



Broken Embers (Vegas Bratva Kings #4)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: It all started with a fake baby bump.

Then, I really got knocked up.

Now, I've been stolen by Russian Special Forces.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

I had my escape planned.

One last night in his bed. One last time letting him tie me up, strip me down, and own me completely.

Then?

I was betrayed—by my own damn hormonal body.

One second, I was drunk on pleasure. Who wouldn't turn their nose up at that?

The next?

A sharp nip to my overly sensitive nipple made me scream— not in bliss like usual, but in agonizing pain.

Then, I face-planted the floor.

I woke up in the ER—

Just in time for a big-mouthed doctor to announce to Oleksi:

First pregnancies are always the worst!

Now, Oleksi knows—everything.

And my escape plan is blown to hell. But just when I think it can't get worse—

Russian Special Forces storm his mansion.

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SABrINA

I step through the door of the Mirochin mansion into the night, and somehow the quiet of the darkness seems louder than the chaos that came before it. The silence wraps around me like a noose as I walk away from the man I love, the home that had started to feel like mine, and the child I just claimed wasn't mine.

I bite back the tears. Each step I take is heavier than the last, my body screaming at me to turn around, to run. But I don't.

I don't run. I don't beg. I don't cry.

I walk.

Because I have to.

I have to protect the people I love—even if it means walking straight into the line of fire.

Only this time... It's not just me walking into it, and I will do whatever it takes to protect the new little life growing inside me as well.

I don't allow my hand to drift to my stomach the way I want to. I can't. I won't. If they knew—I stop myself from shuddering at the way the general had eyed Elena when he thought she was Sabrina's daughter. I can't let on that I'm pregnant.

The SUV waiting at the base of the steps looks almost too ordinary. It's jet-black, with tinted windows, and the engine is idling quietly, like it's not the steel coffin I know it is. A soldier opens the back door for me, and I duck inside without hesitation, keeping my chin high and my fear buried deep beneath the practiced calm on my face.

The door slams shut behind me, and just like that, I'm sealed in.

Beside me, General Vladislav Ergorov sits like a ghost carved from bone and steel, his face carved with cold lines and shadowed purpose.

I meet his eyes, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. Then he nods once, almost cordially as the vehicle starts to move.

"I am General Ergorov," he says.

I arch a brow. "You kidnapped me. I think we're past fucking introductions."

His lips press into a thin, unimpressed line. "Watch your tongue, Miss Craft. Where we are going, such insolence will not serve you well."

"Where are we going?" I ask, keeping my voice even, even though my pulse is pounding against my ribs like a warning drum.

"I cannot tell you that," he replies. "But we will arrive soon as it's not too far."

He leans toward me suddenly, fingers reaching out toward my temple. I flinch, twisting just enough to avoid his touch.

His hand drops, but his tone turns icy. "Did Mirochin do this to you?"

“No,” I say firmly. “I fell and hit the floor.”

He studies me for a moment longer, the scrutiny in his eyes prickling like barbed wire against my skin. It’s clear he doesn’t believe me. But he lets it go.

“You are free of him now,” he says.

His words slice straight through me.

Free of him?

The bile rises to the back of my throat.

Does he think he’s somehow rescuing me?

What the fuck is happening?

What the fuck does the Russian Special Forces want with me?

I bite back the questions tumbling through my mind. I need to focus and keep track of where we’re going.

We ride in silence for the next ten minutes, as the general is preoccupied with his phone. My eyes are locked on the window, watching the city blur into darkness as we head out of Moscow. I’ve been silently clocking every turn, every landmark. I’ve been here for three weeks—I know the bones of this city now.

But soon we’re leaving the city, heading into the unknown. Ten minutes out on a long, silent road, the SUV pulls over in the middle of nowhere. Snow glitters in the moonlight like shattered glass, and my gut twists.

My first thought is, ‘This is it. I’m going to be executed and dumped in the woods.’

“Is this where you shoot me and leave my body on the side of the road?” I try to keep my voice steady as if I’m not fucking petrified.

“Why would we go to all the trouble of extracting you from that Mirochin fortress just to kill on the side of the road?” The general gives me a confused look.

“Because isn’t that what people like you do?”

He opens a center compartment between the seats and pulls out a long black strip of fabric—a blindfold.

“You don’t have a high opinion of us, do you?” He watches me intently.

“You did storm the Mirochin mansion and kidnap me in the middle of the night—what am I supposed to think?” I point out.

“I need to put this on you.” The general holds up the blindfold.

“Are you serious?” I stare at the item like it’s a poisonous snake. “And what if I refuse?”

“I would prefer not to harm you,” he says. “But if you resist, I will use chloroform.”

My hand twitches toward my stomach before I can stop it, then clenches into a fist in my lap. No. That could hurt the baby. No matter what’s waiting at the end of this road, I won’t risk my child.

“Fine,” I grit out. “Blindfold it is.”

He places it over my eyes with surprising care, careful not to brush the wound on my forehead. Darkness crashes over me like a second skin.

The SUV starts again, and this time, every jolt and turn is disorienting. I count in my head, try to track it, but after ten minutes I'm hopelessly lost.

A stop.

Russian murmurs.

Another turn.

Another stop.

The door opens and two sets of hands guide me out. I stumble slightly but don't let them see me falter. I keep walking, stone-faced, as I'm led down a corridor that seems to stretch forever. Each step echoes like a countdown.

Then the blindfold comes off.

The light is so bright I squint, my vision swimming. I blink hard, disoriented until shapes emerge.

A woman stands across from me.

She is tall, maybe five inches taller than me, with dark blonde hair pulled into a sleek knot, flawless ivory skin, sharp cheekbones that cut like glass. Regal. She looks poised and dangerous.

She is speaking quietly to General Ergorov. Beneath her arm is a yellow folder, and while in her hands she's holding a sleek tablet that her eyes keep darting to.

Eventually, their conversation finishes, and General Ergorv turns toward me.

“We will meet again, Miss Craft.”

Something in the way he says it tells me he means soon—and it’s not a promise. It’s a threat.

He walks out, leaving me in this fluorescent cage with Miss Russian Ice Queen. I meet her gaze, unnerved by how much she reminds me of my mother. There’s something in her eyes—familiar, cold, calculating.

She addresses me in a smooth, accented English. “Hello, Sabina. Welcome home.”

Sabina.

My stomach knots. They don’t know I speak Russian, I realize. That might be the one advantage I have right now.

“Sabina?” I repeat. “My name is Sabrina. And this sure as hell isn’t my home.”

I move toward the chair she gestures to and slide into it as she takes a seat in front of me at the wooden table. I’m glad to sit as my legs feel like jelly, and I don’t want them to see my fear.

“You do realize what you’ve just done qualifies as an act of war, right? Kidnapping an American citizen? Not exactly diplomacy.”

She doesn’t flinch—doesn’t blink. Just places her elbows on the table and laces her fingers together.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she says. “You may live in the United States and be a

citizen there now. But you were born here in Russia... but not as Sabrina Craft.”

She pulls out a sheet of paper from the folder, which is crisp and official-looking, and slides it across the table. I don’t want to look. But I do.

It has my date of birth and time of birth, but the name is not mine; it reads ‘ Sabina Mariya Zorin’.

The surname knocks the air from my lungs.

Zorin.

That was the name on the birth certificate Tara had hidden in that box she’d hidden—the name tied to Lidiya Zorin.

My voice shakes as I push the paper back. “You’re lying.”

“I may not know you now,” she says, “but I saw you the day you were born, Sabina.”

I stare at her. My body goes still. “Who the hell are you?” I whisper.

The woman leans back, graceful as a swan. “I am Yelena Zorin.”

Fuck! The name of Lidiya Zorin’s mother—her name rings in my ears like a funeral bell.

I stare at her, bile rising in my throat. “What? Are you trying to tell me you’re my mother?”

“No,” she says. “I’m your aunt.”

OLEKSI

This house used to be one of my fortresses, but now the once magnificent entry hall is nothing more than a fucking wreck. Glass litters the floors and the sound of the attack still rings in my ears. This is not the first time I've been left among destruction, but it is the first time it has happened in my own home and the first time it's left me feeling like the attackers ripped my heart out through my soul. The silence is thick with Sabrina's absence as I stand in the aftermath, the memory of the attack replaying through my head and blood pounding in my ears like a war drum that refuses to stop.

My arms instinctively close around Elena's small warmth, the only thing grounding me. She stirs softly against my chest, strapped to me in the baby sling. Her cheek rests trustingly just over my heart, and her soft breaths heat a path around it, totally unaware that the only mother she has known for her short nine-month life is gone. I swallow as the anger and pain pound through me once again, and my hands curl into fists at my side.

"We're going to get her back, sweetheart," I whisper to the little girl I have just found out is my niece—a tiny part of my brother's heart and soul.

My jaw clenches when I think of an image of the petite, brave woman with a huge heart, fiercely protective instincts, and an unmatched loyalty to those she loves and cares about. A woman who risked everything and carried the burden of my brother and her sisters' secret all alone for the past eight months, knowing the dangers that one little slip about Elena's parentage would create.

Still, Sabrina didn't think twice about it and took Elena on as her own daughter. She truly is a remarkably special person. My brow furrows as Clyde's words echo through my head. I hope we find her before the people who took her find out just how special Sabrina is.

What the fuck did he mean by that? I turn to where Lev, Clyde, Syd, and Ivan huddle near the front door, my eyes narrowing as a dreadful feeling starts to creep into my gut. I didn't get to press Clyde about what he meant because we were interrupted by Syd who came to tell me that Lev was chasing down one of the fucking Russian Special Forces bastards that were still loitering around the property. She was floored to see Clyde alive, and then Ivan joined her to let us know that Lev was back.

Once back into the foyer, I had to get my men to work on starting the cleanup and making plans to re-secure the mansion. With all that out of the way, I can press Clyde for answers. Walking toward the group, Syd is the first to see me, and she gives me a tight smile as the rest of them turn. Drawing nearer to them, I signal them to keep their voices down. They know why as their eyes land on the little angel snuggled against me, secure in her baby sling.

I can see that Lev is still pissed that he didn't catch the Russian fucker that vanished into the early morning.

"I'm sorry, boss," Lev says, his voice low. "He just vanished."

"It's okay, Lev," I say, trying to keep my cool. We're all tired. Lev, Syd, and Ivan had been the only three of my men that weren't taken down by tranq darts and gotten a few of the bastards before the entire fucking team crashed into my house. "They are slippery cunts and know their way around this town better than we do."

Elena stirs, her little mouth opening in a sleepy yawn. I adjust the sling to keep her quiet.

“Where is Magda?” Ivan asks.

“Sabrina gave her a few days off,” I say. “She wanted to visit family in Moscow.” I catch the time on my watch. Almost five-thirty in the morning, and it already feels like a lifetime since Sabrina was taken. “Magda should be back before six.”

“It’s best not to leave the little cutie alone right now,” Syd says.

“I don’t want her out of my sight until I know what the fuck is going on,” I growl and my eyes catch Clyde’s. “Why the fuck did General Ergorov and his team of Russian Special Forces take Sabrina? What do they want with her? Has this got something to do with Tara and Gavriil digging into some Russian woman’s birth certificate?”

Clyde’s eyes narrow to slits. “What do you know about that?” His voice is low and deadly calm.

“Not much,” I admit. “We found a Russian puzzle box that Tara had hidden in hers and Sabrina’s apartment. In it was a birth certificate for a Lidiya Zorin, a photograph of the famous Russian cryptographer and mathematician, Anya Novikov, and...” I hesitate to tell them about the adoption papers of Gavriil and Irina that Sabrina and I found in a hidden compartment of the box.

“Please tell me that you didn’t go poking around here in Moscow?” Clyde’s eyes bore into mine. “Is that why the two of you came here?”

“There were a few reasons we came here!” My brook becomes frosty. “Admittedly, that was on the list. But the hospital had burned down...”

“And I got hold of some of my contacts to find out about the hospital records,” Syd picks up the conversation.

“Did you specifically ask about Lidiya Zorin?” Clyde’s tone becomes more forceful.

Syd and I exchange a glance, and I nod.

“We did,” Syd answers.

“Sabrina had a theory that Lidiya may have been Tara’s real name and that Carla and Sol may have stolen her from Russia, and that is why their parents lied to them about who Tara’s real mother was all these years,” I add. “Sabrina wanted to know if her parents were kidnappers, and then her theory seemed even more plausible when her mother, Carla, went missing in Moscow a few days before we arrived here.”

“What?” It’s Clyde’s turn to look confused. “Why would you think that Carla had gone missing in Moscow?”

“Because Sam told us that Nikolas’s yacht had gone missing near Trabzon,” Syd answers. “He told us that it had just disappeared off the radar.”

“Carrying my aunt, Carla, and Mark.” My hand absently strokes Elena’s soft hair as she sighs and moves position.

Clyde’s brow furrows deeper, showing us he didn’t know about this. “What were they doing near Turkey?”

“They were on a cruise celebrating my Aunt Galina and Nikolas’s engagement,” I explain. “But they were supposed to be going to the Bahamas.”

“That’s a serious detour,” Clyde points out the obvious. “Wait!” His eyes register his realization. “Trabzon is on the Black Sea coast, not far from the Georgian border.” His eyes hold mine, and I can see his mind putting the puzzle pieces into place. “It would make sense that if Carla wanted to come into Russia, she’d do so through a

not-so-obvious route.” He looks at me wide-eyed as full realization dawns. “Fuck! Do you think Carla knows that Tara was looking into her real mother, and that’s why she came here?”

Now my mind’s reeling as I had not thought about that possibility. “Has there been any news of Tara’s whereabouts?”

“No.” Clyde shakes his head. “I was in Russia when Sam called me with instructions for an urgent extraction of first Sabrina and Elena, and then you.”

“What?” Syd, Ivan, and Lev splutter.

“What kind of an extraction?” Syd asks suspiciously.

Clyde raises his brows and purses his lips. “The kind where they have a seemingly tragic life-ending accident.”

“Erased!” Syd’s brows shoot up, and she looks at me. “Jesus, fucking Christ, Oleksi, what kind of hornets nest have we kicked here?”

“That’s what I want to know.” My eyes bore into Clyde’s. “Why were you in Russia?”

“I promised Tara that I would look into Lidiya Zorin for her,” Clyde admits.

“Was that before or after she dumped your bleeding body at a hospital and ran?” Syd sneers, her tone filled with malice, which shocks me as I’ve never seen such spite in her before. But it’s fleeting, and the hurt and anger that flashed in her eyes during her outburst are gone as quickly as they came.

Clyde turns to her. His eyes are icy as he drawls, “Actually, I didn’t want Tara to take

me to the hospital at all. I told her to run and go to a safe house. But she's as stubborn as a fucking ox and took me anyway. Then I had to all but get security to escort her from the hospital to leave me. Tara, unlike some people, knows what loyalty is all about."

Before they can get into a full-blown argument, I intervene. "So Sam hasn't been able to locate Tara yet either?"

"No." Clyde's answer is curt and clipped. "When I asked, all he said was that he may have a lead." He looks at me curiously. "Did Sam tell you that Carla went missing in Moscow?"

"No," I reply. "Sabrina tried to call her mother, but a Russian woman, a housekeeper at a hotel in Moscow, answered and told Sabrina that she'd found the phone in a room."

He looks at me in surprise. "Shit." He spits. "I take it you investigated that?" Before I can answer, he fires off another question. "Which hotel?"

"Hotel Volkovya, in the Patriarch's Ponds District, Central Moscow," I tell him.

"Oh no!" Clyde's face drops. "I'm assuming you went there?"

I nod.

"The suite number the housekeeper gave Sabrina, where she found Carla's phone, was one that is permanently booked for some influential Russian family," Lev adds, glancing at Ivan. "Ivan and Syd found out that the day Carla was supposedly in the suite, no one had been booked in there for the night or was reportedly in there."

"Of course not," Clyde says in exasperation. "There's a reason they call that hotel the

Wolf Den. Because of its discretion, each private client that has a suite there has a personal card key, and they pay per month or year, so they don't have to book."

"That makes sense," Ivan says with a nod. "Although I've never heard of the hotel being called the Wolf Den."

Ivan looks at me for clarification, and I shrug. "Me either. However, my family has never had much need for hotels in Russia. We have property all over the country." My attention turns back to Clyde. "What do you know about the hotel, and why would Carla have been in a suite booked out to the Morozov family?"

"Oh fuck no!" Clyde hisses, running his hand impatiently through his hair. "It's starting to make sense now."

"What is?" All four of us ask him, as nothing is making sense to me yet.

"The first red flag you and Sabrina raised was poking around in Lidiya Zorin's business, the second was looking into the Morozov family," Clyde informs us. "While the Volkovya is discreet, trust me, the Russians still keep a close covert eye on it, especially on some of its more important families."

My brows shoot up now as it registers. "Oh, fuck, do you think the Morozov that has that suite is General Timofey Morozov?"

"Woah!" Ivan gives a low whistle. "The man who basically changed warfare strategy and authored the Morozov Doctrine? The doctrine that is still taught in elite Russian military academies?"

A muscle ticks in Clyde's jaw as he says, "I believe so."

His confirmation makes my blood run cold. "So are you telling me that now the

Russian Special Forces have Sabrina and Carla?” I swallow. “And possibly my aunt, Nikolas, and Mark as well?”

“No!” Clyde shakes his head. “I doubt General Ergorov has Carla or your aunt and their partners.”

“You seem very sure of that,” I note.

“If Carla’s last known whereabouts were in the Morozov Hotel suite, she’s not with the same people who took Sabrina,” Clyde clarifies, his voice as sharp as the edge of a blade. “And for the record, Sabrina was taken by the Russian Military Special Authority Division, known as the RMSAD. Led by General Ergorov.”

“RMSAD?” I’ve never heard of them.

“Yes,” Clyde’s jaw clamps as he takes a breath and continues. I can see the same worry he had in his eyes earlier when he mentioned having to get to Sabrina as quickly as we could. “Ergorov doesn’t answer to the regular command structure. He runs black operations under executive privilege. The kind most Russians pretend doesn’t exist.”

“What kind of black operations?” Ivan asks before any of us can.

“The kind that makes your skin crawl and you’d find in some horror movie,” Clyde states. “They carry out biological, psychological, and... other experimentation. A lot of covert shit goes on there. There are whispered rumors of many different types of human experiments, such as genetic enhancement programs.”

My blood turns to ice now as my worst fears start to jump in front of me. “Is that why they took Sabrina?” My voice rattles with emotion. “Because she’s a high-potential individual?”

“No fucking way!” Syd’s voice breaks through the sudden tension in the room like a bullet. “What crap is that? They can’t just pick American citizens off the streets of Russia for having a superior intellect and then experiment on them. I don’t care who the fuck they are, that would have serious implications for the Russians, kidnapping an American.” She fixes Clyde with a look that could kill. “How would they even know about Sabrina?”

Clyde doesn’t flinch, and the following words out of his mouth hit me like a punch to the heart. “They’ve known about Sabrina for a long, long time.”

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OLEKSI

My breath catches in my throat, and fear jolts through me at Clyde's words. I open my mouth to press him for more information, but his phone buzzes. Elena jumps at the noise, and I feel her little heart speed up as she lets out a soft wail.

"Sh, sh, sweetheart," I coo. "It's okay." Syd finds the pacifier and hands it to me. Within a few seconds, Elena settles down with a bit of a glare at all of us for having disturbed her before closing her eyes and cozying back into my chest.

My attention turns back to Clyde, who is scowling at his screen, before looking up at us. "That was my contact in Moscow who was helping me look into Lidiya Zorin and just found an address linked to a birth certificate buried under Soviet-era security protocols."

"Where?" I demand, my heart jolting. This could be a lead that gets us closer to finding where they took Sabrina.

"A farm near the southern Russian Black Sea coast. Close to a port town called Gloubaya Bukhta."

I know the place instantly. The memory of it comes at me hard and fast. "I know that little shithole town. It's not far from Dragunov Village or my Uncle Dmitri's Golden Palace."

Syd crosses her arms, a skeptical arch to her brow. “Fuck me, do you think Dmitri’s involved?”

I exhale, long and hard. “I sure as shit hope not.” My eyes narrow thoughtfully. “We’re on better terms now that he’s not trying anymore of his shit with hostile takeovers of the Mirochin Bratva.”

“Or the world,” Ivan reminds us.

“Yeah, we had our own Doctor Evil not so long ago,” Lev snorts.

“Let’s hope it’s just a fucking coincidence this farm is located so close to both my uncle’s palace and Dragunov Village, one of our family’s loyal towns.” While I don’t want to believe Dmitri is involved, I can’t rule it out, although my uncle has never been a fan of the Russian military or government. “If not, at least we have some place to lay low while we figure things out.”

“Does this mean we’re going to investigate the farm?” Syd’s eyes light with excitement.

“Fucking damn straight we are,” I reply with vigor. “There must be some connection.”

“I’m all for it,” Lev says. “But how the fuck do you plan on getting us out of here?” Lev asks. “RMSAD is watching us. We can’t just walk out the front door and take the SUVs as they’re sure to follow us.”

I stare him down. “We’ll get out of here without them seeing us.”

Clyde taps his phone and looks me in the eye. “I know a contact who can get us out of Moscow. But I have to warn you, the ride won’t be comfortable.”

“I’d travel on the back of a fucking donkey that has a penchant to bite or buck if it means finding Sabrina. I don’t give a fuck about comfort as long as it gets us to our destination fast and undetected.”

Clyde nods, turning to his phone. “I’ll make a quick call. Get ready to leave at a moment’s notice,” he warns, and walks toward the front door that my men are currently fixing.

I barely have time to process his words when Magda appears, her eyes wide with shock at the mess my men are trying hard to get back in order.

“What is going on?” Magda asks, and Syd quickly fills her in on what happened. The color drains from Magda’s face, but she gives a quick, sure nod. “Where did they take Sabrina?” Her eyes meet mine.

“That’s what we are going to figure out,” I reply. “And the reason I’m going to need you to keep an even closer eye on Elena and don’t stray too far from any of us.” My eyes move to Lev. “Lev, you are now Magda and Elena’s shadow.”

“Right, boss,” Lev says with a nod.

“We need to pack for a trip out of town,” I tell Magda as I gently unstrap the baby sling, reluctantly handing my little niece to her while trying not to think about my other child, the one growing inside Sabrina. “

“Of course,” Magda says to Elena. “We’ll be ready in no time.”

She turns and walks upstairs, and Lev is about to follow when I stop him. “You need to get ready as well.”

“I’ll do that for him,” Ivan offers. “Right now, with these fuckers watching us, it’s

best to have Elena watched at all times. We don't know when they'll figure out Sabrina was lying about who our little angel is."

I hide my smile at the use of his words, our little angel, as she's become a priority to my team now, who I know will protect her with their lives. Which, if anything happens to me, at least gives me some peace of mind.

Two hours later, we're stuffed into the back of an old delivery truck and on our way to the south coast, which I know is going to be a brutal drive in a death trap. We haven't even gotten to the worst part of the drive yet, and the truck feels like it's bouncing straight off the road. Its engine is groaning at the pace the driver is pushing it.

Lev gives me a pained look. "Clyde's right about this trip not being comfortable—it's like riding in one of those rides at a state fair that you know hasn't been well looked after."

He's not wrong there. Our breath fogs the air like ghosts as the truck rattles through the back roads heading toward our destination. My mind is consumed with thoughts of Sabrina, leaving little room for the physical discomfort. Elena, once again strapped to me in her baby sling, only this time facing everyone in the truck, is the only one enjoying the ride. Giggling with glee every time the truck hits a bump, and I'm sure her little squeals are baby for, again, again.

The others in my team are huddled around on the hard benches, each hanging on to whatever they can find to stop them from being flung off their seats.

The road is endless, and the hours tick by agonizingly slowly. We don't even stop to stretch our legs. As we draw nearer to our destination, my mind starts to tick over.

"Are we ready?" I look at Syd, Ivan, Lev, and Clyde. "We don't know what we're

riding into here. It could very well be a trap.” My eyes fall on Clyde.

“My contact is solid, but you never know,” Clyde acknowledges.

“We’re ready, Oleksi,” Ivan assures him.

“Lev? Magda?” I look over them.

“I’ll stay back with Lev and Elena until it is safe,” Magda repeats the drill. “If there is any sign of trouble, I’m to follow Lev and head for Dmitri’s palace, where we will wait. If we don’t hear from you in a day, I’m going to get Dmitri to contact Sam Winters.”

“Good!” I nod and catch Lev’s attention. “I’m counting on you, Lev.”

“I won’t let you down, boss,” Lev assures me. “I’ll protect our little angel with my life.”

“I know you will,” I tell him.

Finally, after what feels like days, the truck grinds to a halt, and I hold my breath, anticipation tight as wire in my chest. The driver kills the engine, and voices cut through the cold, louder than they should be. My muscles coil, bracing for a fight, but not before one last thought cuts in like a blade: We could be heading straight into the hands of the RMSAD.

I hold my breath as the back doors swing open. Armed guards approach, and for a split second, the panic flares bright. But there’s something off. They don’t look hostile. The first guard nods when he sees us, steps back, closes the door, and I hear him tell the driver to proceed in Russian. The vehicle shakes as it starts up again, and we begin to move.

I exhale, the relief almost violent as Clyde clarifies, “They’re not RMSAD.”

Clyde opens the back of the truck so we can see where we’re going. The guards guide the truck through the gates into a massive compound. It has the look of a farm but the bones of a fucking fortress.

We reach the main building, and when the vehicle stops, this time the guard ushers us out of the vehicle. Stretching my legs, I look at the house in front of me. It looks like a traditional Russian dacha—a two-story, sprawling home crafted from rich, dark wood, with weathered stone foundations and a steeply pitched, green-tiled roof, built to withstand brutal winters.

A deep front porch runs the length of the house, adorned with sturdy carved columns and heavy rocking chairs. Ivy and thick climbing roses creep up the sides of the stone chimney and wrap around the porch rails, creating a peaceful, almost storybook illusion as it sits tucked into the rolling, forested lower foothills of the Caucasus Mountains.

But seeing the fortified entrance to the farm, I’m sure it is just that, an illusion, and that the inside of the house will tell an entirely different story. My senses go on instant alert when another heavily armed guard with calm, assessing eyes approaches us, speaking English with a pronounced Russian accent.

“Follow me,” the guard grunts, turning on his heel and leading us up the few stairs to the front door. “You are expected.”

Expected? That makes my senses go on even higher alert—no one was supposed to know we were coming. My head turns to Clyde, who catches my eye and obviously knows what I’m thinking and has had the same thought.

He steps closer to me. “I’m telling you, my contact who arranged this transport is

solid,” he whispers and glances back toward the truck. “So is our driver.” His brow furrows worriedly.

“Or they’re not!” I point out. “This is Russia, after all. You never know who is an enemy or ally.” My eyes narrow, turning back to the front door. “Just be ready.”

“We all are, boss,” Ivan assures me.

My arms wrap protectively around Elena.

“Do you want me to take her and stay back?” Magda asks from behind me.

I turn to look at her and shake my head. “Stay with Lev,” I order. “Clyde, Ivan, and Syd will go in first.”

“We were going to anyway,” Clyde tells me, stepping protectively in front of me. Ivan and Syd do the same while Magda and Lev stay behind me. Lev is keeping an eye on anyone approaching us from behind.

The guard uses the large brass knocker, giving three heavy raps on the door. He waits for what feels like an eternity, but it’s about two minutes before his phone bleeps. He checks it, opens the door, pushes it wide, and steps back onto the porch, standing to one side so we can enter.

“You may go in,” the guard’s words come out like an order.

Clyde, followed by Ivan and then Syd step in first and my gut twists when I hear Clyde hiss, “What the fuck!”

I’m about to retreat with Elena when Syd and Ivan step aside, and I stare at the four people who are standing in the foyer with a mix of disbelief and confusion.

“What the fuck!” I repeat Clyde’s initial shock.

Carla, my Aunt Galina, Mark, and Nikolas are standing, staring back at us, and they don’t look shocked to see us—it’s clear that they knew we were coming.

My brain stalls. I blink once, twice, and Elena starts to wriggle in glee, her little arms reaching out toward Carla.

“You’re all alive?” The words tumble out, a mix of shock, anger, and accusation.

“Hello, Oleksi.” My aunt steps up to me and kisses my cheeks. “You sound disappointed to find us alive?” She smiles as she leans toward Elena, taking her little hands, kissing her cheek. I hear my aunt whisper. “Privet, moya malen’kaya printsessa, tyotya Galina ochen’ skuchala po tebe.”

My heart stills for a few seconds, and suspicion swirls through me as my aunt steps back. Her words rush through my head: ‘Hello, my little princess. Aunt Galina missed you very much.’ I’m struck with the thought: does my aunt know who Elena really is?

Before I can ponder on it, Carla is there, lifting a now incredibly excited Elena, who obviously loves Carla and my aunt very much, from the baby sling, and I find myself having to stop from snatching her back. I’m struck by just how possessive and how much Elena has come to mean to me.

I take a mental deep breath and try my best not to curl my hands into fists. It’s taking every inch of restraint I have not to snatch my little angel back.

“You look like you were expecting us,” I say, gritting my teeth.

Nikolas offers a faint smile. “Your driver called me as soon as you were on the road.

After all, he does work for me.”

My gaze snaps to Clyde as he steps in and nods. “We thought they were missing, remember?”

“True.” I nod back and turn back to the four people in front of us, my eyes narrowing when my aunt takes Elena from Carla. My mind is ticking over as the questions start to pile up, but before I can voice any of them, Carla pushes me aside to see who the last two people are who are with us and still standing in the doorway.

Carla’s eyes scan them, her expression shifting from surprise to concern. “Where’s my daughter?” she demands, turning to me, her voice rising. “Oleksi, where is Sabrina?”

The words hit like bullets, reopening wounds that are still raw. My chest tightens, and I can barely force the explanation past my lips. “At roughly four this morning, my house in Moscow was stormed by a group I now know as the RMSAD, led by that fucking butcher General Ergorov...” I swallow at the image of Sabrina kissing me and telling me to find us, which hits me like a sledgehammer to the heart. “He took her.”

Carla’s face drains of color, and she staggers. “No, no, no,” she whispers, desperation cracking her voice.

I see her sway as her knees start to buckle, but Mark catches her before she falls, wrapping her in a protective hold, steadying her.

Carla’s breathing becomes shallow, and her eyes fill with tears as she turns to Nikolas. “They have both my girls, Nik.”

My eyes narrow with confusion, but before I can say anything, Clyde demands,

“What do you mean?” His eyes dart between Nikolas, my aunt, and Mark, landing on Carla. “The RMSAD has Tara, too?” The muscle on the side of his jaw ticks. “How do you know?”

Carla nods, wiping a tear from her cheek and clearing her throat. “The day you were shot, Clyde. We believe that when she left you at the hospital, Tara made it to the New Jersey safe house, but she was apprehended by somebody who we believe to be an RMSAD operative.”

“One of my sources in Georgia sent me this.” Nikolas pulls out a phone and scrolls to a photo he holds up to show us. “My source followed them but lost them at the Russian border, where they disappeared.”

Clyde takes the phone and studies it. “Christ, it’s Tara.” He hands the phone back to Nikolas. “She wanted us to find her. I told her to wear those ratty old graffitied sneakers and that hoodie with the sunflower in the hood to ensure we could identify her if she were taken.”

Clyde hands me the phone. I look at the tall, broad-shouldered man in a baseball cap, guiding a hooded woman to a vehicle. My gut twists. The clothes are unmistakable, and it was clever of Clyde to come up with that. Nikolas leans forward and flicks to the next photo.

“This shot confirms it was her,” Nikolas tells us. “My contact managed to snap it because as Tara was being pushed through the door, I think she was trying to look up at one of the security cameras.”

“Just like I told her,” Clyde mutters, pride in Tara following his instructions shining in his eyes. “Your contact couldn’t ID the man with her?”

“No.” Nikolas shakes his head. “The man knew how to keep from being seen and had

shades on.”

“That’s fucking just great,” Syd says, shaking her head and leaning in to look at the photo. “What’s that?” She points at something on the man’s wrist. “It looks like some sort of mark.”

I blow the photo up, but all I see is a blob that looks like a tattoo or blue birthmark. “I can’t make it out.”

“I have my technical guys trying to clean the photo up,” Nikolas tells us.

Before we can say anything else, the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway draws my attention. I nearly stagger as the elderly couple walks toward us with grace and power, their faces instantly recognizable.

“Our guests have arrived,” the woman says, stopping beside my aunt. Her face softens into a smile as she looks at Elena.

“Yes.” Carla turns to us, stepping out of Mark’s hold. “Oleksi. Everyone. I’d like you to meet your hosts, Anya Novikov-Morozova and Timofey Morozov.” She pauses, like one of those game show hosts waiting to let the contestant know if they are right or not before dropping the bombshell without missing a beat. “My parents.”

Her words explode inside my chest like dynamite. The legendary ghosts of Russian military and intelligence history. The man who rewrote military history and the woman known as the Jewel of Russia, claimed to be the most intelligent in the world, are Sabrina’s grandparents?

“What the fuck?” I exhale realization crashing over me, the blood runs ice-cold in my veins.

A cold realization punches through me.

Now I know why Ergorov took Sabrina.

She isn't just any high-potential asset—she's the granddaughter of two of the most brilliant minds on earth.

Clyde's warning from earlier slams into focus.

It's not just Sabrina's mind at risk.

It's our baby she's carrying.

The next heir to the most feared crime family on earth.

If RMSAD finds out, they won't hesitate.

They'll hide Sabrina and our child so deep we'll never find them, and God only knows what they will do to them or what they will try to turn them into.

But I won't let that happen.

Not to Sabrina. Not to our child.

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4

SABrINA

The light slams on like a hammer to the skull.

I jerk upright with a strangled curse, blinking against the brutal glare slicing through my eyeballs.

I guess someone thinks sleep is a fucking privilege.

Judging by the weight of my eyelids and the heaviness in my bones, I must've gotten maybe two, three hours, tops.

The cheap pink scrubs I fell asleep in are a bit too big and are twisted around me.

The hospital style bed squeaks under me as I shove the blankets off and sit up, rubbing a hand over my face.

The room is almost bare, the walls an unforgiving white, the floor a cold slab of gray tile. There's no window. Just a single door, a security camera bolted into the corner near the ceiling, its tiny red light blinking steadily at me like a heartbeat. Watching. Recording.

On a small steel table sits a tray—scrambled eggs, pale and fluffy.

Plain toast, no butter.

A handful of steamed nuts.

“Who eats damn nuts for breakfast?” I glance at the small bowl of blueberries and the cup of herbal tea, still steaming faintly. “What is this breakfast? It looks like a health nut’s fucking wet dream. For the record. I like donuts and coffee or pancakes dripping with maple syrup and spray cream alongside a pot of medium roast coffee, preferably vanilla flavored.”

My stomach churns at the thought of eating, but I know I have to. I’m not alone anymore. It isn’t just my life at stake.

I take a seat on the plastic chair that is as white as everything else in the room and notice a notepad and pen beside the tray.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with this?” I hold it up to the camera. “Write a fucking memoir or journal my feelings?” I raise a brow. “How about this for a feeling. I feel like an American hostage and you’re all going to get your fucking asses kicked for this.”

Of course there’s no answer the camera is just there to observe me in my unnatural habitat like some sort of fucking primate.

Sighing, I force the food down, methodical and detached. Every bite tastes like cardboard, but I finish it anyway. I’ve barely swallowed the food when the door swings open with a thud echoing through the silence.

Two women in black tactical uniforms step inside. Their faces are hard, eyes expressionless. They are soldiers, not caretakers.

“You must shower!” the thinner one of the two commands in English.

I stand and wander over to them. As I near them the tubbier one shoves a pile of neatly folded clothes into my hands. They are wrapped in sterile see through wrappings. I flip through them and find an outfit that looks much like the scrubs I'm wearing, only pure white. The smaller bags contain thin white pants and a matching tunic — along with a basic sports bra and the kind of high-waisted cotton underwear that would make a Victoria's Secret model cry. I hold them up with a dry look.

“Wow,” I mutter under my breath. “The pinnacle of Russian haute couture. Sexy as a brick.”

Neither woman reacts. Figures. Humor is wasted on the humorless. I'm all but shoved out of the room and dragged down a long corridor that sharply turns into another corridor reaching a room at the end of it.

The thinner guard pushes the door open and I step inside to find it's a bathroom.

“So this is where the toilet is,” I say. “That's quite a sprint if I get the runs from that horrible breakfast.”

The bathroom is as bare and unfriendly as the room I slept in. It is all steel fixtures, no mirror, no curtain for the shower head attached to the wall.

“Soap, shampoo, and clean teeth stuff are over there,” Tubby tells me while Skinny starts the shower as if I'm not capable of doing it. “Clean towels are on the hook by the shower.”

“Thanks?” I say, turning toward them where we stand staring at each other for a few seconds and they don't look as if they're about to leave. “You can go now. I know how to shower.”

“We stay,” Skinny tells me. “It's orders.”

“So you’re just going to watch me shower?” I gape at them. “What are you afraid I’m going to steal the fucking soap?” I snort. “Or make a shank out of the toothbrush then hide it up my ass?”

The women don’t flinch. They just stare coldly at me.

“You have fifteen minutes.” Skinny looks at her wristwatch. “You must scrub, wash hair, and teeth.”

We have another staring contest for a few more seconds and I realize they really aren’t going to budge. I’m expected to strip and clean myself under their watchful eyes. The humiliation burns hotter than the water could ever hope to.

I turn my back to them, as I strip and toss the pink scrubs on the floor over my shoulder before stepping into the warm spray of the surprisingly strong shower. I wash, taking my time and giving them a good show.

When I’m done I towel myself dry and twirl a towel around my wet hair before padding over the sink, opening the new toothbrush, smearing some toothpaste brand I’ve never seen before onto the brush. As I put it to my mouth I hope it’s not laced with something. But my mouth tastes terrible from sleep and that dreadful gray breakfast I ate.

Seventeen minutes later I’m dressed with the white scrubs hanging loosely on my frame, swallowing my figure and making me feel even more like a prisoner. I tug the waistband higher, adjusting the pants to sit more comfortably above my hips, and suppress the urge to mutter another biting comment. No sense in poking the bear today. I need information more than I need to feel like I got the last word.

“I noticed there was no brush or comb,” I grumble, running my finger through the tangle of curls now bouncing damply around my face. “If you could get me one

especially for curly hair please.”

They say nothing although I do see some akin to humor flash in Tubby’s eyes. Now that I’m walking beside her I can see that Tubby is younger than Skinny and around my age. Whereas Skinny looks to be in her late twenties or early thirties. Or just doesn’t know how to look after her skin.

The corridors are long, sterile, illuminated by cold fluorescent lights. Everything about this place is designed to strip away identity, humanity. It’s a place for subjects, not people and I feel like I’ve stepped into some bad futuristic or sci-fi movie.

After what feels like a maze of left turns and silent escorts, we reach a heavy metal door. One of the women raps twice, sharp and mechanical. The door clicks open, and I’m ushered inside.

And of course my supposed aunt, Yelena Zorin is waiting for me.

She sits at a plain table, dressed in an immaculate charcoal-gray suit that screams power and restraint. Her hair is pulled back in the same severe twist, and her cool gaze settles on me with the dispassion of a scientist studying a specimen under glass.

On the table before her rests three manila folders.

I don’t wait to be asked to sit, I just go ahead and take the seat across from her.

“Nice suit.” The sarcasm drips from my tongue. “Is that Wednesday’s shade of gray?”

She says nothing. Doesn’t roll her eyes or give a sigh. She simply sits there, watching me from across the table with that cool calm poise of hers. We regard each other across the table. Her eyes are impossible to read, like frozen lakes — deep and cold

and utterly still.

“Good morning...” she glances at her wristwatch. “Sorry, afternoon to you too, Sabina. I hope you got a restful six hours of sleep?”

“Six hours?” I blink at her. I slept for six hours? It felt like no more than two at the most. “What is the time?” I ask, holding up my bare wrist. “Like the rest of my clothes and belongings you took my watch, which I’m going to want back. It was the last birthday present that...” I stop myself from saying more.

“It’s just after two in the afternoon,” Yelena’s words shock me. “I made sure we let you get a good six hours of sleep. Tonight you will go to bed at eleven. You will be woken at seven to have a shower and then breakfast at eight. We will begin working with you promptly at nine each day.”

“So I’ve been kidnapped by a Russian summer camp!” I say and her eyes narrow slightly. “You do know what a summer camp is, right?”

“I am not stupid, Sabina,” Yelena says almost defensively.

Oh, good she has a weak spot—her intellect. How interesting! I refrain from rubbing my chin like a movie villain summing up my target but I really want to because I’ve found a chink in miss icy queen’s armor. I plan to keep a close watch on her to find some more just in case I need some leverage when I’m trying to escape or defend myself against her.

“So when are you going to take me to the room to strap me in a chair attached to car batteries to try and shock information out of me?” I lean back, slide my legs out in front of me and fold my arms, going for I’m relaxed and bored pose. “Or are you going to start with ink blots?” I frown. “I have to warn you all I ever see are... well ink blots. I have no idea where people see butterflies, foxes, and so on.” I purse my

lips. “I guess crazy people see crazy things.”

“We’ll get to testing that,” Yelena assures me. “But today we’re going to start with this.” She slides the folder toward me. “I thought you could learn about your family?”

I stare at the folder in distaste before sitting up and tap it with my index finger. “What is there?” I look up at her. “More Russian propaganda?”

“This is not some indoctrination center, Sabina,” Yelena tells me. “But there is proof of who your parents are.”

I hesitate, then flip it open.

The photographs inside steal the air from my lungs.

“These are your beginnings,” she says.

I can’t stop myself from pouring through them.

There are pictures of a young woman with brilliant, searching eyes and a defiant set to her jaw that I’d know anywhere—my mother. Only according to the writing beneath it, it’s Mariya at age eighteen.

Another one that catches my eyes is of a young man standing rigid in a military uniform and the name reads—Leonid.

They are Mariya and Leonid but look like Carla and Sol, my mother and father.

There are more photos of them. Photos of my father with a younger Yelena and a small baby. Photos of my mother with medals, holding up very impressive medical certifications.

“Jesus, she’s a doctor?” My eyes dart to Yelena.

“Mariya is much more than a doctor,” Yelena tells me, her eyes flashing with a mix of emotions I can’t quite fathom as they are gone just as quickly as they came. “She was a surgeon, a chemist, and a geneticist.”

“Then that’s definitely not my mother,” I tell her, my brow rising. “My mother is a trained prima ballerina who faints at the sight of blood.”

“Mariya was a prima ballerina and would’ve pursued a career as one had she not joined the RMSAD,” Yelena tells me. “And if she ever fainted at the sight of blood... she was acting. She dealt with plenty of blood and all sorts of other bodily fluids in our line of work.”

“What do you mean she worked at the RMSAD?” I can’t help myself, I want to know because if my mother is really this Mariya... I swallow the sudden lump in my throat as the feel of betrayal slices through me. I shake it off. I can have an existential crisis later. Now is not the time to lose my shit. “I take it this place is the RMSAD?”

“Yes, you are in a part of it,” Yelena confirms. “This is where all the science happens.”

My eyes narrow at her use of the word science. “What type of science exactly?”

She tilts her head slightly, assessing me. “We’ll get to that soon enough.”

“You seem to think we have a lot of time to get to things,” I tell her. “But, lady, I can assure you that I already have an army looking for me.”

“They won’t find you,” Yelena tells me confidently. “And I hope they don’t try because I would hate for you to lose the man you loved in a senseless battle he will

never win. No matter who he is.”

Alarm shoots through me. Of course they know who Oleksi is. General Ergorov said he was not there to cause trouble with the Mirochins when the bastard plucked me away from Oleksi. I turn back to the photos to steer the conversation away from Oleksi and pick up one of my mother and father standing together on their wedding day.

Shock ripples through my fingertips as I know I can no longer deny the truth—well, to myself anyway. I won’t admit to the ice queen that I’m starting to believe her—not yet. Just in case this is still some sort of lie for some sick reason.

My fingers trace the picture. Were they really not the simple Vegas couple who juggled nightclub shifts and shady security jobs but Mariya Morozov and Leonid Zorin.

Ghosts from a country I never even knew I belonged to.

“I’ve never seen pictures of my parents when they were young,” I say before I can stop myself, my voice hard and brittle. “They always told us everything was lost in a fire. The house they bought together after they got married.”

Yelena nods once, like a teacher rewarding a student for remembering her lesson.

“That was true,” she says calmly. “But it wasn’t in America, if that is what you believed. It was here. In Russia.”

The floor under me shifts, invisible and violent.

“Are they really Russian?” I say, the words falling out like broken teeth. “They never had a trace of an accent.” Now that I think of it they never had a heavy American

accent either.

“Born and bred,” Yelena confirms.

It takes everything in me not to flinch.

“How did their house burn down?” I don’t know why that’s the first question that pops into my mind. “Or should I ask why?”

She taps the folder with one long, manicured finger.

“Your mother had your father burn it the day after you were born,” she adds. “A distraction so they could flee the country and to make sure that whatever there was in the house that Mariya didn’t want anyone finding was destroyed.”

I let out a breath that feels like it’s tearing something inside me apart.

“They always said the fire took everything,” I mutter, bitter. “Guess they forgot to mention it wasn’t just bad luck but by design.”

Yelena’s mouth tilts—not quite a smile, not quite anything.

“In hindsight, I know they were protecting you,” she says, pausing for a moment and saying almost hesitantly, “and your sister.”

The thought of my sister stops me and while I do already know the answer I need her to say it.

“Why are you looking for my sister?”

“Because your mother and father stole her,” Yelena says without a flicker of emotion

in her eyes. “From me. Lidiya is my daughter.”

SABrINA

My head spins as I stare at the pictures in front of me. Part of me knew—the minute Yelena said her name, the minute she slid that fucking folder across the table—I knew. Deep down, I knew. The birth certificate Tara had hidden all those months ago wasn't a mistake or a lie. It was a warning. A breadcrumb she left behind because some part of her must have known the past would come looking for us one day.

My eyes fall on the photo of my father—young, proud, and heartbreakingly familiar—and my throat tightens painfully.

“So what you’re saying is that Tara is yours and my father’s daughter?” I manage, my voice sounding like it’s coming from somewhere outside myself.

Yelena gives a slow, almost indulgent nod, as if she’s humoring a particularly dense toddler.

“And that I’m the daughter of my father... and my mother...” I trail off, waiting for her to correct me, to say anything that might make this nightmare unravel. But she just nods again, solemn and composed, like she’s delivering some divine truth.

“And you’re related to my mother,” I press, though the words taste like ashes.

“Your mother is my younger sister,” Yelena confirms, her hands folding neatly in her lap.

I let out a hollow, bitter laugh and shake my head. “You both married Leonid Zorin?”

Yelena’s lips twitch, an attempt at humor so dry it almost scratches the air between us. “Obviously not at the same time. Even here in Russia, that is illegal. I was married to him first.”

My fingers tighten on the edge of the table as my mind spins, trying to piece together this twisted family tree. “So that makes my sister also my cousin,” I say, my brows lifting. “That’s... kind of fucked up.”

Yelena’s face hardens instantly. “I cannot believe my sister would tolerate such language from you or your sister,” she says, her voice dripping with disdain.

“My mother uses the same language, I assure you,” I shoot back dryly, loving the way disbelief flashes in her cold blue eyes.

“Never,” Yelena denies, shaking her head sharply. “My sister was a lady.”

“Then we’re really not talking about the same woman,” I murmur under my breath.

I lean back in the chair, the white scrubs feeling too tight around my shoulders. “Why did they leave Russia? Change their names? Was it because they allegedly stole Tara from you? Did you and my father have some vicious custody battle or something?”

Yelena’s hands fold more tightly, the knuckles whitening. “They fled to protect you and Lidiya. They fled because I told my sister what was about to happen... on the day you were born.”

“Me?” I echo, my heart thudding hard against my ribs.

She nods again—that fucking nod I’m already starting to hate—so calm, so certain.

Some twisted part of me wants her to shake her head just once, to tell me this is all a mistake. That someone's going to jump out from behind a two-way mirror and yell, you've been punked! But the air is heavy with the kind of truth that can't be unsaid.

"Okay," I say, folding my arms. "I'll bite. What was going to happen to me?"

Yelena leans forward slightly, her gaze sharpening. "We were working on a project," she says carefully. "Your mother and I. A project that Lidiya was part of... from before birth."

Cold spreads through my veins like black ice. "What kind of project?"

Her lips curve ever so slightly. "We're geneticists working in a black ops site, Sabina. What kind do you think?"

"Mad scientist shit," I say flatly, feeling my blood start to run cold.

"Breakthrough research," Yelena corrects smoothly, "that could change the lives of many people." She tilts her head, studying me. "And Lidiya was part of that... until Leonid and Carla stole her. They stole my Jewel."

"How deeply was my sister involved in all this?" I ask, the bile rising thick in my throat.

"From the moment she was conceived," Yelena says, her eyes softening slightly, as if remembering something precious. "She was perfect. Everything about her from the very beginning. She excelled at every developmental milestone. I knew... she was destined to become the new Jewel of Russia."

My stomach turns over.

“Are you trying to make another Anya Novikov?” I ask, disbelief lacing my words. “The Jewel of Russia? The woman they call the most intelligent mind in the world?” I think my jaw must be hitting the floor right about now. “You’re trying to make a superhuman? You are a fucking mad scientist.”

Yelena’s face darkens. “She is not the jewel—she is not the jewel anymore,” she snaps, her control slipping for the first time. “Anya is washed up. My Jewel... My Lidiya... she is far greater.”

I sit back, stunned by the venom in her voice. Fuck, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear I was looking into the face of Dr. Frankenstein’s daughter.

“You must have witnessed it firsthand,” Yelena says, pulling the file from the bottom of her pile and opening it shuffling through papers that I can tell as school and college transcripts. Tara’s transcripts. “I couldn’t retrieve all of Lidiya’s records, but her grades. All a-pluses. Her debates, all the clubs she resided over, show how she was being so held back.” She turns some more pages before looking at me. “Didn’t your parents know she needed a school for the gifted. One that could push her to her full potential?”

“Tara didn’t want to go to a special school,” I say carefully, watching Yelena’s reaction. “She wanted to be normal. Have normal friends.”

“There is nothing normal about my Lidiya,” Yelena breathes, her face alight with an unsettling fervor. She flips open another folder and taps a document. “I just couldn’t find anything on her sports participation.” She looks at me questioningly. “What was she like at sports?”

“Tara didn’t do sports,” I tell her. “She hated them. I mean she does jogging, hiking, and Pilates to stay in shape but not team or any other sports you have to compete in.”

Yelena blinks, genuinely thrown. “I don’t understand.” Her brows knitted tightly together. “She was supposed to excel in every area of life,” she says, and I’m not sure if she is speaking to me or herself.

“She loved music,” I add, feeling a little thrown by how rattled the cool, poised Yelena is getting over Tara’s lack of physical prowess when it came to sport.

“She danced?” Yelena asks hopefully and is not amused when I snort at the thought of my sister dancing.

I love Tara but, fuck, that girl has no coordination and no want to even try and correct it.

“Hell no!” I shake my head. “Tara is as uncoordinated as a drunk elephant and about as destructive too.”

“That is not a nice thing to say,” Yelena says, indignantly. “Maybe she just never wanted to show how superior she was.”

“Nooo.” Sabrina shakes her head. “She was a terrible dancer.” I smile. “But, Tara, is so musically gifted. She can pick up any instrument and just... play.”

“What instruments did she train with?” Yelena asks.

“The better question is which ones she didn’t.” I smile remembering my sister’s love of music and the way she could pick up and play an... my eyes widen. Fuck. Was she genetically modified? Is that why Tara is so good with instruments? I don’t know anyone to have ever won a debate against Tara, and she was phenomenal with math and the sciences. Like me Tara has a photographic memory. I shake the thought off continuing. “She loved the piano and cello the most though.”

“Really?” Yelena says.

I nod. “I was six and Tara nine when we went to a restaurant for my mother’s birthday. She wanted to go to this fancy ass place. They had a pianist there and she was playing while we ate and then he played some Beethoven song that really struck Tara. She hummed it the whole way home. The following day she demanded my parents take her to a music store. I had to get dragged with it.” I roll my eyes. I’m not going to tell her I was the one who encouraged Tara to make my parents take her. “She found a piano. She said it called to her when my father asked why that one.” I sigh. “Tara sat down at it and played the song she’d heard at the restaurant the night before. Much to the delight of the store owner who was even more shocked and delighted upon learning Tara had never touched a musical instrument in her life.”

“What song?” Yelena demands, leaning forward. “What Beethoven song?”

“Some Beethoven crap,” I mutter, keeping my voice light, waving my hand in the air. “I don’t know. I’m not a fucking musician and I can’t stand that classical shit.”

I know exactly what it was. Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat major, Op. 106 ‘Hammerklavier’. One of the hardest fucking piano pieces in existence.

But I’m not about to hand that little tidbit over. Not here. Not now, when I suspect my sister was a guinea pig in some freaky genetic experiment. I have to stop my hand from going instinctively to my stomach. What would she say if she found out about me? Another thought leaves me cold—holy fuck.

Yelena said my mother and father fled Russia to protect me from becoming part of the same experiment Tara was a part of. Fuck! I have to try and control my breathing as panic starts to claw at my throat and the horrible thought swirls through my mind— am I like I am because I’m also genetically modified? Maybe my mother was being experimented on without even knowing. I swallow. If I am, then that would

mean my baby... I block the thought from my mind. Stop it Sabrina. You're being paranoid. Yelena already as much as clarified that my mother and father left Russia before I became a human guinea pig for these mad fucked up geneticist.

When I get out of here, I'm going to expose this fucking hellhole.

"Beethoven crap?" Yelena repeats, her accent thickening around the words as she yanks me from my panic-inducing thoughts. Her eyes blaze. "Beethoven is not... crap! His work is not easy to play, especially since some of his pieces are the most challenging piano pieces. And for a child to just..." She swallows. "Incredible. That is incredible. I need to know what piece it was."

"Didn't he write that 'Chopsticks' song they teach kids?" I say, deadpan.

Yelena's face freezes in open horror. "That was Chopin," she hisses, like I've just insulted her firstborn—I guess if she's not lying about being Tara's biological mother in a way I did.

She flips open another folder and shoves it toward me. "I guess I cannot expect much from a student who never got an A-plus in her life."

"I did," I say outraged. "I got an A-plus for participation once. I have a few B pluses too. Those must all be in there if those are my transcripts," I say brightly, biting back laughter.

I watch her eyebrows twitch as she scans my records. I can see how she's judging me, thinking I'm nothing and that I'm not as bright as she or my sister. Or my mother... Fuck how did I not see that. Although I have always felt my mother had so much more potential than just being a dancer.

And I always wondered why my father, with his superior military skills, never joined

the US Army, Marine Corps, or Air Force. I know now. It also explains my mother's aversion to traveling anywhere that needed a passport—they were hiding.

"You were good at ballet," she mutters. "Gymnastics, basketball, baseball..."

"And soccer," I add. "I can ice skate, too." I purse my lips. "I was pretty good at ice skating, but I wanted to play ice hockey. My parents refused to let me play, so I quit skating."

Yelena frowns. "You wanted to play hockey? That barbaric sport?"

"You're a geneticist working in a secret black site experimenting on kids," I shoot back. "What you do is probably even more barbaric than playing ice hockey."

She sniffs, clearly unimpressed. "I am enhancing human potential. That sport seeks to destroy it."

"Only if you get body-checked into the boards," I quip.

Her mouth tightens. "Leonid must have tried to turn you into the son he always wanted."

"Nope," I say, shaking my head. "But he loved that I was a tomboy and loved my dolls just as much as I did hunting, fishing, and learning how to gut, skin, or scale them."

Yelena's lips curl in distaste. "You must have been oxygen deprived at birth. It would explain why you are... not as remarkable as your sister, mother, or grandparents."

"Thanks," I say dryly. "Always nice to hear a compliment and from someone claiming to be my family."

“I am telling you like it is, Sabina,” Yelena says. “I don’t believe in giving a child false hope about their future. Let’s face it, you’re a...” She glances through what I take to be my file. “A headline dancer at a Casino.”

“It’s a top five-star hotel and casino,” I say proudly. “And I’m the lead dancer.”

I have to bite down on my lip to stop from bursting into laughter at her expression. Now I truly know what flabbergasted looks like.

“Didn’t you go to college?” Yelena asks.

“I did,” I say, nodding, leaning forward to try to see the file. “Surely it has my community college, I went to. I studied to be a life coach.” Oh God, oh God! That look on her face is fucking priceless.

“I’m so sorry, Sabina,” Yelena says softly, with what I take as her form of compassion. “That illness you had when you were born must’ve somehow hurt your brain.”

“Hurt my brain?” I look at her curiously.

“It’s the only way I know how to tell you that you may have suffered a bit of brain damage,” Yelena tells me. “As no one in our family’s lineage has ever...” She pauses as if looking for a way to tell me I’m dumb without saying it straight out. “It’s a shame really, because it would have been amazing to have another natural intellect like your grandmother.”

“My grandmother was an intellect as well?” I ask, unable to keep my curiosity about my family at bay anymore.

Yelena nods, her fingers flick through the photos still in front of her, and then she

pulls one out and slides it toward me. “These are your grandparents.”

The world tilts.

Standing together are two people I’ve seen only in history books: a tall, stunning woman with glacial eyes and a man in full dress military uniform. Anya Novikov. General Timofey Morozov.

“Wait... what?” I whisper, staring at the photo. “You’re fucking joking, right?”

“Your mother and I,” Yelena says, her voice like ice cracking over a river, “are the daughters of Anya Novikov-Morozov and General Timofey Morozov—your grandparents.”

And just like that, the last thread tethering me to the life I thought I knew snaps.

6

OLEKSI

Five fucking days.

That's how long it's been since they ripped Sabrina out of my life. Since they shoved a knife into my gut and twisted it, leaving me pacing the kitchen of the Morozov farmhouse like a caged fucking animal. Five days of dead ends. Five days of breathing without her.

The floorboards creak under my boots as I turn again, barely noticing Lev sitting at the worn oak table, bouncing Elena on his knee. She's laughing, a sweet, high-pitched sound that cuts through the thick, choking tension in the room. Her chubby fists grab at the air as Lev makes faces at her, pretending everything is fine.

It's not fine.

Nothing is fucking fine.

Across the kitchen, Clyde, Syd, and Ivan huddle over the table, a mess of papers, maps, and burner phones spread out like a goddamn post-mortem. Every lead we've chased has turned into a brick wall or an ambush. Every contact has gone dark or lied to us. Every minute without Sabrina feels like someone is peeling the skin from my bones.

The only thing we've learned? The real reason they took her.

Sabrina's not just some Vegas showgirl who stumbled into Bratva territory. She's the granddaughter of Anya Novikov and General Timofey Morozov — two of the most brilliant, dangerous minds Russia ever produced. Her bloodline alone is enough to make her a fucking national asset, a prize worth bleeding for.

But who they really want is Carla. Or should I say Mariya—Sabrina's mother! She wasn't just some controlling dancer who liked the high life in Vegas. Carla was a goddamn geneticist working for the RMSAD. That was before she and her late husband, Sol, or rather Leonid Zorin, fled from Russia carrying secrets the Russian government would have killed to protect. They are defectors, and now Sabrina is the bait to lure Carla back to the RMSAD.

Sabrina... My heart jolts, and my eyes fly to Elena, so happy and without a care or a clue about what is going on around her.

I run a hand through my hair, yanking at the strands until my scalp burns. There is so much at stake for the three of us. My eyes dart around the room, glancing over my team. None of them knows that Elena is not Sabrina's daughter, but the daughter of Gavriil and Tara. None of them knows about the baby growing inside Sabrina right now, so tiny, so vulnerable. I know I should tell them, but something is holding me back.

My stomach knots violently. I have to find her. I have to bring Sabrina home to me, no matter the cost.

I cross the room in three long strides and wrench open the back door, letting the icy air slam into me like a punch to the chest. I stand there, breathing hard, trying to pull the rage and helplessness back under control before I break something I can't fix.

That's when I hear the sharp clip of heels on the wood floor behind me.

I turn to find my aunt, Galina, storming toward me, cheeks flushed, eyes flashing with the kind of fury I've only ever seen when I was a kid and got caught stealing my father's cigars.

Without a word, she shoves a thick envelope into my chest.

"This just came from Moscow," she snaps. "From the acting Dragunov elder."

I tear it open with fingers still stiff from the cold, my eyes scanning the heavy parchment. It's written in formal Russian — the kind you use when you're about to slap someone across the face with a velvet glove.

We are displeased.

Your disrespect toward the Dragunov legacy is an insult to our ancestors.

You have been in Russia for a month and haven't paid your respects.

You have not mourned Vasily Dragunov.

You have not honored Irina Mirochin.

You are summoned to Dragunov Village to discuss the future and re-cement our alliance.

My stomach drops. I glance up sharply. "Vasily's dead?"

Galina nods grimly. "A year ago. I just found out myself that he died of heart failure."

I blink, processing that. Vasily Dragunov wasn't just an elder; he was a living relic of

the old ways. The man who kept the Dragunov Village fiercely loyal to the Mirochin name even after my family nearly destroyed them,

“And who the fuck is this...” I skim the letter again. “Agafon? I don’t remember Vasily having a grandson.”

“He didn’t,” Galina says tightly. “Agafon’s his nephew. Standing in as the elder until Ruslan comes back.”

“Ruslan?” The name itches at the back of my mind. “Irina’s older brother?”

“Yes.” My aunt nods. “Vasily’s eldest grandson.”

“Didn’t he disappear years ago?” My brow furrows. “I don’t think I’ve ever met him. He wasn’t even at Gavriil and Irina’s wedding.”

“He was studying,” my aunt informs me. “He didn’t disappear, he’s some hotshot Moscow attorney.”

“Figures!” I snort. “Where is he then?” I look at Galina. “Why are we being summoned by the stand-in elder?”

Galina shrugs. “That is exactly what I asked when I called to tell them I would go to the village on your behalf as you’re attending to urgent business.”

“Ah!” I nod. “That’s why you’re so angry. This Agafon pissed you off?”

“You have no idea! That little snot is only thirty-five, and he had the gall to speak to me like he did. I think the Dragunovs are starting to step out of line, twisting who answers to whom!” Her chin rises and eyes narrow to angry slits. “They need to be reminded who is in the seat of power in the dynamic.”

My brows shoot up. “Wow, this stand-in elder really pissed you off.”

“He talks about disrespect...” She seethes. “He disrespected me. I had no idea Vasily had passed away, no one told us, and it was not long after his death that Gavriil...” Her voice catches, and her eyes tear up. “That we lost your brother and his wife.”

“His wife, Irina, Vasily’s oldest granddaughter, whose marriage to Gavriil cemented the alliance,” I remind her. “They lost her too, and not long after their beloved Vasily, it seems.”

“That is no excuse to speak to me the way he did,” Galina pressed. “And the Dragunov’s never sent their respects over Gavriil.”

“No, they did not,” I agree. Instead, they sent Irina’s twin brothers to hunt down Tara Craft. But I don’t say anything to my aunt. She’s pissed off enough.

“I hope they’re not expecting me to kiss their asses to have this alliance reconfirmed,” I warn her. “Because now that I know this interim elder was disrespectful to you...”

“No, Oleksi, you need to be diplomatic here.” My aunt’s anger starts to melt. “We have to remember that the village is a strategic part of our operations for Russia and Europe. If they turn on us, the ports are lost. Dragunov Village controls a huge chunk of the southern coast’s black market trade. While they might be a small village, every other port near them is loyal to them and tends to follow their lead.”

“I know!” I say through gritted teeth. “That’s why grandfather always gave them so much leeway.”

“As much as I would like to punch that snotty interim elder in his face, we can’t afford to lose them,” she reminds me.

I scowl, every instinct screaming that now is not the fucking time for politics. Sabrina is out there somewhere, terrified, alone, carrying our child, and they want me to go bow and scrape to a bunch of villagers with wounded pride?

We'll take the village back if they break their alliance, by force if we have to. I'm about to tell her exactly where they can shove their summons, when Clyde's burner phone lights up across the kitchen.

He snatches it up, barking a terse, "Da?"

A beat of silence. Then Clyde's face goes hard.

He looks at me across the room, nodding once. "We've got movement. They're moving Sabrina."

My heart stops.

"Where?" I bark, already striding across the kitchen.

"Another RMSAD site that's deeper south." Clyde rattles off the coordinates. "Timofey's men have a team ready to move. But we have to go now."

I'm already reaching for my jacket when Galina's voice cuts like a whip through the room.

"Oleksi, stop."

I freeze, turning slowly to face her.

"How many times have you chased leads that turned into dead ends? How many ambushes have there been?" she demands. "This could very well be another one of

those.” She gives me a small smile. “You know it’s true.”

I grit my teeth so hard my jaw creaks. “What the fuck do you expect me to do? Sit here while they tear Sabrina apart?” My anger and frustration rattles through my voice. “Or go pretend to be diplomatic and tell that fucking interim Dragunov elder what he wants to hear so they don’t go to war on us?”

“I expect you to think and act like the Pakhan of a powerful Bratva,” she snaps back, her eyes flicking to my team. “Let Clyde, Syd, and Ivan take a team of Timofey’s men to follow this lead. You go to Dragunov Village to re-cement the alliance and secure our flank.”

My fists clench uselessly at my sides. I know my aunt right. Duty to the Mirochin bratva always comes first.

“Did Agofuck hint at what they were wanting to cement the new alliance with?” I bite out. My skin is crawling as I already know the answer to my question.

Galina’s face darkens. “They want a marriage alliance between the Dragunov line and Mirochins.”

“Of course they do!” The words hit like a slap. “So they are going to offer up the last of Vasily’s granddaughters—Irina’s twin sister, Nadia!”

“Yes.” My aunt gives a curt nod, watching me intently.

I remember Nadia vaguely — Irina’s twin sister. She was shy, always quiet—a ghost in the shadows of the village. Even at her sister’s wedding, she tried to stay in the background.

The bile rises in my throat. Not because the woman is an ogre or anything like that.

Nadia is far from it. Like her sister, Nadia has an ethereal beauty about her. But there is no way in fucking hell I'm marrying anyone other than Sabrina. The woman who is carrying my child and I may as well admit to myself, my heart!

Not a fucking chance in hell am I going to consent to that marriage. We'll just have to come up with another ironclad agreement. I raise my eyebrows—like I've thought before, we could always just take the village by force. I've always wondered why the fuck my grandfather hadn't just done that already.

We have an trained bratva army at our disposal, they're a group of fishermen who as far as I can tell aren't military trained, which showed when my uncle Dmitri (my aunt and father's younger brother), during his reign of terror days, stormed the village and nearly wiped them all out.

"Oleksi!" Syd's voice pulls me from my thoughts. "We have to go now. What are your orders?"

"You, Clyde, and Ivan, take Timofey's helicopter and men to go and check out the lead," I bark out the order. "But don't, I repeat, don't do anything foolish. This is an intel gathering mission until I say it's not. If Sabrina is there, hold our position and contact me right away. I'll get there as soon as I can."

"What about me, boss?" Lev asks, standing and positioning Elena, who has taken to Lev and thinks he's here solely to play with her. He puts her on his hip as if he's been doing it his whole life.

"You will stay here and take care of Elena," I tell him.

"Of course," Lev nods. I know he wants to get in on the action and find Sabrina as much as we do. But I need him here, not just to watch over Elena, but to be my eyes and ears while I'm gone.

“So you’re going to Dragunov Village?” My aunt looks at me.

“Like you said, I have no choice,” I reply.

As my team files out, Nikolas saunters in, carrying a file and dressed like he is heading out.

“Going somewhere?” I ask, looking from him to my aunt.

“I’m coming with you,” he says simply. “If it’s an ambush, you’ll need backup. You may just need backup to stop you from killing that fucker that was so rude to your aunt.”

“Oh, darling, then you’re not the right man.” Galina laughs and kisses Nikolas on the lips before taking the documents from Nikolas and turning back to me. “You’re going to need these.”

Curious, I take them and then freeze when I see what they are—the proposed marriage contract I had drawn up about five weeks ago in case the Dragunovs started to get restless now that Irina was dead.

“Fuck that!” I say, shoving the documents back at her. “This is no longer an option.”

“Like you having to go to the village, you have no choice, Oleksi,” my aunt points out. “It’s the sacrifice we make for who we are.”

“Again, fuck that!” I spit and spin away from her, fury blending with my frustration and boiling together into something ugly and feral. “I may have to go to that fucking village but I don’t care if I have to do a hostile take over of that pissant village to secure that port—I’m not marrying a Dragunov—I don’t care how beautiful she is.”

That would mean my child would be born a bastard, and no way in hell I will do that to them or Sabrina.

As I storm out toward the SUV I notice my aunt or Nikolas already has waiting, I start to brace myself to prepare for war against a tiny fucking little village that has such a significant impact on our business.

OLEKSI

The SUV handles the climb like a beast, its armored tires gripping the frozen mountain pass better than I expected. But even sitting inside this rolling fortress, I can feel the cold gnawing through the seams.

Nikolas mutters under his breath, one hand light on the wheel as he steers around another patch of black ice.

“Fucking steppe,” he grumbles. “Nothing but wind, rocks, and death.”

I snort. “Could be worse.”

He glances sideways at me. “How?”

I jerk my chin toward the windshield where the sleet is starting to whip sideways in angry gusts. “Could be raining.”

Right on cue, a gust of sleet pelts the glass, rattling the armored shell.

Nikolas growls low in his throat. “Or fucking snow.”

“Great, now you’re just tempting fate.” I lean back in the seat, flexing my fingers. “I think what could be worse than this is being crammed in the drafty piece-of-shit truck that bounced us from Moscow to the Morozov farm. I held my breath, counting each

mile it managed to make it to. It sounded like it was wheezing, coughing, gasping like an eighty-year-old chain-smoker.”

Nikolas chuckles under his breath, the sound thin and grim. “You’re right, that would be worse.”

“Elena enjoyed most of the ride.” A smile tugs at my lips, and my heart warms thinking about my little niece. “She squealed in delight at every rattling bump like she was on a fair ride.”

“Elena is showing signs of being someone who’s going to live life on the edge,” Nikolas agrees, turning to me, smiling. “Having her around has stopped me from missing Adam too much.”

“How is your grandson?” Guilt rips through me at the mention of Adam. He is the son of my cousin, Radomir, and Nikolas’s daughter, Leigh. I haven’t spoken to Rad in over a month and don’t know if he knows what’s going on or not. “Does Leigh know about Sabrina and Tara?” I find myself asking before I can stop myself.

Nikolas turns to glance at me. “No.” His voice is firm. “And I think we need to keep it that way.”

“I take it that means Rad doesn’t know either?”

“No.” He shakes his head again, pausing as if contemplating his following words. “Listen, Oleksi...” He turns to me briefly before looking back at the treacherous road. “You and Sabrina should never have gotten caught up in all this...”

“But we are,” I point out. “There is no going back now and no do-overs.” My eyes narrow as I look at his profile.

“There are enough of us involved already.” Nikolas’s grip on the steering wheel tightens, indicating his distress over something. “Fuck!” He hisses. “I warned Carla and Sol.” His eyes seek mine again for a few seconds. “I told them that as soon as Tara and Sabrina are old enough they need to tell them the truth.”

“I take it you were the one who helped them disappear?”

“Yeah, your aunt called me for help,” Nikolas explains. “I thought it was risky for Galena to set them up in Vegas so close to her. But Galena assured me that their friendship was a secret. Galena’s parents disapproved of her keeping company with people as high profile as Anya and Timofey.”

“And I’m guessing Carla’s parents weren’t happy about their daughter being friends with a known crime family!”

“Correct,” Nikolas confirms. “But that didn’t stop the RMSAD from knocking on your grandfather’s door to make sure Galena had nothing to do with Carla and Sol’s defection.”

“You mean Leonid and Mariya,” I correct.

“Right!” Nikolas nods. “We learn that once you’ve erased someone, you erase who they were and never refer to their former names. In most cases, we don’t even know their real names.”

“That seems smart.” I nod and turn to look out of the window.

The mountains close in — jagged, snow-slathered, their black teeth scraping the sky. The steppe is merciless out here. No softness. No mercy. Just like the world I’m from. And it seems, Sabrina never knew where she was from.

“If Carla and Sol had told Tara and Sabrina who they really were, we may not be in this situation right now,” Nikolas says.

“This is why you never wanted Sabrina and Radomir to come to Russia when they were looking for Leigh.” It suddenly dawns on me.

“Sabrina looks so much like her grandmother,” Nikolas says. “I was terrified she’d get recognized.”

“You should’ve just said something.” I shake my head and then smile, thinking of how much Sabrina looks like Anya. “But she does look like her grandmother. It’s like getting a glimpse into what she’ll look like at that age.” I give a snort. “Now I know why Sabrina is more than super smart too.”

Nikolas jerks towards me, and I see his eyes fill with shock, which makes me frown. We also nearly swerve off the road, but he has the vehicle under control in moments. With my heart beating in my throat and my fingers tingling with shock, I have to wonder why he’d be shocked by that statement.

“Do you not know how smart Sabrina is?” My brow furrows.

“What?” He gives me a confused look. “Of course, I know how smart she is. I’ve known her since she was a baby. She and my daughter have been best friends since they were three.” He pulls a face. “Trust me, I know how scarily clever she is.”

“Then why did you almost kill us when I mentioned it?” My eyes bore into his profile. “It’s not like it’s a state secret...” Fuck maybe it is. In Russia, anyway.

“Listen, there is something you should...” Before he can say more, he turns onto the road that leads to the coast and Dragunov Village and skids to a stop nearly sending me through the fucking windshield.

“For fuck’s sake, are you trying to kill me?” I glare at him.

“No!” Nikolas says. “But I think the snipers and those goons might.” He points to six heavily armed men dressed in Dragunov colors - red with black and a blue dragon emblem in the center of their black flak jackets, appearing from nowhere.

“Well, this is new!”

“And not good,” Nikolas adds. “Makes you wonder why they’ve all of a sudden started heavily guarding the entrance road to the village.

I wanted to ask about that myself, and make a mental note to ask the acting elder.

“What is your purpose here?” The one guard steps up to Nilolas’s window and asks as it goes down.

“We’re here to see Agofan, he’s expecting me,” I lean forward to tell them.

Another older man dressed in the same uniform walks over to the car and sticks his head in. I know him. “Hello, Oleksi.”

“Bob.” I greet him. “What the fuck is this all about.”

“Just a bit of trouble,” Bob shrugs. “The new elder wanted security beefed up.”

“Talking about elders, we’re here to see the acting one,” Nikolas tells him.

“Operative word being acting ,” he mutters, and something like disgust flashes in Bob’s eyes. “Yeah.” He nods and turns to the other men, signaling for them to let us through. “You’ll find him at the village hall. Good luck.” He pats the door and steps back for us to move forward.

“Do you think he meant they are expecting trouble?” I ask Nikolas. “Or about to cause trouble?”

“I’m thinking both,” Nikolas’s answers set my hair on end. “Those aren’t just some guards posted at the village entrance for security.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I agree. “It’s like the Dragunovs are gathering an army.”

And that thought leaves me even colder as we roll into the village. The sun is setting and becoming nothing more than a bruised smear against the horizon. Smoke from wood stoves curls into the frozen air as the villagers prepare for the evening. There is a buzz running through the streets.

Nikolas pulls us up outside the village hall — an old stone building that looks like it was built by men who knew how to kill with rocks if they had to.

Standing at the steps, waiting like he’s the fucking Czar himself, is the man I presume is Agafon.

Short. Smug. Oily.

Exactly the kind of man I hate on sight.

Beside him stands a figure swathed in a heavy gray cloak, watching us with calm, emotionless eyes and her hands folded demurely in front of her.

Nadia Voronina-Dragunov. Irina’s twin sister, and if I remember the sibling structure correctly, she’s the youngest of Vasily’s five grandchildren from his late daughter.

I climb out of the SUV, feeling the village’s eyes burning into me from behind every shuttered window.

Agafon steps forward, arms wide in mock welcome.

“Oleksi Mirochin!” he calls. “You honor us at last with your presence.”

I bite down hard on the urge to break his nose and tell him this is no honor I’m bestowing on them, and they may have well kidnapped me, because that’s what it feels like.

“Agafon, I presume?” I reach out to take his soft hand, and he holds it out for me to shake. It’s like shaking a fucking wet rag.

“You presume correctly.” Agafon gives me a slight bow. “Acting elder of Dragunov.”

Jesus, he thinks he’s a fucking king, or by his robes and weird hat, maybe the pope.

“Hello, Nadia,” I turn my attention back to her.

“Hello, Oleksi, it’s good to see you again,” Nadia answers politely. “And thank you for your condolences. May I take this opportunity to extend mine and my family’s to you and yours for the loss of Gavriil.”

“Thank you,” I say. Ignoring the sharp sting in my heart from the mention of my brother. I turn to Nikolas. “This is Nikolas Vasilikis. A good family friend.”

Nikolas shakes hands with Agafon and greets Nadia respectfully. “I am truly sorry for the loss of your sister and grandfather,” he tells her. “They were both great people.”

“Thank you,” Nadia’s voice wobbles slightly, and her eyes brighten with unshed tears.

“Shall we move inside?” Agafon suggests. “The weather is a lot better there.” His attempt at humor falls flat.

Nadia leads the way into the village hall. Inside, it smells like smoke, and a soft buzz of curious voices greets us. A few of the older village members sit at scattered tables throughout the hall playing cards and various board games.

We are led into one of the surprisingly modern boardrooms, where Agafon takes a seat at the head of the long wooden table and Nadia sits to his right.

“Now that the pleasantries are out of the way,” I don’t wait for the idiot to begin. They need to know I am the one in charge, not them. I dictate what goes on here, not them. “Let’s get down to business.” I see the surprise lift Agofuck’s eyebrows. “First, don’t ever summon me or threaten me again.” My eyes narrow as my tone becomes dangerous. “You serve the Mirochins, not the other way around. It’s best if you pass that on to the actual new village elder. Which brings me to my next point, I do not liaise or make deals with acting heads. So, when, Ruslan, is it?” I hold Agafon’s eyes and can all but see his superior attitude starting to crumble. The little tit really thought he had the upper hand here. “—returns, tell him to let me know, and we can sort out the terms of the new alliance between the Mirochins and Dragunov village. Until then...”

“I...” Agafon swallows. “Look here, Oleksi, we...” clears his throat. “If we don’t get the alliance we want, we will sever our connection to the Mirochins. Already, the people of Dragunov Village are feeling unsettled and are threatening an uprising if the alliance is not cemented with...”

“Is that why the village has suddenly got a small army?” I lean back comfortably in the chair, my eyes never leaving his. “So you can stand up against the Mirochins?” I cut him off.

“You... you do need this port...” Agafon tries to reassert his authority, ignoring my reference to my little run-in with their new army. “And remember, it’s not just this port that you will lose access to if we break alliances with you.”

I stare at him for a while, making sure he’s squirming, before saying. “Now you’re trying to extort an alliance from me?” He is either desperate to get this alliance or deliberately trying to goad me into breaking it, and I don’t like that.

“No,” Agafon denies. “We do not want to cut ties with the Mirochins. Your family has looked after this village for generations. We would not have survived the hard time if it had not been for your great-grandfather and his father before him.”

“Then why threaten me and demand my presence here?” I lean my elbows on the table and pin him with my eyes. “Why all the disrespect to my aunt when she offered to come in my place?”

“We needed to cement the alliance with the head of the Mirochin family, not a proxy,” Agafon tells me, not realizing they are doing just that to me.

“My feeling exactly,” I tell him, and see his eyes widen as he realizes what he’s just said. “I will secure the new alliance with the actual new Dragunov Elder and not his proxy .”

“I have Ruslan’s full authority to...” He starts to stammer.

“My aunt runs the Russian operations for me in Moscow,” I point out. “I’d say that pretty much makes her much more than a proxy and a lot higher up in the hierarchy than you are.”

“I... I...” Agafon is now spluttering.

His face is going red with outrage, and I notice Nadia, who hasn't uttered a word this whole time, raises a hand to her mouth. Is she laughing? It's hard to see with the hood of her cape covering most of her face.

Just then, his phone rings and he glances at it. "Sorry, I have to take this." He all but jumps to his feet and sprints out of the room.

"Probably his mommy," Nikolas chirps under his breath.

"It wouldn't surprise me," I agree with him, watching the man hightail it out of the room, but not before I saw the visible signs of relief for the interruption on his face. "I don't know about you, but I have a bad feeling about this."

"Yeah, it's like he's a puppet," Nikolas observes. "He seems to have a script he's talking from."

I nod. "The question is, who is pulling his strings?" I wonder. "Is it Ruslan, trying to antagonize me? Which means he's wanting to stage a war, but I'm not sure to what end."

"Maybe he's starting his own criminal organization," Nikolas's suggestion startles me.

Is that why he's gathering an army? Jesus Christ, as if I don't have enough on my fucking plate. I don't want to have to deal with this pissant village declaring war on us too.

As the door swings shut behind Agafon, Nadia turns towards us and pulls off her hood. I'm struck by her beauty and then amazed by the sudden transformation we witness as her meekness seems to melt away.

Her eyes meet mine — they are sharp, clear, burning with something dangerous.

“We don’t have much time,” she says in a low, steady voice. “So I’m going to cut straight to it. I know why you’re really in Russia.” Her eyes narrow, and she shakes her head. “I know, too, that the RMSAD has taken Sabrina and that you’re looking into Tara’s disappearance, hoping it will shed some light on what happened to your brother and my sister.”

She holds mine and Nikolas’s attention as she continues.

“Okay...” I shrug, willing her to get to the point.

“I can help you with all of it,” Nadia tells us calmly. I say nothing, my body going still.

“How can you help us?” I ask skeptically, knowing by the way her shoulders have tensed slightly, this is not just about helping us out of the goodness of her heart. She wants something in return, and I fear I know what!

“I have contacts in the RMSAD,” Nadia informs us, and before I can say anything else, she adds, “Contacts who, unlike yours, are trustworthy.”

“And what do you get in return?”

“Freedom,” she says simply, her head turning and her eyes holding Nikolas’s. “Get me out of here. Out of this village. Away from my older brother, Ruslan. Away from Agafon—out of Russia!”

I glance at Nikolas, who frowns, and we look at Nadia questioningly.

“And how do you propose we get you out of here?” I ask her.

“And what kind of information can you give us?” Nikolas adds. “We’re not just going to agree to your terms without a sample.”

Nadia looks at me first. “You offer for my hand in marriage, and we pretend to be engaged.” She looks at Nikolas and says, “Once we are out of Russia, you help erase us.”

“Us?” Nikolas’s brows shoot up. “Who is us?”

“My partner and I,” Nadia tells us, and I suddenly understand. “We want to get married and be free of this life we are forced to live.”

I’m struck by the thought that she doesn’t want to marry me either.

“Like Nikolas said, this is a big ask,” I tell her. “If your brother finds out what we’ve done, I could lose this alliance instead of cementing it.”

“He won’t. I have a plan,” Nadia says, glancing at the door. “Now what is it going to be?”

“We need proof you can help us,” Nikolas insists.

She nods, pulls out her phone, and calls someone. Speaking in rapid Russian, “It is me. Are you near her?”

We watch Nadia curiously. She stands and walks over to us. “We can not show this for long, or my contact will be discovered.”

She shows us her phone, and my heart slams against my rib cage. It’s Sabrina in what looks like a white prison uniform, sitting at a table in a large empty mess hall, picking at a bowl of... I lean closer. Fruit?

“How do we know this is today?” I ask, feeling Nikolas tense and suck in air when he sees Sabrina.

Nadia tells whoever is live-streaming this to us to show us proof that this is live. She holds up a newspaper with today’s date on it, and then, to prove she’s with Sabrina, accidentally bumps into the table, sending Sabrina’s bowl of fruit flying.

“What the fuck!” Sabrina springs to her feet. Fruit pieces are sticking to her clothes.

“I am sorry.” It’s a female voice. Laced with a heavy Russian accent as she speaks English to Sabrina.

“It’s real!” My voice is barely a whisper, and I look at Nikolas, who nods. I want to grab the phone and demand to know where the fuck they are but Nadia breaks the connection.

As Agafon walks back into the room, I take the two copies of the marriage contract and slam them in front of him.

“Sign these and Nadia and I are engaged,” I tell him, my tone brooking no argument and filled with impatience. I’ve seen her. I know Sabrina is alive and looking well despite being in some fucked-up Russian black-ops site. I don’t have time to waste with this bullshit. “We will iron out the details with the real village elder when he sees fit to grace us with his presence. Until then, Nadia comes with us tonight when we leave.”

“But...”

“I accept,” Nadia says, standing. “I will get my things.” She grabs a pen from the table and signs both copies where her name appears. She shoves the pen at Agafon. “Sign.” My eyebrows shoot up. There was no meekness in that command and I notice

Agafon nearly shits in his pants at it.

He nods, looking a little shaky and me wondering why the fuck anyone would leave this prick in charge of anything. I shake the thought from my head. It's not my problem if they think he could protect the town from anything.

"We're engaged," I tell Nadia, who nods, and Nikolas witnesses both copies of the contract.

"Get your things, we leave in twenty minutes," I tell her. I just want to get out of here and contact Clyde.

"I only need ten," Nadia quips, and the sudden shift in her tone and confidence makes me realize she had manipulated this entire meeting, and we were looking at the puppet master pulling Agafon's strings.

8

SABrINA

Five days.

That's how long I've been a prisoner of the RMSAD.

And in those five days, I've been moved three times—three different facilities, three different levels of sterile hell. But it's this one, the third one, that's making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

The others were bad—no denying that: all bright white lights, endless corridors, cold hands, colder smiles. But there were people. Scientists, guards, technicians, and other voices echoing down the halls. Here? It's a fucking tomb.

The building is massive, but I've seen no more than six other people since I arrived. Maybe ten if you count the ones in passing. The corridors stretch forever in silence, the hum of the fluorescent lights the only consistent company.

They haven't tested me today for the first time since I was taken.

I know that should be a relief, but it's not. I can't help feeling a little freaked out. I keep thinking, is this all some kind of test? Some fucked up way of testing me in isolation? Is them not testing me a test? I'm used to a rhythm now: morning wake-up, shower with eyes on me, breakfast, hours of assessments.

Always some new flavor of test—Rorschach, pattern recognition, IQ puzzles dressed up like logic games. Half the shit they throw at me, I’ve seen before. And I now know why my father insisted on teaching Tara and me how to get through endless different tests of that kind. He used to train us on how to beat those kinds of evaluations. How to appear average 101. We must always appear capable. Full of potential, but not exceptional enough to raise flags. We just thought he wanted us to lead normal, everyday lives until we felt ready to show the world who we are—on our terms.

I know it was the way Tara was heading. She wanted to be a physics professor and get tenure. Tara had big plans. I swallow, thinking about my sister as the lump burns in my throat. The only good thing about being here is that I’ve managed to find out they don’t know where she or my mother is. While still a constant source of worry for me, at least I know these fuckers don’t have them.

My mind drifts back to my father’s training. Now that I think about it and know what I know, I realize he wasn’t just trying to keep us seem average so we could live an everyday life, he wasn’t just training us for if my frightening aunt ever found us—he was preparing us for when Yelena and the RMSAD found us.

While I’m still angry with you and Mom, Dad, I sniff away the pain that still rips through my heart thinking about my father, the man who gave his life for mine, I understand why you and Mom did what you did. I’m grateful for all you taught us. I still think you should’ve been honest with us.

I wipe the tear off my cheek and compose myself, reminding myself I’m being watched. Blowing out a breath, I pick up another sad grape and pop it into my mouth. If I’m honest, the tests have kept me from getting bored, and it felt good beating them again.

But it also allowed me to assess the RMSAD black ops division. As no one knows I can speak Russian, they used it as a go-to language to discuss me and other things

while I was in earshot. I sigh, thinking of how they have tried to trip me up to find out if I'm pretending not to speak Russian. But I just didn't take the bait and kept my well-honed 'I'm oblivious' look.

"I can't let them know what I'm capable of, little one," I whisper, while dropping a grape onto my lap so I can address my stomach without seeming obvious. "I don't want them discovering you. "

I shudder picturing the operating and other medical rooms Helga (not Tubby) took me to see. Now I'm wondering what kind of tests they'll run on me here. So far, they haven't taken any body fluid samples. Or at least not that I know of.

Something bangs in the distance, I jump, and my head swivels towards the door. Fuck this place! It's different. It's too quiet. Too... clinical, and not in the way you'd expect. It feels like a hospital, complete with psychiatric wards, straight out of a post-apocalyptic movie. I want to say all it's missing are the flesh-eating zombies, but honestly I'm thinking there might just be some in this shitshow of a place.

Even Tubby—sorry, Helga —the one guard who doesn't glare at me like I kicked her dog, admitted it's not a regular RMSAD site. Said this building was "repurposed." Said there were stories about it. Said this is where the real experiments happened. Some of the worst rumors about the RMSAD's "ghost projects" started here.

The worst part? I believe her. The shit I've seen and heard over the past five days is fucking unbelievable. How could anyone be a part of this and sleep at night? Fuck, my mother used to be a part of this.

I shake my thoughts away. While I'm stuck in here, there is not much I can do about it. But fuck, when I get out, I'm going to burn this fucking black ops frankenstein division to the fucking ground.

My eyes catch the large house at the other end of the grounds looming like a shadowy threat through the windows. Helga told me the General's family lives in that house. I think I was more surprised to hear he had a family. I thought he was a cyborg. Who the hell moves his family into a black ops site?

One that doesn't want them to leave! I answer my own question. They are probably all genetically enhanced humanoids waiting to procreate with another pure genetically altered humanoid to form a little family of genetic fuckwits.

I sigh and glance around the room once again. I'm alone in this massive dining hall that I could probably fit three of my school's mess halls into. I shudder and my skin crawls as I swear I can feel the souls of former people like me sitting around here.

I'm freaking myself out even more. I guess I should try and eat my nighttime snack—a bland fruit bowl. It's not bad. I've just never been a fruit girl. Give me pancakes, bacon, maple syrup, and black coffee, and I'm golden. This crap? Grapes and melon, and a slice of kiwi that tastes like it's been through customs twice?

But I eat it. For the baby. I don't let myself touch my stomach, not in public, not even when I'm alone, because if they find out I'm pregnant—really find out—I don't know what the hell they'll do. And I'm not willing to find out.

I'm halfway through a slice of something orange when someone crashes into my table.

Fruit flies everywhere when the table is thumped and upends my tray, and suddenly I'm soaked. Something cold and sticky slides down my chest and pools in my lap.

“What the fuck?!” I shoot up from my seat, heart leaping into my throat. Jesus, there's an entire mess hall, and my table is the one that gets knocked into.

My head shoots up as I realize someone walked into my table, and my eyes meet a young woman about my age. She looks like she stepped out of a Hot Topic Goth edition that hasn't updated its inventory since 2008.

Combat boots. Torn black leggings. A baggy black hoodie layered under a cropped leather jacket. Her hair is dyed black, but streaked through with purple. Her lipstick is dark, her eyeliner sharp, and her face? Her face is flushed with embarrassment.

“Oh shit—fuck—I am so sorry!” she blurts, and her Russian accent wraps around the words in a way that almost makes them musical. “I didn't mean to... I mean, I wasn't looking—shit—I didn't even think anyone was in here.”

My chest rises and falls as I fight the instinct to bite her head off. But the look on her face... It's not fake. She's not here to test me. She's just... awkward—and uncannily human, not some robotic, science-y type.

And probably the first remotely genuine human I've seen since I was taken.

I exhale sharply and brush a sticky chunk of pineapple off my shirt. “It's fine,” I mutter. “I mean, if you planned to douse me in a fruit cocktail and start a turf war, congrats—you nailed it.”

She laughs—a short, surprised burst—and then drops into the chair across from mine.

“I was trying to figure out how to say hi without sounding insane,” she confesses, and I nod, realizing the table bump was planned. “Guess I failed.”

“Not entirely,” I mutter, grabbing a paper napkin and wiping my hands. “You got my attention.”

“I'm Valeska,” she says. “Resident inmate number two.”

“Sabrina.” I blink as her words sink in. “So there are more of us.”

“Three total. Including you,” she confirms. “Though Inmate One isn’t exactly what I’d call... friendly.”

“Yeah?” I arch a brow. “What’s their deal?”

She leans forward, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “He’s a psychopath. Charismatic. Dangerous. Plays the good guy right up until he gets bored, then decides to twist the knife.”

“Sounds like a delight.”

“My older brother,” she adds with a smirk. “Most people call him Mikhail. I call him Fuckface.”

That makes me laugh. “Noted.”

She nods toward my now-empty tray. “Sorry about the fruit.”

“It’s fine.” I pause. “Well, no. It’s sticky and annoying. But honestly? You’re the first person I’ve spoken to in five days who didn’t have a clipboard or a tranquilizer gun, so I’ll allow it.”

“I think that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” she deadpans.

We fall into a strangely comfortable silence. I study her as she pulls two chocolate bars from her hoodie pocket and hands me one. “How about I give you one of these for knocking over your fruit?”

“Shit!” I nearly rip the candy from her hand. “This makes the feeling like I’m about

to attract a swarm of bees so worth it.”

Moving to another seat, I peel the candy bar and notice her weird brooch. It is a large spider with red eyes. “Cool brooch.” I nod toward it.

“Thanks.” Valeska looks at it. “It goes with the look.” She laughs.

All thought runs from my head as I sink my teeth into the delicious caramel gooey goodness of the candy bar and savor the taste of sugary sweetness. “Mmmm”

“Good?” She grins.

“Oh fuck, yeah,” I nod. “I’ve had nothing but bland food since I became an unwilling guest of the RMSAD.”

“Story of my life,” she mutters.

“How long have you been here?” I ask slowly.

Valeska looks at me. Shrugs. “In this facility, or a prisoner of the RMSAD?”

“Both?” I frown, and I start to get a funny feeling.

“How about all my life?” Valeska hisses, her eyes flashing with emotion. “In this facility? On and off, depending on what year or season it is.”

“Where are you staying?”

“In the house across the courtyard.” She inclines her head toward the house.

I stare at her. Something ice-cold unfurls in my gut.

“You live there?”

She nods. “I wouldn’t call it live. More like trapped.”

No.

No way.

“Your... father works here?”

Her expression hardens.

“My father runs this place.”

The room tilts for a second.

“You’re...” I trail off, trying to connect the dots even though I already know what they spell. “You’re the daughter of General Vladislav Ergorov.”

My fruit-sticky fingers go cold.

And just like that, the last little illusion I had that I’d managed to meet someone who might be able to help me is gone, and now I’m thinking this is another test.

I put the half-eaten candy bar on the table. Suddenly, it’s not that appetizing anymore, and I don’t know what it could be laced with. Am I getting paranoid—fuck hell yeah. For a moment, I nearly fell for it. I almost let down my guard, which has been up for so long. I think it is starting to rust in place.

I stand. “I’d better find Helga and see if I can go over my quote of scrubs and showers for the day.”

“Fuck!” Valeska swears, standing with me. “It’s my father, isn’t it?”

“I have to admit, I was nearly taken in by your goth, rebel look,” I tell her. “But let your father and my mad scientist aunt, if she is my aunt, know that it didn’t work. I don’t spill my guts to strangers, and I still have no clue where my mother or sister are.” I shake my head. “How could I? I’ve been stuck in here for five days, and I’m not psychic.”

I turn and start to walk away.

“Sabrina, wait!” Valeska rushes after me. “You don’t understand...”

“I think I do,” I say and I’m saved having to say more when instead of Helga, Skinny, who’s name is Vavara and I love to mispronounce it and call her Viagra and it pisses her off which makes me day just a little brighter for it, appears.

“What are you doing here, Valeska?” Vavara’s tone is sharp and clipped like a frustrated schoolmarm. She is probably one.

“I can go wherever I like,” Valeska reminds her.

“Not when it’s almost curfew,” Vavara points out.

“She was helping me because I accidentally knocked my bowl of fruit over,” I tell Vavara, indicating the sticky mess I am.

“How can you be the granddaughter of Anya Novikov?” Vavara hisses in discussion. “You are a disgrace to her name. She was never clumsy. Even at her advanced age, she still floats with poise and grace.”

“Give me a bottle of tequila and I can do that too,” I tell Vavara, and I’m rewarded

with a scathing look that could strip paint off walls.

“You had better go,” she hisses at Valeska, then turns her angry eyes on me. “Let’s get you cleaned up. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“And what exactly will I be doing tomorrow?” I say, pulling her attention to me while Valeska sneaks away.

“You will see,” she says almost with glee.

I pull a face as if I don’t care. “Cool.”

Later, in my new, sterile room, which admittedly has a much more comfortable bed and warmer blankets, I slide my hand beneath my pillow to make myself comfortable. My hand hits something. I pull the pillow back, squinting through the dark, and find two candy bars and a note. I don’t have to read the note to know who it’s from.

Crumpling the note in my hand, I make my way into the tiny bathroom with just a toilet and basin adjoining the room. I switch on the soft light when I read it.

Sabrina. We need to talk. I didn’t only bump into you to say hi. I’m here to help you, oh, and I have a phone—an untraceable burner. And NO this is not a trick, test, or anything to do with my father’s sick ass world. Like you, I’m a prisoner here trying to find a way out. Did I mention I can get word to a man named Oleksi?

My heart slams into my ribs. This sounds too good to be true. But something at the back of my mind tells me it’s not, and I let myself go over the brief time I spent with Valeska. There was something about her, not malice, more like pain, and for a few seconds, when I’d greeted her, she’d held her breath waiting to see how I’d respond. When I’d warmed to her, her eyes had lit not just with relief but hope!

After I finish a candy bar and find a place to stash the other one and the wrapper, I drift off to sleep wondering if what I saw in Valeska's eyes was real or am I just seeing what I want to see in my desperation to get the fuck out of here.

But as my mind drifts to Oleksi, as it always does when I fall asleep, I know I'm willing to take the risk.

OLEKSI

Nadia sits in the back seat, quiet as stone. She's barely said a word since we pulled away from Dragunov Village. Arms crossed, eyes on the window. Like she's watching the mountains pass but not seeing them.

Nikolas keeps glancing at her in the mirror. Not just once or twice—he keeps doing it, like something's itching at the back of his mind and he's waiting for the right moment to speak.

I finally break the silence. “You okay, Nikolas?” I raise an eyebrow.

He flicks his eyes to me, then back to the mirror. “Nadia, something's bugging me.”

That gets Nadia's attention. She turns slightly in her seat, brows raised. “Something I can help you with?”

Nikolas doesn't answer right away. He meets her eyes through the mirror, gaze steady. “Why won't your brother approve of the person you're in love with?”

She doesn't even blink.

“Because of who their family is,” she says evenly. “And...” she pauses for a second, but her voice stays proud, unflinching, “because the person I love is a woman.”

Ah.

It clicks. Nadia's family is traditional and wouldn't accept a union like that.

I glance at Nikolas, who exhales through his nose like something just fell into place.

I turn in my seat slightly to look at Nadia as I ponder what he's thinking. "The woman in the facility with Sabrina... that's her, isn't it?"

Nikolas fires off another question, "That's your contact in the RMSAD as well, isn't it?"

"One of them," Nadia confirms with a nod. "And yes. That's Valeska. The one who showed you Sabrina earlier."

My jaw tightens. "Why is Valeska in the detention center with Sabrina?"

Nadia's eyes flick to mine. "Like Sabrina," she says quietly, "it's due to a misfortune of birth."

I don't like the sound of that. "How unfortunate?"

She doesn't hesitate.

"Like being Valeska Ergorov unfortunate."

The name hits like a bullet.

I go still. Even Nikolas tenses beside me.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter. "She's the General's daughter?"

Nadia nods. “His only daughter. Trapped in the legacy of her family.”

“Why doesn’t she just leave?” I ask, glancing back at Nadia. “She’s not a kid. She looks to be in her twenties.”

“Twenty-four,” Nadia says, her voice clear. “And she’s tried. How do you think we met?”

Nikolas shoots her a quick look through the mirror. “How did you meet if she’s been trapped in a facility?”

“The General needs her to look after her mother,” Nadia explains. “The woman was once a brilliant scientist. Now she’s a lush who can barely get out of bed.”

I snort. “I can imagine being married to the General would be enough to turn anyone into an alcoholic.”

“It wasn’t the General that drove her to drink,” Nadia says flatly. “It was her son. Valeska’s older brother, Mikhail.”

The name drips venom from her mouth, and for good reason, I’m starting to suspect.

“He’s the nastiest, sickest piece of work you’ll ever meet. He doesn’t just torture people for information. He does it because he enjoys it. It’s like a drug to him. And he’s violent on another level—the word berserk doesn’t even come close.”

“Shit,” I mutter. “Maybe they should use him as a test subject in the RMSAD instead.”

Nadia shakes her head. “Valeska thinks that’s exactly what happened. Something went wrong with his treatment.”

“What treatment?” Nikolas and I ask at the same time.

Nadia meets my eyes. “Genetic enhancement.”

I feel the blood drain from my face.

“He was designed to be genetically superior,” she says, her words razor-sharp.

“What? Violently?” Nikolas hisses.

“I’ve never seen a temper like his,” Nadia continues. “When he snaps, it’s like something else takes over. A fire ignites in him, and it burns until he’s spent. By the time he comes back down, the damage is done. And the damage is extensive.”

“Leaving a wake of destruction behind,” Nikolas mutters.

“Yes.” Nadia’s eyes glint with rage now. “I met Valeska through one of his violent rages. And then a few more. He put her in the hospital more times than I can count.”

“Jesus,” I breathe. “He hit his sister?”

Nadia shakes her head, and for the first time, I see her hands clench in her lap. “Not just hit her. He’s raped her. Then let his friends gang rape her more than once.”

My stomach flips. Nikolas swears under his breath.

“She ended up in my ER so many times,” Nadia adds, voice tight. “I was a trauma surgeon before General Ergorov had my medical license pulled for daring to accuse his precious golden boy of harming Valeska and their mother.”

I blink. “You were a surgeon?”

“Were being the operative word,” she says bitterly. “But I’ll get my license back. Once Valeska and I have a new life.”

Nikolas shifts in his seat. “How do you know we can trust her?”

Nadia turns toward him. “Because there’s only so much abuse a person can take. Full body casts. STD tests. Being held down by your own brother while his friends do what they want to you—that changes a person. Or it breaks them.”

“And her father?” I ask, my voice low and dangerous. “Why hasn’t he stopped it?”

“Because he thinks Valeska is jealous of her genetically superior brother and just wants attention.”

I can’t stop the disgust from curling through my tone. “So what? Does he think Valeska throws herself down the stairs for fun?”

Nadia’s lips tighten. “Mikhail blames his mother for the brutality against Valeska. And the General always believes Mikhail.” Her voice is bitter and angry. “Then he throws his wife into a rehab facility that he conveniently runs. While Valeska’s mother is being tortured, Mikhail makes sure Valeska suffers for having run to their father.”

Nikolas growls. “He deserves to be put down.”

“I agree,” Nadia says without hesitation. “And Mikhail’s back tomorrow evening. They live in the main house on the compound. The same one Sabrina is currently being held in.”

A pulse kicks behind my eyes. My hands clench the edge of the seat. “That bastard better not lay a hand on her.”

“Mikhail’s been known to play with anyone he wants at his father’s compounds,” Nadia warns us. “He shows some restraint with Valeska. But there are rumors. Women who’ve disappeared after he’s done with them. His father buries the mess, and their legal team takes care of the rest. They have an enforcer who makes sure Mikhail’s ‘mistakes’ stay buried.” Her eyes narrow, and her lips spread into a thin line.

Nadia leans forward, her voice changes to one of urgency. “But that’s not the only reason we have to get there before noon tomorrow.”

My eyes cut to hers. “What else is happening at noon?”

She holds my gaze. “Tomorrow is the day they’ll take blood and other genetic samples from Sabrina.”

The breath punches out of me. Nadia knows.

“You know?” I ask.

She nods once.

“Know what?” Nikolas looks between us, his eyes narrowing, then widening. “Sabrina’s pregnant?”

“Yes,” I answer quietly. “But you can’t tell anyone. No one else knows. Not even Carla.”

“Fuck,” Nikolas swears. “I won’t tell a soul. Jesus, Oleksi. If the General finds out—and there’s no denying who the father is...”

“I know,” I say, my voice like gravel. “That’s why we need to move now. I’ll call

Clyde. Find out if that lead panned out.”

“You don’t have to,” Nadia says softly. “It did.”

I turn to look at her.

“I was the one who sent him the lead.”

I blink. For a moment, all I can do is stare. Then I let out a breath. “Shit, you’re more strategic than you let on.”

“I’ve had to be,” she says simply.

I reach for my phone. “I’ll get the helicopter back. Or did you take care of that too?”

She smiles. “No. That one’s all yours.”

Before I can make the call, my phone buzzes. Clyde.

I pick up. “I was just about to?”

“She’s here,” he cuts me off. “We’ve seen her.”

A rush of relief floods my chest. “Send the helicopter. We’ll be ready the second we get back to the farm.”

“Already done,” Clyde confirms. “Are you sure you don’t want us to move in?”

“No. Don’t engage until I’m there. We’ve got someone on the inside.”

“Copy that.”

I hang up and stare out the window. Everything's about to go to hell if we don't get this right.

Forty minutes later, we're in the air. Nadia sits between Nikolas and me, silent until she turns and says, "Thank you for taking me to see Elena."

When we got back to the Morozov farmhouse, Nadia asked to see Elena. I didn't have time to overthink things at the time, and took her to the nursery where Elena was sleeping. I did notice her eyes fill with tears and the way she'd gently traced the little angel's cheek, whispering something in Russian I couldn't quite hear.

Now that I think about it, I find the whole thing unsettling, and I have a bad feeling that Nadia knows all about Elena. I want to know how she does and why it was so important for her to see my little niece.

"It was a noble thing Sabrina did," she continues. "For Gavriil. For my sister. And for Tara."

Nikolas frowns, asking before I can, "What do you mean?"

Nadia looks between us, then hesitates. "Do you know the truth about Elena?"

I nod slowly. "I do."

"So do I," Nikolas says. "Galina, Carla, Mark... we all know. We know that Tara and Gavriil are Elena's real parents."

"Well, damn," I say. "You could've told me you all knew about that!"

"We didn't know how much you knew," Nikolas mutters.

“And Sabrina doesn’t know that you all know?” I ask him.

“No,” he says, shaking his head.

I feel I’m getting a bit tongue-tied with all this we know, you know, she knows, when Nadia clears her throat, getting our attention, stopping our who knows what scene that was turning into a bad slapstick skit.

“You’re both wrong,” Nadia tells us.

We both look at her.

“Elena’s not Tara’s daughter,” Nadia says, her voice steady. “She’s Irina and Gavriil’s. Tara carried her as a surrogate.”

The silence that follows is deafening.

OLEKSI

We hit the rendezvous point just after midnight. Having landed a good distance away from the site, we were met by waiting vehicles. My nerves are on edge, and my impatience to get Sabrina out is growing by the second. Eventually, the SUV's tires crunch into the gravel with a sound that somehow manages to feel louder than a gunshot, making me cringe. I know I'm not being realistic, they can't hear us in the compound from where we are, but I can't afford anything to go wrong tonight. If it does, I know they'll move Sabrina somewhere we'll never find her after an escape attempt.

I glance around as I climb out of the vehicle. Clyde and Ivan are already there, crouched behind the wreck of an old grain silo, eyes sharp, guns ready. Syd is perched a few feet away like she's born from the shadows—lean, wired tight, and hungry for a fight. Behind them, I count four of Timofey's top men. No uniforms, no insignia—just the cold, heavy quiet of people who know how to kill.

Nadia steps out behind me, leather jacket pulled tight over what looks suspiciously like tactical gear. Her boots thud in the frost-hardened dirt, she doesn't say a word, just scans the treeline, then pulls something from her inner pocket.

A rolled-up map.

"I've marked four possible escape routes," she says. "Valeska sent them to me. Each one depends on what's clear when they start to leave in..." She glances at her

wristwatch. “Ten minutes.”

I nod, then split the team fast and clean—two for each exit, and leave one group keeping eyes on the perimeter.

I pair Syd up with Nadia, turning to scan the compound looming in front of us. My heart is thudding like this is my first operation, but I know it’s because of what’s at stake.

I don’t like the fact that Sabrina is going to have to clear the inside of the compound on her own, guided by someone I don’t know. I’m just having to put my blind trust in Nadia Voronina-Dragunov and hope she’s a person of honor like her grandfather was.

I notice the phone in Nadia’s hand light up. There’s no buzz or ring, just the light.

She turns and walks off. That’s when I see the glint of something metal hooked into Nadia’s waistband under her jacket—it’s a gun.

My brow furrows as my eyes travel over the outfit she quickly changed into when the helicopter touched ground. The jacket, the boots, the layered dark gear—she’s dressed like a hunter about to go on a night hunt. My eyes narrow with respect. Nadia is an enigma. One born from the necessity to hide her true identity from the people she loved, the family who were supposed to love her unconditionally.

My thoughts are interrupted when Nadia spins and marches toward me

“Here, Valeska needs your help,” she says softly. “Make it fast, as we don’t have a lot of time.”

She steps back, giving me a bit of space.

I take the phone, and before I can ask what's going on, the screen clicks on, and I see her. She looks disheveled and confused and it's the best sight I've seen all fucking week.

Sabrina.

* * *

SABrINA

I wake with a hand over my mouth and a shadow leaning over me.

Panic hits me like a gunshot. My limbs jerk before my brain catches up. Then I hear it—a soft female voice. My eyes widen to find eyes boring into mine, sharp and focused.

“Don't scream,” she whispers. “It's me, Valeska.” She watches me intently. “Please nod to say you understand. Sabrina, if you scream, the guards will come and you'll ruin everything.”

My muscles freeze, breath stuttering beneath her hand. I nod.

“What is going on?” My breath is labored, and my heart is pounding like a trapped bird.

She pulls back, not giving me a direct answer. “We don't have long. My girlfriend's arranged to help get us out here.”

“What?” I blink at her. My brain is still fuzzy from sleep, and I'm still not sure if I'm dreaming. “Who is your girlfriend, and why would she want to help me?” My voice cracks.

“I don’t have time to get into all this right now,” Valeska says again, quietly but with a steel edge. “I promise you I’ll explain everything later. Right now, we need to move.”

I narrow my eyes as the sleep fog finally clears and my mind catches up. “How do I know this isn’t another test? Some loyalty trap from your daddy?”

She doesn’t argue or even get defensive. She just sighs like she expected this. Then reaches behind her back and pulls out a phone.

“I figured you’d need proof.”

Valeska presses a button. The screen lights up—and my heart stumbles.

“Oleksi?” His name tumbles from lips poured out from my heart.

His face fills the screen; his eyes squint to see me in the dim cell light. He looks like he hasn’t slept in days. “Jesus. Sabrina... baby, it’s good to see you.”

My throat burns. And then, out of fucking nowhere, my eyes sting. My nose runs and before I can stop them tears are streaming down my face like my eyes sprung a fucking leak. Jesus—No! I never cry. I’m not that girl.

But right now, I am.

“No, baby,” Oleksi breathes into the phone. I see his face crumple with concern as he reaches out to the screen. “Don’t cry, sweetheart. Valeska’s there to get you out. Go with her. We’re waiting just outside to take you home. I love you.”

The line cuts right then leaving me stunned.

Did he just say I love you? I can't breathe. My chest squeezes like someone wrung out my heart with bare hands.

"First time?" Valeska asks softly beside me.

I blink at her. "What?"

"First time he said it?" She gives me a little smile. "You know the first time he said I love you?"

I nod. "Yeah."

"Then come on. Let's get you out of here so you can say it back properly."

Valeska helps me up, leans down, and picks up a pair of sturdy boots. "Get these on. And this." She pulls a warm coat from the bottom of the bed and helps me up while I swipe at the waterworks dampening my cheeks.

"Sorry... I don't know why I?—"

"It's okay," she says. "We all break at times."

I pull on the boots and jacket, then reach beneath the pillow on the bed to pull out the candy bar she'd left for me. "Thanks for these, by the way. They came in handy."

"You're welcome," Valeska replies. "Now let's get the fuck out of here."

We slip into the hall. The lights are low. Doors closed. It's eerily quiet—like the place is holding its breath, hoping we don't get caught as we navigate the corridors. I follow her down a side stairwell I didn't even know existed. The metal creaks under our boots, and each step seems a little too loud, like it knows we're running.

We're almost to the exit when we hear it.

Footsteps and they're coming fast and heavy.

"Fuck," Valeska whispers as she looks over my shoulder. "It's him."

Before I can even process who 'him' is, she shoves me into a shadowed alcove and steps out into the corridor.

"Out for a stroll?" I hear a deep voice say to her in Russian. I peer around the wall. There is a tall, blonde, handsome man staring down at Valeska.

"I thought you weren't due back until tomorrow?" Valeska's voice is defiant, but also a hint of fear. I see him take a step closer to her, and she stiffens.

"I came back earlier to see my favorite girl," his voice lowers, becoming seductive. His hand slips into her waistband, yanking her closer. "I haven't had a good fuck in days and I'm so fucking horny right now." He starts pawing at her breasts and leaning in to kiss her throat. "I want to plow my cock into every hole you have until you're screaming and begging me for mercy like you always do..." He starts rubbing himself against her.

"Stop!" Valeska tries to push him away. "You're disgusting."

"You love it, you fucking whore and you know it." His hand grabs her crotch, and he squeezes it.

"You're hurting me." Valeska tries to push him away again, but he grabs her and crushes his lips to hers. "Mikhail... stop!"

I freeze and instinctively draw back into the shadow—Mikhail, Valeska's brother?

My stomach lurches... what the fuck.

“Stop I said,” Valeska says more forcefully right before Mikhail yelps.

“You fucking bitch—you bit me?”

I hear the slap and the thud. My head turns to see Valeska drop to the ground.

Before I can stop myself, I launch out of my hiding place. “Leave her alone you fucking pervert!” I ram the full force of my five-foot-four frame into him, and he barely moves an inch.

And I feel like I’ve just hit a fucking brick wall. My vision swims for a few seconds. Mikhail becomes a blur of movement, reaching to grab me by the arm and dragging me toward him.

“And who do we have here?” he sneers, voice curling like smoke. “A new pet for me to play with.” He draws in a breath as his leery eyes rake over my body. “You’re tiny, aren’t you?”

I twist, kick, and try to claw at him.

But he just laughs, holding me like I’m a mere feather, and compared to him, I feel like one. He’s stronger. So fucking much stronger.

He slams me into the wall. My head cracks back against the concrete, and stars burst in my vision. One hand wraps around my throat. The other claws at my shirt, lifting as his hands seek out my breasts. Fear courses through me, and still I try to fight, squirm away from his hands, but he leans into me.

“You’re so small and feisty,” he purrs. “Good. I love that. It’s going to be such fun

breaking you in.” He rams his rock hard cock against me. “I bet your pussy is so fucking tight that my huge cock is going to rip you in half when I fuck the shit out of you.”

I thrash beneath him, scream again, even as his hands grope my chest. Fingers bruising. Pain flashing. “Oh God your tits are so firm.”

He squeezes one of them again, and the pain rips through me. My breasts are so sensitive from being pregnant that I feel the bile rise in my throat.

“Get the fuck off me!” I squirm again and again, but he just leans harder against me and starts to grind into me, his mouth crushing against mine. I’m trying to move my lips away and keep them from opening, but he forces them and I feel his teeth grind against my lips and taste blood in my mouth.

My breathing becomes labored as his weight is crushing into my chest. I start to feel dizzy, and then there’s a sound.

A crack. Like a bone breaking.

He stumbles.

I turn and see Valeska standing behind him with a metal pipe.

She swings again. This time, the blow sends Mikhail to his knees. Valeska doesn’t stop. Over and over—she beats his body like she’s exorcising a demon.

And maybe she is.

He goes down, blood pouring from his temple.

She kicks him in the ribs. Once. Twice.

“Feel better?” I rasp, still catching my breath.

She spits on his unconscious or possibly dead body. “A little.”

We don’t waste another second. We limp-run down the hallway, turning corner after corner.

“Just a few more feet and through that manhole into the tunnel.” Valeska points to a metal cover sticking up from the ground in front of us.

We have to creep along the wall to keep from being caught by the spotlight swinging across the grounds. We’re almost to the maintenance hole when the alarm howls to life, loud and sharp.

We turn, and my blood runs cold—Mikhail is shouting and barking orders to the guards.

“He’s still breathing,” I gasp.

“Obviously, I didn’t hit him hard enough,” she growls. “Quick.”

We make a dash for the maintenance hole that is already open. “I see you’re prepared.”

She nods, pulling it back and letting me go first before dropping down behind me.

The metal lid slams shut, and she switches the flashlight on her phone, leading the way through whatever sludge is squelching beneath my boots. But at this point, I don’t even care, especially if freedom is just ahead, and I would karate chop my way

through thick cobwebs right now to get there.

Soon, we clear the tunnel and double-time it toward the southeast exit, through another small, pipe-like tunnel with a round wooden door at the end, which Valeska kicks open. Then there it is—freedom.

As I pop out of the pipe behind her, I freeze when a woman steps out of the darkness. My eyes widen with shock.

“Irina!”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Nadia. I’m Irina’s twin.”

Before I can say more, Valeska flies into her arms, and they embrace, sharing a passionate kiss. I step back toward the tunnel we’ve just popped out of to offer them some space. Then, nearly get the life scared out of me when someone else appears out of the darkness.

Syd!

“For fuck sake!” I hiss, holding my chest where my heart nearly jumped out through my throat.

“We’ve got them,” Syd says into her earpiece, then steps forward and does something so unlike Syd—she hugs me. “What was I supposed to do? Knock?” She chuckles. “It’s so good to see you.”

As my nerves start to untangle, Syd moves away. I’m about to ask where the rest of the team was or if there was a rest of the team. As I’m not sure if I dreamed it or not, but I could have sworn I spoke to Oleksi right before our escape.

As I open my mouth, I see Syd lurch toward me. Confusion spirals through me, and once again, fear explodes in my chest when an arm like a steel band wraps around my waist and a large hand grips my throat. Syd goes for her gun.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Mikhail warns Syd, looking pointedly at her gun. “I can snap her neck like a twig before you have a chance to pull the trigger.”

“Let her go!” Valeska hisses.

“You didn’t think you’d get away that easily, did you?” he hisses into my ear. “Pretty new little pet.”

“Let her go!” Valeska shouts again in Russian.

“I don’t think so.” He laughs. “I’m not about to let either of you go.” His eyes land on Nadia. “Hello, Nadia.”

I see her visibly stiffen, and the flicker of fear flitters through her eyes. But she raises her chin, not breaking eye contact with the sick bastard.

“Let her go, Mikhail,” Nadia orders. “You’re not going to win tonight.”

“I think I already have.” He looks at Syd, then snorts nastily at his sister. “You are a fucking little idiot aren’t you?” He shakes his head in disgust. “You bring two little women to rescue you.” He laughs. Then turns to them. “You two are welcome to come back with us. There is plenty of me to go around.”

“Why don’t you let Sabrina go and come over here to show us what you’re made of, asshole.” Syd takes a step forward.

“Don’t.” Nadia blocks her. Her voice shakes. “You don’t know what he’s capable

of.”

Mikhail grins. His eyes rake over Nadia like filth.

“That’s right, Nadia, tell them,” he taunts. “Tell them how I was the first dick you ever had. How I had you screaming and begging...”

“Shut up,” Valeska snaps. “I should have killed you back there.”

“You didn’t swing hard enough earlier,” he says, tightening his grip. My lungs burn. My vision blurs as he starts to cut off my oxygen, and all I can think of is my baby. “I always told you, you’re pathetic at everything you do, except spreading your legs.”

“Shut up, you fucking...” Nadia’s eyes blaze fire, and I see her hand reach behind her back, but this time, Syd’s the one who stops her.

Happy with his victory over them, Mikhail turns his attention back to Valeska.

“Now, Val, I’m not going to tell you again. Get back into the compound. I will give you five seconds to comply or I’ll snap her neck.”

I can’t swallow as his grip tightens to prove he’s not joking. I can feel my face turning red. I can’t even grip his hand as he has my arms pinned to my sides. “Five. Four. Three.”

“Okay!” Valeska’s voice breaks.

She steps forward.

“No,” I croak. “Valeska, don’t.”

“It’s okay, Sabrina.” Valeska’s eyes go blank as she gives me a sad smile. “I’m sorry.”

“Not... your...” I’m struggling to draw breath as his cruel fingers dig into my throat, and Valeska brushes past me.

“Well ladies, it’s been fun, but I’m fucking horny and I have two bitches that I need to teach a lesson,” Mikhail tells them he takes a step back and I feel his body jerk as if he’d been stung along with a noise that sound like like gravel scraping metal—once, twice, three times.

Then Mikhail jerks again. I feel a warm trickle run down my back as his grip slackens.

I stumble forward.

A hiss escapes his lips. “You bitch?—”

I turn to see him stumble. Blood is pooling from his side. Valeska steps forward with a bloody dagger in her hand. Her face is pale and void of all emotion as she watches him. Still, Mikhail tries to lunge toward Valeska. A gunshot echoes like thunder through the still night. The bullet hits Mikhail dead center between his eyes.

He drops.

Dead weight. Then there is nothing but a heavy silence.

I stand staring at his lifeless body and wide, blank staring eyes.

“You’ll never touch anyone again,” Nadia says, stepping forward with the still-smoking gun in her hand. Her eyes, like Valeska's, have no remorse for what they’ve

done as they stare at Mikhail's lifeless, bloodied body.

Valeska kneels beside him and touches his throat.

“He’s dead,” she says quietly.

“You sure?” I ask. The words tumbling from lips that feel numb. My brain seems to have left my mouth on autopilot as more stupid words escape. “The last time he got up. Like the fucking Terminator.”

Valeksa nods but feels for a pulse once again. “Not even genetic enhancements have a chance against a bullet.”

“Unless they’re a cyborg.” More fucking stupid words spew from my mouth and I shove my hand over my lips feeling something sticky on my fingertips. I look at them—blood!

Just then, I hear my name yelled from the dark.

“Sabrina!”

I turn and see him.

Oleksi.

He’s running toward me, face drawn tight, eyes locked on mine like I’m the only thing that matters in this entire fucked-up world.

And for the first time in days, as he wraps his arms around me, lifting me effortlessly off the ground and crushing his lips to mine. The pain fades away, and I feel like I can finally breathe again after five days of holding my breath.

SABrINA

The SUV hums softly beneath us, its tires grinding along the mist-slick mountain pass as dawn teases the edges of the horizon. Ivan's behind the wheel, silent and focused, and Oleksi hasn't left my side. He's here—solid, warm, genuine—his presence the only anchor keeping me from unraveling completely. I stare out the window, but all I see are ghosts. The last five days loop in my head like a bad film reel: the cold tiles of my cell, Valeska's voice whispering in the dark, Mikhail's hands where they didn't belong, his eyes devouring me

My fingers brush my throat, where Mikhail's hand had circled it, and inside, it feels raw. I close my eyes, and I'm being slammed against the wall again with that big brute grinding himself against me. Suddenly, I feel like I need a shower. I lift my hands. The blood is gone. One of Oleksi's men had helped me scrub it off with bottled water and hand sanitizer.

I don't know whose clothes I'm wearing - they could be Syd's or Nadia's. Both women stand at least four inches taller than I do and have slightly larger frames. Clyde fashioned a belt for me so the jeans I'm wearing don't fall off. The shirt hangs on me. But I don't care. At least I'm no longer wearing those white scrubs, stained with Mikhail's blood.

Nikolas is going to burn them and any items that Valeska and I were wearing when we escaped. My feet feel heavy when I move them, and I glance down. They are a pair of running shoes that are two sizes too big, but at least my feet are covered and

not freezing. I snuggle against Oleksi's side, and his arm tightens, drawing me in.

I tilt my head slightly to look out of the tinted windows. Mist swirls around us, thick and relentless, until the trees are nothing more than shadows, gray smudges on the edges of the world. The early morning stillness adds to the eeriness.

I don't know where we're going. All I was told was that we need to lie low until later in the day when we're going to the next safe house. I'm trying not to think about the past week or earlier. The last time I saw someone get shot in the head... I suck in a shaky breath as an image of my father jumping in front of a bullet that was aimed at me when I was only twelve flashes through my mind.

Bile rises in my throat, and I give myself a mental shake to clear the images from my head. But they don't want to go and make me feel like I want to climb out of my skin and leave it behind like a forgotten coat. I close my eyes, but the darkness there is no better. Memories flicker like a broken film reel, stopping and starting with every breath.

The road curves, and I feel the shift, the way the tires struggle to hold their grip. Ivan is unflinching, his silhouette sharp against the dull light. Beside him, Syd is sitting quietly and watching the world go by. No one speaks. But I don't want to talk. I don't want to think. I just want to sit and lean into Oleksi's strength and feel relieved that I'm out of that hellhole.

Syd switches on the radio, and Oleksi pulls the blanket beside me over my body. Light music fills the large armored SUV.

I feel my body drift with the motion of the car, lulled by the soft music and the steady beat of Oleksi's heart beneath my ear. My eyes grow heavy, and I start to drift off, but as I hit that plateau where my dreams usually whisk me away, I'm back outside the facility with Mikhail's finger pressing cruelly into my throat.

I jolt awake, and Oleksi hugs me tighter. “Are you okay?” His deep voice rumbles through his chest, and I feel his lips press into my head as he presses kisses on it.

“Yes, I just had one of those falling dreams,” I lie.

“You’re exhausted and went through an ordeal,” Oleksi says, his voice filled with concern. “We’re almost there,” he tells me. “When we are there, you need to have a shower and curl up in bed.

I look up at him and smile seductively. I know what I need. I need to feel this man’s lips all over my body, teasing me, commanding me, pleasuring me. I need to feel his fingers swirling around my clit before he licks and sucks on it. Ready to drive his long hard cock into me. Burying himself deep inside me as he pushes us over the edge of ecstasy. Leaving me sated and exhausted to sleep into a sleep so deep there are no dreams. Not snapshot memories of the past five days, or one of the most horrible nights I can remember having.

“I know what I’d much rather be doing than just curling up in bed,” I whisper huskily, my lips curling into a seductive smile as my hand brushes his already hardening member through his jeans.

He smiles and runs his hands up my inner thigh, stopping at the apex of my legs. I move my ass so I can press my pussy against his fingers and my arousal at his touch is instant. Electrifying. And a need the likes I have never felt before hits me like a sexual meteor, nearly splintering my control as the need for the release I know only he can give me burns through my nether regions.

Oleksi leans in and kisses my neck. I close my eyes and breathe as he starts to rub me through my jeans, and I can feel myself getting juicier as my arousal spikes.

“Does that feel good, baby?” he whispers in my ear, blowing hot air into it and

sending goosebumps down my body, and turning my nipples into tight wanton pebbles. “Is your little pussy hungry for me?”

“Oh, yes,” I whisper back, my breathing becoming labored. “All she wants is to feel your fingers in her, teasing her, getting her ready to take your rock hard cock.”

“Oh, Christ!” Oleksi moans softly. “You are the only woman who has ever made me nearly lose control with a soft brush of my cock, that low hooded seductive glance you throw me across a room, or you provocative words.”

“While we’re confessing truths,” I whisper back. “You’re the only man who’s ever been able to make me cum without having to help myself.”

“That’s a true honor,” he teases, turning slightly so he can get better access to slip his hand down my waistband. His fingers run up my slit before disappearing between the folds. “You’re so fucking wet for me.”

“That’s because I don’t just want you, I need you—so badly right now.”

“Oh, baby, you have no idea how much I need you.” His lips crush mine and he dips two fingers into my slick pussy and starts to pump them in and out, curling them slightly to increase the pleasure.

“Oh, God.” I suck in a breath and bite my lip to stop myself from screaming, faster, fucking faster.

“I wish I could bury my cock deep inside you right now,” Oleksi growls. “I’ve missed you so Goddamn much.”

“I missed you too,” I admit, my breath becoming labored as he adds his thumb, swirling it and rubbing my clit with it, adding to the building pleasure.

“Do you want to come all over my fingers for me, baby?”

“You have no idea how badly,” I rasp.

“Not yet,” Oleksi commands, and he stops his movement, making me want to scream. “Slow down, baby.”

“No, no,” I breathe, turning my body towards him and kissing his lips. “I don’t want to slow down. Please, please, Oleksi, I… need the release.”

“Shh,” Oleksi uses his free hand to move the hair off my face. “You’ll get your release,” he promises me. Tapping my clit with his thumb. “But you need to earn it.”

“Mmm,” I mumble, moving my hips and pressing my hungry little clit into his finger. “How do you want me to earn it?”

“If I let you cum,” Oleksi smiles slowly as he talks, kissing and nipping at my lips while his hand on my pussy remains still, “you will owe me one sexual favor I can call whenever or wherever. No questions or backchat.”

“Mm,” I whisper, moving my hand up and down his cock that is now rock hard and straining to get out of his pants. “Your cock wants to come out and play. What if I help you cum in the car too?”

“My cock wants to be in your mouth, feeling that incredible thing you do with your tongue when you suck me off,” Oleksi’s breathing becomes deeper and I add a little pressure while dry humping him. “Then I want to bury myself so deep inside you we don’t know where I end or you begin as I drive us to a screaming orgasm.”

“Oh, God,” I reply. His words make my pussy walls contract around his fingers.

“Do we have a deal?” He starts to finger fuck me faster his thumb swirling my clit in time to the rhythm of them. My hips begin to buck, falling in with the rhythm, and I’m starting to feel my orgasm crest.

“You can have whatever you want,” I promise, pushing myself harder against his hand that’s working his magic fingers in and out of me, desperate to feel him touching me again. “Please... don’t stop. My pussy is aching for your magic touch to bring it release.”

His hand picks up speed and I can feel the wall of my pussy start to clamp around his fingers as he whispers in my ear, “Come for me baby.” He flicks my clit and thrusts his other digits hard into my channel pushing me over the edge and before I can scream his mouth clamps over mine swallowing it.

I buck and shake as the orgasm rips through me. Oleksi holds me and continues stroking and kissing me until I start to come down from the orgasm’s high, resting my head against his chest.

“Feeling better?” Oleksi asks, pushing some stray locks behind my ear as my breathing calms.

“A bit,” I tell him. “I wish we were there.” I sigh, and my eyes start to drift shut.

“Sabrina,” Oleksi’s voice seems far away. “Hey, sleepy head, wake up. We’ve arrived at the first safe house.”

I yawn and stretch sitting up and looking around. Low flood lights light the grounds that are surrounded by tall trees that are starting to become visible as morning is breaking through.

“How long was I asleep for?” I scooch toward the door Oleksi holds open for me.

“About an hour,” he answers, taking my hand. “Syd is testing the water to make sure it’s warm so you can have a nice soak in a tub.”

“Without being watched!” I breathe a sigh of relief.

“What?” Oleksi’s brow furrows.

“When I was in the RMSAD detention center, I was watched all the time,” I tell him and see him quickly school his features but it’s too late. I saw the flicker of anger over the indignity I had to suffer. I swallow. “But, I don’t want to speak about it.” I look into his eyes as we step into the cottage that is being warmed by fires started in the many fireplaces around the large cabin. “If you don’t mind.”

Oleksi’s eyes search mine and he nods. “When you’re ready, we are going to talk about it though,” he tells me. “Because I have a lot to tell you too.”

My eyes widen. “Have you found Tara?”

“I...” His jaw clamps. “No.” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, baby, but I was so hell-bent on finding you...”

“It’s okay,” I smile as he leads me through to our room at the back of the cabin.

“This is us.” Oleksi pushes the door open.

We step in and there is a large wooden bed in the center, two nightstands flank it with lamps on each. A dresser lines the wall beside the door, and there’s another door open where I can hear water running so it’s not hard to guess where that leads to.

“It’s not fancy,” Oleksi says. “But it’s practical.”

“Compared to my accommodations for the past five days, it’s like a five star hotel,” I tell him.

“Aren’t you going to ask me about your mother?” Oleksi asks as I head for the bed to test it.

I stop beside it and turn toward him. “Yes, I want to know about my mother.” Of course I do. “Did you find her?” My heart lurches.

“We did,” Oleksi replies and I breath a sigh of relief. “We found her with my aunt, Nikolas, and Mark at...” He stops and frowns. “Sabrina... you mother...”

I hold up my hand to stop him. I have a feeling I know what he’s going to say and I’ve had the fact that my entire life was built on lies rammed down my throat for five days. I just want some time. Just a couple of hours to process it without having to be on high alert all the time. Without having to pretend indifference to having my world blown apart or being constantly tested, questioned, watched, judged.

“Not tonight!” I lower my voice. “Please, Oleksi not now.”

He gives me a tight smile and nods. Before I can say more there’s a light knock and the door which is still open.

We turn to find Nadia and Valeska standing there. Nadia has a small bag in her hand that she holds out to me.

“Shit the bath,” Oleksi mutters and rushes to the bathroom.

“Sorry, I know we’re not the same size, but Valeska is more your height and build,” Nadia says.

“So Nadia packed some of my clothes she has for you,” Valeska tells me. “Just some nightwear, clean clothes.”

“I bought you fresh underwear and a new toothbrush, hairbrush, deodorant, and other girly products,” Nadia tells me.

While I’m standing there staring at the two women who were instrumental in getting me freed from the hellhole before I can control it and to my sheer mortification, I burst into fucking tears—again!

“Oh, no, baby...” Oleksi is by my side in a flash and glares at the two women. “Look what you’ve done.”

Nadia just rolls her eyes at him, steps past him and pulls me into her arms, holding me close. “It’s okay.”

“No...” I sniff and find the more I try the harder it is to control the fucking things.

“Stop it,” Oleksi growls at Nadia. “Maybe you should go, you’re upsetting her.”

“Oh, stop it,” Nadia snaps at him, making me laugh through the tears at the looks on his face being snapped at by her. “It’s her hormones you fool. I’m not upsetting her.”

“I think, what Nadia is trying to say,” Valeska gives Oleksi a smug smile, “is that Sabrina being upset is all your fault.” Her grin broadens. “After all, you’re the one who got her pregnant.”

My eyes widen as I stare at them then look accusingly at Oleksi.

“Don’t look at me.” He holds up his hands defensively. “I have no idea how Nadia knew.”

“I used to work at the hospital you went to the night you found out,” Nadia tells me. “My contact at the hospital called to tell me that Oleksi Mirochin was just in there with his wife and they are expecting their first child.”

“You worked at that hospital,” I sniff and swipe at my cheeks with the back of my hand.

“Nadia was a surgeon,” Valeska says proudly.

“Was?” My brow furrows.

“A long story,” Nadia tells me and looks at Oleksi. “He will fill you in on everything after you’ve had a hot bath, some nice soup that Syd is cooking...”

“What?” I look at them in alarm. “Syd is cooking?”

“And I’m a fucking shit hot cook!” Syd’s voice comes from behind Nadia and Valeska. “Excuse me.” She pushes her way into the room and a delicious aroma enters with her making my mouth water and stomach growl. “That does smell delicious.”

“Then sit and eat,” Syd commands, walking me over to the small table with two chairs near the large windows. I frown. I didn’t even see those there. Syd puts the tray down. “I’ll be back to fetch it when it’s done.”

“Thank you, Syd,” I smile.

“Of course,” Syd says, before leaving the room.

“We’d better go too,” Nadia says. “Nikolas is making plans for us to leave in a few hours.” She looks at me. “It was nice meeting you Sabrina. Take care and love

Elena.”

I frown thinking that’s a strange thing to say, but a nice thing I guess.

“She’s my world,” I admit and feel the fucking tears start to well up in my eyes again. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Hormones,” Nadia tells me, walking over to where I’m standing by the small table, me trying not to salivate all over the place as the aroma of the soup beckons. “I will say goodbye now as you need to get your rest. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“Yes, doctor,” I tease with a smile, then hug her. “Thank you, Nadia. For helping Oleksi find me.” I look past her and hold out my arms to Valeska who gladly steps into them. “And you, Valeska. I have no words for how grateful I am. And I’m so sorry for doubting you in the mess hall.”

Valeska hugs me tightly. “Don’t worry about it,” she says, stepping back. “I get that all the time when people find out who I am.”

“Well, from today, you won’t have that problem,” I point out.

“No, I wont’.” Valeska smiles before they each give me one more hug and walk to the door turning to Oleksi.

“We need to talk before I go,” Nadia tells him.

“Come call me,” Oleksi tells her and she nods. They give me one last wave and leave.

I sit at the small table as Ivan comes to the door and gives a tray to Oleksi. “Here is your dinner, boss.”

“Thanks, Ivan,” Oleksi takes the tray and sits in front of me at the table.

We sit eating in silence for a few moments before I look at him. “Thank you for coming to find us.” My voice is soft and our eyes lock. I see his darken with emotion.

“I will always come to find you, Sabrina,” His voice is filled with conviction and he reaches across the table taking my hand. “You and our child are my world.”

And just like that—the fucking waterworks erupt again!

OLEKSI

Once we're finished eating, I call Ivan to come and take the plates.

Sabrina stretches and yawns in the chair. "I think I'll go see if that bath is still hot."

The thought of Sabrina in the bath starts a slow-burning heat coil inside me. My mind races with images of what we could do in there and my cock begins to press uncomfortably against my pants.

From where she's seated, she looks straight at the bulge starting from my crotch and looks up at me with a slow smile.

"I think someone else wants to have a bath too," she says suggestively. "I think you should join me." She stands and moves close. Our bodies are almost touching as she reaches out a hand and runs it over the evidence of my desire.

"Well, I have just come from a covert operation to extract my woman from a psycho." My voice dips low, and I step closer, sliding my hands along her jaw. I tilt her head back and lean down to capture her lips with mine.

The heat intensifies as our bodies collide, and she wraps her arms around my waist. Drawing away as the heat starts to burn through us, I swoop her into my arms and carry her into the bathroom, kicking the door closed behind us.

Once inside, I sit her on the bathroom counter while I test the bath water. Because I hadn't put any cold water in it before, it's still quite hot and ready for us.

I turn and catch Sabrina watching me. Her eyes are dark and blazing with heat. There is a tremor in my hand as I roll up my sleeves. Droplets of water glisten on my skin. I'm burning for her. Never before have I burned so badly for anyone.

"Take off your shirt and bra," I order. Sabrina blinks at the command, and her breath catches. "I want to see your nipples harden as the cold air kisses them."

Her lips part in a sultry smile, and she reaches for the hem of the oversized T-shirt, pulling it over her head. She tosses it in the corner. I can feel the pulse of my anticipation. My body is taut with it.

Her movements are slow and deliberate, and my heart pumps like a piston in my chest. She is wearing a white sports bra, which follows the path of the T-shirt, freeing her small, pert, firm breasts. Her nipples harden as the cool air skates over them.

Her eyes flick back to mine.

"Beautiful," I murmur, forcing myself not to step up to them as my hands itch to cup the firm mounds in my hand while my tongue and lips suck and lick the hard soft pink buds squeezed tight from the cold and desire. "Now the pants and panties."

A faint flush colors her chest as she unhooks the makeshift belt and slides it from the loops. With a gentle lift of her hips, the jeans and panties drop to the floor; the sneakers and ankle socks follow. She sits naked and exquisite on the counter, her skin a contrast of flushed pink and cool alabaster.

My eyes rake her perfect petite frame, her body toned from hours of dancing and my cock strains painfully against my jeans.

“Open your legs and show me what you want me to do to you.”

Without hesitation or breaking eye contact, Sabrina slides her hand over the flat belly and to the soft patch of blonde hair at the apex of her legs. Her fingers slide softly up and down her slit, tickling and teasing it, before two part the lips and my breath hitches as she exposes the pink glistening pearl inside that her middle finger swirls and then rubs, her body shifting as she starts to pleasure herself.

“Tell me what you’re feeling.” My voice is hoarse, my eyes lifting to meet her darkening ones.

“Heat coiling in my belly as my desire intensifies,” Sabrina whispers, her breath catching as her finger circles again. “You watching me touch myself is adding fuel to the fire, it feels so...”

She trails off for a moment, her lips parting on a moan. Then, voice barely audible, she finishes, “So exposed... and raw. Like I’m unraveling just for you.”

My cock strains, pushing painfully against my jeans, needing to be released, needing to be buried deep inside her. But I deny it. I swallow hard, my eyes fixed on the sight before me. It’s so fucking erotic as her body shifts, thighs trembling. The fingers working her clit are slick now, her need a glistening promise, and just when I think I’ve seen the most erotic thing a man could ever witness, she lifts her other hand—steady, shameless—and pushes two fingers inside herself. Her eyes flutter, her lips part, and she gasps my name as she starts to finger fuck herself.

And I fucking nearly lose it—my control hanging by a thin fraying thread.

“Don’t stop,” I growl. “Bring yourself to orgasm for me. Let me see all of it.”

Her hips lift slightly from the counter, back arching as she rides her fingers, chasing

that release. Her breasts bounce with every breath, her skin flushed, her mouth wet and open. She's close. So fucking close I can feel it in the air, the tension, the way her body coils like a spring about to snap.

But right before she explodes, I'm across the room.

My hand wraps around her wrists, and I yank them away from her core. She cries out, a sound so needy and raw it makes my breath hitch.

She's panting, shaking, staring at me with pure, unfiltered need. And pain.

Not just from denial, but from something deeper that I can see is haunting her.

And it rips at my soul. For one second, I think I've gone too far—she's not ready for this, not tonight, not after what she's just been through. I'm about to pull back, even though it's painful, I can't do this to her.

As I hesitate, unsure if I should go any further tonight — she's just experienced too much — she gazes at me with a desperate intensity. "Please, Oleksi... I need you," she whispers, her voice heavy with desire. Everything changes in that instant.

Our lips meet in a fiery kiss, and all my restraint crumbles. Sabrina's fingers intertwine with mine as we clumsily yank my shirt off. My pants follow, discarded in an urgent heap on the floor. Her legs encircle my waist as I lift her, maintaining our passionate lip lock. As I position myself at her entrance, she shudders in anticipation, and I slowly push inside her slick heat, reveling in the sensation of being enveloped by her.

A soft moan escapes from her throat as my lips explore her face and neck, nibbling and teasing. I pull back slightly before sinking back into her, taking my time to luxuriate in each deliberate thrust that sends waves of pleasure coursing through both

of us.

Sabrina's arms cling to my neck as her head tilts back, our bodies finding a natural rhythm together. Her breasts press against my chest, the friction from her erect nipples adding to the pleasure already building within me. As our pace quickens, transforming into a frenzy of need, her nails drag down my back while she cries out for more intensity. "Harder... I need you harder..."

I oblige, driven by her desire as much as my own, until I feel the telltale sign of impending release — the twitching of my length within her tightening core. In a ragged growl, I urge her to join me on the precipice: "Come with me, baby." I slam into her one final time.

Her climax sends shudders through Sabrina's entire body; she gasps out an exclamation as she clings to me, nails digging into my shoulders. My own release follows immediately after, a potent surge of pure ecstasy that leaves us both trembling in the aftermath.

Our breathing is ragged as we struggle to regain some semblance of composure. Reluctantly withdrawing from Sabrina, I scoop her up and carry her to the bathtub, where I gently lower her in before stepping in behind her and drawing her close so she can lean against my chest. As she absently toys with the still-sensitive peaks of her breasts, she presses back against my semi-erect length, which immediately begins to stir once more.

Feeling her body tense with anticipation, I slide one hand from its resting place on her waist down to the curve of her hip, and then lower, until my fingers find that incredibly responsive bundle of nerves. As I apply light pressure and begin to tease her swollen clit, Sabrina arches into me with a shuddering moan.

I pull my fingers out as I feel she's about to come again. She whimpers at the loss. I

lean forward to nip, lick, and kiss her swan-like neck. “I want you on all fours.” I whisper in her ear.

She whimpers at the loss of contact, but I don’t give her a chance to complain. “On all fours.”

Sabrina crawls forward in the water positing herself as I ask and I kneel behind, pulling her butt cheeks apart. I run my finger down over the sensitive puckered hole toward her pussy, dipping two fingers inside her. She gasps as I start to move them in and out, slipping a third inside. I pick up speed.

“Oh...” Sabrina breathes, moving her hips. “Oh... that... is so good.”

I can feel her legs starting to shake and the soft walls of her pussy begin to contract around my fingers. I pull them out, making her cry out.

“No... no..,” She turns and looks back at me, her eyes wild with wanton need.

I smile, positioning the head of my cock at her opening and thrust inside her, the movement jolting her forward as she sucks in a ragged breath. “Oh... oh..” She moans as I move my hips, drawing out of her and then driving back in. “Mm...” Her breathy little gasps spur me on, and soon I’ve picked up speed, my hand digging into her hips as I use them to move her in time to my thrusts.

I start fucking her hard and fast, my hips slamming into her ass with every stroke. The sound of skin on skin fills the room, mixed with her moans and my grunts.

I reach around and start rubbing her clit, my fingers moving in rough circles. Sabrina begins to shake, her cries getting louder with every thrust. I can feel her tightening around me, her orgasm building like a storm.

“Come for me,” I growl in her ear, my breath hot against her skin. “Now.”

She screams as she comes, her pussy pulsing around my cock. I’m not far behind—I keep pounding into her through her climax, until my orgasm hits me like a sledgehammer. I empty myself inside her, my cock twitching as I fill her up and collapse forward onto her back, careful not to put my full weight on her and gently kiss her back while we ride the tiny little shockwaves of pleasure that ripple through us in the aftermath of our explosive orgasm.

Twenty minutes later, sated and sleepy Sabrina is lying curled against me with her head resting on my chest.

“It’s so good to be next to you again,” she murmurs as I feel her body relaxing, sleep starting to draw her into dreamland. “I don’t ever want to sleep without you again.” These are the last words she mutters before she falls asleep.

My arms tighten around her, and I kiss her head, murmuring, “I don’t intend to let that happen. I want you by my side for the rest of our lives.” I know she can’t hear me anymore. “I love you, little one. I think I have from the first moment I saw you dancing on that stage at the Golden Lights. You took my breath and then my heart away.”

13

OLEKSI

Sabrina is curled into my side, her cheek resting on my bare chest, breathing softly and even. I watch her sleep like I've been doing for the last hour. She doesn't stir, not even when I brush my fingers gently through her hair and move it off her neck.

And that's when I see it.

A bruise. Faint, but clear in the pale early morning light that leaks through the slats of the wooden blinds.

Anger rolls through me so hard it makes my chest tighten. My fingers curl into fists as I stare at the growing mark where Mikhail fucking Ergorov had wrapped his hand around her throat. Syd had briefed me on what had happened. If the fucker weren't already dead, I'd find him and kill him myself. Slowly. Piece by piece.

The only comfort I get is knowing it was Valeska—his own sister—and Nadia who put him down like the rabid fucking dog he was. There's something brutally poetic about that. In Bratva tradition, the blood right belongs to the ones most wronged—and from what Syd told me, Valeska wasn't the only one that bastard had raped and shattered. While I would've loved to be the one to end that fucker's life, it was only fitting that it was them who did.

They may have done the world a favor but it has also ensured a shitstorm is headed our way.

Because we didn't just kill a monster tonight, we declared war.

Ergorov's daughter is gone. His son is dead. Sabrina—his leverage—is in my bed. And I'm holding her like she's the last thing on earth worth saving because she is.

This wasn't supposed to happen. The general wanted to use Sabrina to lure out Carla and Tara. He was already obsessed with reclaiming whatever twisted legacy he thinks belongs to him. Now? He'll come at us with everything. The RMSAD will bleed us dry if we're not careful.

And when Nadia and Valeska vanish later this morning, I know damn well what that means—Ruslan will break the Dragunov alliance. There goes my ports. But there is always a way around that. I'm not my grandfather, and with the help of my Uncle Dmitri, who would love to go to war with the Dragunovs, I'm confident we can take back control of that village.

I blow out a breath. But I was hoping to avoid a war with them and I most fucking definitely was not looking for a war with the Russian Government, because that's what taking on the RMSAD means.

I press my lips to Sabrina's forehead and close my eyes for a moment, steadying myself.

Nadia told me she had a plan. Said she'd make sure the alliance stood.

God, I hope she wasn't bluffing. That village is teeming with innocent women and children. I think of the guards that had stopped us when we'd gone to meet Agafon and frown. Maybe Nikolas was right. Perhaps the Draganovs are looking to go solo and build their own empire. My jaw clenches, and I rub my chin. On top of everything else—that's all I fucking need—another rival crime family to contend with.

A soft knock pulls me out of my spiral.

I ease out of bed, careful not to wake Sabrina. She murmurs something but doesn't wake. I throw on jeans and a t-shirt and pad barefoot to the door. It's Nikolas.

"It's time," he says, voice low. "I'm leaving with Nadia and Valeska in fifteen minutes."

I nod, grab my boots, and follow him down the hallway to the kitchen, where Clyde, Syd, Ivan, and a few of Timofey's men are already gathered. Nadia is there too, standing beside Valeska. And I have to blink when I see her.

Gone is the grungy goth chick with combat boots and black lipstick. Valeska is polished now. Elegant, almost, and poised. She still has the purple streaks in her hair, but otherwise, she looks like someone ready to vanish into a new life. My eyes fall on Nadia, and I know she's more than ready to escape this old life and start again. Somewhere, she can be who she is and love who she chooses without judgment.

"Can we talk in private?" Nadia asks, glancing around.

Nodding, I turn and lead them into the small back room—an old den with a fireplace and leather chairs. As I close the door behind us, I turn to Valeska.

"We didn't get a chance to meet properly," I say. "Or for me to tell you how grateful and indebted to you I am for helping us get Sabrina back." I swallow hard. "Thank you. For what you did. I owe you."

Valeska shakes her head. "You don't owe me anything. Sabrina is... she's extraordinary. Watching her survive that place—it gave me the strength I didn't know I had. I did what had to be done."

“She is special,” Nadia agrees, eyeing me. “You’d be a fool to let her go or take her for granted.”

“I nearly lost her,” I admit. “I don’t intend to let that happen again.” I run a hand through my hair. “But now that the General’s lost his bait, and his golden boy, we’re staring down a war.”

“Not necessarily,” Nadia says, glancing at Valeska.

Valeska reaches into her coat pocket and steps closer. She takes my hand, presses something into my palm, and leans in like she’s going to kiss my cheek. Instead, she whispers, “Whatever you do, trust no one but Sabrina with what I’ve just given you.”

I frown, closing my hand around the objects. They feel like two small plastic disks—SD cards, I’m guessing.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Power. Leverage,” Nadia says softly, a smile lifting her beautiful lips.. “It’s also mine and Valeska’s insurance policy.”

My brows draw tight. “Insurance for what?”

“To ensure that the general stays away from all of us and that Ruslan will not pull out of the alliance with your family,” Valeska explains. Her eyes are steel now. “While Nikolas has moved Valeska’s brother’s body to the town he was last known to be at, and I’ve wiped all the footage of Mikhail being at the institution, there are still the guards that saw him.”

“But it still buys you time,” Nadia tells me. “Time for you to get what we’ve given you to where it needs to go in order for you to be in a position of power over Ruslan,

the general, and...”

“Sabrina’s overly ambitious aunt,” Valeska tells me.

“Aunt?” I frown.

“Yelena Zorin,” Valeska replies. “Sabrina’s mother’s older sister. The woman is obsessed with her work and outshining her mother’s legacy.”

“Great!” I sigh. “Another enemy to add to the list.”

“Surely you’ve stopped counting your enemies, Oleksi,” Nadia drawls, smiling.

“I have.” I laugh. “But I always list the new ones.” I look at my closed fist. “Thank you for this.”

“I told you I had a plan,” Nadia reminds me. “You will find all you need on those, including the plan.”

“Just be careful with what’s on there,” Valeska warns. “There are people who would kill to have what you’ve got there.”

“Noted.” I nod, curious as to what precisely I’m holding here.

As if reading my thoughts, Nadia says, “You’re holding the fate of two dangerous organizations right there, in the palm of your hands.”

I look at my fist with raised brows. “Let’s hope I get to use it before these organizations get to me.”

“Don’t worry,” Valeska says, linking her hand with Nadia’s. “With the help of

Nikolas, we've bought you time to get to where you're going next and then take control of the situation."

I nod, and another thought strikes me, and I look at Nadia questioningly, "You told me that you were sure the RMSAD doesn't have Tara Craft?"

She glances at Valeska, who shakes her head. "No, I kept checking to ensure they would have no leverage to counter with."

"They couldn't be holding her somewhere you didn't know about?"

"No." Valeska shakes her head. "The RMSAD is still looking for her and her mother."

I breathe a sigh of relief. It's not good news, but it's not bad news either. Now all we have to do is figure out who the man was that was flagged with her at the Georgian and Russian border.

A knock at the door. "Come in," I call.

The door opens, and Nikolas steps in. "We have to go."

I turn to Nadia and Valeska. "So this is it?" I ask. "You disappear after this?"

"Yes," Nadia says. "We start a new life."

"No more hiding," Valeska adds, squeezing Nadia's hand.

"I'm happy for you," I say honestly. "Whatever's on these cards better be as good as you say."

“It is,” Nadia promises, then steps forward and kisses my cheek. “And, thank you, Oleksi. For protecting our niece and for being good to my sister when she was alive.”

“I’ll keep her memory alive,” I say. “I’ll raise Elena to know who she came from.”

“Please,” Nadia says quietly, eyes wet. “I ask that you just promise me one thing?—”

I look at her questioningly. “And that is?”

“Don’t ever let Elena fall into Ruslan’s hands. That’s what he wants. A child who unites the bloodlines. He’ll only use her to further whatever cause he has.”

Her words send a chill down my spine, and I want to ask what cause Ruslan may have, but Nikolas shifts restlessly, so I promise, “I won’t let that happen.”

They nod once. Then they’re gone.

I’m left standing in the den, the two SD cards clutched in my fist.

Syd appears in the doorway. “So what now?”

Clyde and Ivan walk up behind her.

“We can’t go back to Moscow,” Syd says. “It’s not safe.”

“I doubt we’ll even get out of Russia,” Clyde mutters.

“I have a plan,” I tell them. “And a place we can go to where we can lay low until we can leave here.”

“When are we going?” Ivan asks.

“We’ll leave in five hours,” I answer.

“Wouldn’t it be better to wait for nightfall?” Syd asks.

“That’s what they’ll expect,” I reply. “Besides, we’re not leaving through the front door.”

“How?” Ivan frowns.

“We hike through the forest. When we reach the edge of the village, there’s a system of tunnels that will take us to a small village. One of Nikolas’s contacts will meet us there and take us to the safe house.”

“And the others?” Ivan asks. “Galina, Carla, Elena, Lev, Mark?”

“They’ve been alerted. We’ll reconnect later. Right now, we move in silence.”

They nod and start to disperse.

I head back to the room, sliding the SD cards into a small pouch and tucking them into a secure part of my travel bag.

I strip out of my clothes and climb back into bed. Sabrina stirs.

She reaches out and presses her hand to my chest, her eyes cracking open. “Where did you go?” she whispers.

“I had to say goodbye to Nadia and Valeska,” I tell her.

Her eyes widen. “They’re gone?”

She sits up, and the sheet slips down her body, exposing her bare breasts.

And that's when I see it. A bruise. Right on the curve of her left breast. Finger-shaped.

"What the fuck?" I breathe, voice low and lethal as I gently trace the marks.

Sabrina looks down, then back up. She tries to wave it off. "It's nothing."

"Sabrina..."

"No." She moves toward me, placing her hand over my mouth. "No talking tonight, remember?"

I watch her ruby-red lips approach mine until they make contact, soft and insistent. I can taste the exhaustion mixed with desire in her kiss.

My cock is visibly hard beneath the sheets as she continues kissing me passionately while moving a delicate hand over my chest and down my abdomen until she reaches my pulsing erection.

Her fingertips press along its length before gripping it firmly at the base. "Are you sure you want to do this again?" I whisper between kisses. "You're exhausted."

"Oh, I want to." She nods and stifles a yawn. "Sorry. I've been so tired lately."

I place my hand gently over her stomach. "That's because someone else is sharing your body's resources now."

I lean down, pressing tender kisses on her belly. Her breath hitches. As I move lower, I part her thighs to expose her glistening, swollen folds. I press my tongue against her

clit, circling it slowly and deliberately.

She moans and arches into me, the sensations intensifying with each lick. I glance up at her face contorted in pleasure as I take her clit between my lips, softly sucking.

Sabrina grips the bedsheet tightly with one hand while her other reaches down to tangle in my hair, guiding me as I continue to pleasure her.

Eventually, her hips buckle, and she cries out, “Oh God, oh God—” She gasps for air, and her entire body is trembling. “Fuck, Oleksi, that...that was?—”

I rise above her, feeling her pulse quicken all over again as I push my cock against her slick entrance.

“Are you still tired?” I tease, positioning myself at her opening.

“Ask me again after you’ve fucked me,” she whispers.

I thrust into her hard and deep, claiming her. Her walls clench around me as I drive even deeper, my body murmuring with the need to make her mine in every way. The slap of skin on skin echoes off the walls, drowning us as I push her legs wider and take her harder. Sabrina claws at my back, urging me on, her breath ragged and desperate.

“Yes, fuck, yes,” she moans, her nails digging in as she loses herself completely.

I grip her hips and pull her into every thrust, filling her with each relentless stroke until we’re both on the brink of falling apart. The guttural sounds coming from her throat make me almost feral. My vision blurs as my orgasm barrels toward me.

“Come for me now, printzess,” I growl, and she loses it.

Her body tightens and shudders beneath me, her pussy pulsing around my cock as I spill inside her. My name falls from her lips like a prayer, over and over again.

We collapse together, breathing ragged, chests heaving.

I roll onto my back, pulling Sabrina with me, and she immediately wraps her arm around me.

“Don’t leave me alone,” she whispers.

“Never,” I promise, kissing her temple.

She falls asleep with her face tucked against my chest.

I don’t move.

I hold her there, my Sabrina, who is carrying our child.

And I wonder if I’ll ever sleep again, knowing just how much I have to lose if anything ever happens to them.

SABrINA

I'm bundled up tighter than a damn burrito, dragging my boots through the mud-slick trail that snakes along the edge of the mountains. The cold bites through the layers I've thrown on—baggy jeans rolled up at the ankle, one of Oleksi's black long sleeves knotted at my waist to keep it from swallowing me whole, and a fleece I borrowed from one of the six men shadowing us from Timofey Morozov's crew.

Every now and then, I feel one of their eyes on me. Or Oleksi's. Or both.

They don't let me out of arm's reach. If he's not walking beside me, he's behind me. If he's not behind me, one of them is. Usually that would've pissed me off and made me lash out. Demand space. Freedom.

But today?

Today I don't mind.

Because something in me broke back there. And I don't know how to put it back together.

My boots crunch over wet pine needles, and I glance at the slope to my right, steep and treacherous, nothing but gray rock and frozen mist. This forest, this path—it all feels haunted. Not by ghosts. But by the shit I brought with me.

For five days, I kept my head high. I spat sass and sarcasm like venom in the RMSAD compound. I sat across from scientists, doctors, psych specialists, and fed them a carefully constructed version of me—average intelligence, limited vocabulary, fake gaps in logic. I didn't let them see it. The fear. The truth.

Because it was all a front. All of it. A last-ditch shield to keep from falling apart.

But now that I'm out?

Every time I blink, I see his face.

Mikhail's.

Blood leaking from the side of his mouth after Valeska stabbed him. That hideous sneer right before Nadia shot him in the head. The way he pinned me—his weight crushing, his hands violating. My chest tightens. My throat constricts.

I stagger a step, gripping a tree trunk to steady myself.

"You okay?" Oleksi's voice cuts through the silence like a blade.

I nod without looking at him. "Just... need a sec."

He doesn't press. He never does when I get like this. But I feel his gaze on me. Sharp. Protective. Still giving me space, even when I'm unraveling.

Syd jogs up to us from where she's been scouting ahead, her hair pulled back into a neat bun, with the collar of her jacket pulled up high. "We're ten clicks from the fallback ridge," she tells Oleksi. "I recommend we pause in the next clearing. Let everyone hydrate. You look like shit," she adds, glancing at me.

“Thanks,” I rasp. “You always know how to make a girl feel like a queen.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Oleksi says.

The others peel off to give us space. Clyde and Ivan light a small fire, murmuring between themselves. Timofey’s men form a quiet perimeter.

He steers me away from his team, and we walk deeper into the forest, stopping near a patch of dry moss between the trees. “We can sit here.”

I sink onto the moss with a groan and drop my pack.

Oleksi lowers beside me.

“Talk to me,” he says, voice low, careful. “If you want to.”

I stare straight ahead.

“I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Try the middle.”

“Can we not?” I look at him and shrug. “I’m just not ready. I haven’t even had time to process it all myself yet.”

Flashes of the different facilities and Yelena run through my mind, followed by the picture of Mikhail’s lifeless body lying on the ground. I give myself a mental shake. Truthfully, if it were just the RMSAD or the picture of Mikhail’s lifeless body, I could probably push it to the back of my mind or process it a lot easier.

But it’s not the facilities, or Mikhail nearly raping me, or the image of him lying with

dead eyes bloodied on the ground that starts a rising panic inside me when I think about it or am reminded of it—it what’s attached to all that that stirs up emotions that because I never dealt with them are still raw beneath the surface. The facility, Yelena, and the picture of Mikhail opened a door that allowed a much older image in, one that my subconscious had edited into the memory reel of Yelena, the facility, and Mikhail.

Now, when I see the bullet hit Mikhail in the head and drop to the ground in my mind, it’s quickly followed by a more terrifying one... One that has lingered like a dark shadow at the back of my mind for twelve years. One, I was never ready to deal with, and still .

How do I explain all that to anyone? Silence stretches between us. I close my eyes. Try to center myself. Breathe.

A hand touches my knee. Warm. Grounding. I open my eyes and find Oleksi watching me.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod. Just once.

“I’m sorry. I know you must have a million questions about the RMSAD.” I take a deep breath. “But I’ve done nothing but talk to Russian weirdos for five days.” I grin as his brows rise. “I just don’t want to talk anymore. My brain and senses have been high alert...” I swallow. “I’m not sure how to explain it without sounding like...”

“You know you’re the smartest person in the room?” He offers with a slow smile.

“I was going to say like Yelena Zorin!” The name sends a spark of anger through me that I didn’t quite expect.

I try to shake it off, but she's back in my head. Breaking apart my life to expose nothing but lies and to show me just how little I know about my family... about me! The picture of Mikhail and how fucking strong his was hits me once again.

I can hear the thud and crunch of a pipe hitting bone. I saw the gash in his head—the scariest part is his sneer about Valeska not hitting hard enough wasn't true. She hadn't hit hard enough to kill him .

If he had been anyone else, the blows she'd given him to the head would have killed them. All it did to him was knock him out. He didn't just get up and stagger about either. He got up and commanded a security team, then came after us like he'd had nothing but a mild bump to the head. It took a bullet to his brain to kill him...

I swallow again and close my eyes. What the fuck kind of genetic enhancement was Mikhail given? And while it's not bad enough that things like that actually happen, my mother was the one who created that treatment. And then that nagging thought that's been eating away at me since I learned my beautiful, loving, caring sister, Tara, was given the same treatment. I can't help but wonder...

“Sabrina!” Oleksi's soft voice cuts through my tormenting thoughts. His hand reaches out to move some hair behind my ear. “Where did you go?”

“I just have a lot on my mind.” I give him a tight smile. “Sorry. Just give me time.”

He leans in, presses his mouth to mine, soft at first, then deeper. Fiercer.

I respond like a woman drowning, fingers gripping his jacket, body arching toward his. It isn't about lust. It's about survival. It's about feeling something that isn't fear. It isn't pain. Isn't... guilt!

I pull him down with me into the moss, into the shadows of the trees. My hands are in

his hair. His hands are under my fleece. Our breaths are harsh, tangled, raw.

Clothes are pushed aside. Unzipped and pulled down just enough.

His fingers slide between my thighs, and I whimper at the contact—needy, aching.

“Here?” he murmurs against my throat.

“Right fucking here,” I whisper.

We don’t need a bed.

We need each other.

Right now.

His cock pushes into me with a thrust that makes me gasp. He bites my shoulder to muffle a groan as I wrap my legs around him. His hand covers my mouth as I cry out, as he starts to ride me, hard, fast, and pushing us over the edge where, for a few blissful moments, our bodies feel like they explode as we orgasm, hit with wave after wave of sensation.

Until we’re both spent, panting, and a little more pain drains from me. Here, with him, everything still makes sense. He’s the one part of my life I know wasn’t orchestrated by my parents—this is mine, my new foundation.

Oleksi stays on top of me, forehead pressed to mine.

“I love you,” he murmurs.

My heart nearly bursts through my chest, and my breath catches in my throat. I feel

tears start to burn my eyes, and I kiss him with such force, pouring everything I'm feeling into it. When we draw apart, my eyes meet his. "I love you, too."

"That's good." He smiles, slowly pulling out of me. "Because I don't ever plan to let you out of my life."

"Good." I smile, sitting up, straightening my clothes. "But I'm not going anywhere." I put my hand on my stomach and smile. "Our baby needs his mother and father."

Oleksis pulls his pants up and stands, looking down at me. "He?" He holds out his hand, and I put mine in it so he can help me up. "What makes you think it's a boy?" He pulls some moss and twigs from my hair, helping me neaten it.

"Just a feeling." I shrug and look at him. "If it is a boy..." I hold his eyes and swallow down the lump burning in my throat, but I'm unable to control the haze of tears that cloud my eyes. "I want to call him Leonid."

I see his eyes widen, he pulls me to him and holds me. "I would've suggested the same name."

"You know?" I look at him curiously.

He nods but doesn't elaborate because Ivan calls us. Oleksi takes my hand and we go back to the group.

We hike for another two hours before I start seeing landmarks that feel familiar—old stone markers, the remains of a rusted fence, and then...

The gilded roofline of the Golden Palace catches the light between the trees.

My stomach flips. I remember the last time I was here with Oleksi's cousin Radomir.

We were looking for Radomir's wife, my best friend, Liegh. I sigh in relief seeing the place. We're close.

Oleksi moves beside me, slowing his pace. His voice is quiet, tentative.

"I know you don't want to talk about it," he begins. "And I've been trying to give you space. But I have a lot to tell you. A lot's happened. A lot of truths?—"

I cut him off. "Are you about to tell me my parents were defectors and my mom used to work for the RMSAD?"

He stops. Blinks.

"Because I already know," I say. "I met my psycho Aunt Yelena, my mother's older sister." I see him frown. "My dear, sadistic aunt could play a Bond villain." I cross my arms, suddenly cold.

"Sabrina..." Oleksi says. "Your mother and grandparents are at the palace."

That stops me dead, and the panic starts to rise, constricting my chest and squeezing my lungs.

"No." I shake my head, forcing myself to breathe. "Just no."

He goes still.

"Do you have any idea who those people are?" I look up at him.

"Your mother and grandparents have filled me in," Oleksi tells me, and I'm pretty sure they've only told him what they wanted him to know.

“Every day while I was in the RMSAD, it was me against them. Against an enemy I didn’t even know I had, but strangely enough had been preparing to fight my entire life,” I say bitterly, knowing I’m not making sense. But he’s popped the lid off, and now I can’t stop, and I snort. “Keep your heads down, Sabrina and Tara. Remember, you can still be remarkable as a normal person. My parents drilled that into Tara and me, nearly every day, while we were growing up.” I clear my throat trying desperately to hold back the tears—fuck these hormones. “While every other parent was teaching their kids to read and write, we were being taught not to show anyone just how well we could read and write.”

“That’s fucked up,” Oleksi comments.

“Fucked up!” I splutter. “We innocently thought it was because our parents wanted us to have a normal life. They frightened us with tales of having to go to a special school for the gifted, and we wouldn’t want that as all our friends and family were in Vegas.”

“I’ve wanted to ask why you stayed at an ordinary school,” he admits. “Especially since you are extraordinary.”

“Like that fucking freak Mikhail!” I blurt out, and I see Oleksi’s look of shock. “See, they didn’t tell you everything, did they?”

“I don’t understand,” Oleksi says. “Are you saying that you’re...”

“I don’t know!” I shrug. “But my sister is. That’s why my parents fled Russia. Because the day after I was born, I was going to be taken to be an RMSAD test subject.”

He flinches and his face pales. “Tara is like Mikhail?”

“I think she might have been an improved model,” I sneer. “Because I know my sister and she’s never exhibited what that fucker did. Tara is super smart, but...” I swallow and look down.

“She’s not as smart as you.” He takes my other hand. “Surely your aunt would’ve let you know if you’d been genetically altered.”

“At first, I think she did.” A few tears escape my lids, and Oleksi wipes them away. “But thanks to my father’s relentless training on how to fail all the tests kids are given to test their intelligence, I knew how to make myself seem average.” I sniff. “And according to Yelena, being average is akin to having leprosy in my family.”

“Your mother is not your aunt,” Oleksi tries to placate me. “She may have kept your roots from you, but she did that to protect you.”

“No.” I shake my head. “She did that to protect herself.” I point towards the palace. “Because you know that monster that attacked me and abused his sister and his mother for years?” He nods. “Yelena didn’t make him. She’s not the architect of that treatment.” My voice drops, and my throat now feels raw. “My mother was.”

“You don’t know that for sure. You heard that from a woman you call a psychopath.” His grip tightens. “I know what a shock it must have been for you to find out about your parents.” His jaw clenches. “If you remember, two years ago I found out exactly who my father and uncle were. So I get it.” Before I can speak, he continues. “It may not have been as explosive and realizing your whole life was a lie...” He shakes his head. “But I get it. The person you thought your parents were was all a smoke screen. They may as well be actors playing a part.”

I look at him and blink. That’s exactly how it feels.

“So, I understand how you feel,” His voice drops. “At least you get to confront your

mother.” His eyes narrow dangerously. “I never got the chance to do that to mine.” He takes a breath. “And I know one thing, your mother wasn’t faking being worried sick about you.”

“More like worried sick I was finally going to find out the truth,” I sneer.

“Sabrina—”

“No.” I step back. “That monster who attacked me? Mikhail? He was one of her experiments. He exists because of her.”

He’s silent. Doesn’t deny it.

“I need a minute,” I whisper.

“Take your time,” he says gently.

“No. I need a minute alone.”

His eyes tighten. “I don’t like leaving you alone out here.”

“I’m in the grounds of your uncle’s fortress. What’s going to happen?”

His jaw ticks. “Three minutes.”

“Fine.”

He hesitates, then presses a kiss to my lips. “Three minutes,” he says again, and walks away.

The moment he’s gone, my body betrays me.

My vision narrows. My chest tightens. I can't breathe.

Fuck.

Is this... is this a panic attack?

My brain feels like it's screaming at me, and every muscle in my body is coiled like a tightly wound spring. I need to move. To get away from here. I turn and run.

Anywhere. Nowhere.

Just away.

But I don't get far.

I slam straight into a wall of muscle.

"Jesus—" I choke, looking up and up. "I said three minutes... just three..." My heart slams into my chest when I stare into a face I've never seen before and step back, nearly tripping over a log.

The giant of man, who is taller than Oleksi, reaches out and catches me. He has jet black hair and a face that looks like a master painted it—he is arguably the best looking man I've ever seen. In fact, I'd say he was fucking drop dead gorgeous, with his razor-sharp jaw and eyes the color of arctic ice. His grip on my arms is firm. Possessive even.

"Well," he says. "That was easier than I thought."

"Who the hell are you?" I gasp as his deep voice is rich and smooth as a fine brandy. I try to step out of his grasp, but his hands tighten on my arms.

“A messenger.”

I don't believe that for a minute. This man doesn't look like he'd do the bidding of anyone. No, he looked the type everyone jumped to do what he ordered.

“A messenger for whom?” My eyes narrow.

“General Ergorov.” The man's words knock the air out of me.

“So you're not a messenger then,” I say. “You're more like a lackey dancing to his master's whims.”

I see his eyes darken for a few seconds before he raises an eyebrow. “You're mouthy for someone of your...” His eyes travel the length of me, and I have to stop myself from shuddering. “—stature.”

“And you don't look like you're someone who'd be doing anyone's bidding,” I quip. “But here we are.” I shrug. “But I can save you some breath. I don't want to hear anything that man has to say.”

“Oh, I think you will want to.” He watches me like a hawk, assessing me. “You see, the General is willing to forgive the kidnapping of his daughter...”

My brows rise. Fuck that was quick. “The general has a daughter?” I pull a face. “Can robots even have children?”

He just stares at me, ignoring my sass. “Like I was saying, the General will forgive you for kidnapping his daughter if your mother surrenders.”

I blink. “What?”

“Tell Mariya to meet Yelena tomorrow at the old swings. She’ll know where that is,” he says.

“Why don’t you tell her?”

“I was told to deliver the message to you,” the man answers.

“And if I don’t tell my mother or she doesn’t show?” I raise my brows. “What are you going to do? Drag me back to the detention center in hopes my mother will come save me.” I shake my head. “Then you’re all going to be disappointed because my mother and I... we’re not very close.”

“But she is close to your sister,” the man tells me, flooring me. “If your mother doesn’t yell at the old swings tomorrow...” He lets his threat hang in the air. “Your sister dies.”

The words gut me.

“You’re threatening Tara?”

“Just relaying the message.”

“Sabrina!” Oleksi’s voice cuts through the trees.

The man steps back. “Tomorrow. Or Tara’s body arrives in a body bag.”

“Sabrina!” Louder now.

I spin around.

When I turn back, the man is gone.

Oleksi crashes through the trees, frantic. “Sabrina! What the fuck? You can’t just vanish like that?—”

“I saw someone,” I gasp. “He was here.”

“Who?”

“A messenger. From Ergorov. He said—he said we have until tomorrow. My mother has to meet Yelena.”

His face hardens. “Or what?”

“Or Tara dies.”

15

SABrINA

“I don’t want to go back,” I mutter.

Oleksi doesn’t say anything for a moment. We’re still standing under the trees near where I met the strange man—his words still hang in my head like smoke. I can’t shake the chill his presence left in my bones.

“I know,” Oleksi says finally. His voice is low, soft in the way only he can make it. “But we have to tell your mother. Now.”

I nod. My stomach clenches. I want to curl up in a ball somewhere quiet, not walk into another fucking confrontation. But I follow Oleksi anyway, because this isn’t just about me anymore. This is about Tara. About my mom. About Elena. About stopping this twisted generational cycle of secrets, sacrifice, and silence.

The moment we step into the foyer of the Golden Palace, it hits me like a gust of cold air: I don’t belong here. Not really. The place is beautiful, sure—walls of polished wood, warm lighting, the faint scent of lemon oil and smoked cedar that clings to wealth like perfume—but I feel like a ghost haunting a life that was never mine. A stranger stepping into a family where everyone already knows the script except me.

Two people are waiting in the foyer. They don’t hover or hesitate—they move forward like they’ve been waiting years for this moment. The woman’s silver curls are pinned in a flawless twist, her navy wool dress as regal as the emotion in her face.

The man beside her is tall and broad-shouldered, his white hair thick, his eyes the same sharp blue I see every day in the mirror.

“Sabrina,” the woman breathes, her voice thick with emotion.

Before I can even process it, I’m engulfed in jasmine and lavender. Her arms wrap around me like vines, like she’s trying to graft me back into the family tree by sheer force of will. The man lays a hand on my shoulder—steady, strong, protective.

“My God,” she whispers, her hand brushing my cheek. “You look just like your mother at your age.”

“You mean she looks like you, Anya,” the man—General Timofey Morozov—says with a warm smile. “She has your strength and tenacity, too. I can see it.”

I should say something. Anything. But I’m stuck in this weird in-between place where I’m both awestruck and resentful. Anya Novikov and Timofey Morozov. My grandparents. Legends. Figures from history books I once devoured with reverence. And now I’m standing here in front of them, apparently part of their bloodline, their legacy.

I give them a nod that’s more polite than warm. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

That’s a fucking understatement. A month ago, I would’ve sold a kidney for a chance to shake Anya Novikov’s hand. I grew up idolizing her work—her fierce independence, her brilliance. And now I know why it always felt so... familiar.

It wasn’t just admiration. It was blood.

My eyes flick to General Morozov. I’m not one to romanticize war heroes, but the man had fascinated me for years. His name was always whispered in connection with

Anyas in historical op-eds and academic circles. And here I am. Standing in front of them like some bizarre footnote come to life.

But I can't even enjoy the moment. Not really. Not with the weight of everything pressing down on my chest.

"Rina!"

The sound cuts through me like a blade.

I turn and see her. Carla. My mother. Standing a few feet away, watching me like she's afraid to blink.

And that's when it hits me full force.

I'm angry.

So fucking angry.

Not just because of the lies, though there were many. Not just because I had to learn the truth from a stranger wearing my family's DNA like a crown, or because I was taken, used as bait, toyed with, broken down to nothing, and forced to piece myself back together in some godforsaken underground hellhole.

No.

I'm angry because I missed her. Because I thought I'd never see her again. And I wasn't ready to lose her.

I feel like a pressure valve is about to snap, and before I can do or say anything, she moves.

She rushes toward me with wild, desperate steps, and then she's there—arms around me, squeezing so tightly I forget how to breathe.

“Oh my baby... my sweet girl...” she chokes out, clutching me like I'll vanish if she lets go. “I thought I'd lost you forever.”

Her voice shatters something in me. My legs go weak, my throat burns, and for a second—just a second—I let myself melt into her.

Because even when you're furious, even when your world's been ripped out from under you, even when you have every reason to keep your distance...

Sometimes, you just need your mom to hold you.

I don't hug her back, not really. My arms hover, then touch her lightly. I'm still too raw. Too uncertain. But I don't pull away either.

She holds me like she's trying to absorb my pain, to rewind time, to erase every nightmare I lived in that sterile prison. But she can't. And when I feel my own composure starting to crack, I do the only thing I know how to do.

I pivot.

“Elena,” I rasp, swallowing the sob trying to crawl up my throat. “Where is she?”

Carla pulls back instantly, as if sensing the limits of my emotional bandwidth. “She's in the west wing playroom,” she says softly. “Galina's with her.”

That's all I need to hear.

I turn without another word and walk out of the room, trying not to break into a run

as I head toward the distant sound of Elena's laughter echoing off the marble. Because right now? I don't need more answers.

I need her.

She's in her little chair, spinning a toy, her curls wild and cheeks flushed. When she sees me, her whole body wiggles with excitement.

"Hi, peanut," I breathe, scooping her up into my arms.

She smells like baby shampoo and powder. My chest swells with love. She giggles and pats my cheeks with chubby hands, babbling in her toddler language.

"Let's go somewhere quiet," I whisper, carrying her toward the guest suite Oleksi uses when he stays here. The room smells faintly of him—leather, soap, and something sharper, spiced.

I step inside and freeze. There's a wardrobe open against the wall, and it's bursting with clothes. I walk toward it and draw in a breath, looking at the tags. Okay, designer labels aside, the clothes are all in my size, so I don't have to walk around in borrowed clothes that are too big. I sort through the beautiful dresses, jeans, sweaters, and even underwear, all neatly folded or hanging, waiting for me. And fuck me if my eyes don't fill with tears thinking someone went out and got these for me.

"They thought of everything," I murmur, kissing my little girl's cheek. "At least now we can go for a walk and you won't have to slink into your stroller hoping none of your baby bros recognize you."

Elena squirms and giggles in my arms like she's agreeing with me. I smile. "I take you want me to change now, then, huh?" I'm rewarded with a pat on the cheek for her soft little hand. "What should I change into?" I look at her. "And don't say a fairy

godmother..." I kiss her forehead and freeze as I hear a soft knock on the door.

"Do you think it could be too much to hope it's room service?" I say, walking to the door. "I'm starving."

Elena gurgles as I open the door, and my stomach drops—Carla.

Behind her—Oleksi. And flanking them like a detail team—Syd, Ivan, and Clyde.

"We need to talk," Carla says.

I narrow my eyes and look straight at Oleksi. "You told her about the messenger."

He nods once.

Elena squeals happily, throwing her arms out toward the group.

"She didn't want to talk in front of your grandparents," Syd says. She glances at Elena. "We came to see if you wanted us to take the little princess."

"You needed three people to fetch Elena?" I ask skeptically. "Or did you come to protect Carla and Oleksi from me?"

"The latter," Ivan says with a sheepish grin. "But can we take her? Cook makes this pudding around this time and?—"

"You all want in on the pudding and to use my baby girl to get it," I mutter with a shake of my head. I kiss Elena on the cheek and whisper, "Be good for Ivan. No throwing pudding in Clyde's face."

Ivan gathers her like she's the Crown Jewels and backs out of the room with Syd and

Clyde.

I step aside, holding the door open. “Come in.”

Oleksi starts to step back. “I’ll let you two?—”

“No,” I say quickly. “Stay. I don’t want secrets between us. Not anymore.”

He nods, steps inside, and closes the door behind him.

I glance at the closet as we move to the small seating area where a fire crackles in the hearth.

“Thank you for the clothes,” I say, knowing it was either my mother or Oleksi who organized them.

“Your mother got them for you,” Oleksi says, sitting beside me on the small sofa while my mother sits in the armchair closest to me.

“Thank you.” I turn to her. “I appreciate it.”

She gives me a warm smile as she sits, clasping her hands and twisting her fingers. “I know you’re angry with me. And you have every right to be.”

“You think?” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I never wanted you to end up in that place. The moment I realized what Tara was investigating, and that you were in Russia... I begged Sam to get you and Elena out. But it was too late.”

I stare at her. “So it’s all true, then? You and Dad are really Mariya and Leonid

Zorin?"

"We are," she nods. "I'm guessing you met my sister, Yelena?"

"Oh yes," I mutter. "What an absolute delight she is."

My mother snorts, and then her face becomes serious. "Rina, she doesn't know about you, does she?" Worry resonates in her eyes. "About how gifted you are?"

"Nope." I shake my head. "I realized that all Dad's helping us to dumb down so we could live normal lives was actually how to survive being caught and shoved into an RMSAD detention center techniques." I sigh. "I'm afraid your sister thinks I'm the shame of the Novikov-Morozovs."

Carla's eyes blaze. "She's a fucking snob, sweetheart. Don't let her get in your head. She always hated living in our mother's shadow. She's always wanted to be the next Anya Novikov."

"She may be smart and cunning, but Yelena is no Anya Novikov," I say softly.

"No," Carla agrees. "She's not. She's not even close. And believe me... she knows it."

"It's one of her biggest weaknesses, trying to prove she's the smartest person in the room," I look down. "So it's true then. The RMSAD is the true reason Dad taught us to play dumb?"

"To protect you," Carla says. Her eyes shine. "Because we couldn't risk the RMSAD finding out what you could do. Their reach extends far beyond Russia, and they have scouts constantly on the lookout for exceptional people like you."

“Awesome,” I say.

“We couldn’t risk them ever being alerted to you, especially, sweetheart,” she tells me, her voice wobbling slightly with emotion. “Not after what they did to Tara.”

I look up sharply. “What did they do to her?”

“They used a treatment I co-developed,” she admits. “While Tara was still in the womb.”

My blood runs cold.

“I warned Yelena it was too unstable,” Carla continues. “It made lab rats violent. Strong, yes, and increased their mental acuity.”

It sounds so strange to hear my usually absent-minded mother saying things like increased mental acuity and looking at me with sharp, laser-focused eyes. Fuck, maybe I was just blind to it.

“But it also made them mentally unstable. It was nowhere near ready to be tested on an adult human, let alone a newborn baby or fetus.”

I lean forward. “Mikhail Erogov... he was given that same treatment?”

My mother’s eyes widen in shock. “He was the first newborn I was forced to treat.” She nods grimly. “I was going to give him a placebo to tank the experiment, but my sister was there, right beside me, as if she knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to leave after that, but I couldn’t. Not only did I have an airtight contract that basically said the RMSAD owned me, there were rumors of others who’d left and were never heard from again.”

“Nice place to work.” I shake my head, feeling ill. “Why even join it in the first place?”

Her jaw clenches. “They threatened your grandmother, who at the time was ill.”

“I guess extortion is just a drop in the hat to a division that has so many human rights violations it should never be running,” I say in disgust. My brow furrows. “I’ve seen firsthand what Mikhail Ergorov was like.”

My mother looks at me, startled. “Yes, Syd told me.” Her eyes darken. “I’m so sorry you went through that.”

“It’s not me you need to apologize to,” I tell her with a spurt of anger rushing through my veins. “It’s his sister and mother the fucker abused all of their lives.”

“Even after he brutally stabbed a puppy because it licked him, when he was three, nothing was done about him,” my mother tells us. “I warned them. But they kept the program going and wouldn’t take any of my advice on how to fix it.”

“But it didn’t affect Tara that way,” I point out.

“Oh, sweetheart, you don’t remember,” my mother says, and I feel cold fingers creeping up my spine. “Tara hurt you on more than one occasion during one of her violent outbursts. Eventually, I tried to keep the two of you separated until I perfected the cure.”

I blink. “What?”

“On this one occasion, your father had bought each of you a doll. She chose the one with the blonde hair, and your father gave you the one with the red hair.” She sits back in the chair. “While the two of you were playing, she suddenly decided she

wanted the red-haired one. You wouldn't give it to her, and she attacked you, beating you with her doll."

Oleksi sucks in his breath. "Jesus."

A flash of memory hits me, of a fight with Tara, and her taking my doll, but I don't remember her beating me.

"I don't remember her beating me," I whisper.

"You blocked it out," Carla says gently. "It wasn't the only time. As she got older, the outbursts grew worse. If you won an award or recognition for school or sports, she'd lose it."

I shake my head. "I don't remember that."

"You would," she says quietly, "if you let yourself."

I stare into the fire. "You always seemed to favor Tara."

"I didn't," she says. "I love both my girls the same. But I had to keep Tara close, watching her. Making sure she didn't hurt you."

I nod, piecing it together. "And those pills Tara takes every day?"

"Just vitamins. My own formula. To keep Tara calm."

"You're a geneticist, a surgeon, and a chemist?" I ask her

She gives me a tight smile and nods. "If it weren't for the stain of my past with the RMSAD, I'd love my profession. But I've seen the darker side of it."

“Like something good being used for evil,” I clarify. Fuck it’s like some wicked movie. “So, how did you cure Tara?”

“I had been working on a project for many years,” my mother explains. “One that could help with things like Alzheimer’s, PTSD, and brain injuries. A treatment to heal, not weaponize. I took all my research with me when we left and made sure no remnants of it were left behind when your father and I fled.” She shifts in the seat. “I tested it on Tara after the doll incident, and it worked.”

“That’s why she’s so nice and level-headed now?”

“Yes.” My mother nods. “But we need to find her because Tara is about to run out of her special vitamins.”

“Well maybe she’ll turn into She-Hulk and destroy that fucking place,” I hiss.

“Or they’ll destroy her,” my mother points out, and I go cold, my heart slamming into my ribs.

“I guess now I know why she always seems so freakishly strong.”

“She was strong,” my mother agrees.

We fall into a comfortable silence for a few moments, and I know I have to ask what’s been burning at the back of my mind. I take a breath, not sure if I’m ready for the answer, but I have to know. The question burns at the back of my throat. “Am I… genetically enhanced?”

Carla shakes her head. “No, sweetheart. And that’s what makes you more extraordinary than me, than Tara, even my mother.”

My shoulders sag. “Are you telling me the truth?”

“I am,” she promises. “You’re special because you are who you are—without help.”

Tears spring to my eyes as I’m filled with a mix of relief and grief.

“So I’m just a freak of nature, not a lab?” I close my eyes.

“You are not a freak of nature, sweetheart. You are unique, and beyond special,” she says softly, pausing for a few seconds before saying, “I need to tell you something.”

My eyes snap to her.

She takes a breath. “I’m going to meet Yelena tomorrow. Alone.”

“No,” I say immediately. “No, you can’t.” I shake my head vigorously. “I won’t allow it.”

“Sabrina—”

“No! Mom, I need you. I’m pregnant,” I blurt out, desperate to try and make her change her mind.

My mother’s eyes go wide. “Oh, sweetheart, that’s...” She sucks in a shaky breath and her eyes tear over. “That’s so wonderful. I’m so happy for the two of you.”

“We haven’t told anyone,” Oleksi adds.

“That’s good, and let’s keep it that way until you’re far away from Russia.” My mother’s voice is filled with urgency. “They didn’t find out at the facility, did they?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Thank God,” she breathes. Then her expression turns grave, and she says again, “You can’t tell anyone else. Not while you’re still here.”

“We understand,” I whisper. “But, Mom, you can’t go meet Yelena. That’s like a death sentence for you.”

She leans forward and cups my face. “Please, sweetheart. Let me do this. If I don’t, they’ll come for you. Or harm Tara, like they threatened to.”

“No. We’ll find another way?—”

“There is no other way with the RMSAD,” she says. “But I promise—I’m not going down without a fight.”

I take no comfort in her words. I’m going to find a way to stop her and find my sister without having to swap one of my loved ones’ lives for the other!

16

SABrINA

The second I hear the soft click of the nursery door as Carla closes it behind her, something inside me breaks.

I can't believe my mother is actually going to walk right into the lion's den. I pinch the bridge of my nose—she's really going to do it and I'm racking my brains to come up with ways to stop her.

She's going to walk into that meeting with Yelena tomorrow like a lamb to the slaughter, and we'll never see her again. I don't care what she says about leverage, strategy, or paying dues. They'll kill her. Quietly. Efficiently. Just like they probably tried to kill my father. If not that, they'll lock her in some ghost-facility so deep she may as well be dead.

Defection isn't something the RMSAD forgives. I may not know all the inner workings of Russian intelligence, but I know enough. And every second ticking by feels like a countdown.

I push off the edge of the dresser and pace the room. My nerves are shot. My brain won't stop spinning. I know I should sleep, but I can't. I can't stop picturing that final look on my mother's face when she squeezed my hand—that quiet resignation.

God.

A wave of panic wells up in my chest, and I rub my sternum as if I can press it down. I need a distraction. Something, anything to keep my hands busy. I glance around and spot Oleksi's hiking duffel slouched against the closet. He's in the shower, water still pattering against the tile.

I pop my head into the bathroom. "Hey, do you have any more of those thick socks? My toes are freezing."

He pushes the shower door open just enough to peer out. Drops of water glisten on his chest, sliding down in rivulets, and my brain stutters.

"You mean my thermal ones?"

"Yeah."

"Check the green duffel," he calls back. "Bottom pocket. Bag with my underwear."

"Classy."

He chuckles, and I pull back into the bedroom, making my way to the duffel. The zipper sticks for a second before giving way. I tug out the fabric bag and shake it. A pair of black thermal socks tumble onto the bed, but so do two small plastic SD cards.

Frowning, I pick them up.

What the hell are these?

Why are these stashed with his underwear? I glance toward the bathroom. The water's still running. Curiosity claws at me, but something deeper—instinct maybe—tells me not to ask yet. I shove everything back into the duffel and slip the SD cards into the pocket of my jeans, then pull the socks up to my knees. They're

massive, but warm. My toes immediately thank me.

The shower shuts off. A beat later, the door swings open, and Oleksi emerges, towel slung low around his hips. Water beads on his chest and shoulders. He looks like a fucking Greek god, and the tension inside me shifts from panic to something far more primal.

His eyes flick to my legs, and a grin spreads across his mouth. “Those are my favorite socks.”

“They’re mine now.”

His gaze darkens as it drags over me. “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

A jolt of heat coils in my belly. Without breaking eye contact, I rise to my feet. My fingers move quickly—shirt, fleece, bra, jeans, socks, panties—each item folded and tossed neatly on the chair beside the bed.

By the time I take the eight steps toward him, I’m naked. Every nerve in my body buzzes with anticipation.

His mouth curves in approval, but he doesn’t touch me yet. He lets me come to him.

I place my hands on his chest, then trail them slowly down his abs. I follow with my lips and tongue, tasting the soap on his skin. When I reach his hips, I drop to my knees.

He sucks in a breath as I wrap one hand around his cock and the other gently cups his balls. My tongue flicks over the tip, swirling, tasting the bead of arousal there.

“Fuck,” he mutters, threading his hands through my hair.

I take him into my mouth, working him slowly, teasing, licking, sucking, until he's groaning and flexing his hips.

Just before he comes, he pulls me off with a growl, hauls me up, and tosses me backward onto the bed. My back hits the mattress with my legs dangling over the edge.

He kneels between my thighs, trailing kisses from my breasts to my belly, his fingers stroking upward along my thighs until they're gliding between my folds at the apex of my legs.

"God, you're already so wet."

"For you," I whisper.

His mouth replaces his fingers. He licks and sucks until my hips are bucking, my breath ragged. When he knows I'm close—right at the edge—he flips me over.

I brace on my elbows, and he drives into me from behind.

The stretch, the heat, the burn—it's everything. At this angle, he's so deep inside me, it's like he's touching my soul.

He fucks me hard and fast, his hips slapping against mine. His hand wraps around to stroke my clit again, and I break apart with a scream, shaking as the orgasm hits me like a tidal wave..

He follows me seconds later, groaning my name as he pulses inside me.

We collapse into a tangled heap on the bed, limbs entwined, panting as we ride those tiny waves of pleasure to the end.

My breath slows—my heartbeat steadies. But my mind doesn't. Oleksi pulls out of me and then rolls us onto the bed, pulling me against his chest and gently tickling me with his thumb.

“What are we going to do about my mom?” I whisper, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Oleksi exhales, rolling onto his side to face me. “My team and I are working on it. Nikolas gets back tomorrow, and I'm sure we'll come up with something.”

I sit up abruptly. “We can't just erase her again. I'm so fucking tired of this cloak and dagger shit. My parents spent their lives hiding. I won't do it. Not for me. Not for our child.”

His brows lift. “I agree. But we have to be smart. This isn't just a rival crime family or a crazy aunt—okay, maybe it is—but it's also the RMSAD. That's not a game we win with brute force.”

I groan and fall back against the pillows. “I wish we had leverage... something to bargain with.”

He pauses. “You think the General knows his son is dead yet?”

“I hope not,” I mutter.

He shoots up from the bed, rushes to his duffel bag, and begins tearing through it.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for the SD cards. Nadia and Valeska gave to me. They said there's enough on there to give us leverage over the RMSAD, the General... and Ruslan Dragunov, Nadia's older brother.”

My stomach knots. Guiltily, I slide out of bed and reach for my jeans. “You mean these?” I hold them up. “I found them when I grabbed your socks. They fell to the floor, and then I heard you coming out of the bathroom, so I panicked and shoved them into my pocket. I didn’t want you to think I was snooping.”

Oleksi stops in front of me and takes them from my hand gently. “It’s fine, Sabrina. No secrets, remember?” He kissed my forehead.

He sets them on the desk and pulls me close, kissing me softly. “You can snoop through anything I have. I love you. And once this is over, I want to get married to you.”

My heart stutters. “You want to marry me?”

He grins. “Of course. But not now. I want to do the whole sappy romantic thing when I propose.”

“I thought you hated that vanilla romantic shit.”

“I do. But only with you,” Oleksi tells me. “You’ve melted something inside me. Something I think froze over after my father nearly beat me to death because I didn’t believe in the same values he did.”

My heart slams against my ribs. I remember Radomir telling me about that. I lift my hand to his face, go up on tiptoes, and kiss him. “I’m sorry about your father.”

“Don’t be,” Oleksi says. “He was an evil man.”

“I can now say I can relate,” I tell him with a laugh. He kisses me again, then points to the chair. “Get dressed before I forget we need to check those disks.”

We settle on the couch in the sitting room of the suite, wrapped in a shared blanket. Oleksi loads the first disk into his laptop.

The screen flickers.

Nadia's face fills it.

Oleksi. Sabrina. I told you I had a plan. This is it. Watch this to the end. You will understand why it will give you all the power you need. I will narrate as the scenes unfold, giving you some ideas on how to use the information most effectively.

Disk two is a copy, meant for my brother, Ruslan. Deliver it to him personally and ensure you are in the room with him when he watches it. He is the best person to approach to get your message not only to him, to ensure he doesn't break the alliance when he realizes I'm gone, but also to get it to the General and the RMSAD.

My breath catches. Oleksi and I look at each other, startled, as the scene shifts and we see what's on it. There is a lot of information, so we fast-forward until we see Nadia's face again. She has a smug smile. I think that's a checkmate for all of us. She pauses for a moment. Oh, and if you're wondering why I've told you to take this to my brother first? Remember I told you that the RMSAD has a feared attorney and an enforcer who fixes messes—the attorney is none other than my dear older brother, and the fixer is his best friend and loyal subject, Konstantin Romaov.

Oleksi curses. "Fuck."

"What?" I ask.

He grabs his phone and opens a photo. "I thought the man looked familiar, I just couldn't place him." Oleksi turns his phone to me, and I flinch at the picture of my sister with a tall stranger. "Remember this?"

I stare. My blood runs cold, and I nod.

“The man with your sister is Konstantin Romonov.”

My heart stops. “Then the RMSAD has her.”

We turn back to the screen, staring at it in stunned silence.

As the screen fades to black, an idea has formulated in mind. It’s something risky. Something bold. But it just might save my mother... and Tara and all of us.

Oleksi looks at me. “What are you thinking?”

But I don’t tell him. I know he would disapprove.

Instead, I say, “How are we going to use this to help us?”

He shuts the laptop. “We’ll sleep on it. In the morning, we gather the team.”

I nod, but my mind doesn’t stop. Oleksi takes my hand and leads me back to bed.

This time, as our clothes fall away and our bodies entwine beneath the sheets, we take our time exploring each other’s bodies until the need becomes too much and I straddle Oleksi, letting him sink deep inside me. I breathe out in pure pleasure, feeling him stretching me, filling me. And I start to move. I ride him slow and deep, kissing him like he’s my oxygen, like our lives depend on the way we move together. He holds my hips and groans my name. We chase our high like we’re burning down the world.

When we come, it’s like the Earth tilts. I scream out his name until we collapse together, wrapped in sheets and limbs, and I rest my head on his chest.

But even as I drift off, my brain is still working out the details of my plan.

God, I hope it works. Because if it doesn't, I might never see my family or the light of day again.

That thought alone almost makes me want to scrap the whole thing. But then I see my father in my mind's eye, and I'm transported back to when I was twelve. To that single, shattering moment when he threw himself in front of the bullet meant for me. I still remember the sickening thud, the way his body jolted, the warmth of his blood spraying across my face. The way I held him afterward, trying to hold his skull together with my hands as he struggled to breathe.

His final words haunt me: Look after your mother. Look after your sister.

I won't fail him. I can't.

Tears leak silently from the corners of my eyes and trail down my cheeks. The guilt has never gone away. If I hadn't taken those damn journals—Leigh's mother's journals—he might still be alive. Leigh might never have been hurt or lost her memory. Oleksi's father and uncle, no matter how twisted they were, wouldn't have died the way they did. That one impulsive choice set off a chain of events that led us all here, resulting in blood, war, and grief.

And now? I won't let it happen again.

No more deaths. No more sacrifices. Not if I can help it.

I turn toward Oleksi's sleeping form and snuggle closer, needing the contact. His arm instinctively wraps around me, pulling me in. I press a kiss to his shoulder and whisper against his skin, "I love you... more than I've ever loved anyone. You're my heart, Oleksi. You, Elena, and our little bean—you're everything."

My voice trembles, but I steady it. “I promise I’ll do whatever it takes to protect you all.”

Then I close my eyes, heart heavy, mind racing.

My aunt doesn’t want my mother. Not really. What she wants is the next Jewel of Russia.

And tomorrow... I’m going to give Aunt Yelena exactly that—I’m tired of hiding.

17

SABrINA

I'm not sure how long I've been sitting in this armchair, curled beneath a throw blanket near the smoldering embers of the fire in our suite. Hours maybe. The sky outside the window has shifted from indigo to charcoal, and I can hear the rustle of trees whispering in the wind beyond the glass.

I should be sleeping.

But I can't.

Instead, I'm hunched over Oleksi's laptop with the SD drive inserted, my fingers curled around a mug of lukewarm coffee. The screen glows dimly in the otherwise dark room, documents and folders sprawling across it like the threads of some tangled conspiracy board. Because that's what this is—a goddamn web of lies, corruption, and state-sponsored horror.

I scroll through lines of code, obscure chemical logs, budget allocations, medical data tables that don't match up between reports. There are two versions of everything.

Two experiment logs.

Two outcome assessments.

Two financial reports.

Valeska had noted it in her voice memo. However, now I see it for myself—experiments that were officially terminated due to human rights violations were still going, and not just going—rebranded, shuffled under new project names, with slightly tweaked goals and forged ethical approvals. They were burying the truth under a layer of bureaucracy. It’s brilliant, in a monstrous kind of way.

I might not have the qualifications to understand every single compound or neural pathway diagram here, but I know how to read between the lines. And the story those lines tell is terrifying.

I know I’m close to something—something big. I scroll through another file cluster labeled with innocuous acronyms until I freeze.

This one wasn’t in the earlier folders.

“Facility Epsilon - Contingency Archive”

I double-click.

There’s a pause as it loads, and then—bam. Rows of documents. Scans. Footage.

And that’s when I find it.

The reason Yelena and the RMSAD think they’re untouchable.

The reports detail how Facility Epsilon—supposedly decommissioned fifteen years ago—was secretly reactivated. Not as a research site, but as an execution chamber for failed experiments. Test subjects with mutations or mental breakdowns were terminated and their bodies incinerated, the waste listed as “biohazard disposal.” Some of the images... I can’t look at them. Not fully. But I force myself to keep reading.

My hands tremble slightly as I grab my phone.

I can't risk this being lost.

Not now. Not ever.

I open the encrypted app Marco gave me—the one he insisted I memorize and use if I ever got my hands on “something too big to keep local.” My hacker best friend might spend his days drunk off Red Bull and writing Bitcoin laundering scripts, but when he builds something, it's bombproof. This cloud isn't Google Drive. It's hidden on a private server farm in Iceland with a double-deadman switch. If I don't log in every 48 hours or manually delay the countdown, it auto-forwards everything to a preset list of journalists, media outlets, watchdog groups, and whistleblower forums.

And the first destination?

The media company that is owned by my best friend, Leigh.

Even if I disappear, this truth won't.

I encrypt the folder, tag it “Red Swan,” and send it into the cloud. As it uploads, I lean back, heart racing, watching the progress bar tick up. 32%... 47%...

When it hits 100%, I exhale.

Done.

No going back now.

But what I do need is expert advice on what I've been reading to ensure that I've understood everything. I know someone who can help. I stand and stretch out my

back, grab the laptop, and head down the long, dark corridor of the palace and shudder. This place is eerily quiet.

I get to my mother's room, and as I'm about to knock, the door opens and my mother yelps.

"Jesus, Rina!" She hisses, holding her heart.

"Sorry, I was coming to speak to you," I tell her. "I need your help."

"At five in the morning?" Carla asks.

"Yes, I have something I need you to..." I frown, seeing the hardcover book folded in her hand and her phone. "What were you going to do?"

"I had some things to go over," Carla answers. She glances back into the room to where Mark is sound asleep. She puts her finger over her lips and gently pulls the door closed. "Let's go to the landing lounge. It has a gas fire."

I nod and shiver as it's freezing in this corridor. We pad quietly into the small seating area on the second-floor landing where all our bedrooms are, and I sit cross-legged on the sofa with my mother beside me. She puts her books next to her as I open the laptop.

I flip the laptop back open and turn the screen toward her.

"I found something."

Her brow furrows as she leans in. I explain what I uncovered—the twin reports, the faked shutdowns, the dark resurrection of projects under fake titles.

She stiffens. “This... this is the kind of thing that gets people disappeared.”

I nod. “I know.”

She closes her eyes for a second. “I warned them. I begged them to shut it all down. The former head of the division was going to, but then Ergorov took over, and everything changed. That man has no conscience, Sabrina. He’ll sacrifice anyone, even his own people, for what he thinks is progress.”

“Well, I’m done playing defense,” I say, my voice sharper than I intend. “I backed everything up to Marco’s server. If anything happens to me, it goes wide.”

Her eyes widen. “You... you did that?”

I nod. “Leigh’s outlet will be the first to run it.”

For a moment, my mother just stares at me. Then she shakes her head slowly, a sad smile creeping across her face. “You are so much like your father.”

I swallow hard at that. “Thanks, I think.”

She glances at the laptop again. “But it won’t be enough.”

“What?”

“This kind of leverage might get them to flinch. But it won’t stop them. Yelena will bury it, bribe the right people, kill the rest.”

“I have a lot more than just the documents,” I tell her. “I have video of the facility, experiments, and even your sister and Ergorvo fucking all over the science labs.”

“What?” My mother splutters, her eyes widening. I find the footage and show it to my mother. “Jesus. Turn it off.”

“I did. I read their internal policies at the RMSAD,” I say, my brow furrowing. “Although, considering what it is, I was shocked they had any policies at all. But one of them was very clear—strictly no unsanctioned interpersonal relationships.” I snort. “And I’d say that was a big no, no.”

“Do you think that would faze them?” my mother says. “Like the rest of it, Yelena will just get it buried. She’s fucking the boss, and she established herself as one of the most important people in the scientific research division a long time ago.”

“Yes...” I say, pulling up another document—compliments of Valeska. “But General Ergorov has a very strict prenuptial contract, and I found out he’s married to the big boss’s daughter.” I pull a face and shake my head. “I thought he was the big boss.”

“No, he reports to a board and a chairman,” my mother explains.

“Then he’s not going to be happy to see his son-in-law having an affair,” I say, showing my mother the contract. “And then there is this.” I look at my mother. “Be prepared, it is brutal.”

She nods and turns toward the monitor. I switch it on, and she sucks in a breath.

The video starts in a dimly lit medical room. Cold, sterile. Bleach white walls. Cameras in the corners. But the focal point is the woman strapped to the gurney.

She’s not screaming. That would almost be better.

My mother leans forward to get a better look at the woman. “Oh my God, that’s Evelina,” my mother whispers in horror. “She is Ergorov’s wife.” She puts a hand to

her mouth. “What the fuck are they doing to her?”

The woman, my mother has identified as Evelina, is murmuring. Slurring. Her head lolls to the side like she’s too weak to lift it. Her face is puffy, her pupils so dilated they’re practically eclipsing her irises. Saliva glistens on her lower lip.

“She’s completely sedated,” my mother murmurs, horror dawning in her voice. “This isn’t treatment. This is suppression.”

On-screen, a nurse enters the room and injects something into the IV line. Evelina’s red hair is matted to her face, skin pale and clammy, and she moans softly. Her fingers twitch.

“She doesn’t even look like she knows where she is,” I whisper. “They say she’s an alcoholic. That this treatment is for her own good.”

My mother squints, then leans closer. “That’s not a detox protocol. That’s too much benzodiazepine... and I think—God, is that droperidol?”

Before I can ask what that means, the door in the corner of the video opens, and General Ergorov steps inside. Yelena follows a second later, clipboard in hand, dressed like she just walked off the set of a Cold War thriller.

“Sedation holding?” Yelena asks the nurse, her tone as casual as if she were ordering lunch.

“She’s stable. We increased the midazolam drip this morning as instructed.”

The camera shifts slightly, as if someone had adjusted its zoom. It catches Ergorov’s face as he walks to the bedside and peers down at the woman with disdain.

“She’s barely responsive,” he grunts. “We can’t up her dose anymore. Not without risking respiratory collapse.”

Yelena clicks her pen. “We don’t need to increase it. Not yet.”

“Her father doesn’t retire until the end of the year,” Ergorov mutters. “We need her alive until then. After that—” He makes a slicing gesture with his hand. “—we increase the cocktail, make it look like she got drunk, took pills. An accident.” He looks at the woman in disgust. “I personally can’t wait to be rid of her.”

“Tragic,” Yelena says flatly. “Unsurprising, considering her history.”

“Stupid bitch ruined her own image with all that ‘mood disorder’ talk anyway. No one will question it.” He fobs it off icily. “She should never have tried to go to her father with those lies about Mikhail. That was the final straw.”

The nurse in the room doesn’t flinch. He’s heard this before.

Yelena walks up to the gurney and gently, almost lovingly, pats the woman’s cheek. “Don’t worry, darling,” she says, voice dripping with venom. “You’ll be a national tragedy soon enough.”

I slam my finger on the keyboard and stop the footage.

My mother’s knuckles are white. She doesn’t speak for a long moment, just stares at the black screen like it’s still playing.

“Is she...” she finally croaks. “Is that?—?”

“I believe she’s still alive,” I confirm. “Do you know her?”

My mother nods. “We started at the RMSAD together.”

“Valeska told me that her mother became an alcoholic because Mikhail was abusing her,” I explain to my mother.

“How long have they been doing this to her?” My mother’s eyes are wide with shock.

“Years, if Valeska’s story about her mother’s alcohol problem is correct,” I answer.

“We need to get her out of there,” My mother whispers. “That woman has been through enough hell.”

“I wonder why her father doesn’t wonder where she is?” I say.

“Ergorov has probably spun some lies about her being sick,” my mother says in disgust, “We need to find her and get her out of there. She’s being chemically imprisoned.” My mother’s eyes narrow with fury. “This... this is what Yelena is part of. This is what she’s enabling.”

I nod. “And this is what we’re going to use to end her.”

“This can still all be covered up.” Her eyes narrow angrily. “We need to catch them red-handed and have all the people who matter witness it.”

“I could help with that,” the deep, heavily accented Russian voice makes me jump, and my head shoots around to see Timofey standing, watching us. “Sorry, I couldn’t sleep, and when I saw you two sitting here...” His voice lowers. “It was so nice to watch my little girl with her little girl.”

My heart squeezes. “Would you like to join us?”

“If you do not mind?” He is speaking English.

“Russian, Dad,” my mother tells him and looks at me. “Sabrina needs the practice now that she’s with a Russian man.”

“I’m glad he is Russian,” Timofey says, sitting on the other side of my mother. “But... I’m still not sure about the family.”

“Dad!” My mother hisses and rolls her eyes. “Galina has helped us a lot.”

“I know.” Timofey holds up his hands. “I just...” He looks at me. “This life has been hell for all of us. I want peace for my children and grandchildren.”

“We won’t have peace at all if we cannot get Yelena’s head out of her ass,” my mother says.

“I don’t know what went wrong with my eldest,” Timofey says with a sigh. “She was always so competitive and had to try to outsmart her mother all the time.”

“Jealous,” my mother says. “She was always jealous of anyone she thought a threat to her or more intelligent than her.”

“There’s a word for that,” I say dryly. “Narcissism.”

“We never wanted to admit it,” he replies, voice heavy. “But as the years went by, it got harder to keep pretending.”

My mother nods slowly. “I’ve never been able to fathom why my sister had to be such a cold bitch.”

“Psychopathic narcissist?” I offer, only half-joking.

“It pains me, but you are probably right,” Timofey’s eyes are filled with a sad resignation. “I’ve tried to reach her many times. She’s my daughter.” He shakes his head. “But you have to get to a point when you realize it’s just not going to happen.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say, but that bitch is going down,” I tell him and he looks at me with raised brows. “Do you want to show me what you’ve got, and I can see what I can do to help ensure the right people are made aware of what is going on with General Ergorv’s special project?”

I look at my mother for confirmation as I know the man is a legend and my grandfather, but I don’t know him, and his daughter is a fucking psycho. Well, his one daughter, and I always think a trait like that had to come from somewhere.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” my mother says with a nod. “You can show him.”

I’m still skeptical about trusting anyone else with this, so I show him the part where they have General Ergorov’s wife heavily sedated, and I’m shocked at Timofey’s reaction.

“Jesus, is that Ergorov’s wife?” His eyes are wide with disbelief. “I thought she was in a mental institution after suffering a nervous breakdown over twenty years ago.”

“No way!” I give a low whistle. “Her father put her in a mental hospital? Her daughter thinks she’s an alcoholic.”

“I have an idea, but you’re not going to like it,” Timofey says.

“As long as I’m included in this idea,” Oleksi’s voice sends my heart slamming against my rib cage, and I turn to see him leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Count us in,” Ivan’s voice comes from the stairs.

“What the fuck are you four doing sitting down there?” Oleksi asks them.

“We were just watching out for Sabrina and Carla,” Syd says standing up. “We are in Dmitri’s mausoleum after all and we were just making sure she didn’t get kidnapped by him.”

“Jesus, Syd.” I look at her skeptically. “You couldn’t come up with a better story than that?” She shakes her head. “You were eavesdropping.”

“No, spying,” Lev corrects her. “We were worried about you.”

“You are a good man,” Timofey tells Lev.

“Thank you, sir,” Lev says politely.

“So where are we going?” Ivan asks.

“Yes, Sabrina, where are we going?” Oleksi asks, his eyes boring into mine.

Uh-oh, he’s pissed.

“I...” My eyes dart to my mother who nods then I look back at Oleksi. “My mother and I are going to meet Yelena—together.”

“Over my dead fucking body,” Oleksi hisses.

“I agree,” Timofey says. “I can’t let you two go and meet Yelena. It is a trap. She will have the RMSAD guards with her. “You took a lot from her when you left.” he looks at Carla. “And she will not let that go easily.”

“She tried to take everything from me,” Carla responds. “And now she’s trying to do that again only this time...”

“You have us with you,” Syd tells her.

And suddenly mine and my mother’s two person mission becomes a team effort.

18

OLEKSI

I've never bolted out of bed so fast in my fucking life.

One second I'm dead asleep, curled around Sabrina's warm body, and the next—cold sheets. Empty space. And that creeping sense of dread crawling up my spine.

She's gone.

Panic ignites in my chest, sharp and immediate. I throw off the covers and lunge for the door, heart thudding. For a few seconds, I'm convinced she's been taken. Again. That they slipped past all our security, past my team, past me.

But then I hear it—low voices, murmuring down the hall. I follow the sound like a bloodhound. At the end of the corridor, where the staircase branches off in two directions, there's a soft glow coming from the upstairs landing sitting area.

I stop just shy of the corner, lean in silently.

They're huddled around the gas fireplace. Sabrina. Carla. Timofey. And from the angle of their postures, from the urgency in their voices, I know exactly what they're doing.

They're making a plan.

A plan without me.

Something hot and irrational burns in my chest.

Fear. Relief. And yeah, I'll fucking admit it—pettiness.

When the hell did I become so fucking petty?

I draw a sharp breath, shove the emotion back where it belongs. It's not about being left out. It's the way I woke up to an empty bed. It's the fire that lit in my chest thinking she'd been taken from me. Again.

I push away from the wall and step into the room.

“So what's this plan we're all not going to like?” I ask, my voice flat but loud enough to make all their heads snap toward me.

Sabrina straightens immediately. She looks surprised—guilty, even. Good.

I shoot a glance at Sabrina. She doesn't flinch. She fucking knows.

Timofey looks at me. “We need Ergorov to admit what he's done. To his wife. To Mariya. And...” His eyes flicker to Sabrina. “To my granddaughter.”

“You mean use them as bait,” I say, jaw clenching. “Not a fucking chance.”

“Yes,” he says. “Our trap. We make the hunters become the hunted.”

“And how the hell do you plan to do that?” Sabrina asks, before I can.

“By offering Yelena a bargaining chip,” Timofey says. “My oldest daughter is

obsessed with finishing the perfect version of the formula. The one for gene enhancement. She wants it more than anything.”

“She wants to make the perfect human,” Carla adds darkly.

“Crazy bitch,” Sabrina mutters.

“And you’re thinking of telling her about Sabrina? Because in Yelena’s twisted mind, Sabrina is everything she’s dreamed of being.” My voice drops to a dangerous pitch.

“You’re out of your fucking minds.”

“It’s the only way to ensure Yelena takes the bait,” Timofey says. “She’ll do anything to have Carla, Sabrina, and a child of yours and Sabrina’s—a prodigy. That is what will make her bite.”

Sabrina sucks in a sharp breath. “How did you know I’m pregnant?”

Timofey looks stunned. “Wait... You are really pregnant?”

Silence falls.

“Are you serious?” Syd asks, her eyes wide.

I look at Sabrina. She meets my gaze, then sighs and nods.

“There’s no putting that cat back in the bag now,” she says softly. “Yes. I’m pregnant.”

Syd does something I’ve never seen before—she actually skips across the floor to hug her, then punches me in the arm. “Well done, Boss.”

Lev grins. “Mazel tov.”

Clyde just smiles. “Congrats.”

“It’s not time for congratulations,” Carla snaps. “I told you both to keep this quiet. You cannot tell Yelena that.” She gives Timofey a scathing look before pulling out her notebook, opening it to a page, and snapping a photo, before handing the phone to Timofey. “This is what we use for bait. It’s the first section of the corrected formula Yelena has been chasing for twenty-seven years.”

“No,” Sabrina says, shaking her head vehemently. “You can’t give her that.”

“I agree with Sabrina. If Yelena knows you have this and have completed it,” Timofey’s voice trails off. “She will not stop coming after you, and it will not guarantee she will not kidnap one of you again.”

“Timofey is correct,” I say. “That will not stop her. It’ll make her worse.”

“I have a better plan,” Timofey says, leaning back and smiling. “We set a trap in their trap.”

“So they think we’re walking into their trap, but they’re actually walking into ours,” Sabrina clarifies. “I like it.”

“Then we bring the roof down on them all,” he says simply. “If we take them out at the same time, it won’t allow the other to escape or give them time to destroy any valuable evidence.”

“And while we are occupying them, my father will ensure each base that Valeska marked on the map is raided,” Carla adds. “That way, Sabrina doesn’t get exposed, our new little life growing inside her is safe,”

“And my mother is safe without Yelena getting even a portion of my mother’s complete formulae,” Sabrina finishes.

“I’m fine with that plan,” I say.

“When do we start?” Ivan asks.

“Everyone get ready,” Timofey orders. “Have a good breakfast. The plan goes into operation in three hours.”

Sabrina and I head back to our room. As soon as the door shuts behind us, I turn and lock it.

“What the fuck, Sabrina?” I ask, rounding on her. “I thought we agreed. No more secrets.”

“I didn’t want you to stop me,” she admits. “I was going to leave you a note.”

“Oh, good. A note,” I sneer. “Real considerate.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, eyes wide. “Please, don’t let us fight. Not when we’re about to go face a fucking hydra.”

My anger crumbles. I look at her—really look at her. She is stubborn, brave, reckless and willing to walk into fire if it means protecting the people she loves.

I yank her into my arms with a fervor that borders on desperation. She melds into me seamlessly, like a missing piece finally found. Our lips collide, and the fiery warmth of her body ignites a primal reaction within me, my desire surging to life.

I want to feel her bare skin against mine and tug her sweater up, yanking it up until

it's bunched under her arms, exposing the smooth plane of her stomach and the lace of her bra. My mouth leaves hers, trailing down her neck, sucking and biting until she's whimpering, her head thrown back, her body arching into as a soft mewl escapes her throat.

I lift her onto the dresser with a grunt, her ass hitting the wood with a thud that makes her gasp. Her legs part instinctively, and I step between them, my cock already hard as fucking steel, straining against my jeans. I yank her jeans down her thighs, the denim scraping against her skin, and she kicks them off impatiently. Her panties are soaked, the fabric clinging to her pussy. I rip them off with a growl, tossing them aside.

I drop to my knees, my hands gripping her thighs, spreading her wide. My tongue drags up her slit in one long stroke, and she cries out, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling hard. I bury my face in her pussy, my tongue teasing her clit with relentless precision. Sabrina writhes above me, her hips bucking against my mouth, her moans getting louder, more desperate.

"Fuck, yes," she gasps, her voice breaking. "Don't stop—oh God, don't stop."

I don't. I suck her clit into my mouth, flicking it with my tongue until she's trembling, her thighs clamping around my head. Her orgasm hits her hard, her body convulsing as she comes, and I lap it up greedily, not wasting a single drop.

I stand up, and her hands reach out, pulling at my shirt until I've pulled it over my head and tossed it on the floor. She runs her hands over my torso, making my muscles jerk from her soft touch.

I rip off my pants and slide between her legs, my hands gripping her hips as I pull her to the edge of the dresser. My cock is throbbing, desperate to be inside her. She reaches for me, her hand wrapping around my shaft, stroking me with a firm grip that

makes me groan.

“Fuck I love your hands on me.” My voice comes out ragged before I pull her hands away and line myself up with her entrance, the head of my cock pressing against her slick folds.

Sabrina pushes forward, the walls of her pussy pulsing around it and I slam into her in one brutal thrust, burying myself to the hilt. She screams my name, her nails raking down my back as I start fucking her with a savage rhythm. The dresser creaks beneath us, the sound drowned out by the slap of skin on skin and her desperate moans. Her pussy is so fucking tight, clenching around me like she’s trying to milk every drop from my cock.

I grab her hips, pulling her onto me with every thrust, driving deeper, harder. Her pert breasts bounce with every movement, and I lean down to take one in my mouth, sucking hard on her nipple until she’s crying out again. Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me closer, and I can feel her getting tighter, her walls fluttering around me as she gets closer to another orgasm.

“Come for me,” I growl against her skin. “Come on my cock like a good girl.”

She does. Her body shudders as she comes again, her pussy squeezing me so tight it’s almost painful. I fuck her through it, my own orgasm building with one last plunge a guttural groan rips through my throat as I spill my seed inside her.

I collapse against her, our foreheads pressed together as we both struggle to catch our breath. Sabrina’s arms are wrapped around my neck, and I can feel her heart racing against mine, her body quivering with tiny shudders as the last ripples of pleasure tickle her.

We stay like that for a moment—breathless, tangled, alive.

“I love you,” she whispers.

“You have no idea how much I love,” I say, brushing my lips over hers. “Don’t do what you did to me again.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs, her lips trailing down to my chin, then my neck, her tongue flicking out to taste the salt on my skin. She nuzzles my ear, her breath hot and fucking filthy.

My cock twitches inside her, and I let out a low groan. Her hand slides down my chest, her fingers tracing the ridges of my abs before she palms my pecs, her nails scraping over my nipples. “Oh, fuck, baby, you’re going to have to stop that or we’re going to miss all the action.”

“This is all the action I want,” she purrs, her hips starting to move in slow, deliberate circles. I feel her pussy clench around me again, those tight little muscles flexing and pulsing around my dick.

“What are you doing, you little minx?” I growl, my hands gripping her hips trying to still her as my shaft is already starting to harden again, that warm, wet heat of her pussy as she massages me starting to drive me insane.

“Kegels,” she says with this innocent little smirk that makes me want to flip her over and fuck her senseless. “A woman has to look after all parts of her body.”

Her tongue darts out, running a hot, wet trail down between my pecs before swirling around each nipple, her teeth grazing them just enough to make me curse. “Oh, fuck,” I groan, lifting her off the dresser with one arm, my cock still buried deep inside her. I carry her to the bed, her legs wrapped around my waist, and lay us down, her body sprawled beneath me.

“I want to ride you,” she whispers, her eyes dark with hunger. I flip us over in one smooth motion, and she straddles me, her pussy sliding down my cock until I’m buried to the hilt. Her teeth sink into her lower lip as she starts to move, her hips rolling in slow, deliberate circles.

“Fuck, Sabrina,” I groan, my hands gripping her thighs as she rides me like she’s trying to break me. Her breasts bounce with every movement, her nipples hard and begging for my mouth. I reach up and grab them, pinching and twisting until she lets out a moan that goes straight to my cock.

Her pussy is so fucking tight, so fucking wet, and I can feel every inch of her as she grinds down on me, her clit rubbing against my pelvis with every thrust. “You feel so fucking good,” she gasps, her hands braced on my chest as she rides me harder, faster, her body trembling on the edge of another orgasm.

“Come for me, baby,” I growl, slapping her ass hard enough to make her yelp. “Let me feel that tight little pussy squeeze my cock.”

She lets out a scream as she comes, her pussy clamping down on me like a fucking vice, and I can’t hold back anymore. I thrust up into her, my member pulsing as I fill her with every last drop of cum.

We collapse together, our bodies slick with sweat, our hearts pounding in sync. My arms close around her, and I hold her until our breathing returns to normal.

“If I don’t get up now...” Sabrina teases and kisses me before sitting. “I won’t have time for a quick shower.”

I’m tempted to follow her, but I know what will happen in there, and we have to get ready for what’s to come.

Two hours later, we're ready.

Boots on. Coats zipped. Weapons concealed.

We head out the front entrance of the palace.

And stop cold.

The grounds are crawling with RMSAD agents.

Sabrina's hand slides into mine. "Well, shit."

At the bottom of the stairs, two figures wait.

One, I recognize instantly—General Ergorov.

The other is a woman. Tall. Regal. Icy. Every line of her face screams superiority. She's older than Carla, but there's no mistaking the resemblance.

Yelena Zorin.

"It's a full house," Yelena says, eyes sliding over me, then Sabrina, then Carla. "Delightful."

"Good," Ergorov sneers. "Now we don't have to look for the others."

He lifts a hand.

"Take the three of them. Kill all the rest."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I say coolly. "You might want to check your

messages first.”

“I don’t have time for games, Mirochin,” Ergorov growls.

Bing. His phone dings.

So does Yelena’s.

They glance down.

And freeze.

It’s footage from the collection Nadia and Valenska left. The one of Ergorov and Yelena fucking like animals in the lab.

“I think that’s a company policy breach,” Sabrina says sweetly. “And a pretty solid case for breach of marital contract too.”

“This?” Yelena sneers. “You think this will stop us?”

“Where is my daughter?” Ergorov cuts in, glaring at Sabrina.

“You have a daughter?” she asks innocently. “God, I hope not with my darling maternal aunt.”

“Where. Is. She?” Ergorov growls.

“Why don’t you ask your son?” Sabrina’s smile turns razor-sharp. “Maybe he’s got her chained up again, waiting to dole out another round of abuse.”

“Has Valeska been spewing lies again?” Ergorov snarls. “Mikhail would never harm

his sister... her mother, on the other hand.”

“Talking about Mikhail...” Sabrina taunts.

Bing. Another message.

Yelena’s face drains of color.

She turns to Ergorov and hisses, “I told you to keep your son away from Sabrina.”

He snarls. “That video is fake.”

“Then you’ll love the next one,” Sabrina says, holding up her hand. “I wonder if this one is fake, too?”

A monitor on the lawn flickers to life, its large screen displaying a brutal video—the one of Evelina being chemically sedated by her husband and his lover while they plot to end Evelina’s life.

Ergorov’s face turns purple with rage.

“Where did you get this?” he roars. “Take the three of them—kill everyone else!”

He spins, ready to leave.

But the whup-whup-whup of helicopter blades slices through the air.

Three military choppers descend, troops pouring out.

“What the hell is going on?” Yelena hisses.

Timofey steps out of the house, flanked by armed guards.

And beside him? A man I've only seen in photos. Boris Petrovna. Head of the Ministry of National Security.

Chairman of the RMSAD board.

Ergorov turns ghost-pale.

"I would not do that," Boris says, cold and loud. "Not unless you want to be executed for treason."

The RMSAD agents hesitate.

Boris points. "Arrest them. General Ergorov. Dr. Yelena Novikov. And anyone loyal to their regime."

Chaos erupts as soldiers flood the courtyard.

"You can't do this!" Yelena shrieks.

"Oh, I can," Boris says. "All RMSAD operations are hereby suspended pending full investigation. General Timofey Morozov will lead the oversight team. Dr. Carla Craft will be his second."

Timofey's jaw tightens. He nods.

"This isn't over!" Yelena screams as she's dragged away. "You'll regret this! All of you!"

I watch as she's shoved into a transport van, Ergorov beside her, red-faced and

snarling.

And just like that—it's over.

Almost.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:35 am

Hours after the last troop transport lifted off the palace grounds, peace settles over the estate like snowfall. The golden light of early evening spills through the tall windows, casting soft shadows across the rug in the sitting room.

Elena sits between Sabrina's legs, babbling happily as she gnaws on a silicone giraffe. Her laughter bubbles up like champagne—light, unburdened. It's the sound of safety. A sound I didn't think we'd ever hear again.

Sabrina meets my eyes and smiles.

I lean down to kiss Elena's forehead and murmur, "You're too young to understand, princess, but the war we fought today... it was for you."

There's a knock on the door.

Syd steps in. "Package just arrived. Marked for you."

I take it, thank her, and close the door.

It's plain, hand-delivered by someone high-level. I cut the seal and open it carefully.

Inside is a neatly folded set of papers—thick, creamy stock, the kind used for official signatures.

The Dragunov crest is watermarked in the corner.

Signed.

Dated.

Stamped.

The alliance between the Mirochins and Dragunovs is once again secured.

I let out a breath, turning it over in my hands.

Sabrina tilts her head. “What is it?”

I lift the first page. “The new treaty. The elusive Ruslan Dragunov signed it.”

Her brows shoot up. “Already?”

“Apparently, yes.” I grin, seeing the impish glint in her eyes. “What did you do?”

She shrugs, feigning innocence. “Just sent him a little something to watch that I found of him and his buddy Konstantin discussing the cleanup of one of Mikhail’s messes.”

I stare at her. “Seriously?”

She smirks. “I was very polite. I even said ‘please’.”

I shake my head, amazed, and utterly in love. “Remind me never to piss you off.”

“Too late for that,” she teases.

But then her smile falters. Her hand drifts to her pocket, pulling out her watch.

“What is it?” I ask, already on edge again.

“Tara,” she whispers. “I told Ruslan he had to get her to us by five today.”

My gut tightens. I check my own watch. Four-fifty-nine.

And then—like fucking clockwork—my phone rings.

Unknown number.

Sabrina and I lock eyes.

I swipe to answer.

“Hello?”

A familiar female voice comes through. “Oleksi?”

Sabrina snatches the phone. “Tara?”

“Rina!” her voice explodes with emotion, and I hear the simultaneous relief and excitement in Sabrina’s gasp.

“Oh my God. Rina!”

“Where are you?” Sabrina breathes. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Tara laughs. “No. I’m okay. I was saved from the RMSAD. And... well...”

She lifts her hand.

There’s a ring on her finger.

Sabrina’s mouth falls open. “You’re engaged?”

Tara grins. “Married.”

“Married?” I echo, stepping closer to the screen.

“To whom?” Sabrina stares in shock at her sister’s hand.

Tara laughs. “The man who saved me. Who risked everything to do so.”

And then the screen shifts slightly.

A tall, handsome man steps into view beside her.

Jet-black hair. Piercing eyes. Cold, calculating stare.

Sabrina stiffens beside me. “That’s him,” she whispers. “The man in the woods—the messenger.”

My hand tightens around her waist, pulling her slightly behind me. Protective. Instinctive.

Tara doesn’t seem to notice the shift.

“I’m married to Ruslan Dragunov,” she announces, as if dropping a bomb.

“Hello,” Ruslan says. His voice is smooth, velvet-wrapped steel. “Nice to finally meet you both.”

I nod curtly, keeping my expression unreadable.

Sabrina manages a polite smile. “Where are you? If you’re still in Russia, we’d love to see you. Especially Mom.”

Tara falters. “We... we can’t,” she says, her eyes flicking to Ruslan, who smoothly takes over.

“We’re laying low for a while,” he says. “Some of my former clients have recently been arrested. There’s... interest in tracking down all associations.”

I don’t miss the pointed nature of that comment.

“Thanks for the alliance,” I say coolly, moving the conversation away from who got his ‘client’ locked up. “I’ll have my legal team review the details and get back to you.”

“Of course,” Ruslan says smoothly, his gaze raking over us. “It’s a mutually beneficial agreement.”

There’s a long pause.

Tension simmers under the surface.

Sabrina clears her throat. “Where are you going to lay low?”

Tara blinks. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

“But—” Sabrina falters, panic bubbling to the surface. She glances at me helplessly.

I step in. “She wants to ask you something.”

Tara cocks her head.

Sabrina straightens. “I want to ask you to be my maid of honor.”

Tara’s jaw drops. “You’re getting married?”

“Yes,” we say in unison.

Her eyes widen. “When? Where?”

“In Vegas,” I say. “Four weeks.”

“There’s a lot of planning to do,” Sabrina adds quickly. “And I need help.”

“I...” Tara glances sideways at Ruslan again. Something flickers in her expression.

“Oh, Rina...”

Sabrina’s eyes begin to gloss over, and I see her knuckles tighten.

“We have to lay low...” Tara repeats, voice gentle.

“Come lay low in Vegas,” Sabrina says. “You can stay in our apartment. I live with Oleksi now.”

She crouches, scooping up Elena.

“And... what about your niece?” Sabrina lifts her up so she’s visible on the screen.

“You haven’t even met her yet.”

Tara gasps, eyes softening. “You... you already had a baby?”

“She’s eight months old,” I say, stepping in before Sabrina blurts out more. “She’s ours. And...” I place a hand on Sabrina’s stomach. “We’ve got another on the way.”

Tara stares at us.

Stunned.

Silent.

“I...” she fumbles. “Rina... I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll come home,” Sabrina pleads. “Say you’ll help me plan my wedding.”

There’s a beat.

Then Tara glances sideways again.

I see it now—what I missed before.

She’s scared.

But not of us.

Of him.

She tries to mask it with a smile, but I can see right through it.

“What do you say, Ruslan?” Sabrina says, tone deceptively light. “Bring my sister home. Don’t make me sad on my wedding day.”

A flicker of understanding passes between them.

That was a threat. Polished. Polite. Laced in steel.

A smile lifts the corner of Ruslan’s mouth. “We’ll let you know,” he says. “We have to go.”

The screen goes dark.

Sabrina lowers the phone slowly.

“That didn’t feel right,” I say.

“No,” she agrees. “She was trying too hard. And Ruslan... he’s watching her like she’s... his.”

“She didn’t look free,” I mutter.

“I want to find her,” Sabrina says softly. “Before we go home.”

I pull her into my chest and kiss the crown of her head. “I have a feeling they’ll come to us.”

She tilts her face up. “Why?”

“Because you’re not the only one who knows how to threaten people.”

Her lips twitch. “Your threats aren’t quite as... veiled.”

“Nope,” I say. “They’re much more effective.”

We’re interrupted by the soft ding of my phone.

I glance at the screen.

It’s a message from Ruslan.

We accept your invitation. As it turns out, I have business in the United States. We’ll arrive in a week or two.

“Told you,” I say, holding it up for her to read.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Invite them to stay at the hotel.”

I sigh, grab my phone, and type out the message.

“There,” I mutter. “Anything else?”

Elena reaches for me. I lift her into my arms, and she snuggles against my chest with a sleepy sigh.

Sabrina curls up beside us on the couch, resting her head against my shoulder.

“I hope she’s okay,” she whispers.

“She will be,” I promise.

We sit in silence for a while, letting the fire crackle and the tension melt away.

“I think we’d better gather the family,” I say after a moment.

Sabrina frowns. “No. I don’t want to tell my mother just yet. She’s been through so much already.”

“What don’t you want to tell me?” Carla’s voice startles us.

She steps into the room, her gaze immediately softening when she sees us all curled together.

“Tara just called,” I tell her gently.

“What?” Carla’s eyes widen. “Is she okay? Where is she?”

“She’s fine,” Sabrina says. “She’ll be in Vegas in two weeks.”

“For our wedding,” I add.

Carla blinks. “You’re getting married?”

“We are,” I say with a small smile.

Carla’s face splits into the widest grin I’ve ever seen. She steps forward, kisses us both on the cheek, and scoops up Elena. “I’ll put our little princess down.”

We watch her disappear down the hallway, humming softly to our little girl.

I turn to Sabrina.

“Come with me.”

I lead her through to the bedroom and shut the door.

“Close your eyes.”

She arches a brow. “Seriously?”

“Trust me.”

She does. Eyes shut. Breath held.

I move to the dresser, retrieve the ring box I’ve hidden for weeks, and drop to one knee.

“Open.”

She opens her eyes, and her mouth drops open.

“Sabrina Craft,” I say, voice hoarse, “will you marry me? And promise you’ll never go off on a life-saving adventure without me by your side again?”

Tears spring to her eyes as she nods. “Yes. Yes. A million times yes.”

I slide the ring on her finger, and then I’m on my feet, pulling her into my arms and kissing her like it’s the first time all over again.

When we finally break apart, she grins up at me through her tears.

“Although...” she says breathlessly. “I can’t promise anything about the adventure part.”

I laugh, hold her tighter, and kiss her again.

Because if we’re going to face more madness in this life—we’ll do it together.

Always.

THE END