."

I lounge back and lift my feet onto the table, my shoe close enough to Margot's pussy, I could nudge it with a light stretch.

"Are you gonna give the 'I was in the system too' speech? Because frankly, you overdo it. It doesn't make people feel connected to you. It makes them think you're delusional."

"Delusional." She stutters out a laugh. "Okay."

"You didn't go in at birth, and you said you were adopted in what? Like two years?"

"Yeah, Arseni. You're totally right. It shouldn't count at all."

"I'm just saying..." I shrug as if this conversation is relaxed, but I feel anything but.

"You don't know what it's like to be unwanted."

You have two sets of parents who passed away, and I'm sure that was very hard.

But at least you had them. You can't relate to the unpicked litter. You should stop trying."

"Okay." She nods, a little too fervently.

Her voice holds anger, or maybe just frustration, but either way I watch bravery bubble out of her.

"You're right, I had parents, and most of them loved me."

I feel grateful to have been adopted and was heartbroken when Sam and Georgia passed.

Sure, I'm a thirty-five-year-old woman who's never been married, but you're right, I can't relate to your terrible, terrible misfortune of being unwanted.

I can't imagine what that must feel like. ”

I flick ash and prod my tongue against my cheek. I don't like how sarcastic she sounds, but I'm trying not to let it charge me.

I should just let it go. She isn't trying to be insulting. She just doesn't fucking get it, and that's okay. No one does.

“What university did you go to, Margot?” I ask when I can't stop myself.

She scoots back on the table and closes her legs. I don't even protest. Her pussy isn't as appealing right now.

“Berkeley. Where'd you go, Arseni? Harvard? Yale?”

“I went to sleep in the tunnels, hugging a baseball bat so tightly people called me Baby Ruth. Because when I left high school, I didn't have people to drive me off to a dorm. I got a goodbye from the government and a good riddance from every adult I'd ever known.”

“Wow, that must have been really hard.”

I drop my cigarette to the ground before I burn her with it. When Roscoe goes to check it out, I grab his collar and don't take my eyes off Margot.

“How do you feel about the smell of Pine Sol?” she asks.

I narrow my eyes and don't respond. Pine Sol?

“Because I can’t smell the stuff without having a panic attack.

I fainted once, in Home Depot, because the chemical smell reminded me too much of a kitchen sink cabinet, which is where I was hiding when my father stabbed my mom twenty-six times while I listened to her scream.

I bit my hand so hard it bled while he searched for me.

The sound of a shotgun blowing his brains on my mother’s dresser was what told me the coast was clear. ”

Her eyes shine in the moonlight as her voice shakes. Looking away, I cross my arms as my chest tightens.

“When they took me away, I had nothing but a backpack full of clothes and a photo my mother had drawn for my lunchbox. All her work, gone. All our photos, destroyed. I had one thing left of the only person in the world I cared about, which to you, must make me so lucky.”

I turn back to her at those words to see tears streaking her face. She trembles with emotion that surrounds me, opening my mouth like it’s trying to crawl inside. I don’t know what to say, but I also don’t want her to talk anymore.

This was too much. Too personal. Too... I don’t know.

“You think I don’t understand the pain that comes with being unloved, but you don’t know the pain of losing someone. And you never will because you’re a cruel, hateful bastard who doesn’t deserve love. Maybe that makes you the lucky one.”

“That’s enough.”

“Oh, is it, Daddy? You don’t want to play anymore?” She hops off the table and shoves my legs so I bring them to the ground. She shifts between them like she’s going to straddle me, but she just stares me down.

“I said that’s enough , Margot. You made your point.”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so.”

I shift in the chair as she lowers to her knees, dragging the handcuffs under her feet so her hands are in front of her. “I get it, Arseni. I do. You wanna teach me a lesson . You’re so mad that I didn’t want to fuck you before, so you’re getting even with me now. Here, let me help.”

When she grabs my cock through my pants, I shove her hands away. “Jesus Christ, calm down .”

“Calm down?” she asks, her eyes wide, crazed .

I feel my eyes widen as well. “ Yes .” It’s embarrassing how uncomfortable I feel, seeing Margot like this. In my mind, she’s a bitch who ditched me the same as everyone else. That’s what she’s always been in my mind. Even before she gave me the boot, I knew it would happen.

They’re all the same to me. All nothing but disappointments. Barely even human, more like collages making up one being. The only thing that makes Margot stand out is how badly I want her pussy.

I don’t empathize.

I don’t relate.

I don't give a shit.

That's the way it needs to be.

Roscoe nudges my leg like he can feel my unease, his whining returning.

Margot leans into me, crazy eyes never leaving mine. When she speaks, it's an angry whisper. "Okay."

She flings her hands toward mine, and I don't understand why until it's too late. The orange glow of my cigarette, dimmer now but still scolding, presses down hard on the backside of my hand. My eyes widen, and I inhale a yell that doesn't leave my mouth until she's sprinting away.

"Fuck!" My hand shakes as I bring it to my face, inhaling burnt flesh. I clench my jaw as my neck inflames to the same degree as my hand.

I don't immediately move, instead glaring at where she disappeared inside the garden. It isn't until I remember the electric fence that my eyes pop wide, and I take off after her.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

MARGOT

The garden is bigger than I thought it would be.

When I bolted from Arseni, I beelined toward it, thinking I could bob and weave so he wouldn't see which direction I exited, but the place is such a jungle-in-process, it doesn't belong in Las Vegas.

I hurdle bushes that are half-grown and sidestep hundreds of lilies, their purple hue giving the dark garden color. When I finally make it to the end, the grounds feel so open, I almost stop and hide. But I don't hear Arseni, and if I let him catch up, I don't know what that'll mean for me.

The pit bull who met us outside barks at my feet as I break through the garden as if he's been waiting for me.

I trip on him before collecting myself and sprinting toward a tall fence that looks like it was made for a prison, which ...

fitting. It looks so far off in the distance with the pit bull at my side, my muscles permanently tense bracing for him to attack.

Right now, the dog just chases, barking at my shins.

"Margot!" Arseni calls, his voice sounding far away. Instead of a feeling of security, it only makes me run faster, my bound arms jolting in front of me while my legs soar over the too-green lawn.

When I'm ten feet within the fence, I can hear Arseni approaching.

"Margot, stop!"

I crash onto the fence, my bound hands slowing me down but not stopping me. My feet do most of the work while my hands cling to cold chains to keep me from falling.

I look up at the top of the gate as I approach it, but when I'm just about to reach the thick wire at the crown, Arseni grabs me around my waist.

"No!" I reach for the stars while he yanks us to the ground, my back crashing on top of him. I try to get away, but he takes my waist and pulls me back.

"Let go of me!"

He yanks and flips me to my back before pinning me with his body. Loud breaths pelt my chin as I arch my neck to look at the free land behind me.

So close. I was so fucking close.

"The fence is electric," Arseni says through heavy breaths. "Look up at the wire you were about to touch."

A sad, desperate, bitter laugh pops from my mouth as I bring my eyes to Arseni's. I don't need to look. I saw it. "So?"

His brow furrows as he watches me. He doesn't respond.

"Why wouldn't you just let it shock me? Wouldn't it be hilarious?"

"It's not for cattle, Margot. It could've killed you."

“Isn’t that what you want?” I yell in his face, anger prickling my ears. “Or are you not finished torturing me?”

He looks around my face but says nothing.

“We both know what this is coming to.” I sniff in air that feels even colder than before, like it absorbed the chill from my oncoming fear. “You’re not letting me go, and I’m not going to be your boss’s whore. I’d rather you just killed me.”

“You would?”

My heart pauses at the lack of emotion in his tone. He sounds so matter of fact, so ambivalent, that it breaks through my anger and seizes my throat.

I just stare at him, trying to work up the courage to nod. I don’t want him to think I’m more afraid of death than I am of being someone’s whore. I won’t prostitute myself for anyone or anything, and I want him to know it. But I don’t want to die.

I want to escape. I want to find a way, because there must be a way.

I turn my head so I don’t have to look at him and avoid answering. Part of me wonders what it would be like if he killed me. It’s a strange thing to wonder, but as his lips press to my neck, I can’t picture it.

Would he be cruel? Would he make it hurt?

He turns my head so he can kiss my lips, his warm, urgent tongue entering my mouth.

If he cares that I don’t kiss him back, I wouldn’t know it.

He doesn’t slow down. If he’s angry about me stubbing a cigarette out on his hand, he

doesn't show that either.

He brings the wounded hand down my body to cup between my legs.

He kisses his way across my cheek to my ear, curling his fingers into my skirt. "Things got too personal earlier," he whispers. "I don't wanna fight with you. Or hurt you. Or kill you."

When his fingers move to rub my clit, I suck in a gasp.

"I just want this," he whispers, grabbing me tightly again before rubbing.

"Aren't you angry about your hand?" I speak with as strong a tone as I can manage. I want to sound as indifferent as he did, but I don't quite manage. His rubbing makes my pitch too high.

When he removes his touch, I think maybe he is angry. Maybe I shouldn't have reminded him. But then he pulls off his shirt and takes my cuffed hands. His palm flattens mine against his chest as he leans to whisper in my ear again. "Feel."

My hands move across his chest at his insistence, feeling my way over a valley of scars. Some are lines, some are rough patches, all hold a story. It makes me think of my dream, of licking my way across them.

"I've been a prisoner too." He kisses my ear. "My captors weren't as nice as I am."

"Should I be grateful?" My voice is small and not as sarcastic as I mean for it to be.

He pulls back to show me his face. It's as boyish now as it was when he was seventeen, but his eyes look aged beyond his years. He isn't the same person he was then, and it's insane that I just now am seeing that.

He's Arseni. He's ... deviant, playful, handsome, too handsome. But he's harder now. And vengeful. The scars my fingers dance across hold so many sources of anger, I finally start to understand that it isn't just me he's angry with. Maybe it isn't me at all.

"You shouldn't be grateful... You should be relieved. You can't hurt me, Margot. Nobody can. I'm not gonna punish you for trying."

Rising to his knees, he unbuckles his belt while I steel myself beneath him.

"Do you think this isn't hurting me?"

He meets my eyes, full, glistening lips parting. "No." He tucks his hand inside his pants to rub. "I think this is your dirtiest fantasy."

Still stroking himself, he nudges my legs apart with his knees and lays his face at my opening.

I look up at the stars when he lifts my skirt up and runs his hand over my wet flesh at the same pace he pleasures himself.

"I think you fake your moans with that old fuck from your office, and when he leaves you full of cum, you touch yourself while thinking of a guy like me."

"A guy like you?" I ask, my pitch high with fright. Not at what he'll do to me, but at what he might discover. What he might already know. The secrets he's uncovered between when I saw him earlier and now.

He presses a kiss to my inner thigh, then drags his bottom lip up before kissing me again, higher this time. "A guy who knows how to touch you."

With his free hand, he presses against my leg to open me wider for him. I hold my breath when his tongue slides up my slit. “A guy who knows how to lick you.” He licks me again, long and slow while my hips lift ever so slightly, giving away everything he’s accused me of.

“And suck you.” His lips curve around my clit in a kiss before he sucks, just as promised. I can’t help the cry that escapes, my bound hands lifting above my head until I’m tugging perfectly trimmed grass from the lawn.

I want to tell him to stop. I want to lie . Tell him he’s wrong, that I’m not attracted to him, that I couldn’t be attracted to him. That everything he does repulses me. That his stupid, cocky, radiant fucking face doesn’t turn me on when he’s between my thighs like this.

I wish that my sex life had been fulfilled before this. Maybe then when he fits two fingers inside me, I wouldn’t moan. My back wouldn’t arch, and my heels wouldn’t grind into the earth.

I wouldn’t want this so much.

My lips part with a gasp as he fucks me with his fingers, his tongue flicking across my clit. Every glide of his tongue is so controlled, every thrust of his fingers smooth. I hate it. It makes me feel like I’m the desperate one, squirming beneath his delicious touch.

It isn’t long before he takes my hands and walks me to the ledge, just as he did the night he came to my office. Only this time, he doesn’t hesitate to drop me.

I cry out a high-pitched, elongated “ahhh,” my shoulders digging into the ground as my body bows. My world feels like it shatters, making everything fade for a few fleeting moments. It’s bliss. I wish it didn’t have to end.

When Arseni pulls his mouth away, I roll my head to take in the pit bull, his tongue hanging out as he happily pants a foot from my face.

“Come here,” Arseni says, gently taking my arms to guide me to sitting.

I just blink when he pulls his cock from his pants and strokes it an inch from my face.

I should pull away, but I can't. My eyes are glued to the light sheen of cum on the tip reflecting the moonlight.

Arseni pumps faster, his hand threading into my hair to hold me close.

“Open your mouth,” he orders, spreading his precum over my lips. My tongue catches a taste, and I close my eyes to it.

“Open ,” he orders more forcefully as he takes my jaw and squeezes.

I don't fight as hard as I want when his fingers digging into my jaw pry it open, and I suck in a sharp breath through my nose when he pushes inside.

Salty, warm goo fills my mouth as he groans, holding my head close while he finds his release.

I swallow some of the cum and let the rest ooze around his cock, spilling down my chin.

His eyes look lost in desire as he pulls out of me and examines the leftover droppings. When I go to wipe it away, he guides my hand to my side.

“You're so beautiful like this,” he whispers, his voice so soft and convincing that I blush.

I'm old. Well, not really, but I feel too old to be desirable. I buy the most flattering clothes, the finest makeup, and run myself thin—literally. And none of it ever seems like enough when I look in the mirror.

So maybe I don't hate that Arseni says differently.

Maybe that's why when he gathers a trail of his cum and brings it to my mouth, I suck his finger willingly, experiencing him with all my senses.

The taste of his pleasure, the look of wanting parting his lips, the smell of his raw scent, the feel of wet cum drying on my chin.

I don't hate it, and maybe that makes him right. Maybe I've been desiring this all along.

"Good girl," he coos, stroking my head with a gentle touch. He tucks himself away and zips up his pants while I silently die inside.

I wish I didn't hate myself for this. It would make life so much easier.

"Come," he says, holding out his hand for me. "Let's get you some real food."

Real food . If he said that with less of a serious tone, with even a trace of humor, I'd probably shrink away from embarrassment.

But he doesn't seem to be degrading me. Ironically, I don't know if he's ever spoken to me with more care.

It's almost like I'm human.

ARSENI

She must be hungry.

It's been twenty-four hours since Fox and I picked her up, and in my experience, that's about how long it takes for hunger to become painful.

It isn't a coincidence that I waited until now to feed her, but she seems almost disinterested in the idea as she stares off, legs tucked beneath her on the kitchen floor.

I finish plating the leftover turkey and green beans, then stick the plate in the microwave. When I peek at Margot, she still hasn't moved. Not an inch. She's all dead eyes and wounded shoulders.

I'm not sure why the sight unsettles me.

After the microwave beeps, I take out the food and hold a hand out for Margot. "Come."

She blinks slowly, looking half asleep as she meets my eyes.

Sad. She looks sad.

"Come."

Breaking her gaze away from me, she climbs to her feet without taking my hand. I lead her to the tiny, two-person table meant for the help—God forbid they eat at the

same monstrous dining table as Nikita—and sit.

When she goes for the other chair, I take her arm and guide her to my lap instead. She blushes as she stares down at her thighs.

There's no protest from her as I run my hand up the back of her neck and tug her frizzed hair loose from her ponytail. It spills over her back in mocha brown locks, soft beneath my touch. I push hair back to tuck behind her ear.

“I never liked your hair pulled back,” I say, eyeing the knotted mess.

It strikes me that I never saw it like this when I lived with her.

It would be a Sunday when she had no intention of leaving home, and still, she presented herself as a woman without physical flaws.

It feels ironic that I find her so much more beautiful now, more ... real .

“Pleasing you was never my goal.”

She turns her head away from me, like she can't stand for me to see her face. Her tone is overly defensive. You'd think I'd accused her of dressing up for me.

She was sensitive back then about these things too. Always denying her attraction, even when I was only poking fun. There wasn't a time I seriously thought she'd fuck me, but my god, it was fun prodding. Any time I'd catch her looking at me, she'd blush. Any time I got too close, she'd shiver.

Now, it's as if nothing has changed. And it's strange. I can't tell how much of her feels violated and how much is still bothered by her attraction toward me. Not because I'm a monster but because I'm young. My age seems so irrelevant at this

point.

I caress her cheek but don't bring her to face me when I notice her staring at the food. She looks even sadder now.

"It's Thanksgiving," she says.

I don't know if she wants me to confirm, but I don't. I turn her, her eyes shining with something I can't make out. Then, I pick up a piece of turkey and bring it to her lips. When she goes to lift her arms, I hold them down.

Slowly, her lips part, and with the innocent way she eyes me, the situation almost feels erotic. The goal was to demean her, but the feel of her lips on my fingers makes my cock stir.

I pick up another piece of turkey, my mind taking me to places I command it not to go. "Did you have big plans?"

She shakes her head after cinching the food with her teeth. Once she's swallowed, she doesn't immediately take the next bite.

"I was just thinking how pathetic it is that this is the first Thanksgiving I've shared with another person."

Glancing at me, she quickly takes the next bite and turns her head away to chew.

"You mean as an adult?"

She swallows. "No. My dad was an anti-patriotic drunk. One time my mother put a paper turkey I made on the fridge, and he broke her arm for it... We didn't do Thanksgiving."

I nod, though I don't at all understand.

I've sat through so many awkward dinners with families of fosters I hardly knew that it seems impossible to have been alone thirty-five years in a row.

I desperately wanted to be. There is nothing that says, 'you have no family' more bitterly than recognizing two faces among a crowd with everyone referring to you as a stranger's son.

"What about your adoptive parents?"

"They were the over-the-top volunteer type. They took me along when I was a kid, but..." She shrugs. "I never counted it before, but it's obviously better than this."

I stare at the plate, picking at a green bean. It's a nice reprieve from her talking when I take it to her mouth.

I don't know why I'm asking questions. I don't want to know this shit. Boo fucking who, you missed out on a holiday. So what?

"Do you live here?" she asks, glancing around.

It's strange. Very fucking strange. But my knee-jerk reaction is to say yes, just to impress her. My second reaction is shame.

"No, this is my boss's place. I'm staying here to be close to you."

"He let you bring your dog?" She scrunches her forehead like that's confusing for her. Even she thinks a dog doesn't fit in a place this nice. Nikita is seriously going to kill me.

“Someone broke into my house today and poisoned Roscoe. He’s just here until the guy who did it is taken care of.”

Her face blanches. When I bring another bite of turkey to her lips, she doesn’t take it.

“What?” I ask, lowering the food.

She swallows. “Do you know who did it?”

“Some dick my roommate pissed off. Why?”

Her knee jabs my thigh as she curls her body into me. “Are you sure?”

I narrow my eyes and take my time answering.

“How bad was the damage? Did they steal anything?” she goes on, her voice growing impatient.

“ Why ?”

With a deep breath, she closes her eyes. “Five years ago, my stalker burned a cat in my backyard as a threat. He isn’t above hurting animals.”

Jesus Christ, he burned a cat ?

“The guy was there to trash the place. Roscoe was probably just in the way. If he wanted him dead, there are more efficient ways to kill?—”

“It could’ve been a warning.”

Her eyes hold so much anxiety in them, they twitch. She’s rigid in my lap, and for

once, I don't think it has to do with me.

Just how traumatized is she?

“Margot... Your stalker did not break into my house. How would he even know who I am, let alone that I have you?”

“He was at the park the night you took me. He would've seen everything. And he?—”

“If he'd followed me, I would've noticed the tail.”

She shakes her head, flustered. “He wouldn't have had to follow you. Arseni, please just listen to me... He is dangerous . What happened today is nothing compared to what he'll do tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the next day. Or the next.”

Her worried expression is dead serious. I look over it for a moment, searching for some sign that she's exaggerating. She sounds like a fucking nut.

“Okay,” I say in an attempt to appease her. “What do you suggest I do about this oh-so-dangerous man?”

More dangerous than me, apparently.

Still with a straight face... “You have to let me go.”

My eyes pop as a laugh launches from my chest. I hold her in place when she tries to climb from my lap.

“You are fucking adorable ,” I say, tears filling my eyes from laughing so hard.

She got me. She really got me.

What an incredible actress.

“I’m serious , Arseni. He’s insane. He won’t see this as you kidnapping me; he’ll see this as betrayal. He will ruin me, and he’ll do the same to you.”

“Okay, Margot.” I nod and wipe moisture from beneath my eyes. “I know I haven’t explicitly told you this, but... My boss is the former Pakhan of the Petrov Bratva, and technically, you belong to him. Do you think he’s going to be afraid of some freak who forgot to take his meds?”

“It’s you who should be afraid.” She doesn’t even blink. She looks as crazed as the man she’s describing.

I open my mouth to argue some more, but I can see in her eyes, she doesn’t want to hear it. She’s delusional, but I’m certain she’s not actually crazy. Just plagued with the psychosis that comes with prolonged periods of fear.

“Why don’t you tell me who he is so I can be on guard then? Who knows, maybe I’ll even be able to use my mediocre skills to defend myself.”

I don’t think for a second he broke into my place. I don’t even think he knows who I am. I’m not even sure he exists.

But if he does, I’ll kill him. For no other reason than to put an end to this nonsense.

She bites her lip and looks away. “I don’t know his name.”

That’s a lie. An obvious one.

“Do you know what he looks like?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve only seen vague silhouettes at night.”

I blink at her, annoyance brewing. At first, this was funny, but I’m quickly getting over it.

“How long has he been stalking you?” I ask, now pretty fucking sure she’s making this up. I can’t believe she’d think something like this could work. It’s insulting, and the longer we sit here, the more I want to push her off of me.

She shrugs like she can’t remember.

For God sakes.

Rolling my eyes, I shove Margot off me. She yelps as her ass slams on the kitchen tile. “Well, this has been fun, but I think that’s enough bullshit for one night.”

Her jaw is dropped in shock as she peers up at me. “Arseni, please .”

“Get up. I’m taking you back downstairs.” I wave impatiently toward the kitchen entrance, my neck feeling tight. I roll it before meeting her tearful eyes.

“Now , whore,” I snap, making her wince.

She turns away with a cry, and all it does is annoy me more.

She’s fucking playing me. This whole night, I’ve let her spin bullshit and found myself believing it. I felt sorry for her. I felt...

I don’t know what I felt. But now I feel like a goddamn fool.

My jaw is clenched when she finally stands, my arms tense at my sides. I shove her when she trudges from the kitchen and yank her back by her shirt when she almost falls.

“Walk. Faster.”

“Arseni, please, you’re scaring me.”

I’m scaring her.

Now, I’m scaring her.

She whines as I take her by the back of the neck and stride toward the basement, regretting the idiotic decision to ever bring her up here. She wasn’t ready. I wasn’t ready.

This was a mistake.

She stumbles down the last few steps of the basement, crashing hard on the concrete floor. She pulls her mangled body into a ball and cries without any indication of getting back up. I don’t even care. I storm back up the stairs and slam the door behind me, leaving her ankle unchained.

A minute passes while I pant, my forehead against the door, my eyes closed. I can still hear her cries. They’ve turned to wails, and the sound makes my skin crawl.

Shoving off the door, I head for the backyard for another smoke, but my feet glue to the tile as I pass a storage closet containing the cleaning products. I stare at it with narrowed eyes.

Something tugs at my chest, something that makes me nauseous. I don’t think about it

long. I push thoughts from my mind before they can settle and force myself to walk away.

I don't make it outside before I turn around and go back to the closet.

There're gallons of cleaning shit, so it takes me multiple trips to pour it all down the drain.

When the last of it is gone, I slam the bottles in the trash and head outside, telling myself all my thoughts are settled. Knowing it's a lie.

MARGOT

THREE DAYS LATER...

I 'm in a crime lord's house.

It makes no sense, but I'm just coming to terms with that reality, days after Arseni revealed it.

I didn't think it was a lie, but it didn't feel real until now as I'm being led upstairs by a mystery person to meet another mystery person.

It was hard to think of danger here beyond Arseni, and maybe that makes me naive. Or better yet, stupid.

"Faster," the man behind me commands, shoving my back. I gasp and do as he says with more fear than I've ever given Arseni, and again, I'm struck by the difference.

But they're the same. This degenerate has platinum blond hair and a lip ring, but he has the same merciless aura as Arseni. I wish he would've been my handler from the beginning. Maybe then I wouldn't be so confused.

A delectable smell enters my senses as Lip Ring leads me into a dining hall, one newspaper-guarded person at the table among an abundance of food. Scones, eggs, bacon, fruit, pancakes, a whole feast that looks undisturbed.

The person, a man , lowers the newspaper as we approach and looks up at me with a

blank expression.

As soon as our eyes meet, he livens with a friendly smile that shifts a mole above his lip.

Moles are strange things. On most people, they're unfortunate marks of imperfection.

On a lucky few, they're mere accessories, adding to beauty uneasily marred by defects.

This man falls into the latter category.

"Good morning, Margot," he croons, folding up the newspaper. "How did you sleep?"

How did I...

What?

I blink at him, sweat prickling the back of my neck. Lip Ring told me I was wanted upstairs—three out of four words total he's spoken—but I'm not sure this man is the owner of this home. He looks too polite to be a killer.

"Please." The man with the mole gestures to the chair next to him. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I had Rosemary make a little of everything."

My forehead wrinkles as I take in the spread.

This is for me?

And there's a Rosemary here?

Does she know I've been kidnapped? Could she help me?

"Please, sit," the man prods, a cheerfulness in his voice that eases pressure in my lungs. It's silly, but after days of being disregarded, I can't help but appreciate the pleasantness.

I sit where he instructed and take a plate he passes to me. He smiles, all lips, before taking a sip of his coffee.

"I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Nikita, Arseni's friend."

Arseni's friend. Arseni, who's barely said a word to me for three days. Who barely looks at me during his infrequent trips to the basement, feeding me just enough to keep the stomach pain at bay. I'm sure Arseni has said many good things.

"Nice to meet you," I say while eyeing the scones. I cautiously grab one, the scent so heavenly, I bring the bread to my nose.

I take the first bite slowly, the fresh-baked pastry crumbling between my teeth before softening to a doughy ball of sugar.

I close my eyes and exhale, iced glaze sticking to my fingers.

I take care to go slow, concentrating on every chew, but eventually, it hits how ridiculous it is to worry about how I appear to the people who are starving me.

I shove pastry into my mouth, one hurried bite after another until it's devoured. Eggs are next, the steaming yellow protein clouds collecting in a pile with every spoonful I topple onto my plate.

"Hungry?" Nikita asks with a laugh.

A laugh .

I freeze like I've been caught doing something naughty, sweet crumbs sticking to my lips. The serving spoon clinks against the dish as I return it then wipe crumbs off my mouth with the back of my hand.

“You're a bit of a character, aren't you?” He pushes his coffee away to lay his elbows on the table.

I squint at him while nibbling on cantaloupe.

“When the kid first told me about you, I expected a leopard-print wearing soccer mom with fake tits and bloated lips, but you are much sneakier. You look plain.”

Plain . I don't respond to that. On anyone else's lips, it would be an insult, but his voice is so light, it sounds like a compliment.

Why am I up here?

Is this...?

As my stomach turns, I rest the cantaloupe on the plate and pull a napkin onto my lap. My movements are smooth, unhurried, and though I avoid his eyes, I wonder if he can see the sudden onslaught of fear that consumes me as viciously as I devoured the scone.

This is my owner.

Of course he'd want to introduce himself. I'm not up here to have breakfast with a kind mystery man. I'm here so my master can get a better look at me.

Duh. Fucking duh.

I cover my mouth as the digesting scone lurches up my throat. It's subtle, I think. I swallow it back down and keep my face turned away.

The disgusting part of this is that I should be relieved to be passed off from Arseni. This man is closer to my age. He's handsome. Clean cut dark blond hair, polite demeanor. He's like Austin, except with a lot more money and blood on his hands.

And still, I'm repulsed. Even more desperate for escape. The reaction only makes me feel guilty because my lack of repulsion toward Arseni stands out like a glaring red flag.

"I don't mean plain to be boring. Just the opposite," Nikita says, catching onto my discomfort. "The way you disguise yourself is admirable."

I lower my hand and peek at him through my curiosity. "What?"

He smiles wide, showing some of his bleached teeth. I wonder if he and Austin even go to the same dentist.

"I'm referring to your taste in men, Margot. Or... boys." He lifts a shoulder like the clarification is hardly necessary. But to me, it's everything. It's everything I've hidden, everything I hate myself for.

Cold dread hugs my face as blood drains. My heart stops beating.

How does he know?

"You know what I bet?" He shakes a finger at me while scraping his bottom lip with his teeth. "I bet you convinced the kid everything between you was his idea. You

probably let him hit on you for a while before you gave in to the chase.”

Oh my God.

My heart palpitates until I feel faint, but I just stare at Nikita as calmly as I can. “And by kid you mean...?”

“Arseni. But I’m sure this applies to the rest of them.”

The rest of them .

I shake my head, but Nikita speaks before I can.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Margot. I didn’t really want you here. But now...”
As he leans toward me on the table, I get the urge to shift away. I didn’t notice just how dark his eyes were before. I didn’t see the malevolence in them. “I think we could have some fun .”

I shudder at his enunciated word and can’t help myself from sitting back farther in the chair just to get another couple inches away from him. “I’m not sure what you’re getting at...”

The pull of his lips relaxes, unveils a face that strikes me as his true identity. This is definitely the boss. He definitely has blood on his hands. And he may wear a blue suit as good as Austin, but the comparison ends there.

He takes the folded-up paper and places it in front of me. “Is this you?”

I squint at the black and white, skating across an article about the city garden to one with my work photo—an unflattering pose where my eye looks lazy from twitching during the flash.

I hated that photo. Every time someone looked at my ID badge with it attached, I fought the need to slap my hand on top of it.

Now, the whole world can see.

My fingertips dig into my lips as I glimpse the article through wide eyes. I don't need to read much to get the gist of what it says, but I still latch onto every word, my throat shrinking with each line.

No.

No, no, no, no, no, no.

"You don't have to be scared," Nikita says, sounding perfectly relaxed. "The cops won't touch you as long as you're here."

The cops .

I close my eyes as my lip quivers. The cops aren't even on my radar. I could go to prison for the rest of my life, and it wouldn't be as great a hardship as the knowledge of what everyone thinks of me.

This was my worst fear.

The source of every nightmare I've had for seven years.

I begged Arseni. I told him this would happen.

I should've begged harder.

"Don't cry," Nikita says when a sob bubbles out of me.

“Look at this as an opportunity... Kinks are not shamed here. I appreciate deviance from my guests. You’ll have opportunities to live out your fantasies in much more fulfilling ways than looking at kiddie porn.

All you have to do is let me and my guests watch. ”

I slowly turn my head his way, silent tears spilling onto the newspaper, smudging the ink.

My jaw is dropped a centimeter in remorse and an inch in shock at what he’s saying.

“This is a mistake,” I say, a whisper all I can manage.

I pick up the paper with a trembling hand.

“Nothing about this is true. I’m not... I don’t have a kink .

I have a lunatic who planted horrific photographs in my house because I pissed him off.

I would...” I suck in a breath. “I would never do what you’re suggesting. ”

Nikita scratches his shaved chin for a moment. He doesn’t look like he’s thinking as much as collecting himself. “You’d never, what?... Fuck a juvenile? Haven’t you already crossed that bridge with my young cohort? He’s as child-like as it gets.”

I shake my head, my arms wrapping around my cramped stomach. “That’s different. That... That wasn’t my fault . He made me?—”

Nikita holds up a hand. “Okay, this is getting boring.”

I close my mouth and watch as a palm sands his forehead before moving into his hair, disheveling locks. He slams his palm on the table, rattling glass and making me jump. “You know what, it’s fine.”

When he smiles, all friendliness is gone. I’ve disappointed him. I’ve let down everyone , but he’s currently the only person in the world I’m disappointing for the right reasons.

My heart is too broken to let fear of this mobster take first place in my mind. It’s there. I can’t ignore my current situation.

But part of me hopes he sinks a bullet into my head while I’m not looking. I wish he’d done it before showing me the newspaper.

“I’m always looking for a new maid.” Nikita picks up my plate and chucks it at the wall. I gasp as the ceramic shatters, its pieces clattering on the tile like rain. “Start now.”

The anger in his voice pushes me from the table on autopilot, bunching the clothed napkin in my hands.

“ No .” My heart leaps at his voice. “Don’t dirty my serviettes. Make use of your tongue if you wish to keep it. I don’t want to hear you speak again.”

Breath shaking, I set the napkin down and walk around the table toward the broken plate. As I pass Nikita’s chair, my arm is hugged to my tense side, as if he might reach out and snatch me. But he doesn’t. He watches as I drop to my knees and begin gathering shards of ceramic.

Every sharp piece I collect makes me think of cutting my wrist, even as I shake with fear of pain. How can I still be afraid of suffering while too mortified to live?

“Clean the wall , slave.”

My lips parted, I slowly lay the shards on the floor and turn to the splattered grease stain, bits of watery egg clinging to it.

I can feel his impatience behind me, the energy so violent I know he was serious about cutting off my tongue.

It would be fitting for him to choose today, of all days, to commit such a symbolically cruel act.

No one will ever believe I’m innocent, but without a tongue, I won’t even be able to speak the truth.

I wouldn’t put it past Him to have given Nikita the idea.

Rising onto my knees, I close my eyes and lightly run the tip of my tongue across the wall. Bits of egg collect on my taste buds, but it’s only sour shame that registers.

“What’s going on?”

Arseni’s voice. Cautiously curious.

I whimper at his arrival but don’t turn my head towards him, though I want to. I desperately want to.

My lungs wheeze as pain twists, and it’s stupid, but I want him to fix it. I want him to ask me if I’m okay. To kiss my tears away. To cradle me on his lap and talk to me like I’m a human being.

After his harsh desertion on Thanksgiving, I resented his presence. I’ve been grateful

for his neglect.

But now, his rejection hurts. It hurts like an all-new wave of agony rushing over me, and I want desperately for him to understand. Because it occurs to me that he's the only person in the world who might.

It's Nikita who speaks next, his voice bunching my shoulders.

"Oleg! Take the slut back to the basement!"

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

ARSENI

I don't look at Margot as she leaves.

My eyes stay trained on Nikita, my face blank. I don't know if this is some sort of test or if he's just gotten bored and decided to bring out the new toy. But I won't chance it either way.

Once Oleg and Margot are out of the room, I step closer to the table, my hands clasped behind my back.

"It's done."

Nikita lifts his coffee cup while eyeing me with what looks like annoyance. It must be about Margot, and I want to ask what happened but know better.

"Any witnesses?"

He takes a drink after watching my head shake. When he sets the coffee down, he rolls his neck. "Good. I don't ever want you to leave a witness again. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir... Is there a problem with the whore?"

He points to a newspaper lying in front of a chair crookedly pulled out. "Yeah. She's atrociously boring and comes with baggage."

I sit down in the chair, scooting it straight, and look over an article about Margot. The creases in my brow deepen the further I read.

“What the fuck?”

“Don’t get excited,” Nikita says, leaning back in his chair. “The cunt is innocent.”

I shake my head while skimming where it says the woman suspected of acquiring child pornography is evading the police. They don’t even think she’s been taken. They think she’s on the run.

That should be perfect for me. It should make me laugh. But humor never comes.

I turn to Nikita. “How do you know?”

He glares. She’s really put him in a foul mood. “How do you not know?”

I don’t answer him, but I vividly remember her begging me to return money to a ‘stalker.’ She freely claimed she was paying him off for information he had on her. When she wouldn’t tell me what it was, I grew disinterested. But if this is what she was hiding... Now I understand.

“I offered her sanctuary here, and she practically spit it back in my face,” Nikita says. “No one with this kind of deviant taste could resist that.”

“Resist what?” I ask, my voice oddly weak. “What were you going to do, provide her with the shit?”

Nikita raises a brow. “Did I just find your line?”

I rub a hand over my jaw and inhale a slow breath instead of answering.

I don't know why I'm annoyed with him. I don't even think he's serious.

The guy gets off on tugging out every sliver of vulnerability he can from a person, so it shouldn't surprise me that he'd take his chance with Margot. I'm not surprised. Just ... annoyed.

I stand from the table, folding the newspaper under my arm. Before I can take a step, my phone goes off. I don't have to look to know who it is. Luka gave himself a special ringer two years ago, which is just a series of porn star moans.

I strip my cell from my pocket and hit ignore while Nikita boils beside me.

"Who is it?" he asks, his voice deceptively calm.

"Fox. He found the guy who trashed my place." I turn the phone on vibrate and slide it back into my pocket.

"Again?"

Again...?

Shit .

I close my eyes at the memory of telling him about Fox's newly deceased enemy. It was brief, just an off-handed remark when Nikita asked yesterday. His tone was so bland, I knew he didn't care. But he obviously remembered.

"Now you're lying to me about Luka calling?"

I face him with a sigh. "I haven't been answering."

Don't be so fucking paranoid .

“Uh huh.” Nikita lazily lifts a hand. “And I suppose you want me to just trust that?”

“Yes.”

“ How ?”

“The same way I trust you, boss,” I say with a heavy shrug. “You say shit, I believe it. I say shit, you believe it. That's how these things work.”

Lowering his hand, he nods, but it isn't in agreement. “You say a lot of things, Arseni.” He blows a breath through his nose and looks away. “How are we supposed to trust each other if we keep secrets like this?”

“It's not a secret.” I shake my head. “I just didn't want it to worsen your already bad mood.”

“Ah, you lie to protect me. Thank you, son.”

My teeth grind as I look up at the ceiling. I remember the first time he called me son. We were in the back of the Lincoln, Oleg taking a walk as Nikita ordered. He said he wanted only my ears, and at the time, that had me beaming with pride.

I listened to the job he wanted me to do, one he claimed too important for anyone else to fuck up. He spoke to me in a way no one in the Bratva ever had, not even Luka. He spoke to me like I was not only intelligent, but essential. He saw things in me I didn't see, nobody had ever seen.

And when the moniker slipped off his tongue, his hand on my shoulder, I nodded sharply, obediently , but I am ashamed, humiliated to admit that I wanted to cry.

It doesn't have the same effect now. Now it just sounds condescending.

"What do you want me to do?" I deadpan.

"I want you to be loyal," Nikita says, his voice dropping like he's wounded. But it's fake. I don't even look at him, and I know it's fake.

"I am loyal."

Seconds pass, enough that I get tired of staring at the ceiling and look at him instead.

His chin rests atop interlaced fingers. When he perks up, his palms flattening on the table, he sucks in air to speak.

"I want you to block his number... I trust you, but I don't trust him.

He'll never get the message if you keep leaving the door open for him like this. "

Luka isn't a heartbroken ex-girlfriend. He's a fucking annoying gnat who won't buzz off.

"Fine." I pull out my phone and wag it. "I'll block him."

Murderous contempt pools in Nikita's eyes, making his upper lip twitch like he wants to sneer. But it only lasts a moment. His lips pull into a small smile as he lowers his chin. "Thank you, son."

I turn to leave, already unlocking my phone to go to Luka's contact, but Nikita isn't quite finished.

"Have the whore ready by tomorrow evening... I'm throwing a party in her honor.

And yours, too.”

My shoulders bunch, my steps faltering.

Yes sir .

That’s what I should say. It should slip off my tongue as easily as it has a thousand times before, but this time, my vocal cords are pulled too tight with some fiery force. I’m walking away before I realize it’s jealousy.

I leave without another word, even as protest stacks on my tongue. I couldn’t voice it even if I wanted to, even if I was currently capable. Any protest would only make me fail the inevitable test he’s giving me. I knew it would come. I knew it before Margot arrived.

Just don’t get attached .

When he spoke those words, I shrugged them away. I welcomed his tests, knowing I would come out favorable.

Don’t get attached? I’ve had more siblings than I’ve had friends. I’ve broken more friendships than I have hearts. I’ve fucked more women than all of the above.

I lost the only person I ever believed was family.

I have no attachment to anyone or anything. I could pack a trash bag full of shit tonight and live the same life in another city without a moment of discomfort.

All of this is true. And still, I feel uneasy heading for the basement. Like I’m somehow going to fail this test I’ve studied my whole goddamn life for.

I pull up Luka's contact when I make it to the basement door and hit block. When my phone asks if I'm sure, I hover my thumb above the confirmation.

My eyes closing, I click cancel and shove my phone back in my pocket.

MARGOT

When the basement door opens, I stare with hopeful anticipation.

Hard, even steps creek the floorboards until Arseni steps into the basement, his face a blank mask.

For days, I've avoided his eyes, always turned away when he's come in. But now I peer into them with a plea for understanding that he hasn't even asked for. He carries the newspaper under his arm and tosses it down when he reaches the bed.

"Was this his doing?" Arseni asks, his voice ice.

My gaze on him unrelenting, I nod. My mouth twists with the urge to cry, but I manage to speak a cracked word through it. "Yes."

Arseni runs a thumb over his strong jaw. "Was this what he had on you?"

He doesn't sound judgmental or scolding—as much as he should—nor does he sound intrigued like the other man. Still, the question makes me flinch.

"No." I shake my head so many times, it's pathetic. Like I'm hoping to remove all doubt. "No, I would never?—"

"So he planted them?"

I nod.

With a sigh, Arseni drops his hand and sits next to me on the mattress, his foot brushing the chain locking my raw ankle. “Are you surprised?”

I look down at my lap. “No... He told me he would do this.”

“Why?”

Again, I flinch. And again, it has nothing to do with Arseni’s tone.

My reflex is to lie and say that I don’t know. That the man is a maniac who has no rhyme or reason for his actions. But it’s a lie. After seven years, the weight of this secret has my head underwater.

Will he judge me? Will he...

No, he won’t. Arseni, of all people, will understand. And I need that right now more than anything.

I suck in a deep breath. “So that he could show the world who I am without having to come forward himself.”

I feel Arseni’s head turn to me, his eyes scrutinizing. My hands shake with fear of letting this lodge free. Even when the whole world hates me for a lie, it’s still terrifying to admit the truth.

“What?” Arseni asks, sounding genuinely confused.

I close my eyes and hug my knees. There aren’t any chemicals in this basement. I’m certain of it. For days, it’s smelled like mildew and death, and Arseni didn’t spontaneously bathe in Pine Sol.

But still, I smell the lemony scent of fear. It quickens my heartrate and threatens to paralyze me. I speak before my mouth can numb.

“When I was thirty, I met a boy who told me he was eighteen. I... I was attracted to him. At one point, I even thought I might be falling for him. But after a month passed of us ... dating ... he started acting crazy. He would call me during meetings then leave violent, raging voicemails when I didn’t answer.

He begged me to quit my job so we could run away together, and when I broke things off with him, he threatened to kill me and then off himself just like... ”

I clench my eyes shut and bite my tongue.

“Your parents,” Arseni mercifully finishes for me when I can’t. I nod.

“He was sixteen years old,” I whisper, my head lowered so I can’t see anything but the frills on my skirt and a curtain of hair. “I didn’t know. I swear, I didn’t know.”

I squeeze my arms around my knees while my stomach twists into a tight knot, though it isn’t due to Arseni’s judgement. He doesn’t care. He can’t care. It wouldn’t even make sense for him to.

But I care. I’ve cared every day since He told me he loved me.

I knew then what a horrible mistake I’d made, even before knowing he was a minor.

He was a boy who looked at me like I was beautiful, and I was eager to let him.

He reminded me of... He reminded me of my foster kid, and I was sick enough to use him as a replacement for my fantasy.

I made the greatest mistake of my life. And it all started with becoming a foster parent.

“You were thirty when I met you,” Arseni says, obviously putting the pieces together.

I bite my lip.

“Was I before or after this guy?”

“Before... You left just before it started.”

He huffs out an angry ball of air like he’s breathing fire. I’m not watching him, but I know he’s tense. His tension puts me in a headlock.

“You were adamant about kicking me out because of my ‘inappropriate sexual advances.’ The social worker wouldn’t place me with another woman because of you.”

“That’s the reason you had to go,” I say, my voice small. “I didn’t lie.”

He laughs dryly. “Was I seriously not attractive enough for you?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, I...” I raise my head and let out a shaky breath, wiping my palms on my thighs.

“You were too attractive.”

My mouth is dry, but I still swallow as I get the urge, not looking at Arseni. “I was having dreams about you. I was... I was afraid of what would happen if you stayed.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

He pauses like he’s waiting for me to explain, but I don’t. I don’t have words to.

“If you wanted to fuck me, you should’ve fucked me. I wasn’t psychotic. I wasn’t going to rat on you or stash child porn in your house as revenge for not loving me.”

Finally, I turn to him with my jaw dropped. “You’ve kidnapped me.”

His brow furrowing, he waves that away. “It’s different. I had a job to do, and you were conveniently?—”

My bitter laugh cuts him off, and he stares at me as his lips thin. “The only difference between the two of you is your denial about who you are and why you’re doing this. Seven years ago, I didn’t want either of you. And you’re both punishing me for it.”

He opens his mouth, his face red, but freezes without releasing words. His body slouches with a sigh as he rubs the back of his neck.

“Fine. We’re the same... But why not me ?”

When his eyes flicker with pain, I have to look away. I know exactly what he’s asking, and it isn’t why I chose to fuck the other guy instead of him.

Why didn’t you want me?

But really... What’s wrong with me?

I know he’s asking this because I’ve wondered that same thing about myself a thousand times.

It never goes away. No matter how many years pass, no matter how many flattering looks you receive, you never forget that the woman who bothered to carry you to term looked at you and walked away.

In my case, my mother walked to Heaven. In Arseni's...

who the fuck knows. But he asks himself why every day of his life, to each person he comes across.

I know because I feel it too. I know because I spoke to his counselor when he was seventeen.

He's the same as the boy who's heart I not only broke but warped into a black hole. He's also the same as me.

"Because I loved you," I whisper. "Not... Not like that. But I loved you. I saw you as a wounded manipular trying desperately to push everyone who tried to care for you away. I saw how scared you were that they would leave. I... I saw you, Arseni.

"And I knew the one thing you needed most in the world was someone who would reject all of your efforts to sabotage their love for you. And for someone to see you as the scared child that you were. I wanted so badly to be that person. So badly... But I couldn't stop seeing you as a man, and I was not going to be just another person who used you before throwing you away. "

I pause, biting my lip against a stomach cramp. "I hate that I couldn't see how broken the other boy was... But I'm glad I didn't do to you what I did to him."

"Still?" he asks, his body turning my way. "You're still glad?"

There's disbelief in his voice that I can't help but validate. I know I should hate him,

and a part of me does. There's just so much more of me that hates myself.

"Yes," I breathe out, feeling smaller sitting next to Arseni. I brace for a laugh. For him to degrade me, tell me what a fool I am.

Instead, he smooths a hand over my jaw and turns me toward him. His lips press to mine gently, his fingers brushing my cheek.

For a moment, I just stay still and play the part of unwilling participant. But it feels like such an act now, and his touch is lighter than I knew he was capable of, and his cologne smells like safety, and it all just feels like exactly what I need it to be.

I kiss him back, my body twisting to face him. When my hands move to his hard chest. It's the signal he needs to deepen our kiss, his mouth opening to invade mine. And I let him. I meet his tongue and stretch my neck when he chooses to claim it, hungry lips devouring me.

I don't know what his touch means. I don't know if he's telling me everything's going to be okay or that he finally forgives me or if maybe he just wants to fuck me again.

But I pretend. When his hands work the buttons of my blouse, I pretend he's saying he understands. When he rips his shirt over his head, I pretend he's saying he sees me too. He sees that I don't have evil in my heart, despite my poor decisions. That I'm good . That I...

That I try. That I really fucking try.

His tongue licks the valley between my breasts while he works my blouse over my arms. I shrug the material off and let it lie behind me. The soft cotton flattens under my back as Arseni guides me to the mattress.

I arch for him when one of his hands slides around to unclasp my bra, his other tugging the skirt down my waist. The material is filthy with his crusted cum and my sweat, but it feels unbearably hot too. No one could ever accuse Arseni of being cold blooded.

He roars like an inferno on top of me, his lips latching onto my nipple while he yanks my bra free of my arms. It's so sexy, I squirm from my clit throbbing.

He moves onto the other nipple before rising up and unbuckling his belt, his pants sagged low enough that a well-defined V juts from his waist. I could lick the valleys the way he did my breasts and get off just the same as if he fucked me.

"I want you on top," he says, his eyes blazing with lust. It makes me feel alive. It makes me feel desirable, lust-worthy, and like I wouldn't dare do anything other than what he wanted, just to keep those fiery eyes on me.

I balance myself on my knees when he yanks me up by my arm, pulling me against his chest. I cling to his sides and peer up at him with my clit so full, it aches.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

“Grab my cock,” he commands, his hand moving my hair over my shoulder. It’s too thin and has no body, but I like that he likes it down. My scalp tingles while he combs his fingers through it, but then stings as he yanks, not enough to really hurt, just enough to get my attention.

I tuck my hand inside his boxers to grip him and squeeze when he jumps in my grasp. He pushes his pants down and lowers to breathe in my ear. “Stroke me.”

I obey instantly, his quick breaths egging me on as I stroke him until my forearm burns.

“Faster .”

Sucking in a sharp breath, I hurry to obey, pumping him with the same speed as I’d rub myself. A moan escapes my mouth just from the energy in the room and my greedy core. I use my other hand to work my clit at the same time I stroke Arseni.

My lips are parted with tiny moans, so when Arseni fits his mouth over mine, he has no struggle gliding his tongue inside. I match his intensity, kissing him back, only hitching when he wraps his arms around my back and pulls me down with him.

I shift on my knees until my needy hole finds his cock. Finally, our kiss breaks with his groan as I lower myself onto him, clenching to the deliciousness of my walls filling.

I needed this.

This thought plays through my mind as I grind my hips. The friction his cock makes is like a smooth caress and a tight pair of arms hugging me that feel so good I could cry. I needed this. He wanted this.

“Just like that,” he coos, holding my hips with wide-splayed hands.

His approval makes me hold my rhythm, the spot I hit, hold everything.

It hits me just how hard I want to please him, and I try not to think about how pathetic that might be.

I just keep reminding myself that this is okay, that I need this, over and over until the thought no longer seems required.

I gasp when Arseni squeezes my breasts and lifts himself to suck my nipples. I was already so wound up when I climbed on top of him that the extra stimulation shoves me over the edge. My mouth opens in a loud moan as I slowly roll on top of him, pleasure shooting up my spine and squeezing my core.

I slap my hands down on Arseni’s abs and dig my fingers into the tight bundles of muscle.

“That’s a good girl,” he purrs, rubbing my thighs. He waits until the waves of my orgasm recede to roll me to my side.

Hurrying onto his knees, he flips me on my stomach and drags my hips up to his cock. I’m still shifting my knees when he impales me.

“Uhh,” I cry out, running my hands along cushioned metal rings in the old mattress until my arms are fully stretched in front of me. Arseni slaps my ass as his cock massages against my G-spot and makes me mewl.

“Tell me you like this,” he commands while he fucks me, gripping my ass until it stings.

I don’t hesitate. “I like it.”

“Louder.” His pace quickens.

I let out a cry before turning my head to the side and sucking air into my lungs. “I like it.”

“That’s not good enough, baby. Come on.” He spanks me again, hard enough that my body jerks.

I bite my lip and clench my eyes at the forceful thrusts of his hips, the needy way he palms me. His desire is so expressive, so uncontrolled. I can’t say what it does to me because it’s hard to put into words.

“I love your cock, Daddy,” I yell, giving him what he really wants.

He digs his hands into my hips while he ruts into me, even harder, even faster. “Holy fuck,” he groans, little grunts escaping him.

It’s seconds before he slams into me with two hard, emptying thrusts, a guttural, animalistic growl ripping up his chest. His grip on my hips bruises.

When his hold finally relaxes, he nudges me forward and lays down beside me. I crawl onto his chest while he stares up at the ceiling.

“That was amazing,” I say through pants, my lips curving into a smile despite all the odds.

To the world, I'm a monster. But here, in this dark, gloomy torture chamber, for just a moment, I'm okay.

I crane my neck to look at him when he doesn't respond. His face is blank, his hand lightly draped around me.

My smile falls along with my stomach, and for a solid second, I wonder if I imagined everything that just happened. If he wasn't as palpably lustful as I thought.

But no, I remember well. It was incredible. For both of us.

"Is—is everything okay?"

Seconds pass. Without looking at me, Arseni nudges me off him and untangles himself from the chain caging his shins.

I sit up as he dresses, tucking my legs beneath me and crossing my arms over my chest. My face is hotter, hotter than it was when I was inflamed by his desire.

Once his shirt is over his head, he tugs it straight and speaks to the wall. "Tomorrow night, you're going to be the entertainment at my boss's party... Try to fuck just like that. You might enjoy it."

He leaves me like that, and I just let him. Shock numbs my face, my tongue, my throat until I can't even think of speaking.

When the basement door closes, so does the door to my heart. I've never felt so stupid for letting a person in.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

ARSENI

Hudson is already sitting at a table in the back when I get to the bar.

He's in plain clothes today, which makes him look ten times closer to the friend I knew.

His blond hair is tousled, his baby blue T-shirt hugs his biceps.

He's facing away from me, but when I approach the circular table for two, he looks up with his stupid grin that for some reason brings me instant comfort.

"Hey, man," he says, slouched on the barstool while cupping a bottle of beer. "You still drink Coors?"

I eye the bottle in front of me as I sit down. Honestly? I've never given a shit about brands in my life. It all tastes like refreshing piss to me.

"Yeah, thanks." I pick it up and take a pull for the sake of politeness, but after I set it down, I roll my neck and pull out my cigarettes.

"You still smoke?" he asks, as if cigarettes are only a teenage thing.

I pop one in my mouth and flick my lighter three times before it ignites over the tip of my cancer stick.

The nicotine does little to relax me, but it at least makes my bones stop itching.

I offer the pack as I exhale a cloud of smoke.

Holding up his hands, he shakes his head. “You look like shit.”

I toss the pack next to an ashtray in the center of the table. “Long day.”

Hudson checks his watch. “It’s mid-morning.”

My shoulders lift and fall. “So how the hell are you, Suds?”

His lips spread into a grin. A slow, knowing grin that reminds me how human I am. I swear I can lie to most in the Bratva, but Hudson sees right through me, even after all this time. That’s the power of history.

“You called me out here to ask how I am?”

I stare blankly as if I’m confused. Taking another drag, smoke collecting in my lungs allows me a few moments’ hesitation. I blow it out the side of my mouth then rest the burning cigarette in a groove of the ashtray. “You told me you wanted to get a beer, remember?”

“That’s what people are supposed to say when they run into old friends. I’m a cop now, Ars... You think I didn’t run your name as soon as I had a minute to kill?”

I don’t say anything. My heel taps against the metal leg of the stool as I think through my next words. Part of me just wants to spit out my questions and get this over with. The other part knows better. Hudson can read me because he knows me at my core. I know him just the same.

He looks around as if he thinks someone is eavesdropping, but the only people in here are us, a guy drinking at the bar, and the bartender busy staring at the forecast on a

mounted TV. Hudson leans toward me. “What would your bosses think if they knew you were sitting with a cop?”

They’d think I should die. No questions asked. No chance to defend myself.

It’s telling that I’m here at all.

Again, I don’t respond. He knows I’m with the Bratva, but he isn’t stupid enough to believe I’d admit it. He managed to get a 17% in Algebra, but he’s got a graduate degree in street education.

“Whatever you want, it must be important.”

“It is.”

He lifts a hand, his eyebrows raising as if to tell me to get on with it. I flatten my palms on the table while leaning toward him.

“You know the old foster mom of mine we talked about the other day ... Margot Stevens?”

He nods.

“I read in the papers this morning that they found child pornography in her house.”

Hudson’s eyes gloss over a moment before lighting up. He jabs an excited finger at me. “Holy shit, right, that was her. I can’t believe I didn’t put two and two together. You know she’s on the run?”

“That’s what I read.”

Hudson looks around again. His voice is hushed when he speaks.

“Between you and me... What’s in the newspapers isn’t all she’s got a warrant out for.

There’s an eighteen-year-old rich kid who’s claiming they’ve been hooking up for years.

His parents put out a hundred-thousand-dollar reward for anyone who has information on her whereabouts. ”

I blink several times. “Who’s the kid?”

Hudson smiles. “Come on, man. You know I can’t tell you that.”

My head turns while I try to make sense of that, but I can’t. The guy stalking Margot would be my age by now. Unless she was lying.

But no, she wasn’t. No fucking way could she fake all that.

I shake my head. “Whatever information you have is bogus. Margot is innocent. Trust me, if she was a pedophile, I would know it.”

Hudson laughs. “Just because she didn’t wanna fuck you doesn’t mean she isn’t a predator, man... Although, that’s gotta sting.” He winks before taking another swig of his beer.

“I’m serious, Hudson... She’s being set up.”

He shrugs. “Okay, so? What do you care?”

What do I care?

Great question. Great fucking question.

“Are you really risking your life so you can tell me your old foster mommy wouldn’t let you smash; therefore, she couldn’t possibly be a pedo?”

“No... I’m risking it because I need a favor.”

He arches a brow.

“I need you to check Margot’s doorbell camera and the camera at her back porch for anybody entering her home over the last couple of days. Unless he came and left through a window, you should see a man our age who’s been stalking her for the last seven years. He planted the photos.”

“What?” Hudson smiles, but it’s stilted.

“I’d do it myself, but the place is being surveilled in case she comes back... Just tell the detective working the case you got a tip.”

“Why don’t you tell him?” He hitches his thumb. “We can go to the station now. They’re definitely gonna have some questions for you.”

I just stare at him until his eyes dim.

“Oh... Right,” he says like he’s just remembering why I can’t talk to cops. He ruffles his untidy hair and leans forward on his elbows. “Ars, is there something else you wanna tell me?”

“Like?”

“Like... Do you know where Margot Stevens is?”

I shake my head. “I got a no-reply email from her last night asking for my help. She thinks I’m the only person anyone might believe, given our history. And I believe her.”

Hudson’s lips twist while his eyes roam my face. I can tell he thinks I know where she is. I like the guy, but I wouldn’t be terribly surprised if the police started following me. It’s too bad there isn’t a cop’s chance in heaven they could get a warrant to search Nikita’s house.

“Remember what I said about that hundred-thousand-dollar reward?” he hints.

“I don’t know where she is, Hudson.”

He stares at me another few moments before leaning back and lifting up his hands. “All right... I’ll give your tip to the detectives. Will we find prior evidence of this stalker ?” He says it like the word deserves quotes. “I’m assuming she’s filed reports on the guy?”

Turning my eyes to a ‘Welcome to Las Vegas’ street sign on the wall, I consider it. It doesn’t take long.

“No.”

She would’ve been too ashamed. If I had his name, this might be simpler, but I’m guessing it’s a little too late to insist on her giving it to me. It’s doubtful she’ll ever trust me again.

Her wounded voice enters my mind, making me flinch. She sounded more heartbroken than I’ve ever heard her when I left the basement. It was like I

disappointed her. Like she expected more from me.

But it's too late to be her hero. It's too awkward to be her friend.

This is the best I can do.

"She went seven years of being stalked without ever making a report?" Hudson asks.

"She had her reasons."

"Such as..." he twirls his hand, but I'm finished with the conversation.

He's a good guy. I've always liked him, and if I'm honest, talking to him reminds me of all the things I don't have in common with Luka.

It reminds me that there are people out there who get me, who've seen pain and have known what it's like to fall to the slums.

And there are some, like Hudson and me, who were lucky enough to get a second chance at life. The world is cruel, but it's kinder than I am. No one gets a second chance from me.

"Thanks, Suds," I say, standing and throwing a couple of bills down. I pat his shoulder as I walk by and pull my hood up before walking out of the bar, hoping like hell my paranoid boss doesn't have someone following me. He'd never understand this.

Hudson and I may be a lot alike, but we're on opposite sides of the fence.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

MARGOT

For the first time in days, my captors have given me new clothes. A shower. Jewelry even.

But it isn't out of kindness. Not even close.

The man with platinum blond hair, Oleg, is the one who took me upstairs. At first, I thought he was being merciful. He didn't come into the shower with me or even pay much attention while I undressed.

Then he ordered me to shave. Everywhere. That was the first sign of sinister intent. The second was the red, lacy lingerie he deemed a 'dress,' the six-inch heels accompanying them hardly subtle.

I don't know why it felt so cruel for him to insist I dress myself up like a whore, going as far as making me fix my hair and makeup.

But it did. When I was finished, I thought for sure he'd take me to Nikita, but to my great relief, he brought me back to the basement.

I've been sitting on the mattress, my hands shaking ever since.

The knowledge of an ominous party happening tonight makes the wait so much worse than if I were sitting in the dark. A party means people, not person. It's unlikely I'll be solely facing Nikita when I go back upstairs.

How many people are they going to have rape me? How much more broken can I possibly be?

When the door to the basement finally opens, I suck in a breath and stand, lifting my chin as if I'm not terrified. It feels stupid and pointless, but I can't stand the idea of the sadists getting off on my fear.

I expect Oleg to show, but it's Arseni who's come to get me. My face falls along with my eyes until I lift them up like heavy weights.

He's one of them. He's worse than them. At least they're honest.

He shouldn't get to see my fear either.

Holding my gaze on his face turns out being useless when he won't look at me. A ring of jingling keys swings on his finger as he approaches, the chain around my ankle in his sights.

He doesn't say a word as he unshackles me then grasps my arm and leads me to the stairs.

I told myself the next time I saw him wouldn't hurt, that I was awakened now, that he couldn't weaken me anymore.

But still, with every step up the stairs we take, his hardened expression wiggles the knife he plunged into my chest.

"You're a monster for this," I say, keeping my voice as even as possible.

He flicks his blank gaze at me then shoves open the basement door. "True... But there are worse things."

I huff. “Like what?”

“Like pedophiles.”

That hits me like a physical blow to my stomach, and my lungs act accordingly. I yank from his grasp, my chest hurting from lack of oxygen until I manage to take a weak inhale.

I told myself I wouldn’t do it. I swore to myself I wouldn’t do it. But my eyes don’t care. They fill with pained tears Arseni doesn’t react to.

Standing in the doorway, he slides to the side and waves for me to go through. When I don’t budge, he lowers his hands to his sides. A frown, almost imperceptible, shows more in his eyes than it does on his lips.

“If you don’t walk, I’ll carry you... You don’t want me to do that.”

“What’s going to happen to me?” I cross my arms over my chest and glare like I’m angry, but all I can seem to feel is fear and betrayal. I wish I was angry.

Arseni just stares.

“Arseni...” His eyes close as my voice trembles.

“Stop,” he says before his Adam’s apple flexes. His voice is sharp, but the discomfort is written in his features.

He doesn’t want to do this .

I turn my head away when hope brings warmth to my frozen toes. I can’t fall for this again. My heart won’t allow it.

He doesn't care about you, Margot. He's never cared about you.

He kidnapped you. He assaulted you. He used you when you were most vulnerable then tossed you away like a cum-filled sock.

He. Does. Not. Want. You.

"Don't fight this," Arseni says, opening his eyes with a sigh. "You'll only make things worse for yourself."

"What am I supposed to do?" My voice squeaks as I wrap my arms tighter. "Am I just supposed to let people rape me?"

"Yes." He nods, his tone completely serious.

It only scares me more. "You should be as boring as possible. I think..." He breaks his gaze away.

"I think I can keep you for a while, but if you excite Nikita, things will get harder for you. You don't want to grab his attention..."

So don't fight. And don't cry too much."

My breath stutters through my dropped jaw, and I climb the last step to meet my captor. "Arseni, please . Help me ."

"I can't."

"Why not?" I flatten my palms against his chest and sidle close to him. My eyes are all pleas, but it makes no difference because he doesn't look at me.

“Because I don’t want to.” He bats my hands away as he distances himself. I nearly fall forward. My wobbly legs don’t want to stand.

“You’re a whore, Margot,” he says, squaring his shoulders.

He looks just above me. “Whoever you think I am, get it out of your head. I’m not your savior.

I’m not your friend. I’m the guy who fucks you so your cunt doesn’t dry up before it’s put to use.

That is all that I am... If you don’t start walking, I’m gonna hurt you.

” He finally finds my eyes when he shrugs. “It’s your choice.”

My choice...

As if anything that has happened here has been my choice.

He played me. He played me like the blind idiot I am.

Now I feel anger. It stills the quiver in my lip, pinches off my tear ducts. Gritting my teeth, I nod and wipe the moisture off my cheeks.

When Arseni starts walking, I follow him, just to save myself the embarrassment of uselessly begging him one more time. I only have a hint of dignity left, and I’ll need it for tonight. Nikita is bound to shred all he can.

My eyes stay glued to Arseni’s back as I follow him down a hallway into the open space of what I’m guessing is a living room. My eyes finally move from him when he stops.

A man by the sofa ceases his pacing and lets his arms uncross when he sees Arseni. Then his gaze flicks to me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Arseni growls. His shoulders lift with tension.

The man opens his mouth, but no words come out when Nikita’s arrival interrupts. “Luka.” Nikita spreads his arms in a warm welcome that I’ll never trust again. “I’m so glad you could make it. Please,” he waves his hand to gesture toward a hall. “The party’s right this way.”

After turning back to us with his face pinching, Luka heads where Nikita waved, not bothering to respond to the psychopath. Which is a little strange considering Nikita is supposedly important.

“Why the fuck would you invite him?” Arseni sneers as soon as Luka’s gone.

Nikita’s smile drops. “He came by yesterday while you were out. It doesn’t seem he got the message I asked you to send... But ,” Nikita sighs. “I’ve decided to forgive you. You’re young and impulsive; it’s in your nature to seek out those with the same maturity.”

Arseni’s back straightens as his hands flex. Nikita didn’t speak in a condescending tone—more like he was merely stating the truth. That only magnifies the slight.

“I’ve decided to embrace this,” he says like he’s really decided to be the bigger person. I don’t really know what this is about, but I can see it’s pissing Arseni off. “Now...”

When Nikita’s eyes find mine, they stay as dark as his soul, the smile he forces never touching them. He gestures where Luka went. “If you don’t mind, Margot. You’re the guest of honor.”

If I don't mind.

I scoff aloud when I only mean to do it in my mind. Nikita's smile slips, but he doesn't say anything more. Arseni grips my bicep and drags me down the hall, Nikita's cane stabbing the floor behind us. I don't know what happened to give him that limp, but I hope it was painful.

Music comes from an open set of double doors, and when we enter what looks to be four rooms made into one, several sets of eyes turn to look at me like they were anticipating our arrival. My arrival. Others are too caught up in their own sin to notice us.

I look around the room that's purpose appears solely for sex.

Many couples and even a pair of three people are adding moans to the musical space as their bodies mingle on top of leather couches, one of four benches, and in one case, the wall.

Several pieces of equipment litter the room without any obvious purpose, but there's one piece at the head of the room that runs my imagination wild.

Four tall, wooden posts jut from the floor with cords strung through metal rings at each of their centers. I know this is meant for me even before Arseni leads me to it. It's too big, too spotlighted not to be for the main event.

My spine shivers as the eyes on my back seem to multiply. This is only getting more terrifying.

I peer over my shoulder at Arseni as he nudges my back toward the posts. But of course, he doesn't look at me. If he did, it wouldn't matter. He isn't going to change my fate. He isn't my ally.

Still, I'm pathetic enough to try.

"What is this?" I whisper as he leads me to one of the posts and begins tying me to it.

Yellow rubber strangles my wrist, cutting off blood to my hand.

It's mercilessly tight, despite the elastic material, but I don't bother protesting.

I'm too busy sweeping the room, darting across faces that look hungry, vicious, ready to devour me. All except one.

I linger my gaze on Arseni's supposed friend leaning against a wall near the exit. He frowns, his brow furrowing uncomfortably, but he doesn't look away.

Please, I mouth, though I know it's futile. He does nothing in response.

As Arseni pulls my other arm to the beam on my left, opening up my chest, I turn to him. "Arseni, what are you doing?"

Still no answer. I don't really need it. It becomes clear when he finishes tying my wrists and lifts my leg, bringing my sore ankle to another pole. I gasp at the sudden strain in my arms and try to put my weight on the ground with my other foot. My toe barely touches.

"Please, please, stop. You don't have to do this.

" Adrenaline washes the walls of my veins.

I thought I was scared, but it's now that the real panic starts.

My breaths come in tight little jerks of my lungs when he moves onto my other ankle,

lifting me into the air so every limb is spread for maximum exposure.

The last knot he makes feels like it cuts off all blood supply to my foot, but it doesn't hurt nearly as much as the tension in my joints. My limbs scream as he steps back to observe me.

“Arseni...”

I let out a sob that he doesn't acknowledge. I press my chin to my chest to peer at him, my neck protesting for nothing when he doesn't meet my eyes.

Another voice calls to him, and we both look to see who it is. A blonde woman, young and perky, gives him a seductive wave like they know each other. Or maybe she's just a slut.

He goes to her while I feel as though the muscles in my shoulders will tear, and he doesn't give me a passing glance as he takes the woman's hand and leads her to a couch.

I let my head fall back to look at the ceiling, my sobs uncontained. Fear clutches my throat until I can't get any real air in, my desperate lungs trying so hard they hyperventilate.

When the first man's hands slide up my thighs, pushing the lacy lingerie onto my stomach, I clench my eyes shut and try to pretend I care as little as Arseni does.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

ARSENI

Margot's cries for help completely drown out Eve's voice. Still, she yammers in my ear like she can't see the lack of blood in my face, the cold sweat beading my forehead.

She talks to me like I'm fine. Like this is fine.

Like everything's fucking fine.

"Arseni !" Margot yells for the hundredth time. Days ago, I loved my name on her tongue. Yesterday, I loved it.

Now it's a fucking ice pick in my ear. And Eve just. Keeps. Talking.

My eyes find Nikita across the room. Unsurprisingly, the voyeur fuck is by himself, sitting on a throne that would look like the other identical chairs if his pompous ass wasn't attached.

He smiles and raises his glass to toast me. Even from here, I can feel his satisfaction. I can see his game.

This isn't so he can make use of Margot. This is so he can ruin her for me.

Breaking away from him, I try to suck in air, but nothing comes. My heartbeat thuds in my ears so loud, Margot's cries are now muted. I'm not grateful for it. I feel like I'm having a heart attack.

“Are you okay?” Eve asks, her muffled voice breaking through as she plants a gentle touch on my shoulder. “Arseni?”

I slouch forward and place my hand over my heart, it’s out of control thump assuring me it hasn’t stopped. It feels so fucking cold in here. So loud, even as my brain works tirelessly to drown it out.

Too much. It’s too much.

I grip the edge of the couch and force myself to stand on wobbly legs. I stumble toward the door like oxygen awaits on the other side, and when Luka blocks my way, I give him a shove. My gait is a lurching, uneven shuffle all the way out the door.

Once I’m in the hall, I flatten my back against the wall and suck in deep, fast, breaths until I no longer feel like I’m suffocating.

My eyes are closed, so it’s Luka’s footsteps that give away his presence, though I didn’t even need them. I knew he’d follow.

“Who is she?” he asks, his voice low. Kind. Like he’s speaking to someone fragile.

I open my eyes and wipe the sweat off my upper lip, pushing myself away from the wall just to prove I’m not too weak to stand.

“Some whore. What the fuck does it matter?”

“It matters because you were having a fucking panic attack in there. Who is she ?” His voice is harder this time, but it’s also filled with a heavy dose of concern. Not for Margot. Luka is a lot of things, but a good guy is not one of them. His concern is for me.

And I hate him for it. I fucking hate him for it.

I turn my head just so I don't have to look at him. "Margot Stevens."

I don't have to see him to feel tension wrapping around his surprise. "The foster mother?"

Bringing my bottom lip into my mouth, I nod and wish I'd never told him about her. Wish he couldn't see how screwed up I am.

But at the same time... I don't feel disappointed that he's here. That one person in this building knows me, just so I don't feel alone. Even as I put Margot through hell, it's myself I try to coddle.

She's right. I'm a monster.

"Is this really who you want to be?" Luka asks. "I mean, Jesus Christ, Arseni, she wasn't your real mother. She didn't abandon you. Pick a lighter method of revenge, for fuck's sake."

"This wasn't my idea."

"Then stop it ."

"I can't."

"Why not?" he spits. All the judgement he held back when he walked out here is in every word he speaks. But he sounds genuine too.

Margot is my past. My problem. Mine to hurt and mine to eventually kill. It doesn't matter what arrangement I made with Nikita. If I'm as valued to him as he claims, he

would step aside if I asked him to.

That's the problem, though. I'm not worth shit.

"Because this is a test." Finally, I meet Luka's eyes. "Nikita wants to know I won't let a woman make me weak."

"So?" Luka's nose wrinkles as he scoffs. "Fuck him. When did you start caring about this shit?"

"When did you start caring about this shit?" I counter, leaning toward him. My finger stabs the air as I talk. "Don't you dare act like you're some kind of saint. She's just a whore. You've done worse."

His hands raise at his sides. "So what? This isn't about me. This?—"

"It's always about you." I step up to him until I have to raise my head to look into eyes brimming with self-righteous arrogance. It isn't new. Luka is the most selfish person I know.

His jaw slowly unclenches, softening his features. "You're right."

No .

My fists tighten, my jaw tics. Anger roars so hot, it heats my sweat as I will him to sneer. To spit back. To prove everything about him I've come to believe.

I hate you.

Goddamn it, I hate you.

“I dragged you into my world because I was selfish and alone.” He places his hands on my arms. “There are so many instances where I thought I was helping you, when really, all I wanted was to mold you to be like me. I made you a killer when you could’ve been anything. But you do not have to?”

“That’s what you think you did to me?” I yank from his hands as I step back. “You think I’ve been angry about?”

“I know exactly what you’re angry about... None of it happened the way you think it did, Arseni. I didn’t choose her over you.”

I rip my head away and scoff, but all my derision does is put a light Band-Aid over the wound from his betrayal.

Scars burn on my body, some permanent, some just a memory. Two weeks I spent in captivity while protecting Luka from the same fate. No matter how much our enemies tortured me, I could never have given him up.

Instead of coming for me, he ran off with his girlfriend. He chose to save her instead.

“I didn’t know ,” he goes on, his face twisting desperately. “I had no idea they’d taken you. If I had?”

“Get out.” Not my voice. Nikita’s.

Luka and I turn to look toward the playroom entrance where he stands. “You’ve upset my partner.” He gestures to me. “And you’re tainting my guests’ fun. Get the fuck out of my house . Tell my nephew I said hi.”

Luka glares at Nikita but doesn’t respond. When he turns to me, he nods to the door. “Come with me.”

“No.”

“Arseni, the sick fuck doesn’t give a shit about you. Walk away with me, right now. Come on.” He tries to grab my arm, but I pull away. One glance at Nikita tells me it isn’t enough.

I wrap my fingers into a fist and slam it into Luka’s jaw, sending him stumbling backward before I shove him to the ground.

His lanky body hits with a grunt.

Towering over him for once, I ram my shoe into his ribs, once twice three times before moving my aim lower down his side.

“Fuck, Arseni, stop,” Luka growls, his body naturally curling against the blows. He could stop me easily if he wanted. Instead, he just fucking lies there like a helpless bitch.

Fight back , you pussy , I want to snarl but don’t with Nikita standing there.

He doesn’t.

He won’t.

And I truly wish I didn’t care.

When I’m done, I turn away from him like he means nothing to me and storm toward Nikita.

My hands shake with rage, and I’m banking on him thinking it’s directed toward Luka.

In truth, this is the first time I haven't wanted to hurt Luka.

It's the first time he's told me to walk away that I wish I could. If Margot didn't need me, I might.

When I'm a foot from Nikita, I stop and stare, my face feeling hard as a rock. "Partners, right?" I ask, managing to hold most of my sarcasm back.

Nikita nods but doesn't give me a patronizing smile like he normally might.

I reach into his suit jacket and pull his knife from its sheath. Holding it up for him to see, I flick open the blade. "No more tests."

He doesn't respond, but I don't wait for him to. I stomp back into the playroom where Margot has gone silent. There's a man between her legs who's leaned over so he can lick her tits like a fucking pervert with a death wish.

I step behind him to grant it, jerking him up by his hair before plunging the knife into his back. He yells but is silenced with three stabs in a row, quick jerks of my arm allowing nothing but gurgled protests to come from him.

I could stop there, but I don't. The knife enters his back at odd, frenzied angles like I'm carving a pumpkin on LSD. It isn't until I get tired of holding his lifeless body up that I finally drop him, along with the knife.

The room has silenced. Even the music has been turned off.

Margot has her face turned away from me as I cut the cords suspending her, and she still doesn't look at me when I cradle her in my arms and carry her from the room. Every other set of eyes follows me to the door.

I pass Nikita without a word and step over the blood Luka spilled on the floor. He's nowhere in sight. Margot shakes in my arms as I carry her up the stairs to the room I'm occupying. She doesn't say a word, and I start to wonder if she'll ever speak to me again.

I wouldn't blame her. Like I said... I don't give second chances.

I'd be a hypocrite to ask for one.

MARGOT

I can smell the man's blood on me.

The sound of the bath running plays in the background of my muddled mind as I stare down at my abdomen. Lace clings to my belly like the chilled, thick liquid is a glue. It was hot when it touched me. And red. So red.

My eyes had opened when my assailant's mouth ripped from my nipple and the weight of his body left. I was confused at first. He looked more afraid than I felt. I didn't even know his jerking body was being stabbed until liquid fire spurted from his mouth onto my stomach.

I screamed. I thought I was next.

Then his body dropped, revealing Arseni clutching a knife like a mad man. He looked so enraged, I wasn't sure if I should be scared.

I'm still not sure.

My back leaned against the filling tub, I peel the skimpy lingerie from my stomach to see the blood smear.

I close my eyes and let the lace fall while Arseni moves around the bathroom, collecting things for a bath that could never wash away tonight.

Or last night or the night before. Or even twenty-seven years before when I first

witnessed death.

It's their bodies I think of instead of the man's from tonight.

My father's blood under my bare feet, painting footprints on our hardwood floor.

My mother's silk robe in the clutches of my tiny hands.

Her strangled cry.

His yells of remorse.

Him calling my name softly, gingerly, as if he didn't plan to kill me too.

The worst day of my life.

For twenty-seven years I've given it that claim without a second thought of if a day could get any worse. Now, I consider it. But no, it still takes the lead.

"Fuck!" Arseni yells, slapping a hand on the porcelain wall of the tub. It makes me jump.

My eyes open as I turn to him, but he isn't looking at me. I'm not sure he ever will again.

His forehead is pressed to the wall, his eyes clenched shut.

Regret. He's regretful.

I wish I cared.

When water spills over the side of the tub, wetting my back, Arseni shuts off the faucet and kneels in front of me. I just stare at him and wait to see if he'll look at my face, but he chooses my stomach instead. His head hangs low as the crease between his eyes deepens.

“Are you hurt?” he asks in a voice that sounds so uncertain. I hate him for it. I hate him for having the audacity to come to my aid when it was too late.

“Yes,” I say. Firmly. Though I know he's talking about the blood. It isn't mine, but that isn't what he asked. He doesn't deserve a moment's reprieve from the guilt hunching his shoulders.

Clearing his throat, he tucks one hand under my knees and another around my back to lift me gently. He places me in the tub, sending water splashing onto his shirt and drenching his shoes before he removes the soaked lingerie over my head like I'm his dying grandmother, lost without him.

It's wrong and stupid, but it makes me more aware of my age. It makes me think of the blonde he was with and the way he took her hand. Has me imagining what it must be like for her after they have sex and she's lying on his pillow.

I doubt he cherishes her, but I bet he's never left her lying in her own self-hatred with his cum leaking between her thighs.

Arseni spurts liquid soap onto a rag, then runs it over my arm, creating little suds of masculine scent.

“I'm sorry I don't have anything that smells better,” he says, moving the rag across my neck, down my other arm. “I could go look for something else...”

My face has remained pretty much blank, but now it scrunches. I move my head to

look at him, but of course, he's pretending to be focused on cleaning my neck. I wonder how inflamed my skin will be before he moves lower.

"Are you fucking serious?" I ask. This makes him pause, but he doesn't answer. Or he's at least too slow.

"After everything you've done to me, this is what you're sorry for? Not having frilly soap?"

"No." He shakes his head.

"Check the bedroom your psycho friend took me to. I saw plenty of girly products while I was being made to look like a whore. You could score me some perfume if you're feeling generous."

He leans back on his heels and lays the rag on the side of the tub. He looks off like he's lost for words, but that isn't good enough for me. I've spent so much time feeling overly sorry for him. Now I feel like an idiot.

"I should've shot you when I had the chance." My voice quivers with what I tell myself is anger.

He nods. "I know."

"I should've filed fucking harassment charges against you." Water sloshes when I turn, not even sure if he follows what I'm saying. "I should've called the police when I busted you with pot. I should've sent you to jail."

He nods again. "I know."

"I was easy on you. I... I was kind to you."

“I know.”

“Don’t fucking tell me you know!” I screech, my voice reverberating off the bathroom walls.

He doesn't flinch. The bastard doesn't even flinch.

I swipe up the rag and slap it against my knee, lifting my leg to wash the touch of the dead man off me. No surprise, it doesn't work.

“I’m sure your toddler girlfriend appreciates you giving her a bath, but I happen to be a grown woman. I can wash myself. Go the fuck away.” I say it with such bite, such confidence that it hits me like a wind-knocking blow that I don’t actually want him to leave. And I’m afraid he will.

Arseni is... I don’t know what Arseni is, but he’s all I have.

“My toddler girlfriend?”

My jaw clenched, I turn my glare his way to finally, finally see him looking at me. And the asshole looks annoyed.

“You are obsessed with age.” He shakes his head and lays his forearms on the side of the tub.

I huff and roll my eyes but can feel my face heating. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. After everything you went through tonight, you’re still managing to be jealous of some girl younger than you.”

I’m certain my face is red as a tomato now. My lips are pinched as I turn away, but

I'm only forcing myself to be angry. I'm really just ashamed.

"Listen to me, Margot," he says, drawing me back to him with his hand on my cheek. His eyes are so serious, I want to stand up just so I'm taller than him. "Listen very fucking carefully so I can say this for the last time... I do not give a shit about your age."

I stay perfectly still, despite the urge to squirm. To fight back. To slap him just because I want to. Just because he deserves it. I don't because I want these words, despite everything in me telling me they don't matter.

"I do not give a shit who you've fucked or how old they were when you fucked them. I don't care that you were once my foster mother. I don't care that you think fucking me is wrong. You are a woman, and I am a man. That's it . Anything else is just filler."

His words make my chest hard, like it's frozen. When I speak, even the words passing through my mouth feel cold. "Except, it is wrong. You've been raping me."

He rolls his eyes. "Okay."

"Is that just filler , Arseni?"

"I haven't done anything you haven't enjoyed."

"Oh." My laugh is short and bitter. "I must've been moaning hard tonight then, huh? 'Cause I just loved that shit."

He cringes and looks away. His guilt has returned.

"You can't even look at me, let alone tell me you're sorry. You're a coward," I spit

with watery eyes.

“I am sorry.” After a deep breath, he turns to me. Instead of remorse, I catch anger making his brown eyes brighter. “No one is ever going to touch you again... I promise I’m going to find a way to fix this.”

“Fix what ?” I watch for him to cringe, as if realizing how moronic it is to tell me he can fix what’s already happened. But he doesn’t. His eyes hold steady onto me.

“I’m gonna get you out of here.”

My pinched face relaxes until my skin feels loose and sunken. “What?”

“I don’t know how yet, but I’ll find a way... No one is ever gonna hurt you again. You have my word.”

“Your word means nothing,” I say, but my voice is weak. Hopeful.

He nods. “I know.”

I blink at him. I think I don’t know what to say until the word slips out. “Why?”

His lips part, but he doesn’t speak. I wonder if he’s thinking about what to say. Or what his answer is.

Have I misunderstood? Is he really talking about letting me go?

My life beyond here materializes in my mind. Being on the run, or more likely, being in prison. I didn’t know it was possible, but a sudden fear rushes through me at the thought of leaving.

“Because I’m sorry,” he says.

I wait for more, but it doesn’t come.

I can’t think of anything to say. Thank you feels too ridiculous. I don’t believe you feels too repetitive.

‘How could I ever go back to my old life?’ feels too pathetic. Because what kind of person wouldn’t jump at the chance to leave this house of horrors?

What kind of person wouldn’t jump at the chance to leave Arseni?

He stands, obviously having no more to say, and leaves me to wash myself in my grown woman bath. All I can think the whole time is how I wish he was doing it instead.

ARSENI

I 'm laying down on the bed, my hands clasped behind my head when Margot finally walks from the bathroom. It's been at least thirty minutes since I left her, and I don't imagine she hates me any less.

I don't know what to say. I don't have anything to say.

I expect her to find the closet, but instead she walks to the bed and sits down facing away from me. The white towel she's wrapped in doesn't run low enough for me not to see the fingerprints on her thighs. I can't decide if I should hope they're mine.

I lay my head back and close my eyes, telling myself she's safe now. It's over. But it just ... doesn't make it go away.

"Are you really going to let me go?" she asks in a small, hopeful voice. How she could possibly believe me now is beyond me.

"Yes."

"How are you so sure your boss will let you?"

I don't answer right away. The 'how' has not been figured out. I don't know. I really don't know how Nikita will react.

He cannot kill me, but he can put her head up on a pole if he chooses. There aren't any rules against killing a witness. In fact, there is absolutely no way the Bratva will

just let me set her free. If Vitaly gets a whiff of this idiocy, I'm dead.

But Nikita... He's a psychopath who needs me. At the very least, he needs me not to open my mouth about what I know. There's a trade to be made here. If I can just figure out how to do it without getting Margot and myself killed...

Rule against killing me or not, Nikita wouldn't just risk me blabbing about what I know. I can't betray him. I can't turn my back on him. Even if I did walk away from him, I wouldn't know where to go.

So I need him to agree with this without the overt threat we both know I could throw. And that is gonna take some time.

I take too long to answer. Margot inhales a sharp breath like she thinks I was bullshitting her, all my credibility sucked away in a gust of air. I can't blame her.

"Even if you let me go, I still wouldn't escape him."

I stare at her for a moment, her chin lowered, her grasp around the towel tight. It takes me a second to figure out she isn't talking about Nikita.

"If you gave me your stalker's name, I could take care of him before the night is over."

She shakes her head without a moment's thought. "It isn't that simple."

"Of course it's that simple. I'll get a video confession of him planting the photos in your house. You can be free of him forever... I just have to know who he is."

Again, she shakes her head. If tonight hadn't created such a cloud of guilt inside of me, I'd probably get irritated with her. Maybe even snarky.

Instead, I just stare.

“I want to tell you,” she whispers, turning her face slightly toward me while still looking at the ground. “But I can’t. He’s more dangerous than you’re imagining.”

“Have you not figured out by now that I’m dangerous?”

“It’s different.”

“How is it different?”

“You’re not crazy,” she grinds out like it somehow matters. Like I don’t already live every day of my life dealing with a fucking lunatic. I roll my eyes but push to sit up. I’m not going to press her about it. In fact, I’m glad to be finished talking about him.

Then Margot speaks.

“He’s law enforcement.”

I perk up, the heel of my palms sinking into the memory foam.

“High up,” she squeaks. “Really high up... He’d destroy you, and if that didn’t settle him, he’d have you killed by your own people.”

My head tilts as I think. The high pitch of her voice gives me the impression that she’s lying. That she just doesn’t want me to pry again. But I can’t quite tell.

“He can’t, Margot. He’ll be dead.”

“He’ll find a way.”

Leaning back against the headboard, I can't help but laugh, even without finding anything funny. She sounds delusional, like she thinks the guy is supernatural. "Okay, so what? What does it matter if I'm dead?"

"It matters."

My lips fall. "Why?"

She doesn't answer... She doesn't have to.

I look away when she gets harder to stare at. Even now, even after everything, she still cares what happens to me. And even now, after everything, she still thinks she's a rotten person. A predator. A monster.

Like me. She hates herself the way I should.

"You're too good of a person, Margot..."

Her shoulders lift with a puff. "Tell that to the rest of the world."

"I will."

When she turns to me, I get the biggest urge to move closer. To hold her. Maybe even kiss her.

"I'll scream it for anyone who will listen."

She laughs dryly, but her lips soften with a small, grateful smile that tugs at my chest. Suddenly, what I want most in this world is to see that smile widen.

"So... no one then?" she asks.

“Fine. I’ll scream it until they listen.”

There it is.

Her lips pull, only another half centimeter but enough to make me move down the bed to sit next to her. My fingers light, I collect her hair over her back, exposing her shoulder to me.

I’m gonna fix this too . I so badly want to tell her. So fucking badly. I want all this shit in her life to go away. But I don’t tell her, and it isn’t because I think she won’t believe me. I don’t tell her because I’m selfish. Because I want her here, to be really here, not just waiting to leave.

I want her to want me, even if it’s only to avoid the weight of the world. Even if it’s only because she thinks I’m better than the man who claimed her soul first.

In some ways, I don’t want him to die. I want him quietly in the background, sidling her closer to me.

Because fuck, I like the way she’s looking at me. Like I’m her comfort. Like I’m absolved.

“You forgive too easily,” I whisper, running my knuckles up and down her arm.

Her smile slips, but she doesn’t pull away. “What do you think I should do?” she whispers back. “Should I kidnap you? Hurt you? String you up so others can use you?”

I shake my head, letting my eyes trail her bruised body. I fucked up. I really did.

“Point taken.”

My eyes draw to her when she cups my face, her brows pinching like she wants to say something. It takes her several seconds to try.

“You know, my entire adult life, I’ve only dated people a decade or more older than me?” She licks her lips nervously, the supple flesh glistening like she’s glazed with sugar I wanna lick away.

“Okay.”

“And I...” She swallows. “I was never attracted to them. And I hated myself for it. I think this is why I’ve never been married.”

Okay , I want to say again, not fully understanding her point.

“What I’m trying to say...” She sucks in a breath as she slowly unravels the towel. “Is that you’re right. I’m obsessed with age. I’ve spent my whole life pretending I didn’t want someone like you...”

The towel falls onto the bed, revealing tits I force myself not to reach for. Not right away.

I can see the rest of her unsaid words so clearly in her nervous eyes. I’m tired of pretending .

Chewing on one corner of my lip, I press my thumb to her collarbone and mark a path to her shoulder. My cock hardens, demanding what I’m not used to denying myself.

“Are you sure?” I whisper, tucking hair behind her ear.

She twists toward me and places her palm on my pant leg, her chest expanding sharply with her nervousness. Or maybe it isn’t nervousness. Maybe it’s lust.

“I don’t want my memory of tonight to be...”

What it is, I finish for her in my mind.

“I just want to remember you. And I want...”

My eyes narrow with concentration as she looks around, stumbling for words.

“Yes?”

She closes her eyes. “I want you to be nice to me.”

Nice to her.

“You want me to be gentle?”

Her eyes are intense when she opens them. She shakes her head. “No... Not really. Just ... after .”

My balls tingle like she just told me she likes it rough. Which she didn’t, but... Close enough.

My mouth dips to her ear so I can roll the lobe between my teeth. She gasps at the little bite and puts her hand over mine when I squeeze her tit, letting it spill through my hand.

“Do you have any idea how much I love your sexy little body?” I ask, dipping my hand between her thighs. She spreads them for me eagerly and grips the comforter in two tight fists.

“ Tell me ,” she urges, her lips parting when I rub her needy clit. I could make her

come a thousand times in a row and she'd still moan for me. I'm certain of it.

"This pussy," I say, breathing into her ear while I insert two fingers into her soaked hole, using my thumb to work her clit.

"This pussy has ruined all other pussy for me. I wouldn't have stuck my cock in that blonde cunt downstairs if she begged.

" Margot's deep moan massages my balls. I'm mostly full of shit, but if Margot knows it, she doesn't seem to care.

I think she wants it. I think she wants me all to herself.

The truth is, I don't know what I'll do once she's gone. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't turn down pussy if the girl literally begged, but it would be a letdown. For the rest of life, that's what I have to look forward to. Fucking letdowns.

But not tonight. Probably not tomorrow either.

So in the meantime, I'm hers. It turns me the fuck on that she wants it that way.

"You're the most stunning woman I've ever laid eyes on, Margot.

" I don't even know if I'm lying, but I love the way she arches her neck at that, her face twisting like she's about to come when I know she isn't there yet.

"I wanted you the moment I saw you." Definitely not a lie. "And every goddamn moment since."

"I wanted you too," she moans but then snaps her eyes open. "I mean, not right away . I?—"

I stutter a laugh in her ear, broken up by shushes. “ Stop , silly girl. I don’t care either way.”

I kiss her cheek, her jaw, her neck, all while working her cunt. I’m a selfish lover, but I could explore her body all day.

“Th-that day you brought friends over to skinny dip in the pool... I looked.”

I smile against her neck.

“At first, I didn’t know what you were doing, so it was an accident. But then...” She grunts at the pressure against her clit. “You had climbed out of the pool, and I watched you through the kitchen window. I didn’t look away.”

“Naughty girl,” I purr, kissing my way to her nipple that I take in my mouth.

Every part of her my lips touch is another piece off-limits to another man.

I can’t even think of hands on her, mouths on her.

It makes me see red, makes me hungry to go shoot up the playroom like a teenager with my head shoved in a toilet one too many times.

“Do you want me to kill the men downstairs?” I ask, hoping she’ll say yes. Part of me hopes she wants me to fuck her in a pool of their blood.

“No.” Her jaw quivers with ecstasy. “I just want you .”

I slide my hand from her pussy to her chest and shove her to her back. “Do you want to know how many times I watched you while you slept?” Pulling my shirt over my head, I stand.

“That’s terrifying.”

I chuckle as I unbuckle my belt. “You used to have wet dreams. Well, actually, you still do.” Shoving my pants to the ground, I grip my cock and pump a few times, as if it needed a primer.

“I used to fantasize about putting my cock in your mouth while you slept and letting your moans vibrate the tip. I’d make you drink my cum so you’d wake up with my taste on your tongue. ”

“I always dreamt of you,” she whispers, and I know without question that she’s serious. I knew it at the time too.

I lift her knee to her chest as I enter her, her warm pussy squeezing me. “Did you fantasize about me while you were awake too?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about it.” I shove in hard at the demand, not knowing how badly I want it until it’s done. She looks into my eyes as her back arches.

“I found a playboy in your room once, opened to a page with a woman who looked like me. You were out with friends, and I...”

“Yeah?”

Her eyes get heavy with a moan. I want her words so badly I think about slowing my hips, but I can’t. It feels too good. My cock is too needy. And I have a feeling if I stopped, I’d break the magic. I never knew she could be so vulnerable.

“I crawled under your covers and touched myself, imagining you masturbating to a

photo of me in that very spot.”

“Jesus, Mommy . You’re so bad.”

“I always hated it when you called me that.”

I smile. “Do you still hate it?”

“Yes,” she says without hesitation. “But... Not as much.”

“So it’s on the table then.”

“No, Arseni. It is definitely not on the table.” Her words are authoritative, but there’s a smile playing on her lips while she peers up at me like a sweet little deviant. God, I love her like this. She’s never been more beautiful. More free.

Right now, if I told her she was the most stunning woman I’d ever seen, it would be true. No fucking question.

“I could look at you like this for the rest of my life,” I say while grinding my hips. The words are out before I realize the full extent of their meaning, and I kiss her with my eyes closed just so I don’t have to see her reaction.

I don’t know what I would feel if she told me she could never see me with that same intensity. But I know if she said she could, it would be a lie. Even if she didn’t know it.

I love her vulnerability. It’s turning me on like the horny teenager she touched herself to.

But she wouldn’t like the same from me. That shit isn’t nearly as cute as a taboo

crush.

I'm still kissing her when she comes, her lips pausing while I devour her moans. Her pussy contracts around my cock, bringing me closer to release, and it isn't long before I get there.

My palms slamming beside her on the bed, I jerk my hips hard with explosive pleasure wracking my body. She takes my face to kiss me brutally, passionately, hungrily.

When I've filled her with every drop of come my balls have to offer, I pull out and take her in my arms. I lounge back against the headboard, cradling her while peppering kisses on her forehead.

Be nice to me , she said. I didn't really know what that entailed, and I'm not sure I cared. But suddenly, it feels important. It feels like something I don't want to fuck up.

Ever again.

ARSENI

Detectives didn't find anything on the cameras :(

Peering down at my phone, I sigh at the news from Hudson but am not surprised. Her stalker had been watching her long enough to know about the cameras the same way I did. And just like me, he came through a window.

Probably. A worse scenario is that the detective on the case is the stalker. Margot said he was high up, but how high exactly?

This would be so much easier if she just gave me his name.

Did you look yourself?

Something bangs in the conference room I'm standing by, drawing my eyes. The lieutenants are meeting with the Pakhan, so virtually every important person in the Bratva is in that room. Notice I'm waiting outside.

No... You said just to give the info to the detectives?

I go to reply, but bronze skin wrapped up in a yellow flowing package turns a corner down this hall. Lucia jerks to a stop when she sees me, big brown eyes going wide. I hope it's from fear.

Going back to my phone, I stab out a text while she wanders this way.

The stalker is one of yours. Someone high up maybe, but young. Need you to look for someone who moved up the ranks quickly.

“They invite Luka to these things now, huh? He must be so important,” I drone to Lucia, lowering my phone to meet her glare.

“He is. And you are not. So what the hell are you doing here?”

Wow, that’s rude.

“Aww you learned how to curse.” I smile and raise my shoulders like I think she’s adorable. She isn’t. At all.

Her arms cross over her chest as her face pinches with a pissed off expression that makes her look like a shrew. I can just picture her stomping around her house, throwing out demands, her husband’s balls held tightly in her fist.

“Luka walked into an especially large doorknob,” she says with a snarky tone like she wants me to explain myself. As if I owe her anything.

“Hm.”

“Two of his ribs are broken.”

“Okay.”

This only pisses her off more. Her eyebrows nearly kiss. But she doesn’t say anything right away. She just stands there glaring at me like I couldn’t kill her if I wanted to.

“You don’t even care...” She shakes her head, her lip curled. “He could kick your ass, just so you know.”

“Oh, I know.” I nod, though I doubt it’s true. In a fair fight, sure. I like to play dirty.
“But you can’t.”

Her glare falls as her arms loosen. Her composure is only gone for a few moments, but in that time we both remember how we met. It makes me grin and her grimace.

Luka wanted to kill her. It was me who thought she could be of better use.

I should’ve listened to him.

“Why did you even come to our wedding?” she asks, trying to regain her composure. Her discomfort shows in the way she shifts her weight, her jaw flexing. It’s pathetic that she even tries to look brave.

“Because , Lucia... I needed to see the look on your face when you saw me again.”

Her lips part, and her hand flies toward my face, but I see it coming a mile away. I grip her wrist, holding it tightly when she tries to jerk away and savor the panic in her eyes.

It’s not because I’m a sadist. I like to have fun, but I just really, really hate this woman.

When the door to the conference room opens, I let her go. She stumbles backward and gingerly grabs her wrist like I hurt her, but I bet she just hates the feel of my hand on her. So do I.

I ignore Luka when he strides out, and for once, he does the same. He gives me a passing glance before taking his wife’s hand and leading her away. I wonder if she’ll tell him about our conversation. If she does, he really will kick my ass.

Nikita is one of the last to leave, only Vitaly—who does not give me a passing glance—behind him. It's petty, but I get the urge to flip him off as he walks away.

I look down at my last message from Hudson before putting my phone away.

I'm on it.

"Did you have a nice chat with the Columbian girl?" Nikita asks. Lucia is from Mexico, but I doubt he cares. There's humor in his tone that makes me think the meeting went well. Which, for everyone else, means it went poorly.

"Something about Luka falling down a flight of stairs. He broke a couple ribs. What a shame."

Nikita snickers as we walk. I'm surprised he's even speaking to me. He brought me here just to humiliate me, knowing I'd be denied entrance. He didn't even hide his smirk when the guard stopped me at the door, which we both knew would happen.

Little punishments. Nikita loves to dole them out.

"It's bullshit that they let her hang around like this. The leadership is soft."

"Sensitive ears, Arseni," he chides. He, better than anyone, knows where the cameras are around here. He had them installed.

I don't know why it matters if someone picks up on me talking shit, though. They know exactly what we think of them.

Nikita doesn't speak again until we're in the car and I'm pulling away.

"I think it's sweet that they let the Columbian follow her husband around like a

puppy,” he says, picking up where we left off. “It’s Mila’s presence that annoys me.”

“Right.” I tip my head. I don’t want to talk about Mila. I don’t give a fuck about Mila. but still, I add just to appease him, “Generations can go by without women being allowed into the business, but Vitaly has to be different. There’s no respect for tradition.”

“I don’t care about that.” Nikita waves it away like he’s batting at an imaginary fly. “I’m not a misogynist, Arseni.”

I turn to look at him, my forehead wrinkling as I search for signs of sarcasm. But no, he’s dead serious.

“Every decision made is filtered through Mila. She’s the Pakhan’s wife, it’s only natural but when they agree, everyone is forced to believe it’s because Vitaly is a pussy.

When they disagree, everyone is forced to listen to it.

Wives should not be allowed in meetings.

” He lays his head back against his seat like he’s exasperated.

Though, he’s obviously achieved whatever he set out to today. His talkative mood is a dead giveaway.

I think back to last night, to the promise I made. I’ve been contemplating how to handle this, my mind spinning all night. I’m not quite ready, but I can’t see there being a better opportunity to bring it up.

“A lot of the lieutenants are married,” I comment. He doesn’t respond because ...

why would he?

“Wasn’t Maksim’s wife a whore at one point?”

His lifted hand is his only response, and even then, it seems as if it means, “ who cares ?”.

“Why did you let that happen?” I ask, shifting to sit straighter. My hands on the steering wheel begin to slip. “I mean, you were Pakhan. You had to allow her freedom, right? He couldn’t just marry her without your consent.”

“I’m a roman-tic,” he says, bored. Crazy part is, I actually believe him.

“Must run in the family,” I say, just to steer his attention where I want him. His narrowed eyes find me as his head rolls. “I mean, Lucia was a witness to a crime, and Vitaly still let her live.”

“Luka is his brother-in-law.”

“Huh,” I say like I’m considering that. Like it matters at all. “So you don’t think he would let others make the same choice?”

“No. Vitaly is as by the book as it gets.”

I nod, my stomach turning, but when I look over at Nikita, he’s staring like he knows exactly what’s in my head.

“Of course...” I resist the urge to wipe my palms on my pants. “Vitaly doesn’t know everything. Who knows what people have gotten away with since he became Pakhan.”

“Too much, I’m sure,” Nikita agrees, his voice smooth. He’s enjoying this. “It was much more difficult to get things past me... Still is.”

This seems pointed.

I take a turn before shifting in my seat. “That must be why you excel at having secrets.”

“Do I?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah... Think of all the shit you’ve had me do that Vitaly knows nothing about.”

“Ah, so we have secrets.”

We .

As if anyone would ever dub me a mastermind. Anything I’ve done, I’ve done for Nikita. The Bratva knows that. It still won’t keep them from stringing me up by my toes, but no one will be disillusioned.

“Many...”

“What are you getting at, son?”

I shrug and open my mouth, but I don’t have any new words to say. I could run him around in a circle for the next twenty minutes, but every second that ticks by is a second that my heart races too fast.

He knows what I want. At some point, he’ll get annoyed by me beating around it.

“If I hid a secret from the Bratva... Would you keep it?” I ask.

“A secret like ... letting the whore go?”

I don't say anything. Instead, I pull into a gas station and put the SUV in park.

My eyes stare out the windshield at a mother and son passing by. It's a second before I find the courage to speak.

“She would never go to the police... I swear on my life.”

When he doesn't answer, I turn toward him. He studies me with no sign of what he's thinking.

“How can you swear on your life when you know I can't kill you?”

I run my finger over the grooves of the steering wheel. “You could tell the rest of the Bratva. They'd do it for you.”

“Ah, and what would you do with our secrets then ?”

“Nothing.”

“ Nothing ?” His brows raise. He thinks I'm lying. I don't know if I am or not.

I nod, my throat feeling unusually thick. “They'd die with me... But it's a moot point. She'd never go to the police.”

“Because...?”

I open my mouth, searching for the reason. He seems to find it before I do.

“Because she loves you?”

My eyes constricting, I look away. “No... But she cares for me.”

“Do you love her?”

“No,” I say automatically. I sound too certain, too quick, too nervous. It makes us both think I’m not certain at all. “I care for her too...”

“I see...”

I clear my throat and peer at the radio, the title of a song we aren’t listening to moving across the screen. “I need you to do this for me, Nikita.” My voice is low. It almost sounds desperate. “You do this, and I’m yours. All my loyalty belongs to you.”

“I thought it already did.”

I nod vigorously. “It does ... It does. But you’re always talking about how important trust is. This solidifies it. We’ll both have secrets the other must keep, and we’ll go to our graves with them.”

“Hmmm.” He faces forward and takes a deep breath as he seems to consider it. Twenty seconds turns to thirty and maybe more. But finally, he gives a curt nod.

“Okay, Arseni. Set her free.”

What ?

My mouth doesn’t open. Relief doesn’t unwind my chest.

This feels too easy.

“As long as you can assure me she won’t go to the police, I don’t see what the problem is.”

What the problem is?

She could tell a friend. She could hold onto this for years before coming out with her story. If he lets her go, it’ll be him letting a witness go. The Bratva will kill him as easily as they’ll kill me.

And Luka has seen her... What happens if they run into each other? What happens if any person at last night’s party sees her, and they decide to talk?

This is too problematic for him to say yes right away.

“She won’t.”

“Good.” He lounges back in the seat, resting his arm on the door. He gestures toward the road. “Should we get on with it? I’m sure Margot is anxious to get home.”

Home. Now.

I tighten both hands around the steering wheel and pretend that didn’t just make my heart race. That the idea of her leaving brings me just as much remorse as it does relief.

I’m not ready for her to go.

“Tomorrow,” I say, putting the car in reverse. “You and I have other things to do today.”

He chuckles like he knows. After a sigh, he clicks the overhead bin for his sunglasses. “That’s what I figured... Tonight, I’m having dinner with Sophie. I’ll stay over so you can have the house to yourselves.”

He slides the glasses onto his face, a satisfied smile lingering.

It occurs to me that maybe he wants this as much as I do.

Maybe he wants to have something to hold over me.

He probably thinks all he’d have to do was threaten Margot’s life to get me to fall back in line.

I’d never be able to walk away from him, truly this time, and maybe that’s exactly what he wants.

But maybe not.

“Why?” I can’t help but ask.

He looks toward me with a smile that shows sharp canines. “I already told you... I’m a romantic.”

MARGOT

The taste of burnt chicken rests on my tongue like it was cooked there, charring my taste buds along with it. Every sip of wine I take splashes at the taste like it tries and fails to put out the fire.

Still, I ask for seconds with a smile on my face, and when Arseni delivers it to me—looking strange in a pair of khakis and a red, button-down shirt—I'm quick to dig in.

It's terrible. It reminds me of my mother's cooking and all the times my father grumbled on the couch, refusing to eat it.

Twice I can remember him tipping over the pan in the kitchen when it wasn't to his satisfaction.

"You don't have to eat it," Arseni says. He's said it at least five times throughout this back patio dinner. Even me asking for seconds hasn't fooled him.

"It's good."

He frowns like he isn't convinced. "I swear to God I followed the instructions."

I smile and put another piece in my mouth. Chewing keeps me from answering.

He pushes his plate away and runs a hand through his soft, brown hair, looking away from me like he's nervous.

He's been like this the entire evening, ever since he came and got me from his room claiming he made dinner for me.

There's a long stick candle lit in the middle of a white tablecloth that would be romantic if this wasn't so awkward.

All I can think about is how this is the same table he made me spread myself on for his entertainment, the cold biting into my naked bottom.

I'm sitting in the chair where I burned him.

It's weird. And reassuring. And confusing as hell.

When I woke up this morning, I felt nauseous about last night.

Arseni was already gone, the weight of his arm around me replaced with a pillow that was soft and disappointing.

I kept thinking he regretted it. That any time today he'd throw me back in my dungeon like it meant nothing.

Like I hadn't fully opened myself to him, revealing everything inside.

I told him things I wouldn't write about in a journal. I told him things I wouldn't tell a shrink. He knows more about me than I've admitted to my shower.

Words can't describe how scared I was that it was all for nothing.

Or how scared I am, now, wondering if I made a mistake.

I feel naked. Exposed. More so than when Arseni strung me up. More than ever in my

life.

“So.” He clears his throat. His nerves make my heart flutter. They give away everything that last night meant to him too.

He doesn’t go on. His mouth opens, and he looks like he has something he really wants to say, but it’s lodged in his throat.

“Yes?” I ask.

He closes his mouth and looks away. “Where do you think you’ll go when you leave here?” He turns back to me, but I’m certain that wasn’t what he was going to say.

I shrug, my pulse jumping just thinking about it. “I don’t know.”

I don’t want to even think about it.

“The cops probably?—”

“You know what I was thinking about today?”

He closes his mouth to let me go on.

“I was thinking about how you know every dirty secret about me, but I don’t know any of yours.”

He scratches the back of his head while considering that. “Uh, yeah you kinda do.”

“Like what?” I pick up my wine glass. I’m amazed at how relaxed my voice sounds. At the fact that I don’t spill my wine. It doesn’t even slosh around, despite my sweaty hand making the glass feel slick.

“Well, like I’m a soldier in the Russian mob, for one.”

I let out a soft chuckle. “As if all Las Vegas’s finest don’t know that as well.”

Laying his hands on his chair’s armrest, he shrugs. “What do you want to know?”

Everything .

Something .

Anything to make me feel less humiliated at my own confessions.

I take another sip of wine while I try to think of how to respond without him seeing how desperate I am. How horribly self-conscious.

His words from last night come back to me like a breath to the back of my neck, raising the hairs.

I do not give a shit about your age.

I do not give a shit who you’ve fucked or how old they were when you fucked them.

I don’t care that you were once my foster mother.

I don’t care that you think fucking me is wrong.

You are a woman, and I am a man. That’s it. Anything else is just filler.

I let his words comfort me. Let myself believe that they’re true.

Because they are... To him, at least. He says these things with so much authority that

I'm beginning to believe them too.

"What um..." At least thirty seconds have passed, and I still don't know what I want to ask. I shrug. "What's something you've never told anyone?"

He looks up like he's thinking about it. He doesn't look like someone about to expose all of his secrets. He looks like someone with nothing to hide.

I pretend that doesn't bother me.

"I think Nikita has innocent people killed just because it amuses him."

I nod and try not to show my disappointment too much. "Oh."

"Why did you become an engineer?" He picks up his wine glass and stares inside it like it's more interesting than this conversation.

I love my job. I'm fairly passionate about my job. Designs are like paintings to me. Physics has always been my favorite subject.

But right now? I don't give a shit.

"It's good money," I lie. I do okay, but I'd make more if I'd gone to law school like my adoptive father begged.

Gwen and Arthur were so desperate to have a child, but I was still never my adoptive father's blood.

He couldn't see himself when he looked at me, so he settled for trying to turn me into him.

I tuck hair behind my ear. “You know, your answer was sort of a fact about Nikita. Not about yourself.”

His eyes narrow like he’s confused by that. “You just said to tell you something I’ve never told anyone.”

“Right, but...” I bring my thumb to my mouth to chew on the nail, looking toward the back door.

“You mean something personal?” he asks. I don’t for one second believe he didn’t already know that.

But I don’t call him out on it. I just nod.

He rubs his chin, faking contemplation. I can see it in his eyes now. See the armor he wears, the doors he just reinforced.

He isn’t telling me shit.

“I think you pretty much know everything,” he says. “I grew up in the system, then I was homeless, then I joined the Bratva.”

“How?”

“How what?”

“How did you join the Bratva? Did they recruit you?”

As if they just walk around picking up homeless kids.

Or maybe they do. I don’t know.

He tips his head side-to-side. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Something like that?”

Could you be any more vague? I want to ask but bite my tongue. I can tell I’m already beginning to sound flustered. Desperate. Maybe even angry.

How could he not have one thing to share with me? After everything I’ve shared with him...

He lifts a hand in a dismissive wave. “You don’t want to know the details, Margot. Trust me.”

“Then what do I want to know, Arseni?” My arms slowly cross over my chest. “I watched you kill a man right in front of me. He puked up blood on my stomach. What is it you think I can’t handle?”

“Why are you pushing this?” he asks, tension winding into his tone as well.

“Because ... ” My voice holds emotion. I’ve just begun and already I can tell I’m going to lose it on him. “You know everything about me. Every real thing about me, things that I never dreamed of telling anyone. How do you think that makes me feel? I’m fucking naked here.”

“Oh my God.” He leans forward to cradle his forehead like an asshole. Like I’m demanding, dramatic, maybe even crazy.

“Am I seriously asking too much?” I huff, but it’s weak. I feel gassed when all I’ve been doing is sitting here.

“Showing me the type of porn you’re into isn’t bearing your soul to me, Margot. I

find your little fetish adorable. I'm a bit more complicated."

My cheeks burn as I turn away, my tongue feeling thicker.

Little fetish. Adorable.

I'm just cute to him. Like a little puppy he's just taught to roll over.

My secrets mean nothing. My shame means nothing.

Throwing my napkin on my plate, I stand and start toward the back door. I'm not even sure where I'm headed, his bedroom or the basement.

The basement. I settle on it as I step inside.

"What the fuck do you want from me?" Arseni stomps behind me.

"I don't want anything from you," I snipe back, walking faster toward the basement.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"My chamber, Daddy. Let me know when you're ready to torture me again."

"Margot."

No .

When my lip starts to tremble, I nearly break out into a run, only stopping when Arseni pulls me back by my arm and pins me to the wall.

" Stop ." His command is fierce, but his face quickly softens. The vulnerability that

shines in his eyes makes me hesitant to break away. To find sanctuary in a prison just so I won't have to face him.

When I speak, my voice is a soft whisper. "What did you want from me tonight, Arseni? Did you want me to gush because you lit a candle and made me dinner?"

He blinks, his mouth opening. "I just wanted you to know I cared about you..."

"But you don't ." I shake my head, my cheeks pinching.

"You like having sex with me. You like making fun of me. What you feel is lust, and maybe that'll be enough for you to let me go, but it isn't enough for you to care about me in the way that I need.

So please, just leave me alone. Unless you're going to set me free, I don't want to talk to you again.

And if you aren't... Well, good. I'd rather be dead than face the world anyway because what's adorable or frivolous to you haunts my goddamn soul, and if you can't understand that, then you don't understand me. And you never will."

His arm weakly falls when I break away from him, standing taller while still somehow feeling shorter as I retreat.

I don't know if I meant everything I said. If I'd rather be dead than face the world.

Yes. I think yes. But maybe no.

I don't want to die. It's just so hard to live with myself.

"I used to have sex for money."

I stop at the sound of his voice and listen to his steps approaching.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

“Sometimes it was for food. Most of the time it was for drugs.”

“Okay,” I say as if I’m not impressed. As if that’s as cute as what he claims my darkest secret is.

“I’d only ever let guys blow me, but one night, this guy offered me two hundred bucks and a hit of crack if I let him rub his cock against my ass. He reeked of BO and had black, rotted teeth that smelled like death. I was certain he hadn’t showered in at least a week.”

“But you said yes,” I say, still sounding unimpressed, even as my chest tightens.

“Yes.” He steps up to my back, hovering his hands beside my shoulders. Almost touching, but not quite. Like he’s uncertain. Like he’s ashamed.

“We drove out by the lake, and he gave me the hit ahead of time... I don’t know what I was thinking.

I mean I wasn’t, I was high as shit, but I still should’ve seen what was coming.

He beat the shit out of me before he raped and left me stranded on the side of a dirt road.

I remember looking up at the stars and wishing I’d die.

I just laid there praying a car would come and run me over, but it didn’t, and I got tired of waiting. ”

He brings his hands back, the tension they caused my shoulders retreating. I wish he'd put them back. I wish I'd turn around. But I'm just stuck, my ears buzzing as I concentrate on his voice.

“So I got up and walked down a path until I was on a cliff overlooking the lake. I was so wasted I knew I wouldn't be able to swim to shore, so I just ... let myself fall.”

He doesn't go on. I think that's the end of the story, but if it was, he'd be lying in a numbered grave next to the rest of the unclaimed bodies.

Slowly, I turn, keeping my face a blank mask, though I get the sudden urge to hug him. He doesn't look affected by this. He looks empty, but I know that's far from the truth.

I abandoned him just like he knew I would. He was seventeen then, a year before emancipating.

What could his life have looked like if I had been there for him?

He must've asked himself the same question. I picture him seeing me after years have passed, and his hatred makes more sense. I did nothing to him. Nothing for him. No one did. That's the point.

“What happened next?” I ask, my voice small.

He lifts a shoulder like it hardly matters.

“A guy jumped in after me and pulled me to shore. Gave me CPR. He brought me home with him and tied me to a bed for a week just to force me sober. I thought he was a serial killer for the first several days, but when I came out of it, I was grateful. He let me crash for a while, gave me some new clothes, got me a job. Showed me

how to shoot a gun. He was Bratva, so... That's how that happened. ”

“What was his name?” I ask, though I already know. I don't know how, I just ... do.

“Luka.”

I nod at the confirmation, my lungs feeling shrunken.

I'm sorry . I have the urge to say it, but it would reek of pity. I know Arseni well enough to know it's the last thing he would want.

“I never told him what happened before he found me that night,” he goes on. “You're the only person who knows.”

My lips lower into a frown while I move my gaze to his hands, wishing I was courageous enough to hold them. I know what he's saying to me.

See? I care.

My chest feels full, so full it pushes up into my throat until it feels like I've swallowed a frog.

“The truth is, Margot, I'm a broken fucking mess.

I live in a dirty trailer, drive a car with a floorboard you can't even see because it's so full of trash.

I have no real friends. No family. Every time I see a stranger who even slightly resembles me, I wonder if they're one of my parents.

I've only felt like family to someone once in my life and got burned.

The idea of letting anyone close scares the shit out of me.

“The way I feel about you scares the shit out of me. Because I know I’m not good enough for you, and I know you must see that.

The second you stop needing me for survival, I’m gonna be some wet dream you run away from, and I deserve that.

I do. But what I’m feeling for you is not lust, and I can’t let you lock yourself in the basement thinking it is. ”

Brown eyes shine at me with so much sincerity, so much earnestness that I feel myself leaning Arseni’s way, as if he’s pulling me toward him.

“Arseni,” I whisper, though I don’t know what else to say.

You’re not a wet dream.

You’re not a mess.

You’re just broken. You’re beautifully shattered into a thousand pieces that sparkle like diamonds, and all I want more than anything in the world is to put those pieces back together. I want to hold you and kiss you and love you the way you try to make me love myself.

I want you.

Trash and all.

I can’t say any of that. I don’t have enough air in my lungs to try.

So instead, I just push onto my toes to kiss him, softly weaving my hands around his neck. He takes my waist and guides me to the wall while his tongue strokes mine.

Too many times he's brought my body pleasure against my will, but this time I can't say he's even trying.

There's nothing sexual about the way he kisses me.

Nothing hurried. It's an end to a first date make out, and it just occurs to me in this moment that that's exactly what he tried to make this night. A date. Our first date.

I ruined it with my self-consciousness.

But then again, I didn't. This is better than polite conversation and a candle-lit burnt dinner. This is real.

Not lust. Not a dirty fantasy. But real.

Finally, I know what to say.

I break away from him, my arms still snug around his neck.

"I've never felt closer to anyone in my life," I whisper, inhaling cologne special for this occasion. "I've never felt more understood... You're a fantasy, Arseni, but not in the way you fear."

You're the man of my dreams.

The chaos that broke up my rigid life.

The haven I can lie with.

The freeing of my soul.

“I care about your past,” I add, my voice still pillowy soft. “I care about everything you are and everything you’ve ever been, but I care about your future even more.”

“I care about yours too.”

“I know.” I nod, my eyes stinging. “That’s why you’re going to let me go.”

His gaze breaks away from me as he tucks my hair behind my ears.

My eyes close as he kisses me, his hands smoothing down my body to rest on my hips. I don’t interrupt the kiss again. Neither of us say a word as we slowly undress each other, handling each article of clothing with care.

I whisper his name as he fucks me against the wall, and he peppers kisses to my neck. When I come, he squeezes me like my pleasure is his. When he comes, I do the same.

Afterward, he takes me upstairs and lays me in his bed, snuggling his front against my back.

The light is off, and my energy is spent.

I can feel myself falling asleep, and he must be able to sense it too.

Because the words he whispers as he strokes my hair are so full, so agonized like an admittance of some sort, that I’m certain he isn’t saying them for me to hear. I’m certain he thinks I’m asleep.

“ I love you .”

MARGOT

“Margot.” An insistent hand nudges my shoulder, rousing me from sleep. “Margot.”

Immediately, my brain registers that the voice isn’t Arseni’s, but I still don’t startle as I blink open my sleepy eyes, my hand lifting to shield them from the brutal light of the lamp.

It shines over Nikita, perched at my bedside, and casts his shadow over me.

I gasp like it itself is here to strangle me.

“Shhh.” He presses a finger to his lips. “The kid is gone, but he’ll be back soon. We don’t have much time.”

Wide-eyed, I turn to the empty spot next to me, my hand slapping the cold space like Arseni could possibly still be there.

“What’s going on?” I ask, my voice panicked as I scoot away from Nikita’s hand, warming the space Arseni occupied when I fell asleep.

He looks panicked as well, his eyes darting to the door, his hands fidgeting. “If you’re going to go, you have to hurry.”

“What?” I squint at him, then at the door, then back at him. Who is he afraid is coming?

Am I in danger?

Go where?

“What’s going on? Where’s Arseni?”

I yank my legs back when his hand rests too close to it on the bed. Sighing, he places his palms in his lap.

“I sent Arseni on a job... I needed to get you by yourself. I...” He runs a hand through his hair and tugs at the ends. He looks troubled by something and not at all threatening, but his words make my stomach cramp.

He sent Arseni away.

He wanted me alone.

“I need to apologize to you, Margot. I’ve needed to apologize to you for some time, but I haven’t had the courage to do so. Arseni is my closest confidant. I didn’t want to betray him.”

I shake my head. “What are you talking about?”

He rubs the back of his neck as he lets out a long breath.

He looks genuinely bothered by something, and it’s scaring me.

“When we met, I acted like a dick. Arseni thought if I was cruel to you, it would push you closer to him. I should’ve...

” He frowns as his eyes close. “I should’ve never let him bring you here.

I thought for sure he'd change his mind and let you go. He isn't a bad kid, but?—"

"What?" My voice comes out harsh. My brows pinch.

What the fuck is he talking about?

Nikita pulls back. For a moment, we just stare at each other.

"What has he told you?" Nikita asks.

What has Arseni told me?

Why? What... What is going on?

I look at the door like Arseni will be there to unmuddy this man's words. To save me from this lunatic. But of course, he's gone.

No sunlight peeks through the window. I'm not surprised that he left without saying goodbye, but I wish I was. I wish he understood what it was like to wake up to an empty bed after the night we shared.

The last words he spoke before I fell asleep drift into my mind, pulling my eyes shut. He loves me. If he left without saying goodbye, it's because he thought he'd be back before I woke up.

He didn't know this psycho would creep into his room. He didn't know he'd shake me awake spouting nonsense.

I should've never let him bring you here.

What the fuck does that even mean?

“He told me everything,” I say, my voice strong as I open my eyes and turn back to Nikita.

Nikita’s frown deepens. He doesn’t say anything, but the look on his face shows his pity.

For me. He feels pity for me .

“He told me he brought me here as punishment for not accomplishing what he wanted with my coworker. He said I was your whore and it was his job to break me in.”

“ My whore?” Nikita raises a brow. “He said that?”

I don’t respond. My stomach twists tight, hunching me slightly.

I wish he’d go away. If I had enough air in my lungs, I might scream at him to leave.

I don’t want to hear whatever he has to say.

“He brought you here because I allowed him to bring you here.” Nikita’s tone makes it sound like it should be obvious.

“Whatever job he told you to do, he was supposed to do himself. I had no idea you existed until he brought you up... You were never here to be my whore. You were here so he could get his revenge for...” Nikita twirls a hand. “Whatever.”

“That is a lie ,” I scoff. “An obvious one. If you had no interest in me, you wouldn’t have strung me up for your party, you sick fuck.”

“You think that was my doing?” Nikita purses puzzled lips. “Margot, with all due respect... I haven’t touched you. I certainly get no satisfaction from others touching

you.”

“Bullshit,” I spew, but my breath stutters.

I sort through my memory bank, looking for Nikita’s leer. For the lip ring guy’s words, telling me it was Nikita who wanted me to whore myself out.

The memories aren’t there. It was just Arseni who said that.

Nikita is right, he’s never touched me. Other than that first encounter, he’s never spoken to me. He’s acted uninterested in my presence here.

It was Arseni who wanted me here?

The answer feels too plain to see. Because of course he wanted me here. He did want revenge.

Why wouldn’t he just go to Henry directly? It never made sense that he wanted me to do it. Except, of course, because he wanted to torture me. But what would Nikita have gotten out of that?

What would Nikita have gotten out of any of this?

“Listen, Margot... I suppose all of this is irrelevant anyway. My point in coming here is to let you know you’re free to go.

I’m not allowing Arseni to keep you here anymore, and I feel badly enough about my part the other night that I don’t plan on allowing him to kill you.

I am truly sorry. No person should ever be put through what I’ve condoned Arseni to do. ”

My first instinct is to argue with him. To say once again that he's lying.

But none of it makes sense anymore.

"You're letting me go?" I ask, my voice weak.

"Yes." Nikita nods. "Of course. I wanted to let you go the other night, but Arseni begged me not to. He said you were ... falling for him." Nikita cringes like he's embarrassed to even say it.

"Every time I insist that he free you, he tells me he needs more time, but... I don't think he intends to let you live. "

Arseni?

Arseni would kill me?

No.

No, of course not.

That is ridiculous .

I roll my eyes, though it does occur to me how foolish I'm being. I should just get up and leave. The man Arseni is supposed to be convincing to let me go is literally sitting here telling me I can. And still, I remain seated.

Because I'm not sure I want to leave. Not without Arseni.

How pathetic is that? How pathetic am I to be so afraid of the world, I'd stay in a crazy man's home when he's showing me the exit?

“You’re lying,” I say, because no matter how much sense it might make, I can’t believe it.

Arseni brought me here for himself.

He let others use me for his own pleasure.

He wanted me close to him. He even asked Nikita to be cruel just so I’d crawl into Arseni’s arms, which is exactly what I ended up doing. And when he killed that man the other night, I sought his arms then too.

It makes sense.

But I can’t believe it. I won’t.

He loves me.

I think I love him too.

“What possible reason could I have to lie?” Nikita asks, his confusion believable. Too believable.

I don’t know how to answer.

He pulls out his phone, his brow furrowed, and brings up a text thread that he holds up for me to see.

I squint at it, inching closer. Arseni’s name is at the top.

I carefully take the phone. The newest messages are from an hour ago, Nikita giving him a location, saying something about a camera being down. Above that are

messages from last night.

Nikita - Have you let her go?

Arseni - Not yet. Tomorrow.

Nikita - Tomorrow never comes, son.

Arseni didn't text back.

My throat pangs as I stare at the screen, trying to read the words in some other way that doesn't make everything that Nikita said make sense.

Oh my God...

I put my hand over my mouth, tears blurring the words on the screen. Nikita gingerly takes his phone back and rubs an unwelcome hand over my back. I don't jerk away like I want to. I'm not sure if this man is as evil as I've dubbed him. Everything I know about him came from Arseni.

"I have friends in the police department. I called in a favor for you to get that porn situation cleared up... They want you at the station to answer some questions, but I promise you aren't under arrest. It's a formality."

A tear falls to the mattress when I blink, darkening a circular patch on the white sheet.

I should be thrilled at what Nikita is saying, but I'm too numb.

The police know I didn't do it... I'm not under arrest...

“You should go now. I told them you’d be there by six at the latest. It’s 5:45.”

I still don’t move.

“Margot, you need to leave before Arseni gets back.”

Tipping my head toward Nikita, I blink away tears, trying to push the sadness away with them.

He’s right. I need to leave.

Slowly, I climb to my feet, though I know I should be running. I should be happy to leave and never look back.

As I climb into a car Nikita lends me and pull away, I burst into tears, never feeling more conflicted in my life.

I’m halfway to the police station when I notice the black SUV following close behind.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:25 am

ARSENI

My eyelids feel heavy as I pull into Nikita's driveway. The sun is barely waking up, a sliver of yellow and red peeking from the horizon. If I wasn't so exhausted, I would be annoyed. No, scratch that, I'm definitely annoyed.

Slamming the door to my car, I walk the silent path to the house with my teeth gritted.

I don't know whose house I was just at or why Nikita could possibly need to be watching it at three o'clock in the morning, especially considering the owner wasn't even home.

The owner being some broad I've seen before on his cameras and only on his cameras.

I'm almost certain she isn't important or someone who remotely needs surveilled. I'm pretty sure Nikita's a creep.

I almost told him no. I wanted fucking desperately to tell him no.

I'm tired of this. I'm tired of his obsessions, of helping him stalk everyone around him. I'm tired of his tests. I'm tired of him .

Luka was right. I really hate to admit it, but it's true. I don't know how I can commit my loyalty to this man for the rest of my life.

I also don't know what choice I have.

Trudging upstairs, I keep my steps soft. I was gone longer than I hoped, so it's possible Margot is up wondering where the hell I am. But I'm banking on that not being the case.

I ease open the bedroom door, cringing when it creaks. I step inside and quietly click the door shut behind me, but when I turn toward the empty bed, my shoulders deflate.

"Margot?" I check the dark bathroom. Empty.

"Margot?" I call louder as I turn and go back out into the hall. I check the kitchen first, then the dining room, then outside. All empty.

"What the fuck?" I mutter under my breath, my heart beating faster. I go back inside to continue my search and find Nikita in the gym.

He's doing some yoga pose that's basically a handstand, but his bare feet are together and he looks like a ripped monk.

I'd be impressed, but I've always considered yoga to be feminine.

Same with gardening. And the color purple.

If Nikita wasn't creeping on random women, I'd suspect he was gay.

I still wouldn't be surprised if he was.

"Have you seen Margot?" I ask, trying to keep the worry from my voice.

Nikita lowers his good leg to the floor and takes his time with the other, gently

tapping the ground before jerking himself to standing. He swipes his towel off the mat and mops up the sweat on his neck.

“She isn’t in my room,” I say, as if that wasn’t implied. “Did you take her to the basement?”

Tossing the towel back down, he limps over to the rack of dumbbells, one shoulder lifting in a shrug. “I sent her home.”

My rapidly beating heart pauses. “What?”

Nikita flicks his gaze at me before pulling weights onto his shoulders and raising onto his toes.

“About a half hour ago, she woke me up with her scream. She had a nightmare and was still freaked out when I checked on her. I think she thought I was going to hurt her or something because she was begging me not to kill her and sobbing about how she wanted to go home... It felt like the right thing to do.”

Air whistles past my teeth as I stand with my mouth agape. I look around like I’m thinking, but really, I don’t know how to process it.

She’s gone.

Margot’s gone.

“You just let her go?” I ask, my voice weak. “Just like that?”

He looks up from his calf raises. “Should I have done something different?”

Yes .

No...

No, I guess not.

“Did she say anything about where she was going?”

“Home, I suppose. She kept saying she wanted to go home. I gave her the keys to the Jag, so she’s probably there now.”

Home. Where a police car is staked outside, just waiting to nail her.

“She wouldn’t go home.” I say it almost off-handedly, like Nikita is going to help me solve this. Like he cares at all.

She wouldn’t go home. Not only that, she wouldn’t tell him that’s what she wanted.

She would’ve said she wanted to leave, maybe. But not to go home.

“It’s for the best, son.” Nikita sets the weights back. “She was becoming too much of a distraction anyway.”

No, she wasn’t. I left Margot in the middle of the fucking night to do what he wanted. She hasn’t distracted me from anything.

Nausea flips my stomach while I just stare at my boss. At my lunatic, psychopathic boss. The one who stalks people just to make sure they’re in line. The one who wouldn’t hesitate to kill a person out of boredom.

The one who wouldn’t hesitate to kill me ... if he could.

“Where did she go, Nikita?”

Wiping a hand over his face, he shrugs again. “I don’t know. I did have her followed, of course. Just to make sure she didn’t go to the police station. But I haven’t heard?—”

“She would never go to the police.” I walk toward him, my steps feeling heavy. “She doesn’t need followed.”

He tips his head to the side. “For both of your sakes, I hope that’s true.”

“Why would you not let me be the one to follow her?” My eyes narrow as my stomach rolls. “Why would you let her go? You wanted her dead. You told me it wasn’t safe to have any way for Vitaly to connect us to that job. Why would you just let her go?”

“Because you asked me to.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No, that...” Closing my eyes, I press my hands to my spinning head. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“She wouldn’t have left without saying goodbye,” I go on, speaking to myself now.

She wouldn’t have left without saying goodbye.

I know she wouldn’t.

She... She cares for me. She’s afraid of the outside world.

She wouldn’t have just left.

“What did you do?” I ask, my soft voice full of foreboding as I meet Nikita’s eyes. They’re blank pools of darkness, two black holes situated between his nose.

He doesn't answer me. I wait for pity to show or maybe confusion, but he just remains blank. When his phone goes off by his towel, he goes to retrieve it. Turning to me, he tosses the phone.

I barely catch it. My reaction time is slow. My head is muddled. It isn't until I look down at the message that anything starts to make sense.

You were right. She's going to the police. Intercepting now.

I don't recognize the number, but I know who they're talking about.

"I'm sorry, son..."

I look between the phone and him, my eyes wide, my heart panicked. "You did this."

Nikita shakes his head.

"Call them off," I demand, shucking the phone at him. It falls at his feet. He doesn't move to pick it up. "Call them the fuck off!"

"If you hurry, you might be able to catch them... Just be careful with friendly fire." His voice is neutral, but I can feel his meaning. His intentions. All of it.

This is how I'm supposed to die. How, finally, he'll get rid of the kid who knows his secrets.

He's the fucking scorpion to my frog.

"You son of a bitch," I say, my hands shaking with rage. If I wasn't certain he had a knife in his pocket just waiting for me to attack, I might kill him. I wish I had the time.

I turn and run from the room.

As I jump into my car, I try to think of what to do. How to reach Margot in time without knowing exactly where she is. I know the Jag's information, so I could get the GPS traced, in theory.

But the Bratva isn't going to help me with that. The Bratva will kill me the second they get the chance, if not by Nikita's orders than Vitaly's. Everything having to do with Margot will be pinned on me and me alone. I don't know how I didn't see this coming.

I rip my phone from my pocket and dial the only number I can think to call right now. The only person who might be able to help me.

Hudson answers as I peel out of Nikita's driveway, the mansion in my rearview for the very last time.

"I need your help," I say, my heart in my throat.

MARGOT

My eyes stay glued to the unmarked SUV behind me.

It's driving too close. Way too close. One stomp of the brake will send them crashing into me.

I'm almost to the police station, only a few blocks away, but I stop at a red light and throw on my blinker. The SUV follows me as I turn. I'm ninety percent sure it's the police. A detective or something making sure I'm in fact going to the police station.

Which is terrifying as hell.

Because I know I can't.

I thought I could, for the sake of clearing my name, but I can't. I'm too afraid He'll be at the station, and I find it impossible to believe he would ever let Nikita make a deal to get me off. He wants me to suffer. He'd laugh if I ran right into his arms.

So I can't go.

I step on the gas to speed through a yellow light, but the SUV doesn't stop either. It bumps into me from behind, a little love tap in case I didn't notice them before.

They want me afraid.

Any second, I think blue and red lights will flash and an officer will come on a

loudspeaker, asking me to pull over.

But it doesn't come. And they bump me again.

"Shit," I hiss, stepping harder on the gas. Horns blare when I dart through a red light, tires screeching to avoid hitting me. I think for sure the SUV will stop, but it careens through, crashing into the front end of an Impala.

I cover my mouth as I gasp, peering in the rearview. It isn't until the SUV shoves the Impala out of the way, roaring to catch back up with me that it occurs to me this might not be the police.

It might be worse.

ARSENI

“Fuck.” My foot taps as I pick anxiously at my lip.

She’s all right.

She’s gonna be all right.

Don’t panic.

“We should call the police,” I say, as if I can’t hear the siren blaring on top of the car. Hudson insisted on going with me as backup when I called, and I didn’t even hesitate to climb into his cop car. I’m a fucking dead man.

“I doubt your buddies would appreciate that.” Hudson points to the glove box. “Take my silencer out, will you?”

“I don’t give a fuck what the consequences for me are.

” Frustration spills through a mound of helplessness in my tone.

Every second feels like a second too long that I’m not with her.

The only thing that gives me a shred of comfort is suspecting Nikita wants the brothers to take me out as well, so they may wait for me to arrive.

But if that were the case, Nikita would’ve given me her location.

Of course, in some ways he did. He knew I could find the Jag.

She's okay. For the moment, she's okay.

I fucking hope.

"Yeah, well, pretty sure the Bratva wouldn't let a law enforcement witness go, so her life is on the line here too."

When he points at the glovebox, I open it and retrieve the silencer he asked for.

"Aren't these illegal?" I hold up the black metal while pursing my lips at him.

"Nope."

I hand it over and watch him take the wheel with his knee while pulling out his gun. He screws the silencer on before taking the wheel again. When I lean over, I see the speedometer needle on ninety-five.

We'll be there soon. She just has to hang on a little longer.

I didn't bring my gun, which makes me feel like a world class fool right now. I ran out of the house without thinking about it. I was just panicked.

But I don't want to use a gun anyway. I don't want to kill my brothers. Whoever Nikita sent after her is a pawn, and I'm hopeful I can make them see it. After all, I'm the biggest pawn he has.

I could say Vitaly ordered them to stand down. But would they believe me?

Luka.

They'd believe Luka.

"What do you need a silencer for, anyway?" I ask, pulling out my phone and bringing up Luka's contact with shaky fingers.

"Like I said, I don't want to alert the police. We should keep the noise to a min—What the hell are you doing?"

He swipes the phone from my hand and tosses it in the backseat. All I got sent was: Help .

"What the fuck?" I wave a hand toward the backseat.

"Who were you texting?" Hudson demands, throwing a disapproving glare my way.

"Backup. We don't know if these guys are going to stand down."

"I'm a cop," Hudson says with a frustrated huff.

"They'd drop you like a dime for that reason alone. We aren't the Irish, Hudson. We don't think too hard about killing cops."

"Well, I'm laying my ass on the line for you, Ars. Nobody can know that we're working together. Just..." He shows me a palm. "Calm down. We're gonna get her."

The way Hudson says it—like he's talking partly to himself—makes me stare at him for a few seconds. I know my energy is chaotic. I know how scared I feel. Maybe it's rubbing off on him because he sounds worried too. More than I'd expect.

I stretch to grab my phone from the back seat and see a message from Luka.

Where are you?

I tuck my phone beneath my thigh and face the windshield. We're out of town now, and after a thirty second phone call with someone, Hudson tells me Margot has stopped. My heart leaps into my throat.

She's okay.

We'll be there soon.

She's okay.

Nikita wants them to kill me. He would tell them to capture her, not kill her right away. He wants me to find them and try to stop them. He's banking on it.

She's okay.

It's okay.

Just a little bit further.

But it's only seconds before my head is spinning with what happens when they do kill me. No one will know what took place. No one will protect her.

Tossing Hudson a glance, I bring my phone to my side and slyly type out another message to Luka.

Route 94 out by the lake.

Hurry , I add.

I tuck my phone back under my thigh and ignore it when it immediately buzzes. He'll come. I've been blowing him off for six months, and I broke his ribs just days ago, but ... he'll come.

Regret hits me so hard, I double over, resting my forearms on my knees. If I'd just listened. If I'd just been less selfish...

She never would've been here to begin with. I never would've come across her. The need for revenge would never have surfaced.

She wouldn't be fighting for her life right now.

When Hudson's phone rings yet again, he holds up a finger to tell me to be quiet.

"Sergeant Peters," he says into the phone. At first, I think he's talking to Sergeant Peters, but his authoritative command that follows makes it clear that he is Sergeant Peters. It occurs to me that I've never paid attention to Hudson's last name.

When he gets off, I give him a puzzled stare. "Sergeant?"

He looks at me and shrugs. "My uh, adoptive father, I guess you can say, is the Chief of Police. Helps to know people."

I nod and face forward, the first piece of water coming into view.

Almost there.

Hang on, Margot.

MARGOT

Shrubs.

The only cover I have is fucking shrubs.

I hate the desert.

“Ready or not, here I come,” a man coos in a thick, Russian accent. Water drips from my hair as I crouch as low as I can behind a pathetic bush more stick than leaves. My drenched shirt clings to my body while my skirt soaks up the dirt it lays in.

The gaping hole in the concrete barrier of the bridge is clearly visible from where I hide, though the sun is just beginning to rise. It’s dark enough that the men have flashlights scanning the area in search of me. When a beam hits me, I hold my breath, but it continues to scan.

I’m gonna die.

Every moment for the past ten minutes—that have felt like an eternity—I’ve had that same gut-punching thought.

It was too late before I realized I was doing the men a favor by driving out of the city in favor of rural roads, but as soon as I did, I knew it was over for me.

Their SUV knocked into me over and over, nearly making me spin out of control before I shoved harder on the gas and prayed my car was faster than theirs. It wasn’t.

I saw the bridge up ahead, rolled down my window, and screeched as I jerked the car into the barrier and careened fifty feet into the lake. It felt like a suicide attempt the whole way down.

I don't know what I was expecting when the car hit the water.

Maybe for it to rocket to the bottom, giving me seconds to climb out before I was too far down.

But no, when it hit, the car jolted to a stop.

It felt like I'd missed the lake altogether.

My face whip-lashed against the steering wheel, and for a moment all I could hear was a ringing in my ear. All I could taste was blood.

Then the car started to sink.

Rushing water awakened me from shock, and I hurried to unbuckle my seat belt. I waited until the car was submerged before abandoning it through the window and peering above the water.

I couldn't see anything, not even the outline of people up high, but I knew they would be there. For a minute, maybe less. So I stayed beneath the surface, my lungs empty and aching.

Then a bullet sliced through the water a few feet away. I startled, twisting my body that way while another bullet joined it. And another.

My eyes wide and stinging from lake water, I swam away from the gunfire in a panic, staying as deep under as I could manage. I made it beneath the bridge before my

lungs refused to go any farther.

I pulled up, gasping for air, and immediately started propelling myself toward the shore. They must've heard me because they haven't given up their search ever since.

My one piece of good luck is that shrubs aren't technically the only thing out here. There's trash piled up beneath the bridge next to tacky graffiti signatures, a mattress, a trashcan, a hammock, an old tire. Junk. Junk that's way too obvious to hide behind.

They searched for me there first while I crawled my way up the slope of the desert, feeling more and more exposed by the second. They haven't found me, but it'll be any moment now. The bullets into the water make me certain they don't plan on letting me live.

I'm a fool.

That's the other thought that strikes me, what a damn fool I am. I should've known leaving would never have been easy. I should've known they wouldn't just let me walk away.

I should've known not to trust Nikita. Certainly not over Arseni.

I'm going to die with Arseni believing I left him ... again. That I don't want him, that I never wanted him.

For the rest of his life, he'll think I ran away and got myself killed because I couldn't spend another day with him. He'll think I hated him.

He'll have no idea that I loved him. That I wanted a life with him more than I wanted my freedom.

I should've waited.

I should've trusted .

Instead, I'm here wishing I was back in my captor's bed, just so I could tell him that for the first time since my mother died, I don't feel alone. And I never want to feel alone again.

The flashlight roams over me again, and I'm sure this is it. It doesn't pause on me, but the man holding it draws closer. He's maybe thirty feet away now, and if I don't move, he's going to stumble right onto me. If I do move, he'll shoot me.

I collect dirt into my palm and prepare to fling it in his eyes when he approaches. It doesn't seem like a great strategy, but it's the only one I can think of.

Until I hear the siren.

I whip my gaze toward the blue and red flashing lights appearing on the other side of the bridge.

A cop.

Holy shit, a cop.

There's no way the help is here for me, but I'll be damned if I don't take advantage. I peek at the man with the flashlight, his friends spread out searching for me. He's turned away toward the cop car. It's now or never.

As soon as the cop makes it to the bridge, I break off into a sprint toward the road, my assailants becoming aware of me one-by-one. I scream when gunfire blasts but force myself not to let a cower slow me down.

The chase isn't over when I practically hurl myself onto the bridge, sprinting until I make it to the gaping hole my car made. It isn't over, but screeching tires sound like safety.

It's ironic that yesterday a cop was the last person I wanted to run into. I would've chosen the mafia.

But now, I fall to my knees crying tears of pure relief as the door of the car flies open.

ARSENI

She's alive.

She's alive .

“Oh my God,” I say, slapping Hudson in the arm as if he can't see the woman flailing her arms in the road. He slams on the breaks, and the tires squeal to a stop.

“Stay in the car,” I say to Hudson, not taking my eyes off Margot as I throw the door open. I don't wait for him to respond. I jump out of the car and nearly trip over myself at the relief in Margot's eyes.

She's fallen to her knees, but at the sight of me, she stands. Tears burst from her eyes as she runs to me. I take her in my shaking arms and have to hold back all emotion. All relief.

It isn't over yet.

“No one shoots!” I yell out in Russian at a brother as he climbs onto the bridge. The SUV is parked behind us on the other side, and if we hadn't spotted Margot, we would've stopped there. Who knows if it would've been too late.

Two others are quick to join him, all guns drawn and pointed our way. I urge Margot behind my back and lift up my hands.

“I have orders from Vitaly to take the girl to headquarters!”

Boris is the first to furrow his brow. He takes the lead among the others. “Nikita Petrov gave us strict instructions?—”

“He lied to you.” I roam my gaze over the brothers. “He lied to all of you the same way he lies to me... Put your guns down, and I’ll explain everything.”

“What the fuck are you doing with a cop?” Boris asks, still not lowering his gun.

“He’s on the payroll. Vitaly sent him too. Put your guns away .”

“Fuck you.” Dimitri shakes his gun at me. “We have strict orders to kill you too, you idiot.”

“Right, because Nikita can’t kill me himself. He isn’t the fucking Pakhan. What do you think it’ll mean for you when the actual Pakhan finds out you went against his orders?”

Boris and Dimitri give each other a look.

“We’ll call him,” I say, keeping my hands up. “It’ll take two minutes to clear this up, I swear to God.”

Or two minutes for them to know for certain I’m full of shit.

“ Please , just put the guns down. I’m unarmed.”

The driver’s side door to the car opens, and I slowly turn my head Hudson’s way, my eyes wide with disbelief.

Stay the fuck out of this , I try to say with my eyes. He doesn’t listen. All guns draw to Hudson, who holds his own at his side.

Margot clings to me, and when I look over my shoulder, she's peeking around my back at my brothers. She shakes in terror.

"Put your gun down," I tell Hudson before he fucks things up for all of us.

"Them first."

Margot's body stiffens. She was shaking, but now she's still, her nails digging into me like a frightened cat.

I look over my shoulder again to tell her it's going to be okay, but her eyes are no longer on my brothers. They're on Hudson. Her mouth is agape. Her face is twisted in horror. And when the muted sound of a silenced gun goes off, she sucks in a breath to scream.

Boris is the last to fall as I turn around, confusion making everything happen in slow motion. My mind feels like it short-circuits. There's a question mark permanently branded on my brain.

It isn't until the butt of the gun hits my temple that I understand why Margot screamed. It isn't because of my brothers' deaths.

It's because her worst nightmare is coming true.

MARGOT

S ix years ago, I made the worst mistake of my life.

I agreed to foster a seventeen-year-old boy who teased me, taunted me, and haunted my dreams every night that I fell asleep. He turned me into a monster, a woman capable of preying on the young and innocent.

I wanted that seventeen-year-old more than any respectable grown woman should ever think to, and it made me sick to my stomach. So sick I had to get rid of him if I had any chance in hell of saving my soul.

When he was gone, he still managed to haunt me. The friends he brought to my house occasionally showed up looking for him, and one scorching summer day, when I was at my most vulnerable, I invited one in for a glass of lemonade.

Please understand that I was in shambles. My identity was fractured. The caring, loving person I thought I saw in the mirror was now gone.

I didn't know who I was. I didn't know who I wanted to be.

Hudson knew something was wrong that afternoon. He was charming and handsome and kind in ways that were a stark contrast to my old foster son. He claimed he was eighteen, and I believed him. He seemed so mature, so beyond his years.

He came by the next day with a homemade batch of cookies just to say thank you for the lemonade. I took them with a quivering smile and nearly broke. It had been so

long since someone had cared about me, since someone had thought of me.

I was weak.

And he was kind.

The sex we had that day in my bed was the most passionate I'd ever had. When he delivered a gorgeous bouquet of roses to my work two days later, I thought my life was turning around.

We had sex every single night for weeks. I saw myself on his phone's background and blushed. I listened to his declaration of love and wept.

Looking back, there were so many red flags I missed. The way he would fume if I didn't take his call at work... The endless questions about my male coworkers... The missing panties, the missing stray cat that hung around my back porch, the possessive way he held me.

The first flag I finally recognized was the trip to Paris he booked, going so far as telling my boss I wouldn't be at work the next two weeks. My boss threatened to fire me—I'd been so distant lately—and I confronted Hudson with barely contained frustration.

He hit me. Then wailed, begging me to forgive him.

I tried to break up with him, and he threatened to kill himself.

I changed my locks, and he broke a window.

I got a new phone number, and he loaded my inbox so full of rants, clients' emails were swallowed up in the storm.

I was fired and remained unemployed for six months before I finally allowed Hudson into my house again, begging him to stop sabotaging my prospects with his calls to potential employers.

I cried to him. I begged him. And he relented.

For the moment.

Not a day went by for two years that he didn't threaten to call the police on me for my relationship with him. He threatened to tell them I raped him, groomed him even.

Then he became a police officer. The threats intensified. I offered to pay him to leave me alone. He declined for six months. Then finally, finally we worked out an exchange.

I would pay him every month to keep my secret and not approach me. For years, it's worked.

But now he's back.

"No!" I cry as Hudson knocks Arseni out with his gun. My hand over my mouth, I fall to my knees and inspect the lump on Arseni's temple. It's skipped over red and gone straight to purple.

I tap Arseni's face and bend so close that our lips brush. "Wake up. Please."

I peek at Hudson as he struts to the three men who were after me.

"Arseni, wake up!" I slap his face while my tears drip onto his cheeks. He doesn't stir.

Hudson fires two shots a piece into the men before turning back to me. I hunch over Arseni and cower, my head spinning.

What do I say?

What do I do?

Why didn't he kill Arseni?

My eyes close at this thought, and I wail while covering Arseni's body with mine, though I know it's a mistake. Because I know Hudson.

I'm his.

I'm always going to be his.

God pity the man who tries to take me away.

As Hudson nears, I force myself to stand and step over Arseni's body to partially block it. "He isn't breathing." I force my eyes onto the devil's. They're angry. Fiery . Fuming with vengeance.

"Th-thank you," I whisper, my voice shaking with fear I hope he's too delusional to see. In my experience with him, he's smart, but he likes to fool himself. It's all a fantasy to him. He punishes me every time I try to ruin it.

"I..." I take a step closer and lay my trembling hands against his chest. "I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't rescued me."

"Rescued you," Hudson deadpans. His lip curls, but he doesn't push my hands away. He'd never do that.

He just wants me to grovel.

“Do you think I don’t know every sick, twisted fucking fantasy you’ve been living out...” Hudson’s voice is low and menacing, barely contained rage bubbling beneath the surface. He points to Arseni. “With him ?”

I shake my head, but I don’t know what to say. I never know what to say to him.

“You’re sick, Margot.” His eyes narrow with derision as he takes me in. “You need help.”

“Yes.” I nod several times, tears leaking down my face. I know exactly what he’s saying.

I’m a pedophile. He tells me all the time when he’s angry. Never mind the fact that he’s the same age as Arseni, and they’re both grown men.

You’re faking it with him , he wrote to me in unknown blood on my bathroom mirror three months ago. He was talking about Austin.

I know what you really like , he followed up in an email the next day. Photos of children were attached.

I’m not that , I almost sent back. But I knew better than to defend myself. I took the rest of the day off and spent it crying in my bed.

“Yu-you’re right. I’m sick.” I take Hudson’s hands, my fingers grazing the gun. He tightens his hold on it and eyes me suspiciously. “Please help me, Hudson.” Running my hands up his arms, a sob escapes. “Show me what I need. Please .”

“You only wanted me when I was a child.” He shakes his head, still admonishing me.

Some of the anger has left his eyes.

“That’s not true.” I close my eyes and bite back the oncoming sob. “I-I just didn’t know what I wanted. You’ve always been there for me, and—and—and now I see that. I see how much I need you.”

Taking a deep breath, I prepare to go in for the kill.

“Hudson Nathaniel Peters... I love you.”

I hold his arms gently while trying not to cry. My own voice is glass in my ears. It hurts to say these words not because I don’t love Hudson—of course I don’t—but because I mean what I’m saying. Just to the wrong man.

I’ve never told a man I loved him before, and it feels like agonizing irony that the man I love is lying unconscious on the road, his brain possibly filling with blood.

“I love you,” I say again, just so I say the words aloud. I’m looking at Hudson but speaking to Arseni. “You’re the only person in my life who’s made me feel like I have everything I need. I feel alone without you. I... I can’t lose you.”

“You’ll never lose me.” Hudson frowns, holstering his gun. He places both hands on my shoulders in a possessive embrace. “I’m devoted to you, Margot. You’re the love of my life and always have been.”

“I know.” I nod several times. “You’ve always done such a good job of showing me... Now it’s time for me to show you.”

He lets me take his hand and lead him a step toward the car before he stops. I hold my breath and resist the urge to look at Arseni. I peek over my shoulder. “Hudson, please... I want to go home. With you.”

He stares at me for several seconds that last for hours. I stare at him back hoping my eyes shine with innocence. Hudson is a maniac, but he isn't stupid. He can lie to himself, but I don't expect his guard to vanish.

Please leave.

Please, please leave.

If Arseni wakes up while we're still here...

Finally, Hudson nods, his eyes roaming to Arseni. The one look holds the breath in my lungs, like I expected him to just forget about the man I have to leave behind because I can't bear to stay and watch him die.

"Baby..." The pet name is pushing it. I can feel that it's pushing it, but Hudson doesn't blink. He nods again and steps around me to get to Arseni.

"Wh-what are you doing?" My whole body tenses as I watch Hudson lug Arseni up by his arm. He grunts as he slings him over his shoulder.

"We need him."

"But why?"

Hudson doesn't answer right away. I follow him as he hauls Arseni's body to the trunk of his car.

"Somebody has to take the fall for the photos in your house... I'm not going to let you go down for that."

I blink at him, but he doesn't look at me. Neither of us mention the absolute irony of

that statement. He pops the trunk and strains to lift Arseni inside. Arseni's body makes a thump, his foot hanging out.

"Thank you, but why would you think he'd take the fall?"

I... I'm sorry, I just don't think I can spend another second with this man.

He—he protected me from his boss, so he isn't bad, and maybe he's even an okay friend, but I've spent too much time around him already, and all I want is to be with you. "

Hudson looks at me and sighs. "Baby, that's all I want too. And believe me, in an hour, we'll leave Vegas forever, but we have to take care of this first. You don't want me to have to go on the run with a fugitive, do you?"

"No." I shake my head. "No, I..." My mouth hangs open as I think. Finally, I point to the trunk. "He's selfish. He'll never take the fall for me."

Hudson's jaw clenches, making my shoulders hunch at the anger that suddenly brews. "Yes, he will."

Don't respond . My brain yells it at me, but I don't listen.

"How do you know?"

Hudson looks away, his anger near explosive. "Because he loves you."

The tension in my shoulders releases abruptly, though my heart lowers to the road.

I don't know why it affects me so deeply to hear Hudson say it when I heard the confession just last night.

But it hits me hard, and I realize for the first time that Nikita could see it too.

That was the point in having me run to my death.

And Hudson... Arseni must've spoken to him. They must've maintained a relationship after all these years.

When Arseni asked me to tell him Hudson's name, I had to refuse. I thought I was protecting him, but now I realize I was protecting me. I was ashamed. It was bad enough that I had sex with someone Arseni's age. I couldn't admit it was one of his friends.

If I had, maybe Hudson would be dead instead of the others.

I look at the trunk, my eyes seeking to implore Arseni for forgiveness he can't give... But I notice something.

His foot. It isn't hanging out of the trunk.

Hudson rubs his head, seeming lost in an enraged fantasy. He wanders the few feet to the trunk only to be kicked backward by a shoe to the balls. Hudson's eyes widen as his clenched jaw drops, wheezing in a groan. He stumbles backward as Arseni whips out of the trunk, landing on his feet.

He tackles Hudson to the ground just as the psycho snaps into fight mode, his growl making me jump. Arseni lands a blow to Hudson's face but makes the mistake of turning to look at me.

Hudson rips Arseni's head back and throws him off. Manic eyes find me before Hudson starts to crawl my way like a figure from a scary movie. I scream.

Arseni jumps for Hudson, locking his arm around Hudson's neck and pulling. "Run!" Hudson bucks, but Arseni holds on tight, and I do as commanded. I run.

And it's a mistake. A stupid, moronic mistake that I'll never forgive myself for.

I could've gotten a phone, the car keys, a gun , but instead I just run over the dead men like a panicked woman without a fucking clue. It isn't until the thought of grabbing a gun occurs that I remember the other one holstered on Hudson's hip.

I come to an abrupt stop, my lungs sucking in a gasp as I spin to yell out for Arseni.

And that's when I hear the gunfire. It's muted. Just a light pew . But lethal.

I run for Arseni as he stumbles backward toward the hole in the barrier, holding his stomach.

"Arseni!" I screech, pumping my legs harder.

He looks over at me at the sound of my scream. His heel slips on broken rock as he steps back too far. He grasps at air as he falls

"No!" I run to the ledge and fall to my knees while peering over as Arseni hits the water. "Arseni!" I scream again. I climb to my feet to jump in after him, but Hudson grabs me just as my feet lift from the ground.

I scream and thrash while Hudson hauls me back to the car.

"Shut up, shut the fuck up!" he yells in my ear, his arm wrapped around me tightening. I think he just hates the sound of me crying over another man, but then I hear the car.

I turn to it, waving my arms and begging for help while Hudson tries in vain to stop me.

“Help, please, help!”

“If you don’t shut your mouth right now, I’ll kill them. Do you understand?”

I quiet, but it isn’t because of the threat. It’s because I’m confused.

The car isn’t slowing down. It’s engine revs as it speeds up.

Hudson realizes it shortly after I do, the distraction loosening his hold.

I break away from him, heading for the lake but stop short and scream as the car pegs Hudson before slamming the cop car’s backend, metal crunching on metal.

The sound is so loud, I feel my heart stop, and I just stare at the stranger jumping out of the smoking car.

No. Not a stranger.

“Arseni?” the man from the party, Luka , asks, his eyes wide with fright. I point a quivering finger at the lake and stumble on words that he doesn’t listen to anyway.

He runs to the side and dives off without the slightest hesitation. I move to watch him splash, Arseni nowhere to be found.

ARSENI

I like to think I'm a good swimmer.

Maybe even a great swimmer, if I'm feeling especially arrogant. The skill stems from countless hours at the same lake that swallows me up now. It drags my injured body down without mercy, and it's all I can do to drag my way to the surface.

While I catch my breath, Margot's screams above my head force their way through the water in my ears.

I suck in a breath to yell, but nothing comes out.

My head bobs up and down in the water while my limbs fight to keep me up, water covering my mouth like a gag every other second.

I take a deep breath before going under and peer at my wounded abdomen sucking away my strength. It tinges the water around it red.

My eyes shutting, I thrust myself to the surface and gasp in air. I splash as I struggle to stay afloat, but I used most of my remaining strength on getting this one breath.

"Margot!" I yell, half the word swallowed up by water.

What is he doing to her now? What will he do now that he has her?

This is my fault.

This is all my fucking fault.

The last of my strength drains away as I sink, my eyes open to watch the blurry concrete underside of the bridge above. I've never felt so hopeless.

But soon, it's over.

MARGOT

I can't take my eyes off the water.

For several seconds, it's still. There's no sign of either man.

Then Luka pops up. Alone .

"No," I whisper to myself, covering a hand over my mouth. After a quick breath, Luka dives beneath the water again, leaving me in suspense.

"Please," I whisper again. I don't know who I'm begging. Luka, I guess. Maybe God.

Please save him .

The blood seeping from Arseni's abdomen is stained into my mind as I watch and wait.

I hate it. I hate every second of this.

I'm just standing here.

I'm doing nothing .

My toes hanging over the edge, I suck in a breath and prepare to dive in, but I stop myself before I can fall forward.

I can't save him like this. I don't even know that I'd be strong enough to pull him to shore.

Whipping my head toward the cop car, I rush that way and fling open the door.

What's something an officer should always have on hand?

A fucking first aid kit.

The sound of splashing water yanks my attention toward the gap in the bridge, but I force myself to ignore that too.

He's alive.

He'll be okay.

I have to believe that.

Papers fling as I rip apart the glove box only to come up empty.

I check the back seat, though after only a second my head tells me it wouldn't be there.

I check the center console, search the storage space in the doors, even go to the trunk and rip up the carpeted base to find a spare tire.

"Where the fuck is it?!" I scream, slamming my fist on the base of the trunk. I run back to the backseat and check the seat storage before my eyes finally land on the floorboard. I know it's there before I even check. A box about a foot long is neatly tucked beneath the driver seat.

I yank it out and sprint to peer out at the water. My heart beats fast in my ears with every step. It feels like a moment of truth. A reality that will shape the rest of my life.

I see Arseni's head above water with Luka swimming him to shore.

Hugging the first aid kit to my chest, I let out a cry of relief and sprint to where Luka is headed. He's pulling Arseni onto the muddy bank when I get there.

"Arseni!" I scream as if he could ever hear me. I throw the kit down as I dive to his body, my nails digging into mud.

Luka starts compressions on his chest while I caress his face, muttering things not meant for Luka's ears. I don't back off when he pinches Arseni's nose to perform mouth-to-mouth.

"Is he okay? Is he gonna be okay?" I blubber, which Luka rightfully ignores. He doesn't look panicked, which I tell myself is a good sign. But he doesn't look relieved either.

"Arseni, please ." I pat his face as if that'll wake him up. With a few more compressions, water shoots from his mouth, his chest lifting off the ground, and he takes in a sharp gasp.

Luka falls backward, his arm shielding his eyes. The guttural sound he makes is filled with relief.

"Arseni," I say, rolling him onto his side.

He looks me in the eyes and combs my hair with a dirty hand. "Are you okay?"

I smile but just let out a cry in response.

Luka gets back up and rifles through the first aid kit. Arseni's eyes scan him, but he doesn't look surprised.

"Luka saved you." Arseni moves back to me, his eyes hooded. The memory he shared with me of the first time he met Luka pops into my mind, and I wonder how much déjà vu he must be feeling.

"You came for me," I whisper, caressing his face while Luka applies pressure to his abdomen.

"I need to call an ambulance, okay?" I nod encouragingly though I must look like I'm answering for him. "I'll be right back."

"No." He grips my hand when I turn. It isn't as firm as it would normally be, but it's strong enough that I feel my chest unwind.

"It isn't safe." He cringes against pain. His voice is gravelly like it's hard to talk. "No one can know."

I glance at Luka, but he isn't looking at either of us. He's intently attending to the wound. Or pretending to. I don't know what he's feeling, but he doesn't look like he thinks he's a hero.

What happened between them?

"Arseni, you could die."

I watch for reason to come over his expression. For the seriousness of the situation to occur to him. But all he does is stroke my hair.

"I love you," he whispers.

I don't know if it's a distraction. I don't know if he's telling me this just so I'll accept whatever consequences come of this.

But he means it. Looking into his eyes, full of affection I've been yearning for my whole life, I know for certain that he means it.

"I love you too." I roll my lips into my mouth, holding in a cry.

"Help will be here soon," Luka interjects.

"What?" Arseni lifts up to look more pointedly at his friend. "No. No, Luka, she can't be here. She's..." Instead of finishing, he looks at me. "You have to hide."

"Margot's safe," Luka says. "I promise."

Arseni's gaze moves back to him, his eyes squinting. I don't know if he's suspicious or confused.

I watch Luka's serious eyes, the sound of a car horn approaching not breaking either man's focus.

"You go down, I go down."

Arseni's eyes close at Luka's words. He places a hand over his eyes while his face scrunches. It takes me a moment to realize he's crying.

When he goes to sit up, Luka helps him and throws an arm around his back. As the two men hug, I watch with an emotional smile curling my lips. Perhaps it's irrelevant by now, but a heavy feeling of... forgiveness... washes over me. Forgiveness for myself.

Because I know in an instant that I didn't leave Arseni without a family way back when. That arrangement was never supposed to work out.

He was born an orphan, but he has a family. And now, I do too.

"I've got you," Luka says, patting his back. " Always ."

MARGOT

The smell of brownies fills my kitchen.

When I open the oven, I inhale a deep breath and grab the oven mitt to pull them out.

It isn't a special recipe—in fact, it's from a box—but when I was trying to rack my brain for the perfect welcoming treat, I had an image of my old foster son hoovering these with his friends he invited over without asking.

It's a reminder to myself of everything that could go wrong, and for some reason, that brings me peace.

Calm. Stability. Everything a new parent needs.

My head turns when I hear a crash, and I hurry to the spare bedroom to find Arseni throwing toys into a trash bag.

I sigh. "Babe..."

"It's too much." He shakes his head without looking at me and busies himself packing away video games. There's at least fifty on the shelf. "I don't know what the fuck I was thinking."

I look around the stuffed room and can't help but agree.

Arseni has spent a small fortune on this room.

We've painted it three times. Added shelving just to tear it down when Arseni realized with horror that the kid probably wouldn't have anything to put on it.

Then he put everything back up and filled it himself.

Every trip to the store, he comes back with some new flashy toy or video game console. Every night I go to sleep, he's next to me on his phone, researching the burning question of the day. He's an absolute nervous wreck.

And, my God, I love it.

"Honey... You need to put the trash bag down."

"It looks like I'm trying to fucking buy the kid. I mean Jesus Christ, why would you let me do this?" Dropping the trash bag, he waves a hand around the room. He looks crazed with his hair disheveled like he's been pulling it. I know for a fact he hasn't slept in a week.

"It looks like you care . Because you do. And that's all that matters." I walk up to him and place my hands on his chest when he still won't look at me. Finally, his tortured eyes meet mine.

"I love you. You're a good man. And you're going to be a great father."

He sighs. I don't think that gave him the briefest comfort. "Would we still be doing this if we'd known you were pregnant?"

" Yes ."

"He's not going to think that."

"He will." I force a smile. "It just takes time."

My words sound so confident, but in my head, I'm stuffing that trash bag full of shit and running around in a panic. Arseni being panicked helps. It lets me know I'm not alone.

This feels so much like the first time, yet so, so different.

The boy's name is Santiago. He's eleven years old and has spent the last four years of his life living in abandoned houses with his mother and her various boyfriends.

No one has been able to locate her for three months.

The state took custody of him a week ago when an anonymous caller tipped them off.

"What if he knows?" Arseni asks. The shame in his voice tells me exactly what he's thinking.

What if the boy knows it was Arseni who called?

"He won't."

"But—"

The doorbell ringing cuts him off. His eyes widen with panic and don't land on me until I cup his face and force his head straight.

"Baby... You're the only person he trusts to help him. You've been building this relationship for months. He needs you. So please, breathe. It's all going to be okay."

He takes a deep breath and nods.

"And if all else fails, just remind him of your own experience with the system. Then he'll really know you get it."

An amused grin spreads across my face while Arseni's eyes narrow. He breaks away from my hold to head for the door.

"Not funny," he calls behind him.

"A little funny."

When we get to the door, Arseni hesitates with his hand on the knob. The doorbell rings a second time, and he still doesn't answer it.

"Babe ."

He shushes me, then takes a deep breath. When he opens the door, a social worker and the boy, smaller than I pictured, stare up at him.

I remember this same moment six years ago with so much clarity, I search for the similarities. There's a trash bag in the social worker's hands, but it's nowhere near as full as Arseni's was. The little boy looks more scared than Arseni did.

And my heart, once empty and desperate, doesn't leap from my chest this time. It fills. Floods . Because I know without a shadow of a doubt that this time, I'm looking at my son.

"Hi," Arseni squeaks before clearing his throat. "Please come in."

The social worker introduces us to Santiago while the boy doesn't say a word. According to Arseni, he's never heard him speak. He's found him sitting outside by himself, communicating only with a stick or a dribble of a basketball Arseni once rolled into the boy's yard.

When the social worker leaves, the three of us stand awkwardly for a moment.

“Would you like to see your room?” Arseni asks.

The boy just stares.

“Are you hungry?”

The boy doesn’t even blink.

Arseni turns to me. “You uh, you made brownies, didn’t you, sweetheart?”

I nod enthusiastically.

“Would you like a brownie?” Arseni asks Santiago. The nervousness in Arseni’s voice is so apparent, I want to hug him. But damn, he deserves this.

Arseni’s foot taps as he looks around, his hand scratching at the back of his neck. It’s only been a minute, but he acts like we’ve been standing here for twenty. With a snap of his fingers, he strides toward the guest room.

Santiago’s gaze follows him.

Arseni returns carrying a basketball. He kneels in front of the boy and offers it like he’s offering his last meal to a king. There’s kindness in my love’s eyes that touch my heart and remind me all over again why I fell in love with him.

Arseni is so many things. Not all of them are good.

Sometimes he’s struck with fear that pushes people away. Sometimes he says things he doesn’t mean.

But the things that really matter. Loyalty. Honesty. Love.

He has those in spades. And staring at him now, I cup my belly absently and fill with the knowledge that he'll love our children with the same intensity as he loves me. He already does.

Santiago takes the ball cautiously and brings it to his chest. Seconds pass while nothing happens.

But then, to my surprise and glee, my new son's lips quirk up.

Seven months later, as he holds his baby sister in his arms, they spread into a full grin, and the photo of the moment rests on our mantle next to my mother's drawing. Beside that is Arseni and I on our wedding day, our lips locked.

We're in the living room with Uncle Luka and Aunt Lucia—both of us drowsy beyond belief after a sleepless night with the baby—when Arseni slips up by calling me Mommy. It's a reflex from talking to the kids.

Lucia laughs, her brow furrowing.

But I smile.

Because finally, I can say that I don't hate it.

* * *

Thank you so much for your interest in Arseni! I hope you've enjoyed this series :)