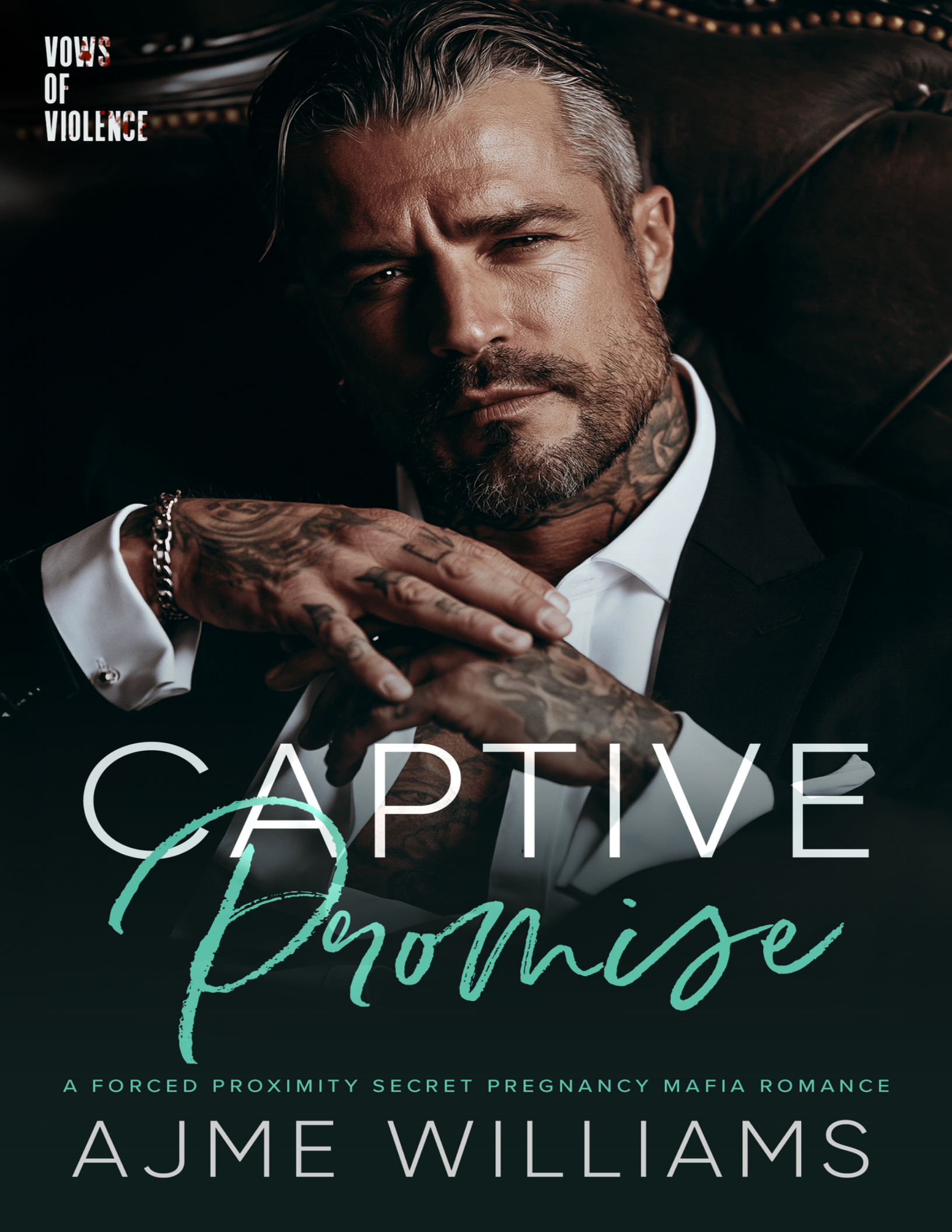


CAPTIVE Promise

A FORCED PROXIMITY SECRET PREGNANCY MAFIA ROMANCE

AJME WILLIAMS

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VOWS OF VIOLENCE

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All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajme Williams writes emotional, angsty contemporary romance. All her books can be enjoyed as full length, standalone romances and are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited .

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DESCRIPTION

I saved a dying stranger's life.
Two years later, the mafia monster kidnaps me.
His ransom? Thirty days in his bed.

Nico Barone doesn't want money.
He wants **me**.

Apparently, the ruthless mafia underboss has spent two years watching me.

Learning my routines.
Memorizing my life.
Waiting for the perfect moment to claim the woman who saved his.

Now I'm trapped inside his mansion with one rule:
Thirty days, and I'm free.

I should hate him.
Instead, I'm discovering the monster has a weakness.
Me.

He's possessive. Dangerous. Completely obsessed.
And when his enemies come for me, Nico makes one thing terrifyingly clear:
Touch me, and he'll start a war.

I know better than to fall for a mafia man.
Especially one my Bratva family would kill on sight.

But thirty days is long enough to make terrible mistakes.

Now I’m staring at **two pink lines**...
I’m carrying his baby.

And suddenly, the promise of freedom feels like another one of Nico’s lies.

Because I can’t stop wondering...
Was getting me pregnant another accident?
Or was this how Nico planned to make his captive his forever?

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PROLOGUE: NICO

The world is upside down.

No, it’s sideways. I don’t know. The Maserati is screaming, metal shrieking against asphalt, and the sky keeps trading places with the road.

There’s glass everywhere and it’s glittering.

Beautiful, almost, the way it catches the streetlights as it sprays across my face like rain.

One flip.

I was angry. I remember that much.

The Corsicans—the deal—we’d been fucking played, and my hands strangled the wheel while the speedometer climbed because I’ve always had a lead foot and it got worse when I was full of rage.

Or maybe that’s not how it happened. Maybe the brakes. Maybe the truck that came out of nowhere. The memory keeps dissolving every time I reach for it, sand slipping through broken fingers.

Two flips.

There’s blood in my mouth and it tastes like copper and salt.

My ribs are wrong. I can feel them moving in ways ribs shouldn’t move, grinding like gravel under a boot heel.

Somewhere far away, a horn is blaring one long endless note, and it takes me too long to realize it’s my own car. My own chest collapsed against the wheel.

Three.

Concrete. The barrier rushes up and the world goes white—

—nothing has edges anymore. Time means nothing. I’m hanging from the seatbelt or I’m lying on the ceiling or I’m floating somewhere above all of it, watching a man die in the wreckage of a quarter-million-dollar car.

I think, *Good riddance*, and I also think, *not yet*, and I can’t tell which thought is mine.

Sirens. Red light sweeping through shattered glass. Voices shouting numbers and words I don’t understand (*BP dropping, pneumothorax, get me a line*) and hands. Hands on me, pulling, pressing, and I want to fight them because hands on me have only ever meant violence, but my body won’t answer.

Then the voice. “Stay with me. You hear me? Eyes on me. You’re not done yet.”

The voice is feminine and soft and steady, cutting through the chaos like a blade through silk, and I latch onto it the way a drowning man latches onto driftwood.

The hands that go with the voice are sure of themselves.

They don’t fumble or shake.

They move over my ruined body like they’ve already decided I’m going to live and my wishes and wants are irrelevant.

I try to see her, but it’s hard. Instead, I get pieces. Dark hair. The curve of a jaw.

Brown eyes catching the ambulance light, fierce and focused and looking at me—*at me*—like I'm something worth saving.

Then the white swallows everything.

I surface in fragments.

Fluorescent light.

The rhythmic sigh of machines breathing for me. Pain that lives in every cell, dulled to a roar by whatever's dripping into my veins.

A ceiling I don't recognize. Restraints—no, not restraints, just tubes and wires, my body being held together by other people's skill.

I learn later that I'm at Columbia Presbyterian. Luca—it had to be Luca—got me admitted under a name that isn't mine, scrubbed the crash from every police blotter in the city, and paid whoever needed paying. I learn that I died twice.

Once in the ambulance and once on the table.

But the first thing I learn, the first true thing in that hazy chemical fog, is *her*.

She comes into the room reading a chart, and the world, which has been smeared and doubled for days, snaps into perfect focus for the first time.

She's tall and lean, wearing a sky-blue blouse tucked into fitted black dress pants with a stethoscope hanging around her neck. Her white coat has writing on the right breast side, but I can't read it.

Her dark brown hair is pulled back in a ponytail that's losing its fight, and loose waves escape around her face.

She looks tired the way only doctors can, but when she lifts her eyes from the chart and finds me awake, she smiles, and something in my shattered chest moves that has nothing to do with broken ribs.

“Well,” she says. “Look who decided to rejoin the living.”

Her voice. *Her voice.* The one from the wreckage. The one I followed out of the dark.

“You were there,” I rasp, unable to stop staring at her. My throat is sandpaper from the intubation. “At the crash.”

She nods. “I was on my way home when I saw it happen. Lucky for you, I never learned how to mind my own business.” She crosses to the bed, checks the monitors, and her fingers brush my wrist as she takes my pulse the old-fashioned way, skin to skin, and I feel that touch travel up my arm like a current. “I’m Dr. Katerina Sokolov. I’ll be looking after you while you’re here.”

Katerina.

I’m bandaged to hell and back. Forty percent of my body is bruised. There’s a plate in my arm and a tube in my chest, and I hurt in ways I didn’t know a body could hurt.

And lying there, broken into pieces, I look at this woman and think one word, clear as a bell through the morphine haze.

Angel.

For three weeks, she treats me like I matter.

Not like a payday, or a threat, or like the name that makes men fearful in this city.

She doesn’t know *that* name.

She knows the fake one on my chart, and she treats *him*—that fiction, that nobody—like his life is the most valuable thing in the world.

She argues with other doctors about my pain management.

She catches an infection two other doctors missed.

She comes by at the end of shifts she didn’t have to extend, just to check, just to talk, just to look at me with those warm brown eyes like I’m a man instead of a monster.

She has no idea what she’s saving.

When I’m healed enough to vanish, I do what creatures like me do.

I disappear back into the dark.

Two years.

That’s how long I’ve been watching her.

It started as gratitude, at least that’s the lie I told myself, anyway. A man should know who saved his life.

So I had my people pull everything: the Stuyvesant transcripts, the Columbia med school records, the residency evaluations that read like love letters from her attendings.

Brilliant. Relentless.

Thirty-two years old and already the trauma surgeon they call when nobody else can stop the bleeding.

And her family.

Sokolov.

I should have made the connection in that hospital room. She’s cousin to Nikolai and Maksim Sokolov. Bratva royalty, two steps removed—close enough to be loved and close enough to be guarded.

The princess who chose scalpels over the family business—and the family let her, because even wolves understand the value of keeping one of their own clean.

She lives behind layers of security most men can’t even see. Drivers who are not just drivers.

Doormen who carry.

A cousin’s shadow stretched protectively over every hospital, every coffee shop, every block of her carefully ordinary life.

Untouchable.

The word should have ended it. Instead, it lit the fuse.

I know her now. I know she takes her coffee black until the third night shift in a row, when she surrenders to sugar.

I know she runs the Hudson greenway on Sunday mornings, earbuds in, dangerously oblivious.

I know she cried outside the hospital for eleven minutes last March after losing a nineteen-year-old on her table, then she fixed her makeup and went back inside to finish her shift.

I know the playlist, the takeout orders, her favorite clothing store, and the bodega cat she greets by name.

I know everything except what her hair feels like out of that ponytail. What her mouth tastes like. What sound she’d make with my name on her lips—my *real* name.

I’ve had beautiful women. Powerful women. Women who came to me freely and women who calculated their way into my bed, and not one of them ever kept me up at night.

Not one of them pulled me out of the dark with nothing but a voice.

Not one of them saved my life then simply forgot me.

Moved on.

Went back to saving other men like I was nothing remarkable at all.

She doesn’t even remember I exist.

I remember enough for both of us.

So I wait. I watch. I plan. Patience is the only virtue I’ve ever possessed, and I’ve sharpened it for two years on her name. The Sokolovs can’t guard her forever.

Somewhere, sometime, there will be a crack in all that armor—an opening, an opportunity.

When it comes, I will take her.

No matter what it costs.

No matter who bleeds.

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1

KATERINA

Twelve hours.

Twelve hours, two gunshot wounds, one ruptured spleen, a perforated ulcer that decided to make its grand entrance at hour eleven—and her.

The motorcycle girl.

She comes in at hour six, seventeen years old, helmet split clean in two, which is the only reason she still has a face.

The taxi driver who hit her is in the waiting room sobbing into his hands.

She's hypotensive, belly rigid, and the FAST scan lights up like a slot machine—blood everywhere it shouldn't be. We're in the OR in nine minutes.

Her liver is shredded. Not lacerated—*shredded*. It was the worst I've ever seen, and I've been doing this for a long time.

Twice on that table her pressure bottoms out and the anesthesiologist's voice goes carefully neutral, the tone we all use when we're really saying *it might be time to stop*. And twice I say, "No. Hang another unit. We're not done."

Because here’s the thing about a seventeen-year-old on your table. Somewhere outside those doors, a mother is bargaining with God, and I am the only person standing between joy and despair.

So I pack the liver. I clamp and sew, and my hands do what years of training built them to do even when my back is screaming and my eyes are dryer than a desert.

At hour eight, against every statistic in every textbook, her pressure holds. Even better, it steadies and climbs.

She’ll wake up tomorrow with a wicked looking scar and her whole life still in front of her.

I hope she realizes that she’s been given another lease in life and doesn’t do any more stupid shit.

When I find her mother in the waiting room and say the words “she’s going to make it”, the woman grabs my hands and presses them to her wet face and says something in Portuguese I don’t need translated. That. That right there is the entire reason I do this. So another mother can see her child.

The ulcer at hour eleven is almost insulting by comparison.

I won them all. Tonight, at least, everybody lived.

The locker room smells like industrial soap and feet, which is gross and I really hope sanitation takes care of that.

I peel off my scrub cap and my hair tumbles loose, heavy and damp at the nape of my neck.

For a moment I just stand there with my forehead against the cool metal of my locker, listening to the fluorescent lights buzz.

Somewhere down the hall a gurney rattles. A monitor chimes its endless, patient heartbeat.

The sounds of the hospital at 7 a.m.—the sounds I’ve lived inside for so long they’re more like a pulse than a place.

I change into jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that smells mercifully of my own laundry detergent instead of antiseptic, shoulder my bag, and swipe my badge at the time clock.

The little screen flashes green. *Sokolov, K. — Shift End.*

Freedom. A hot shower.

The leftover pad Thai in my fridge that I've been fantasizing about since hour eight.

I don't care that it's technically breakfast time.

I've been craving pad Thai, and dammit I'm going to eat it right over the sink like the pig I am.

Then, the holy grail, a whole day off tomorrow, which I plan to spend horizontal and watch an obscene amount of trash TV.

There's a new season of *Real Housewives* and I can't wait to watch rich women act like idiots while I let my brain rot.

The corridors are still in their night mode, lights dimmed to amber. I pass the nurses' station on four, where Dawn is holding court over a contraband box of donuts.

"Dr. Sokolov." She points a glazed cruller at me, her brown eyes narrowed behind her cat-eye glasses. "Tell me you're actually going home and not circling back to check on the motorcycle kid for the third time."

I grin. "Second time," I say cheerfully. "And I already checked. She's stable."

"Mm-hmm." Dawn has been a trauma nurse for twenty-six years and has earned the right to that *mm-hmm*. "Go home, baby. Eat something that didn't come from a vending machine."

Damn Dawn and her eagle eyes. She knows I have a weakness for cookies and candy. "Yes, ma'am."

In the elevator lobby, an older man in a rumpled Mets hoodie is asleep upright in a chair, a teddy bear with a balloon clutched in his lap.

Either a new father or grandfather, I'd bet my license, waiting out the hours between visiting windows.

The vending machine hums its blue glow over him like a nightlight and I gaze longingly at the brown sugar pop tarts I know are there.

Instead, I fish my phone out as I wait for the elevator and thumb through the day's accumulated life: a text from my best friend with a recipe I will never make, three memes from Priya in cardiology, a reminder that my dry cleaning has been ready for nine days.

The small, dumb, lovely administration of an ordinary life.

My phone rings before the elevator arrives.

Nikolai.

My heart does a little leap, exhaustion momentarily forgotten, because there's only one reason I can think of for my cousin to call this early—Aria.

Maksim's wife is due any day now, round and radiant and so over being pregnant the last time I saw her that she threatened to evict the baby by sheer force of will.

I've only met her a handful of times, but I liked her instantly—the way she rolls her eyes at Maksim's brooding, the way my terrifying cousin turns soft as warm butter when she and Daniel walk into a room.

I've been quietly praying for a girl because Maksim and Aria did not want to know the baby's sex.

God, I hope it's a girl.

The Sokolov family could use more estrogen.

I answer with a grin already forming as I fantasize about all the baby clothes I'm going to buy. "What's up, Kolya? Am I a cousin again? Please tell me it's a girl—"

"Where are you?"

Two words, and the grin dies on my face.

I know my cousin's voices like the back of my hand. There's boardroom Nikolai, smooth and cold. There's family-dinner Nikolai, dry and almost human.

And there's this one—flat, clipped, and stripped of everything but command—the voice I've only heard a handful of times in my life, and never once when things were okay.

"I'm at work," I say slowly. "I just finished my shift. Kolya, what—"

"Are you safe?" Nikolai demands. "Is anyone with you?"

"I'm in the middle of Columbia Presbyterian, there are about four hundred people with me." I pull the phone away to check the screen, as if it might explain something. "I'm fine. I'm about to head home. What is going on?"

What comes next comes fast.

Too fast, his words tumbling over each other in a way that is so profoundly unlike my measured, deliberate cousin that my stomach drops before I've even processed the content. Dinner at Maksim's.

The families together—Brennans, Santoros, all of them.

A breach. A child.

"Wait—wait, slow down." I press my free hand flat against the wall, grounding myself the way I do before I tell a family bad news. "Someone took *Seraphina*? Leo Santoro's daughter? She's—God, Kolya, she's what, two?"

"Not even three," my cousin confirms, his voice like ice which means he's irate. "They breached the perimeter at Maksim's estate during dinner. In and out in under thirty seconds. They managed to evade Maksim's worthless guards and snatched the girl when Danya's back was turned while the children played in the backyard." Nikolai growls in anger.

The hallway tilts slightly.

I slide down onto the bench because my legs suddenly aren't reliable.

Seraphina Santoro. I've never met her but I'm friends with her mother, Emma, on Instagram and I see Emma post about her daughter all the time.

She has Emma's dimples and Leo's dark eyes and this hiccupping little giggle that I've heard in videos.

Emma recently shared a photo of Seraphina and Leo where Leo was sitting on the floor, a plastic crown on his head and surrounded by stuffed animals while he pretended to drink tea as Seraphina looked on. It was *adorable*.

Now she's gone in under thirty seconds. From *Maksim's* house.

I avoid my family's world like the plague, but you don't grow up Sokolov without knowing certain truths.

And the truth is this: my cousins are paranoid in a way that borders on pathology.

Nikolai once made me move apartments because a neighbor's boyfriend had a record.

My brownstone has windows that could stop a rifle round and a door that belongs on a bank vault—his housewarming gift, installed whether I wanted it or not.

Maksim's Westchester address may look like a home, but I know it's a fortress with throw pillows.

Whoever got through that isn't some opportunist.

This is an enemy.

A serious one.

"Emma," I whisper, my heart going out to the woman. I've always found her to be delightful. "Leo. God, they must be—" I can't even finish it and shake my head, a lump in my throat. I've delivered the worst news in the world to parents in waiting rooms, so I know what their faces look like. "Kolya, this is horrible, and I'm so sorry, but…why are you calling *me*? I'm a surgeon. Unless someone's bleeding, I don't see what I can possibly—"

He hesitates and that immediately puts me on edge.

Nikolai Sokolov does not hesitate.

Nikolai decides, announces, and expects the world to rearrange itself accordingly.

The silence on the line lasts maybe three seconds and it frightens me more than everything he's said so far combined.

"A message arrived after midnight," he says finally. "The people who took Seraphina are willing to negotiate her return. But they will only negotiate with one person." A breath. "Dr. Katerina Sokolov. And you must come alone."

The hallway noise drops away. The buzzing lights, the distant monitors, all of it swallowed by a high thin ringing in my ears.

Me.

"That's—" My voice comes out wrong, so I try again. "That doesn't make any sense. I don't *know* anyone in your world. I've spent my entire adult life making sure of it. Why would kidnappers want—what could they possibly want with *me*?"

"I don't know yet." I can hear what it costs him to say those words, because Nikolai not knowing something is a personal insult to his entire existence. "But I'm not waiting to find out. I'm sending a car. You're coming to the estate tonight, where I can protect you, and we'll handle—"

"No." The word bursts out of me.

"Katerina," Nikolai says my full name slowly, in the voice that makes hardened criminals reconsider their life choices. "This is not a discussion."

"You're right, it's not." I'm on my feet again, pacing the hallway, and a passing nurse gives me a wide berth. "A two year old is out there somewhere, scared out of her mind, away from her mother, and the people holding her will only talk to *me*. If you lock me away in your fortress, what happens to her, Kolya? They asked for *me*. That means I need to be *reachable*."

“It means it’s a *trap*.” His control is slipping now. I can hear the Russian bleeding into his vowels the way it does when he’s truly furious. “Think, Katya. *Think*. Someone breaches Maksim’s security like it’s nothing, and their one demand is the single member of this family who lives outside our protection? They don’t want to negotiate, Katerina. They want *you*. Leverage against this family, or worse. You’d be handing yourself to them gift-wrapped.”

“Then they can have me gift-wrapped,” I snap. I notice my hands shaking but I can’t bring myself to care. “Because here’s what you don’t get to decide: if there is anything—*anything*—I can do to bring that little girl home to her parents, I’m doing it. I do whatever it takes. That’s my *job*, Kolya. I just did it today. This is my whole life, everything I’ve trained for. You don’t get to take it away from me because you’re scared.”

Only a few hours ago I stood over a dying girl and refused to stop. The photo of Seraphina and her father pops in my mind, and my resolve sets.

“I am the head of this family,” Nikolai snaps, but I roll my eyes. *Blah blah blah, Kolya.*

“And I don’t answer to you.” The words snap out sharper than I intend, and I sigh, rubbing my nose with my hand at Nikolai’s silence. “I love you. I know what this is. I know losing control of anything makes you batty. But I am *not* negotiating this. If they reach out, I answer.”

I can practically hear Nikolai’s molars grinding together, but it doesn’t bother me.

Nikolai has not been told no by anyone other than Maksim in a decade, and I’ll wait his little temper tantrum out.

Even though I rejected the Bratva life, I know you never, *ever* speak first when there’s silence.

“Security around your home,” he says at last and he sounds pissed. “Around the clock. That’s *not* negotiable, Katya,” he says severely, as if he can tell my mouth has dropped open in outrage. “They stay out of sight, but if anything feels wrong—if anyone so much as approaches you aggressively—my men move in, and you do not argue.”

I puff out a breath. “Fine. That’s fair.” It is, and we both know it’s also a surrender. I’m gracious enough not to gloat. “I’ll call you the second I hear anything. I promise.”

“How are you getting home?”

I roll my eyes. Oh, here we go. Nikolai is going to lose his shit. “The train, like a normal human—”

“*Absolutely not,*” Nikolai bellows and I quickly pull the phone away from my ear before I suffer lasting hearing damage. “A car is already waiting for you at the main entrance. It’s a black Mercedes. Yuri is driving.”

My jaw drops at his audacity. “You sent a car before you even—” The line clicks dead and I make a disbelieving sound. I pull the phone away from my ear and glare at the screen.

I can honestly feel my cousin’s smugness even though we aren’t talking anymore. I stomp toward the exit. “Of course you did, you *arrogant, meddling*—” A woman waiting by the elevators raises her eyebrows. I curse my cousin the rest of the way to the lobby in Russian, under my breath, because some sentiments require the mother tongue.

A janitor guides his mop in slow figure eights across the marble as I walk toward the exit.

The gift shop is dark behind its grate with its sad balloons pressed against the glass and I catch my reflection in the long window by the exit and almost don’t recognize her: a pale woman with wild eyes, holding her phone like it might detonate.

I make myself slow down and unclench my jaw.

Twenty minutes ago, my biggest problem was leftover pad Thai and trashy TV.

“Good morning, Dr. Sokolov,” the security guard says from his desk, not looking up from his crossword. “Get some rest.”

“Thanks, Bruce. Good morning to you, too.” My voice comes out astonishingly normal, which I’m super proud of.

The early morning air hits me at the entrance and I take a deep breath, watching as people rush by on their way to work.

Cabs streak yellow past the ambulance bay.

A cluster of nurses laugh on their smoke break under the awning's halo of light.

A man walks a dog while someone on a bicycle speeds by. The familiar electric ordinariness of a city that never quite sleeps.

Then it happens.

The hairs on the back of my neck lift, like something is dragging a current up my spine.

Someone is watching me.

I whirl around, heart slamming, gaze raking the street.

The nurses.

The dog walker.

A couple arguing over a phone screen.

Steam rising from a manhole, gilded by the weak morning light.

Windows, dozens of them, dark and bright, any one of them could—

Nothing. No one.

Just a tired surgeon, alone on a sidewalk, jumping at shadows because her cousin filled her head with kidnappers and traps.

That's all.

That's rational. I run a shaky hand through my hair and shake my head.

But the feeling doesn't pass.

The black Mercedes idles at the curb exactly where Nikolai said it would be, and Yuri—a slab of a man I dimly remember from some long-ago Christmas—is already opening the rear door.

I slide in, and the leather and the soft classical station should be comforting, but they're not.

"Dr. Sokolov." Yuri's eyes find mine in the rearview mirror as he pulls into traffic. "Long time. You were this tall." He lifts one enormous hand off the wheel, palm flat, somewhere around door-handle height.

"The Christmas with the ice storm," I tell him. "You taught me to play durak."

He huffs a laugh. "You cheated."

I shrug. "I learned fast." But I notice the way his gaze keeps cutting to the mirrors—side, rear, side again, a steady rotation that has nothing to do with traffic, and the way he takes the long way onto the parkway, doubling back once like he's checking for a tail.

Nikolai didn't send me a driver tonight.

He sent me a guard who happens to drive.

I press myself into the corner of the seat and watch the city smear past the window, my mind spinning the same questions in tighter and tighter circles.

Why me? Who looks at a kidnapped child and a Bratva empire and asks for a trauma surgeon?

What could I possibly have that they want?

I've never treated anyone connected—not knowingly, anyway.

I keep my two lives in separate, sealed containers.

I'm careful.

I have always been *so* careful.

The Mercedes turns onto my street, slows in front of my brownstone with its bulletproof windows and its vault of a door, and as Yuri comes around to open my door I catch myself scanning the rooftops.

The parked cars. The shadowed stoops.

The feeling rides up my spine again.

Somewhere out there in the dark, someone is still watching me.

I just can’t see him yet.

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2

NICO

She’s *home*.

The feed from the camera across the street renders her in high definition as the Mercedes pulls away—Katerina Sokolov on her own front steps, keys in hand, framed by the wrought iron railings of a brownstone her cousin armored.

Four monitors glow in the dark of the penthouse around me, but I only watch one.

God, *look* at her.

Twelve hours on her feet and she still moves so gracefully.

Jeans, a long-sleeved gray shirt, that battered leather bag she’s carried for over two years because the strap broke once and she stitched it herself rather than replace it.

How do I know this?

Because I have the photographs of her sitting in a coffee shop window doing it, tongue caught between her teeth in concentration.

Her hair is down tonight, and that’s rare enough that I lean forward without meaning to.

Dark waves, loose and heavy past her shoulders, still kinked from the elastic.

Eleven hundred and forty-one days I've watched this woman, and I could count on two hands the number of times I've seen her hair down outside her own windows.

Tonight, it seems, the universe is in a generous mood.

She pauses at the top of the steps and turns.

She scans the street, the rooftops, the parked cars, the shadowed stoops, and her face tips up toward the streetlight.

Even through the camera at this distance, those eyes hit me like they did two years ago in a hospital room. Warm brown gone sharp with suspicion.

Hunting for something she can feel but can't see.

You're looking the wrong direction, angel. I'm not on your street. I'm everywhere else.

She feels me, though.

She's felt me all night.

Outside the hospital she spun around so fast her hair fanned out like a matador's cape, and I watched her pulse jump in her throat on the long lens, and I confess I enjoyed that more than a good man would. But then, I'm not a good man.

The vault door closes behind her and the interior feed picks her up in the entryway—my people threaded those cameras through her security system fourteen months ago, during the seventy-one hours she spent in Boston at a trauma symposium, and her cousin's countermeasures never so much as blinked.

She sets down her keys in the blue ceramic bowl and toes off her shoes, left then right, the way she always does.

She stands in her own hallway hugging her own elbows, looking small in a way she never lets anyone see.

The security detail Nikolai promised her is already deploying outside. I track them across the other monitors with something close to affection.

Two men in the gray Suburban at the corner, sight line to her front door. One on foot rotating the block at irregular intervals—credit where due, the irregularity is good tradecraft.

A fourth covering the garden-level entrance from the rear alley. Exactly the positions I war-gamed.

Exactly the gaps I expected. They've arranged themselves like chess pieces defending a queen, and not one of them understands the game ended two years ago.

They're guarding her from the world, but no one thought to guard her from me. No one ever does, until it's too late, and by then I've already won.

The report sits open on the side monitor.

The child is settled at the lake property and she's been fed, bathed, and asleep by eight thirty after a tantrum that apparently required both caregivers and a stuffed puppy purchased en route.

Maria Reyes is a former pediatric nurse. The second woman raised four children of her own.

The little girl will be read to and kept warm and safe.

I made certain of all of it with the same rigor I bring to everything, not out of tenderness, but because damaged goods would ruin the deal, and Katerina would never forgive it.

The child means nothing to me.

A two year old is a key, and I needed a key shaped exactly like Katerina Sokolov's conscience.

Leo Santoro's daughter, taken from Maksim Sokolov's home—close enough to family that Katerina's blood would answer, distant enough that the Bratva's response would be rage instead of complete annihilation.

The breach itself cost me a fortune in bought loyalties and eleven weeks of rehearsal on a replica of Maksim Sokolov's backyard.

Thirty seconds of execution. Two years of patience behind it.

Other men in my position acquire what they want with simpler tools—a van, chloroform, etc.

The thought has occurred to me more times than I'll admit, but I've seen what taken-by-force looks like in a woman's eyes for the rest of her life, and I will not spend thirty days with that looking back at me.

No. Katerina will come to me on her own two feet, by her own choice, because of what she is—because the woman who held my shattered body together on a busy New York street is incapable of doing anything else.

I'm not *forcing* her.

I'm simply asking the world's most predictable question of the world's most magnificent answer.

I pick up the phone.

Luca answers on the first ring.

"Send it," I say. "Then route her line to me."

"Yes, Nico." A pause, half a heartbeat too long and I raise my eyebrow. Luca's lucky I've known him so long because I wouldn't otherwise tolerate the disrespect. "And if the Sokolovs trace—"

"They won't," I tell him. "Send it."

On the monitor, Katerina has moved to her kitchen.

She hasn't eaten—the pad Thai sits untouched on the counter where she abandoned it after two bites—and she's holding a glass of water she keeps forgetting to drink, pacing the length of the island, phone on the granite countertop in front of her.

Her phone lights up.

She freezes.

One ring. Two. On the third, she squares her shoulders.

I watch the breath she takes as she steadies herself and she puts the phone to her ear and says nothing at all.

Smart. Make the caller speak first. Her cousin's lessons are in there somewhere after all.

For a moment I just listen to her breathe. It's controlled, four counts in. I smile.

It's a doctor's breathing, a surgeon who has stood in arterial spray without flinching, and underneath it, so faint you'd need to have memorized her to hear it, the flutter of fear.

Two years. Two years of watching her mouth move on silent camera feeds, of replaying a hospital voice from memory.

"Dr. Sokolov," I say. "Thank you for taking my call."

"You have her," Katerina says flatly and I admire how she doesn't bother with pleasantries. "Seraphina. You're the one."

"She's safe." I keep my voice at a frequency engineered to soothe. "She's asleep. She had dinner. There's a woman with her who spent twenty years in pediatrics. Whatever you're imagining right now, I promise you, she's okay."

"You took a baby from her mother," Katerina states and I marvel at how controlled it is, even though I can hear the rage underneath it all. Ah, there she is. "Do you have any idea—she's *two*. She has a mother who is right now—" The breath punches out of her. "Whatever you want from my family, she is a *baby*, and if anything happens to her, I swear to God—"

"Nothing will happen to her." I tell her firmly, just enough to be believed. "You have my word—"

Katerina scoffs, but I press on. "—for whatever you currently think that's worth. She picked out her own stuffed puppy and named it Pancake. She's fine, Doctor. And she'll stay fine, because you and I are going to come to an arrangement."

Silence. Her free hand has found the edge of the counter, knuckles whitening.

“So tell me,” she says in that same flat voice. “What do you want? Money? Territory? Because you should be talking to my cousins, not to me. I’m not part of that world. I don’t have anything of value.”

I shake my head. She believes it, too, which is astounding. She genuinely cannot imagine what she has.

“I’m not interested in your cousins’ money. I have my own.” I lean back, watching her pace into frame and out of it, the phone pressed so hard to her ear it must hurt. “What I want, Dr. Sokolov, can’t be wired or signed over. What I want is time. Yours.”

There’s a very long pause as Katerina stops pacing. “Time,” she says slowly.

“Thirty days,” I tell her and the words come out of me easily. “You come to me voluntarily. You stay as my guest—your own rooms, my word that no harm comes to you—and you spend thirty days learning who I am. Not what your cousins will tell you I am, once they’ve dug up my name. Not what tonight has already made you decide I am. *Who I am.* You eat dinner with me. You talk to me. You look at me. That’s the price.”

On the monitor she’s gone completely still, and I watch confusion move across her face as her lips part in surprise. A smile curves my mouth. This isn’t the ransom she’s braced for.

“At the end of those thirty days,” I continue, “Seraphina goes home to her parents without a scratch on her. The child’s safety was never the variable—you are. And when it’s over, if you look me in the eye and tell me I’m exactly the monster you decided I was tonight…” The next words bother me more than I expected. “Then I’ll vanish from your life, and your family will never hear my name again. You have my word.”

The silence this time is even longer. The water glass hangs forgotten in her hand.

“That’s—” She stops and clears her throat before she starts again. “You want me to—what, to *know* you? That’s the ransom?” Her laugh comes out

with no humor in it. “You breach a fortified estate and steal a two year old. You terrorize an entire family—and your demand is that I *get to know you*?” She slaps her palm down on the island and I can hear it through the phone. She’s angry now and I can see it by how her spine is ramrod straight. “Do you hear yourself? Whoever you are, whatever you think a month is going to prove—I already know everything I need to. Tonight told me everything."

“Tonight told you what I’m capable of,” I correct. “Not why.”

Her laugh is harsh. “There is no *why* that survives what you did tonight.”

“Thirty days, Doctor,” I tell her. “We’ll see.”

“And if I say no? If I tell you to go to hell and my family hunts you down instead?”

“Then you’d be gambling a two year old’s ride home on your cousins finding in days what they couldn’t prevent in seconds.” I say it gently, nearly regretfully. “We both know you won’t, Doctor. Not because of me. Because of who you are.”

“You don’t know the first thing about who I am,” she snaps, her voice trembling a little.

I know everything about who you are, I could tell her. *Everything except the one thing I’m buying with thirty days.*

Her breath comes down the line, ragged, and when she speaks again the contempt could strip paint. It’s glorious. “Why me? Out of everyone—why *me*?”

The truth presses against my teeth, two years of it, eleven hundred days of it.

Because you saved me and forgot about me. Because I have been patient longer than I’ve ever been patient for anything, and you are the only thing in this world I could not simply buy or take.

“You’ll have thirty days to ask me that in person,” I say instead.

“At least tell me where—”

“A private estate, upstate. Far from the city. It’s completely secure. More secure than the brownstone your cousin built around you, and yes, I know exactly what he built.” Her gasp sounds down the line but I continue on. “You’ll have your own rooms. You’ll be treated well.” I check the clock. “You come alone, Doctor. That part is not negotiable. Your cousin’s detail—the gray Suburban at the corner, the walker doing irregular loops, and the man in the alley—they stay behind. If anyone follows the car, if there’s a tracker in your bag or a transmitter in your jewelry, if Nikolai Sokolov so much as tests my patience, the deal is off, and your family can spend the next decade searching for that little girl on their own.”

Katerina brings a fist to her mouth. “How do I know she’s even alive? I want proof of—”

“You’ll have proof of life within the hour. A car will be on your street in exactly sixty minutes. The driver’s name is Paul. Pack a bag, Dr. Sokolov. Pack for a month.”

“Wait—wait, you can’t just—if I’m going to even consider this, I need—”

I hang up.

It’s a small cruelty, cutting her off mid-sentence, and I permit myself to enjoy it for exactly one breath.

Not because I like her fear—her fear is the one part of this that bothers me—but because in thirty days I intend for her to learn that I am a man of my word and schedule, and the lesson begins now.

Sixty minutes.

Let’s see how long it takes her to jump into action.

On the monitor, she stands statue-still in her kitchen, phone in hand, staring at nothing.

Then the glass goes down on the marble with a crack that nearly breaks it, and she’s dialing.

I touch the audio feed for the interior because I have no intention of missing this.

“Kolya.” She doesn’t wait for hello. Stress radiates off her as she drums her fingers on the table. “He called. Get Maksim. Get Leo. *Now*—and Cillian if he’s still there. Put me on speaker.”

It takes ninety seconds to assemble the most dangerous conference call in New York. I pour two fingers of Barolo and listen to the kings of three families crowd around a phone for her.

She reports like a surgeon dictating an operative note.

Her voice is steady, and you would never know how she truly feels.

Only I, watching her free hand clench and release against her thigh, off-rhythm, over and over, know how angry and scared she is. Magnificent. She is magnificent, and they can’t even see it.

Nikolai detonates first, as expected. “Absolutely not,” he roars. “Out of the question.” The phone speaker crackles with the explosion of his anger.

He’ll have men at her door in ten minutes. She’s coming to the estate. The negotiation happens through intermediaries or not at all.

“There are no intermediaries, Kolya. You heard the terms. Me, alone, or nothing,” my angel says coolly.

Maksim’s voice comes on next and out of the two brothers, Maksim Sokolov is the more physically imposing one.

He asks about my voice, accent, background noise, and word choice.

He’s building a profile of me from her answers, and I salute him with the wine because it’s exactly the right move and it will get him exactly nowhere.

Cillian Brennan wants to discuss the car, intercept points, and a tail rotation the driver won’t spot.

I roll my eyes.

They’re all amateurs at this, even if they think they’re professionals.

Not one of them is able to do a single thing about the next hour, because I’ve built it so the only door out of this leads to me.

Then another voice joins and this one makes me stiffen.

Leo Santoro, father of the year, sounds like a man who has been screaming or crying or both.

“Katerina,” he breathes her name, and the line goes still. “Is she alive? Did he—do you believe him? That she’s safe?”

My angel closes her eyes, lashes pressing down and gathering herself before she says, “He gave me some details, Leo. He said they got her a stuffed puppy and she named it Pancake.”

The sound Leo makes is a half-laugh, half-sob. “Pancake?” He breathes. “She—she has a stuffed rabbit named Pancake. It’s sitting on her bed right now. Oh, Sera…”

Got him. Now he knows his daughter is alive. That detail was a gift and I gave it to Katerina for a reason.

“He’s getting me proof of life within the hour,” Katerina continues, her eyes glassy. “And yes, God help me, I believed him. Whatever he is, hurting her isn’t…it isn’t what this is.”

“Then what *is* it?” Nikolai snaps savagely. “Thirty days, alone, with a man who tore a hole through Maksim’s security like wet paper—Katya, *think*. This was never about Seraphina. This was always about *you*. The child is bait. He did all of it to get to *you*.”

Clever, clever Nikolai. Two years too late.

“Maybe.” Her voice doesn’t waver. “Probably. I can’t explain it and I don’t care. Here’s what I know. There’s a two year old that needs to get home to her parents in thirty days, and the only thing it costs is me. That math isn’t hard, Kolya.”

“He said she comes home *regardless*,” Nikolai argues, pouncing on what his cousin just said. “Those were his exact words, right? Seraphina’s safety was never the variable, which means she comes home whether you go or not. So *don’t go*, Katerina. Don’t hand yourself to him for a debt he already promised to pay.”

On my monitor, I watch her go still. Her free hand stops its restless clenching against her thigh.

There it is. I set the wine glass down.

“And if he’s lying?” she snaps back. “If I take that gamble and he’s lying, Kolya—if I stay home in my fortified house and decide to trust the word of this man I don’t know—then what? Then I’ve bet a toddler’s life on the honor of the man who took her.” She shakes her head, strands of hair flying in the air. “I can’t do it. You know I can’t. Don’t ask me to be the kind of person who could.”

Nikolai’s growl comes through my feed. “You are not a *currency*—”

“Tonight I am.” There’s pure resolve in her voice.

On my screen she’s standing straight-spined in her kitchen, hair loose, eyes burning, generations of Sokolov iron dressed in a gray shirt, and I have never wanted anything in forty-two years the way I want this woman. “Leo, tell Emma that Seraphina is coming home. I’m doing this. I need you all to let me, because I’m doing it either way.” She scowls at her phone. “And if you follow that car, if you put a tracker on me, if any of you cost that little girl her ride home, I will never forgive you. Do you hear me? *Never.*”

The argument rages another six minutes, but I pay it no attention. It was over before it began.

Every point they make, she neatly refutes it with logic or sheer stubbornness.

Nikolai threatens to physically remove her from her home and she tells him, sweetly, that he’s always told her to keep her word and it’s far too late to complain about the results.

One by one, the kings go quiet.

There’s nothing else they can do. I dismantled every alternative months ago so that when this moment came, her conscience would have one road and I would be standing at the end of it.

She hangs up and places both hands on the edge of her island as she stares at her blank phone, her body impossibly still.

I'm not even sure if she's breathing and I lean in closer to make sure she's still alive.

But then she snaps to attention and what she does takes my breath away.

She squares her shoulders the way she did before answering my call, pushes her hair back from her face with both hands, and walks upstairs to pack.

There's no tears. She doesn't even collapse.

My beautiful, brilliant girl walks toward the wolf with her chin up because a child needs her to, exactly as I knew she would, and the satisfaction spreading through my chest is so vast it feels almost like peace.

I drain the wine and pull up the route to the estate. Two years of watching. Fifty-four minutes left.

Then, Katerina Sokolov, you are finally, finally mine—

—for thirty days. To start.

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3

KATERINA

The car is exactly on time and if I wasn't so freaked out, I would roll my eyes at the punctuality.

I've been watching the street through my front window for twelve minutes, and the black sedan slides to the curb at the sixty-minute mark precisely, headlights sweeping my stoop.

This strange man is clearly not a foreigner because *my* family—except Maksim and Nikolai but they're weirdos—treats proposed times as a suggestion. 2:30 start?

Nah. We'll show at 3.

You need to be somewhere in 15 minutes?

More like you'll start getting *ready* in 15 minutes.

My ears are still ringing from the bitching that Nikolai and Maksim gave me. After I hung up on them the first time, they called me *again* to ream me for my decision.

They kept shouting over each other on speakerphone until I hung up on both of them mid-sentence.

Let them be furious. Furious is survivable.

A two year old in a stranger’s hands is not.

I sling my bag over my shoulder.

It took me fifteen minutes to pack it, because it turns out there’s no good answer to the question: what does one wear to a kidnapping.

I walk out my own front door before I can stand here long enough to let my cousins’ voices win.

The driver is already out of the car and I stop short when I see him.

He’s *huge*, shoulders like a doorframe, a gray crew cut and a completely expressionless face.

Ever heard the phrase ‘the lights are on but there’s no one home?’ Yeah, that’s this guy.

He takes my bag from my shoulder, sets it in the trunk, and opens the back door without a word.

“Paul?” I ask, and he barely nods.

“Thank you,” I say, because my mother raised me to be polite even to the man delivering me to god knows what.

Nothing. Not a flicker.

I swallow and glance around, wondering when the next time I’ll see this place is, before I get in.

The leather swallows me and it’s butter-soft, smelling of faint citrus. It’s a *beautiful* car, which is its own small horror because the worst night of my life comes with heated seats.

My hands are shaking, so I shove them under my thighs and press down until my fingers go numb.

The driver settles in and the engine wakes up purring. If Maksim were here and this wasn’t a life-or-death situation, he would probably be salivating.

Now that he’s a suburban married father, he gets to tinker with cars to his heart’s content.

“Where are we going?” I lean forward, desperate for information. “How long is the drive?”

The driver checks the mirror and pulls into the empty street, not saying a word.

I frown. Okay, rude.

“I’m Katerina, but I prefer to be called Kat even though my cousins call me Katya. They refuse to call me Kat, which is super annoying.” I really need to shut up.

Am I seriously introducing myself to my own abduction’s chauffeur?

But the silence in here is starting to feel suffocating and I have never done well with awkward silences. “Is there a bathroom stop, or do I—”

He reaches forward and turns on the radio and low, mournful, funeral cellos blare through the car. Is this…*Adagio for Strings?* I sit back hard against the seat as the blood leaves my face and the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

That’s it. I’m for sure being murdered.

Why the hell would anyone want to play this song other than for funerals or because they’re depressed and need a song to literally make themselves cry?

Serial killers, I decide. Serial killers are the only ones who would want to play this song.

I also decide it’s probably wise to keep my mouth shut the rest of the journey.

We cross the bridge and the city’s glow peels away behind us, then there’s nothing to do but watch the window and listen to my own head, which has apparently been waiting all night for exactly this much quiet to really get going.

Who takes a child to get to a doctor?

Trees blur past, their color muted due to the gray skies.

The streetlights thin then quit entirely.

We pass by brick buildings and a dilapidated diner, but I'm too much in my head to pay attention to my surroundings.

God, my cousins would have a coronary right about that.

What do I have? What could I possibly have that's worth kidnapping Leo and Emma Santoro's child?

I put my forehead on the cold glass. My reflection stares back, washed out by the dash light, eyes too big.

He knew how to get into Maksim's house. He knew that the Santoros and Brennans would be at Maksim and Aria's. He has eyes inside Maksim's house, which means he probably has eyes inside mine—

I startle and my forehead bangs on the glass.

My skin smarts, but I ignore the pain as iciness washes over me and it feels like there's a hand clamped around my heart.

How long has he been watching me?

I don't allow myself to fall down that path. I do what I do in the OR when a thought tips toward panic instead of information and shove it deep away in the recesses of my brain.

I can't panic. Panicking will get me nowhere and I have no doubt that if I tried to escape, I would be forcibly taken anyway.

Taking a deep breath to quell the rising panic, I try counting mile markers.

I give up within a few minutes.

Forty minutes. An hour.

The back of the driver's head never moves, his hands stay loose and easy on the wheel the whole way.

Somewhere past the ninety-minute mark, I start to wonder if Nikolai was right.

If this is the kind of mistake you only get to make once.

No. I made this choice with my whole chest. I am not going to sit here and unmake it one mile marker at a time.

I must have dozed off, because I'm suddenly jerked awake by the sound of gravel under the tires.

I look around and see that we've reached some type of iron gate.

There's a camera above, swiveling with quiet little mechanical patience to find the car. To find me.

The gate swings open silently, which surprises me.

Usually, these types of old gates creak which would have added to the creepy factor of all of this.

We drive through and it takes everything in me for my jaw to not drop at what I see next.

The grounds are stupidly and unfairly beautiful in the afternoon sunlight.

The drive winds between old trees, the branches reaching together overhead until it feels like driving through a tunnel.

The lawns go on forever, mowed into something too perfect to be real.

There's a fountain off to one side, the water murky in the cloudy skies.

My gaze comes onto the house and my eyes widen.

It's a three-story mansion made of stone and ivy with a sweeping grant driveway.

It's something you see in Newport Beach, right out of the Gilded Age.

I half expect women in old fashioned dresses to be strolling around with their parasols while servants bustle behind them.

I shake my head as if to dislodge the thought. I really don't know what I was expecting.

Maybe a gangster's house?

But then again, what even *is* a gangster's house? Something flashy, I think.

That tries too hard.

This is the complete opposite. And that scares me more than flashy ever would.

The car stops at the bottom of a wide stone staircase and the driver cuts the engine.

The music immediately shuts off, leaving a very uneasy silence. I swallow heavily, unease prickling down my spine.

You can do this, Kat. Whatever this is, you walk in with your back straight.

The door opens for me. I step out onto gravel that crunches too loud, the cold biting after all that warmth, and I look up. My breath catches.

He's already there at the top of the steps.

God help me, my first thought isn't *you're a piece of shit*. No, my first traitorous thought is *holy hell*.

My therapist is going to have a field day with me if I survive this.

He's tall—well past six feet—and muscular, speaking to years of time in the gym.

He has dark hair that looks carelessly perfect.

He's wearing a black sweater that fits like it was poured on, sleeves shoved up his forearms, and even from the bottom of the stairs I can see ink there, dark lines vanishing under the fabric.

He has a strong, square jaw covered in stubble and…and his mouth—I hate that I'm looking at his mouth—is doing something just shy of a smug smile, like he never doubted for a second that I would come.

He's devastatingly, *insultingly* beautiful, and something low in my body sits up and pays attention a full second before my brain can get there and slam the door on it.

I hate it more than I've hated almost anything—this stupid animal flicker of *want*, pointed at the man who stole a baby out of a safe backyard to get me standing on his steps.

My body should know better.

My body, it turns out, does not give a damn what it should know.

Stupid, bitchass body.

I've read too many dark romances, clearly. This is *not okay*.

"Dr. Sokolov." That voice—the one from the phone, low and warm and certain of itself—does something unfair to the base of my spine. "Welcome to my home. I am Nico Barone."

My knees nearly buckle. *Barone*.

I'm not Bratva and I've spent my entire life making sure of it. But you don't grow up in my family without learning the map of who matters in this city.

Nico Barone. Corsican, an underboss. I've heard Nikolai and Maskim talk about him before and what he's done.

Cargo vanishes off the wrong docks and men who cross him simply stop being anywhere.

This man. This beautiful, catastrophically *dangerous* man has Seraphina.

And I agreed to stay with him for thirty days. Holy *fuck*.

"Where is she?" I demand, keeping my voice dispassionate. It's the same tone I use to tell families the worst news of their lives without my own falling apart, because if I let one crack open the whole thing comes down. "I want to see her. *Now*."

"Of course." There's not a flicker of surprise on his face, like he knew that would be the first thing out of my mouth.

Which, I realize with a sinking feeling, he did. He produces a tablet from inside his jacket, thumbs it open, and turns the screen to me.

The first thing I see is a playroom with soft light and toys thrown across a rug in bright primary colors.

And there—small, dark-haired, whole, *unharmed*—is Seraphina in teddy bear-printed pajamas, laughing at something off-screen with a giggle, both hands toward a person just out of frame.

My knees actually buckle and I would have collapsed if I hadn't gotten a hand on the cold stone rail.

She's okay. She's really, truly okay.

"Satisfied?" he asks gently and I stiffen.

"For now." I straighten and arrange my features so they're cool. He doesn't get to see my actual feelings. "That's not the same as forgiving you."

"I haven't asked you to." He pockets the tablet and tips his head toward the open doors behind him, gold light pouring down the steps. "Come in. It's been a long twenty-four hours, Doctor. Let me show you your rooms."

Your rooms. Not a cell or a cage. I follow him through the door because there's no other direction left to walk.

Inside is just as gorgeous as the outside.

There are gleaming marble floors and a staircase curving to the upstairs.

Paintings hang everywhere in heavy old frames.

I look around, in awe.

None of it looks like it's there to show off. It looks like he actually loves it, which bothers me more than gold toilets would have.

This isn't a man pretending to be rich.

He just is and always has been.

He takes me up the stairs and down a long hall lined with closed doors.

At the very end he opens one onto a suite so beautiful that for one disoriented second I forget what it actually is.

There’s a sitting room first, done in cream and deep green, a fire already burning low in a marble surround like someone knew exactly when I’d arrive.

Through an archway, there’s a bedroom with a bed big enough for four, made up in linen so fine it looks like it would pour through my fingers if I tried to hold it.

Beyond that, there’s a bathroom, but I can’t see the details.

There are fresh flowers next to a plate of fancy sandwiches and fruit on the table and a robe folded at the foot of the bed.

The whole thing is so warm and so lovely and so obviously, painstakingly prepared for me that it makes my skin crawl.

A five-star cell, dressed up by a man who knows it.

“You’re free to move through the house however you like, at least after you get one night’s rest,” he says, and I notice he stays in the doorway, never quite stepping over the threshold into the room he’s giving me, as if the boundary means something to him. “The library, the gardens, the pool house, the kitchens—anything you want, you only have to ask, and it’s yours. There’s a gym downstairs, if you’d like to keep your routine. I’d hate for you to feel like a stranger in your own life.”

My own life.

As though he hasn’t just blown it up. I shiver at the mention of the gym.

Another clue that he’s been watching me. Stalking me.

“And if I want to leave?” I ask, wrapping my arms around me as if to ward off a chill.

He’s quiet. When he answers, his voice is soft and almost regretful. “The gates are locked, Katerina. The grounds are watched on every side, every hour, by people who are extraordinarily good at their work. I won’t insult you by pretending otherwise.” He pauses. “Please don’t test it. Not because I’d take any pleasure in stopping you—I wouldn’t, I promise you that—but

because I would so much rather you simply let yourself rest tonight. You've earned it. You've been so brave."

Brave. He says it like a caress, like he has any right to be proud of me.

Out of his mouth, it sounds so fucking condescending and my insides turn hot with fury.

"Don't call me that," I snap, proud that my voice isn't shaking. "And it's *Kat*. Not Katerina. Everyone calls me Kat."

An odd expression flickers across his face, as if I've just made this more interesting for him somehow. "No," he says mildly, as though I've asked him a small favor he isn't able to grant. "I don't think I will."

I stare at him in disbelief. "*Excuse* me?"

"Kat." The way he says it sounds like he's disgusted. "Everyone calls you Kat. That's rather the point. I'm not everyone." He tilts his head, and his voice drops into something infuriatingly certain. "*Katerina*. All that fire, dressed up as something civilized, daring the whole world to look at her and call her cold." A ghost of a smile plays on his lips. "I've waited a very long time for Katerina. I'm not going to spend the next thirty days talking to *Kat*."

The arrogance of it steals the breath right out of me. "You don't get to decide what to call me," I snap, barely able to contain my rage. The fucking *gall* of this man.

He shrugs. "I'm afraid I do. Here, I decide a great many things." He's never lost that gentleness in his voice and that's the part that makes my skin crawl. How can he say something like that and make it sound like a kindness? "You'll forgive me the one indulgence. I've earned so little else from you so far."

"You've waited a long time," I repeat, unable to believe what I'm hearing. "For a woman you've never met."

He smiles, as if he's amused by something. "Something like that."

“Right. Cool. That’s totally normal.” I should shut up, but clearly I’m not going to. Apparently fear makes me chatty. “You stole a baby out of a backyard, drove me I don’t know how many hours into the woods, and now you’re standing in the doorway picking out which of my names I’m allowed to have. And you want me to call *that* patient?"

“Patience is the only thing I’ve ever been good at.”

What the hell does that even mean? I take a step toward him instead of away, mostly to see what he does, and he goes very still, like I’m a wild thing that’s done something unexpected.

He shifts his weight when I move, and that’s when I make the mistake of looking at his arms.

The sleeves of that sweater are still shoved up to the elbow, and the forearms underneath are all corded muscle and dark ink.

Even close up, I still can’t make out the design winding up from his wrist and vanishing under the fabric.

His hands are big and scarred across the knuckles.

The hands of a man who has very much used them.

God, am I seriously admiring the hands of a man that signed off on stealing a two year old?

Goddammit, I’m more fucked up than I would like to admit.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” I snap, getting back on track and ignoring his forearms. “Whatever you think this month is going to be, it’s not happening. I don’t scare easy and I don’t fold. Call me whatever you want. It doesn’t make me yours. So go to fucking hell.”

For a second he just looks at me, and the easy, amused expression on his face flickers, like I’ve surprised him.

He wasn’t expecting me to tell him to go to hell.

I tense, wondering if I’ve pushed him too far and he’s going to go after me now.

But then a slow smile curves across his lips. He looks…pleased.

“No,” he says quietly. “I don’t suppose it does.” He inclines his head toward me. “Sleep well, Katerina.” He pauses as if remembering something. “I want to assure you that you’re safe here. Whatever else you believe about me before this is over—and you’ll believe a great many things—believe that. No harm comes to you under this roof. You have my word, even if that doesn’t mean much to you right now.”

Then he’s gone, the door drawn shut behind him, and a beat later I hear the soft *snick* of a lock turning from the outside.

I’m left standing there with my heart going like I sprinted up the stairs. I hate him.

I hate this fucking house.

And I hate that I spent part of that entire exchange noticing his forearms.

When I finally move, it’s on autopilot.

I shower until my skin goes pink, find soft pajamas in a drawer in exactly my size, and put them on because the alternative is sleeping naked in a stranger’s house and that is *not happening*.

I devour the sandwiches and fruit, pretending they don’t taste as good as they do.

Then I climb into a bed that’s somehow softer than my own and wait for sleep that doesn’t come.

I lie there for hours.

Every time I close my eyes my brain just starts the morning over again from the top—the call, Nikolai yelling, Seraphina giggling on that screen, the way my knees went out from under me on the steps.

Maybe Nikolai was right.

Maybe I made the worst mistake of my life and won’t know it until it’s too late.

I don’t cry. I won’t give this house that.

But a few hours later, I finally let myself admit the thing I've been dodging since the phone rang.

I'm afraid.

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4

NICO

She’s awake the next morning by six.

I know because I’m already in my study with coffee and the morning’s reports when the feed shows her door opening and out she comes into the hall in a pair of leggings and a fresh shirt, hair still damp, glancing around the hallway.

I should let her have the illusion of privacy, but I don’t.

I’ve spent two years learning her from a distance and now she’s under my roof, breathing my air, and the idea of looking away from a single minute of it is frankly absurd.

I’ve waited too long. I’ll ration my self-denial some other lifetime.

So I watch and she does exactly what I knew she would. She *explores*.

What makes me set down my coffee and smile is how she does it.

She’s not acting like a frightened guest wandering a strange house. No, she walks the ground floor room by room, leaving nothing behind her.

She counts doors and looks at the windows.

She finds the keypads and doesn’t touch them, because touching them would tell me she’s thinking about them, and my Katerina would rather I underestimate her.

It’s beautiful to watch, and it tells me something I already suspected and now know for certain.

She spent her whole life swearing she has nothing to do with the Bratva, but yet here she is.

You can refuse the life, *milaya*, but you can’t unlearn the way they raised you to see a room.

Her family built that into her bones along with the bulletproof windows, and she has no idea she’s wearing it like a second skin.

She pauses at the camera tucked into the molding above the conservatory door and looks directly into it for a long, level moment.

I lean back in my chair and laugh, delighted, because she’s found one out of forty and she’s letting me know she found it.

There you are.

She drifts out to the gardens around nine, and *god* the light is good to her. She’s tall and lean, the morning sun finds the auburn buried in all that dark hair and sets it glowing.

Two years I’ve had photographs, but photographs are *nothing*.

They don’t capture the way she tips her face up to feel the sun then catches herself doing it, scowling, as if reminding herself she can’t let herself enjoy anything.

She’s looking for the way out and it’s obvious by the way she’s already surveying the fence.

It should annoy me, but it enchants me instead.

This is the woman I chose—not some soft thing who’d fold into captivity and call it fate, but a creature with a spine of steel who walked in here to

save a child she barely knows and is now beginning the long work of attempting to get herself back out.

She wears her confidence outwardly and underneath it, and, because I have memorized every flicker of her, I can see the fear she'd die before showing me.

It's in the set of her shoulders and the way her eyes never stop moving.

She's afraid, which is smart because she should be. And she's magnificent anyway.

I let her have her day.

I have business that genuinely requires me, and there's a particular pleasure in restraint, in knowing I could go to her at any moment and choosing instead to wait.

I've become an artist of waiting.

She'll learn that about me soon enough.

Later, I find her in the library.

She's folded into the wing chair by the cold fireplace with a book she isn't reading, and when I step through the door she goes still.

She reminds me of a prey animal, as if she's deciding whether to run.

Her hair is down, and I have to take a moment to absorb the fact that Katerina Sokolov is sitting in my library close enough to touch.

But I don't touch her.

I'm not an animal.

I'm simply a man who has wanted one thing for two years and has finally, *finally* been allowed into the same room as it.

“You haven’t eaten,” I finally say. “Not really. You ate a piece of fruit and only half a sandwich.”

Her chin comes up and her eyes narrow. “You’re watching what I eat?”

“I’m watching everything.” I decide to be honest as lies would insult us both. “Have dinner with me, Katerina. You can keep starving yourself to make a point, or you can let me feed you something extraordinary and ask me all the questions I know you want to ask.” I shrug, placing my hands in my pockets. “It’s your choice. It’s always your choice.”

It isn’t, of course, but she’s hungry. For food and for information. The chance to interrogate me is bait she can’t quite refuse.

“Fine,” she grits out. “Dinner.”

I almost tell her she’s just made me happier than she could possibly understand, but I don’t. There’ll be time.

The dining room overlooks the gardens, lit low and gold.

I seat her where she can see the doors, and for a while there’s only the quiet business of plates arriving and wine she doesn’t touch.

She watches me when she thinks I won’t notice.

I watch her without bothering to hide it.

Let her see that, at least. I’ve never once been ashamed of looking at her.

She breaks first, which isn’t a surprise but also is.

It just shows her desperation for answers.

“You showed me Seraphina last night and she looks unharmed. Great.” Her eyes don’t leave mine. “So I’m not going to sit here and let you reassure me she’s okay like that’s the question. The question is what happens to her now. What’s the guarantee she gets to go home? And if I don’t do whatever it is

you brought me here to do”—her lips curl and I watch as if in a trance—“if I don’t *cooperate* to your satisfaction, does that little girl pay for it?"

“No,” I say plainly, because on this one point I want to be believed. “Nothing that happens between you and me touches her. Seraphina goes home in twenty-nine days regardless of how you behave, how much you hate me, or whether you spend the entire month trying to climb my fence. Her safety was never a lever I intend to pull against you. I told you that on the phone and I meant it.”

My angel scoffs. “People like you say a lot of things.”

“They do.” I taste the wine and nearly sigh with pleasure. It’s very good. “But it costs me nothing to keep that particular promise, and I’ve found the cheap promises are the ones worth trusting. She’s well. She’ll stay well. She’ll go home.” I set the glass down. “Ask me the rest. That’s the part you actually want.”

“What do you want?” she asks bluntly, her voice level. “From my family. From me. What’s the endgame here—territory, leverage, a war you’re starting? What is worth taking a child?”

Good question, but it’s not the time yet to answer it. I pretend to mull it over. “You’ll have your answer to that, but not right now. We have thirty days, after all.” I watch her jaw tighten at *thirty days*, at the casual ownership of a month of her life. “Tonight I’d rather not talk about your family at all. Tonight I’d like to talk about you.”

She waves her hand, as if batting away a fly. “I’m not interesting.”

The lie is so enormous I nearly laugh. “Tell me about your work,” I say instead. “You’re a trauma surgeon. What does that mean? What does a night look like, for you?”

She narrows her eyes, looking for the trap, but there isn’t one. There’s only my desire to hear her speak about her life.

And then, because she loves her job, she tells me. She talks cautiously at first, but as she talks she gets more passionate.

“It’s not what people think it is.” She leans in without seeming to notice she’s doing it, forearms on the table. “Everybody pictures chaos, like something you’d see in *Grey’s Anatomy*. But it’s the opposite. When it’s really bad—when someone comes in with no pressure and a clock running—it goes *quiet*. The whole room drops into this kind of cold, fast calm. Everything narrows. There’s the body, and the problem, and your hands, and nothing else exists. No noise. No time. Just the next correct move, and the next one.”

Her right hand lifts off the table as she says it, a small precise motion in the air, and I realize she’s miming it without knowing she’s doing it.

Whatever those hands did to me on that table two years ago, they’re doing it again now over a wine glass, and I have to set my jaw to keep my face still.

“You get someone the numbers have already given up on,” she goes on, quieter. “No pulse, pupils going, every monitor in the room telling you it’s over. But what I learned in practice is that you don’t have to listen to that. You can put your hands inside a person and just…refuse. Hold the line they can’t hold themselves. And most of the time you lose. Most of the time the numbers were right.” She turns the stem of the glass she hasn’t touched, lost in thought. “But sometimes you drag them back over the edge by your fingernails and they wake up three days later annoyed about the parking, with no idea anybody fought a war over them while they were gone.”

There it is.

That’s the sentence that ends me.

No idea anybody fought a war over them while they were gone.

It’s delivered flat, almost rueful, like it’s a small workplace irony and not the single most important fact of my life.

Because she is describing *me*.

She is sitting in my dining room describing the night she knelt over my ruined body and refused to let me die, and she doesn’t know it.

I’m filed under a hundred other faceless saves, and the not-knowing is somehow the most intimate thing that has ever happened to me.

I watch her mouth as she talks.

I watch the small unconscious tells—the way she says *we* about her team and *you* about the patient, the way her voice drops half a register when she gets to the part she loves, the way that careful surgeon's composure cracks just enough to let the fire underneath show through.

Two years of photographs and silent footage and I never once got this: the sound of her, lit up, talking about the one thing that makes her forget to be afraid of me.

I would have taken her a year sooner if I'd known it would be like this. I would have waited a decade longer if that's what it cost.

She's flushed now, beautiful in a way that has nothing to do with her actual looks and everything to do with the fact that she has briefly forgotten exactly where she is and who she's talking to.

"You speak about it like a calling," I manage, my mouth dry.

"It is." She catches herself then remembers where she is and who she's with, and the light goes out behind her eyes. I mourn it like a small death.

She sits back and studies me, her eyes narrowing.

She tilts her head to the side, her glorious mane of hair sliding over her shoulder and my heart beats faster.

What I wouldn't do to run my fingers through it…

"Have we met before?" she asks bluntly.

There it is. I could lie.

It would be easy, and it would buy me time, and time is the one thing I've never been short of.

But I find I don't want to lie to her, not about this.

I've imagined her knowing for two years.

I'm not going to squander the moment now that it's here.

“Yes,” I admit. “Two years ago. At Columbia Presbyterian.”

She goes very still and I don’t think she’s breathing.

“I didn’t see most of it. I was a little busy dying,” I say wryly, with a faint smile. “But I’ve watched the traffic footage more times than I’d admit to anyone. You’d just come off a shift and you were walking to the train when a car went into the barrier half a block ahead of you. The driver was still inside, bleeding out, no ambulance for blocks. Most people would have called 911 and kept walking, a good New Yorker would.” I hold her eyes. “But not you. You ran toward it. You got into what was left of that car and you kept him breathing with your hands and your voice until the medics finally came. Then you rode in with him to Columbia Presbyterian and you put him back together on your table, when everyone else in that trauma bay had already written him off.” I pause, trying to keep myself together. “And for three weeks after, you came by his room at the end of shifts just to check and make sure he was still holding on.”

The color has left her face and I watch confusion bloom across her beautiful face first, then disbelief, then realization.

“That—that was *you*,” she breathes. “The—the John Doe. The one who—” Her throat works and she swallows heavily. “You discharged yourself. You were there and then you just weren’t. Security was asking questions—”

“I had reasons to leave quietly.”

“*You*.” She’s staring at me like I’ve grown two heads. “I remember you. You were a *nightmare* of a patient. You wouldn’t answer questions, you set off every alarm in the department…” She stops, as if realizing what she’s saying and shakes her head. “No. *No*, this is—you don’t get to do this.”

My brow furrows. “Do what?”

“Make it mean something.” Her voice is cold and furious, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve heard all night. “I save lives. I saved *yours* the way I’ve saved hundreds of people’s. It’s what I *do*. It wasn’t special. It wasn’t fate. You were a *chart*, Mr. Barone. You were a set of injuries and a blood type. Whatever you’ve built this into in your head, I was just doing my job.”

“I know,” I say softly. “That’s exactly what makes it remarkable.”

She blinks in confusion.

“You held a stranger’s life in your hands like it was the most valuable thing in the world, and to you it was nothing. It was just a regular day.” I lean forward. “Do you understand how rare that is, Katerina, in my world? I have spent my life surrounded by people who calculate the worth of every life they touch. What it costs them, what it buys them. Then there was you, kneeling over a man you’d never met, a man you’d have run screaming from if you’d known what he was, fighting for him with everything you had because his life had value to you simply because it was a life.” I take a deep breath. “I have thought about you every single day since. Not one of them passed without you in it.”

The wine glass is trembling very slightly in her hand. She sets it down before it can betray her further.

“You’ve been—” She can barely say it. “You’ve been watching me. For two years.”

“*Learning* you,” I correct. “There’s a difference, though I doubt it comforts you.”

“And then you…” The pieces are still locking, and I watch the worst one slide home. Her eyes widen in horror. “Seraphina. You took a *child*. You blew a hole through my cousin’s security, terrorized three families and stole a two year old…to get my *attention*?” Her voice rises sharply on the last word.

Here’s where I have to step carefully, because the real answer is more complicated than her fury is going to want to hear.

“No,” I tell her. “Not only that. If I’d wanted only your attention, there are easier ways to earn it, and I’m a patient man. I’d have used them.” I watch that register on her face and smile slightly. “Seraphina Santoro’s absence from that house serves several purposes, Katerina. Things I’ve been arranging far longer than the thirty days you’ll spend here. Your presence at this table is one outcome of that plan. A precious one—the most precious, if I’m honest—but not the only one. You’re not the reason the child was taken. You’re the reason I’ll enjoy the next month while the rest of it unfolds.”

It’s the truth that I’m willing to give her. It even has the virtue of frightening her more than a simple yes would have.

“What *reasons?*” Her voice cracks for the first time all night and her face screws up. “What could possibly—she’s a *baby*. What reason justifies that?”

“That,” I remark carefully, “is a thirty-day conversation. And we’ve only just begun.” I rise, looking down at this furious, frightened, extraordinary woman who has been the center of my world for two years and has only learned I exist. “Try to enjoy your stay. The grounds are beautiful in the morning. The kitchen will make you anything you ask for. And you are going to be here, Katerina, whether you’ve made your peace with it or not—so you may as well let yourself sleep.”

She’s on her feet, the napkin abandoned, her whole body strung tight as a wire. “I’d like to go to my room,” she snarls, her eyes alight with anger.

“Of course. It’s your home now.” I gesture to the door graciously, the perfect host. “Good night, Katerina.”

She walks out with her spine straight and her chin level and her hands clenched white at her sides, refusing to say one word. Rage and fear are braided so tight even she probably can’t tell them apart anymore.

I let her go.

I pour another glass of wine and stand at the window, hearing her footsteps fade as she heads upstairs.

I feel something I haven’t felt in two years, something I’d nearly forgotten.

Not anticipation. Not hunger.

Peace.

She’s here. She’s finally here.

Twenty-nine days.

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5

KATERINA

Two *years*.

I stare at the ceiling. Two years vibrates in my head, getting worse the longer I think about it.

My life, the one I thought was just mine, had a front-row seat to it this whole time and I was none the wiser.

I shiver and close my eyes and I’m back at the coffee place on 168th, the one with the barista who draws a little heart in the foam and calls me “Doc” like we’re friends.

Was he there?

The cars parked across the street that I dismissed as a really lucky parking spot for neighbors.

Was it one of his people, watching me with a long lens and a lot of patience?

What about the date I went on in February?

The guy talked about his fantasy football league for forty minutes while I nodded and thought about impaling myself on my fork.

Was that monitored too? Filed somewhere with a timestamp?

I sit up so fast the room tilts.

This is literally some *Truman Show* shit. This is a grown man who apparently spent two years building a highlight reel out of my very existence, and I never felt it.

Except…except I did, didn't I?

Outside the hospital.

On my own front steps.

That crawling, hairs-up feeling I told myself was exhaustion and paranoia.

I was right both times. I just didn't believe myself.

I don't sleep again that night.

Somewhere around three I catch myself still turning over the last two years of my life and feeling sorry for myself, and something in me goes cold with a different kind of disgust—disgust at *myself*, this time.

There's a two year old somewhere in this state who doesn't get to sleep in her own bed either, and I'm lying here feeling sorry for myself.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes. Seraphina doesn't care how many people watched me buy coffee.

She cares about going home and being back with her parents.

That's the goal.

That was always the goal, from the second I picked up that phone.

So I stop asking why me and start asking a better question.

Where is she?

He won't tell me? No matter. I'll find out myself.

He’s already at the table when I come down, coffee at his elbow, scrolling on his phone with the unbothered ease of someone who isn’t holding a two year old captive.

Morning light is coming through the tall windows behind him, catching the dark hair falling over his forehead and the line of his jaw.

His sleeves are shoved up again to show off his forearms, like he’s daring me to look.

I can’t help myself and glance quickly at his toned, tattooed arms before I mentally slap myself.

Focus, Kat.

Two years, I think, sitting down across from him, and the thought sours any other thought in my head.

This fucked up man has been watching—no, *stalking*—me for two years and he seemingly finds nothing wrong with it. I want to throw the water glass at his head.

Instead I fold my hands in my lap and breathe deeply.

I refuse to let him know just how much he’s pissed me off. Somehow, I think he would find that amusing.

“Sleep well?” he asks, without looking up.

“Fantastic.” I do my best to keep my voice even as I pour my own coffee before he can reach for the pot. I will *not* allow him to serve me anything. “How’s Seraphina?” I set the pot down with more force than I wanted, the delicate China rattling.

“She’s well,” the asshole responds. “She woke up at six thirty and immediately demanded breakfast. She was given pancakes, eggs, and fruit.” He sets the phone down and gives me his full attention, and I nearly shiver at the full weight of his gaze. “She ate her pancakes, rejected the eggs, and threw a fit about the fruit.” A corner of his mouth twitches. “She’s very opinionated about fruit. I guess strawberries and kiwi aren’t acceptable to Miss Santoro.”

My fingers curl around the handle of my mug. “Where is she?” I breathe.

Nico smirks. “Safe.”

I scowl at him. “That’s *not* an answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting, Katerina.” The corner of his mouth moves into not quite a smile. He’s entirely too pleased with himself, and I hate that some idiot part of my brain still finds it as good-looking instead of infuriating.

Both things are apparently true at once now. I don’t love that about myself.

I stay close enough to watch his hands and focus hard on my coffee, like breakfast is the most interesting thing happening at this table.

“You said you move her.” I keep my voice light. Bored, almost. “How often?”

He leans back in his chair, and he looks amused, like he’s watching me pick up a script he already knows the ending to.

“You’ve decided to interrogate me over breakfast,” he remarks, his gaze on me. “Go on, then. I’ll even try to make it interesting for you.”

Fucking *prick.* “How often do you move her?”

His jaw ticks briefly. If I hadn’t spent ten years learning to catch the truth under what people actually say, I’d have missed it completely. He reaches for his coffee cup and takes a sip he clearly doesn’t need.

Got yah, asshole.

“Often enough,” he responds, his face still impassive.

“Often enough that even you don’t always know exactly where she is right this second?” I ask, watching him carefully over the rim of my own cup.

“I always know exactly where she is.” There’s no tell this time, but that’s also a tell, too.

“Then tell me.”

“No.”

If I could pout, I would. “Why not? If you’re so sure I’m never getting out of here to do anything with the information?”

The look he gives me is almost pleased, like I’ve said something clever. “Because the not-knowing is doing something to you that I find I like very much.” He tilts his head, like a predator assessing its prey. “You’re leaning forward. Did you notice? You’ve been leaning toward me for the last two minutes like I’m about to hand you the answer if you just get close enough.”

I sit back so fast my spine cracks against the chair.

He laughs lowly and it’s delighted and infuriating before he goes back to his phone like he’s won something.

My ears are hot and I’m furious that he clocked me reading him at the exact moment I thought I was doing the reading.

Fine. Breakfast is a wash, but I’m not a quitter.

I don’t get anything else out of him.

He just watches me try, clearly enjoying it, until I give up, push back from the table harder than I mean to, and mutter something about needing air.

He doesn’t stop me, but then again, why would he, when the whole estate is a very beautiful, very expensive leash?

I storm off in the vague direction of outside and end up nowhere near the patio, because I’m too busy fuming to actually navigate.

Somewhere around the second hallway I stop pretending I have a destination and admit the truth: I’m bored out of my mind and pissed and I have nothing to do with either feeling except walk.

So I walk down the east hall, past a sitting room I haven’t seen, past a closed door, then another, counting them without meaning to, because this is how I entertain myself now.

My hands trail over the wood of the doors absent-mindedly.

I’m three doors down before I register that the last one isn’t completely shut, unlike every other room in this goddamn fortress.

I stop dead in my tracks and immediately look around, like I’m some spy in an action movie.

No guard stepping out of the wallpaper.

No footsteps. *Nothing*. I’m alone.

I push the door open another inch with one finger, just enough to look in, and my stomach flips.

There’s a dark wood desk and a wall of filing cabinets.

This isn’t a guest room or a sitting room nobody uses.

This is *his*.

His office.

The place where he keeps the things he doesn’t want anyone else to see.

My heartrate picks up, accelerating at a pace that would probably have given me a stroke if I had seen this on a heart monitor.

If there’s anything in this house that tells me where Seraphina actually is, it’s in here.

Jackpot. I slip inside.

I close the door softly behind me as I don’t want anyone to hear a door closing and come to investigate.

Straightening up, I turn around to take in my surroundings and I stop short.

The first thing I notice is how *clean* this office is.

What a difference compared to my office at the hospital that looks like a paper company threw up in it.

Organized chaos, I like to say.

I know exactly where everything is, even if it makes my residents want to throw up because of how disorganized it is.

No, Nico's office is pristine clean. Surgical clean, really. I bet I could swipe my finger across any surface and there wouldn't be a speck of dust.

My eyes go to the desk first. It's dark wood, worn smooth at the edges from actual use.

There's a leather blotter, squared off perfectly with the corners while a capped fountain pen sits dead center like someone arranged it for a photo.

There's a framed picture off to one side, angled just enough that I can't see the front of it from here.

I'd have to walk around the desk, but I don't have time for that, so I leave it and keep moving, even though I'm dying to know who means enough to Nico that he would frame a photo of them.

It smells like him in here and I take a deep breath, trying to figure out the underlying scents.

Cedar, I think.

And something that smells like clean linen.

I hate that I find this smell intoxicating.

Why couldn't this man smell like sour cream and onion chips?

I shake my head, trying to disrupt my thoughts.

I don't have time to be mad at my own hormones right now.

I have to move quickly as there's no telling when Nico will finish his own breakfast and come back here.

With that in mind, I immediately head for the desk. I yank on the top drawer, but to my annoyance, it's locked. "Goddammit," I mutter, my eyes scanning the neat desk, hoping that Nico would be stupid enough to leave a key lying around.

Nope. Well, it was worth a try.

The second drawer is unlocked to my delight, but to my despair there's only pens, a stapler, and a roll of stamps in there.

They're all perfectly organized and infuriatingly normal. I shut the drawer in irritation and glance again at the surface of the desk.

There's a notepad sitting by the phone.

I glance at it on my way past and stop.

Someone has scrawled—and scrawled is the right word because holy hell, his handwriting is worse than a doctor's—two words and underlined them twice.

Call Luca.

Who the hell is Luca?

Whatever, I don't have time to care.

I move on and lunge toward the filing cabinet.

My heart beats quickly.

I know I'm running out of time so I have to be quick.

The filing cabinet isn't locked either, and I'm honestly shocked by that.

Either he's arrogant enough that it never occurred to him someone would dare or this is the one careless spot in an otherwise flawless system.

Knowing what I know about him, my money's on arrogance.

Heart in my throat, I flip through folders fast, my heart going hard enough that I feel it in my throat.

Shipping manifests. Property deeds.

Blah blah blah.

Nothing I have time to actually read or care about. I shut the first drawer and head to the second one.

Bingo.

There’s a folder of wire transfers, and my hand freezes on it before my brain even catches up with why.

A property tax record.

A parcel upstate, near the Canadian border, some township I’ve never heard of.

The date on it is recent. *Very* recent.

I don’t have a pen or even my phone, so I read the address twice, close my eyes, and burn it into memory.

I’ve always had a great memory—photographic even—so I know this will stay with me forever.

Got you, asshole.

I’m easing the folder back into the cabinet, my fingers not quite steady, when the back of my neck prickles and I can feel someone’s eyes boring into the back of my head.

I stop breathing.

I’m not alone anymore.

I turn around slowly because some instinct even older than fear tells me not to move fast in front of a predator.

Nico is in the doorway.

I have never in my life watched a person look this angry before. The easy warmth from breakfast is gone completely.

His jaw is a hard line and his eyes have gone flat and dark.

Every cell in my body lights up at once, screaming the same word: *wrong, wrong, get out, this is wrong.*

For the first time since I got in that car outside my home, I fully understand exactly what kind of man I agreed to spend thirty days with.

“Step away from the filing cabinet,” he says, his voice a near growl.

I step away from the filing cabinet like it was on fire.

He crosses the room in three strides, and I make myself hold my ground even though part of me wants the wall at my back.

He looks down at the two inches of misaligned paper and I watch him read it the way I'd read a chart.

Then he laughs and that's more frightening than anything else I've heard because there's no rage underneath.

He's actually amused, and somehow that's worse than if he'd screamed at me.

"The Adirondack property." He shakes his head, almost fond. "It's twenty minutes from here. Maybe less. You're a clever girl, aren't you, Katerina?" He looks up, and whatever warmth was in his voice a second ago is gone from his eyes. "But this means nothing. She isn't there, you know. This is just some additional property I've bought." A small, humorless shake of his head. "Did you really think I'd leave the address of where she's staying lying around, waiting for someone to find her? I move her every few days. New property, new caretakers, a different route every time. There is no address in this house that leads you to her. There never was."

My stomach drops through the floor and I realize this has always been a trap. Nico purposefully left his office door open, expecting me to go searching for information about Seraphina. And I walked right into it. Fuck *me*.

"You let me find it," I say, and I hate how small my voice comes out even though I'm so angry and embarrassed I nearly can't see straight. "You—you *wanted* me to find it."

He shrugs. "I wanted to see what you'd do with it." Something flickers behind his eyes—not quite pride, but close enough to it that it makes my skin crawl. "Now I know."

He steps closer, close enough that I can feel actual heat coming off him, and the cedar-and-linen smell I hated myself for noticing is suddenly everywhere.

My pulse jumps for reasons that have nothing to do with fear and everything to do with fear.

“Let’s be very clear, Katerina. I don’t want any confusion about the rules.” His voice drops lower, even, and it’s more frightening than if he’d raised it. “If you run, if you contact your cousins, the Santoros, the Brennans, anyone at all outside these walls. If you do anything to interfere with the next twenty-nine days—Seraphina’s situation changes.”

“Changes how.” My mouth has gone bone dry.

“She disappears,” he says gently, similar to how I would tell a patient’s next-of-kin that their loved one has died. “She wouldn’t be hurt—I gave you my word on that, and I meant it. She would be just…gone.” He makes a gesture with his hand like something is vanishing. “A door with no handle on the other side. You’d spend the rest of your life not knowing. So would her parents.” His dark eyes grow cold and I fight the urge to shiver. “And not-knowing, Katerina, is so much worse than grief. Grief ends eventually. This wouldn’t.”

The bottom drops out of me completely.

I believe every word and that’s what scares me.

I don’t doubt him for a second, because everything about the last twenty-four hours has taught me this is a man who does precisely what he says.

If I don’t comply, Seraphina will disappear completely and her parents will never see her again.

“Get out.” He’s already turning away, like I’ve been dismissed. “Get out of my study.”

I don’t argue with him.

Instead, I leave. I don’t run, but I move fast, blood roaring in my ears.

I don’t stop until I’m back in my own room with the door shut behind me and my spine against it.

My legs finally give out enough that I slide down and sit on the floor.

I don’t go down for lunch or dinner. Nobody knocks. Nobody checks on me.

There’s just silence from the hallway, hour after hour, and somewhere in that silence I understand exactly what he’s telling me by leaving me alone in it.

There are consequences here. I’m not the one in control.

I lie awake a second night in a row, and this time it isn’t rage keeping me up.

It’s fear.

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6

NICO

Three days and I’m still angry about it.

Not that she did it—I’d have been disappointed if she hadn’t). I didn’t want a woman who sits in a room and waits to be told things.

I wanted the one who’d tear my study apart looking for a way to save a child she barely knows.

That part I can live with.

What I *can’t* live with is the way she looked at me in that doorway.

I’ve replayed it more times than I should admit.

The way she froze with her hand still on the drawer, then didn’t flinch, didn’t apologize, didn’t do any of the things a normal person does when they’re caught somewhere they shouldn’t be.

She just looked at me like she already knew exactly what I was capable of and had simply been waiting to see it confirmed.

That’s not what bothers me.

She’s right to know what I’m capable of. I’d think less of her if she didn’t.

What bothers me is what *wasn’t* there.

No doubt. No hesitation.

She’d already made up her mind about me, and she wasn’t going to change it.

I don’t need her to think I’m safe. I know what I am, and I’ve never once been ashamed of it.

What I need is for her to keep wondering whether there’s more underneath it.

That’s the whole reason for the thirty days.

Not to prove I’m harmless, but to prove there’s something in me worth finding, the same way she found something worth saving in a stranger bleeding out on a street, when I had nothing to offer her and she looked at me anyway like it mattered that I lived.

That’s what her face in that doorway took away from me.

Not her fear.

Her curiosity.

She looked at me and decided there was nothing left to look for.

Three days later, I’m still furious about it, because if she’s already decided that on day three, then I don’t have thirty days.

I have twenty-seven days of a woman waiting out a sentence, and I planned for more than that.

I broke a glass in my hand after she left the study.

I didn’t even notice I’d done it until Luca found me standing over the sink with blood running into the drain and asked if I wanted him to call for a doctor.

I told him no, we already have a doctor, and he had the sense not to laugh.

So I’ve let her have her silence since.

Three days of it.

Meals eaten without a word, her eyes on the plate, gone the second she can manage it.

I told myself I was giving her space.

Lie.

I have twenty-six days left with this woman.

I've spent three of them the same way I spent the last two years. Watching from a distance and calling it patience.

Enough of that.

I find her in the gym a little after four.

I don't knock. Some habits don't die just because I've decided to try being a better man for her.

She's on the treadmill running hard.

She's wearing a bright pink sports bra and matching biking shorts.

Her ponytail swings behind her as she sprints, her eyes focused in front of her.

I stop in the doorway and forget every reason I came down here.

My mouth goes dry, which is fucking humiliating for a man in his forties.

My pulse picks up to match her pace and there's a tightness low in my gut that has nothing to do with hunger and everything to do with the sight of her.

My eyes track the sweat on her collarbone and the muscle working in her thighs, the small, private sounds of her breathing hard that I have no right to be standing here listening to.

I've had two years of photographs but this…*this* is so much better.

My eyes trail down her body.

Sweat runs down her spine, her legs, her shoulders, the flat line of her stomach.

I look at every inch of her and feel nothing close to shame about it.

I've wanted this woman for *two years*, and I've had a lot of practice telling myself that wanting was as far as it would ever go.

Standing here now, watching her, none of that practice does me any good.

My hands ache to touch her—her waist, her thighs, the damp skin at the back of her neck—and I have to grip the doorframe to keep myself exactly where I am, because if I move right now I don't entirely trust what I'll do.

This is her with no one watching. I could stay in this doorway an hour. I could stay a lifetime.

I don't get the hour. Hell, I don't even get another minute.

She catches my reflection in the mirror and every muscle in her body locks at once.

She shrieks and her foot comes down wrong on the belt.

Then she's airborne.

Everything in me goes sharp and fast at once.

The machine's still running and she's got nothing behind her but hard floor and no time to catch herself.

I have seen what a skull does against tile and I sure as hell know she has too.

I'm across the room in an instant, not thinking, just moving, faster than I've moved for anything in years.

My hands find her waist and I catch her against me before she hits the floor.

For a second neither of us does anything at all.

She's pressed flush against my chest.

Her hands grip my shoulders where she grabbed for anything solid on the way down.

Her skin is hot and slick under my palms and her heart is slamming so hard I can feel it through both our shirts.

Mine isn't much slower, but it definitely isn't fear doing it to me.

Her face is inches from mine.

She's close enough to count the gold strands in her brown eyes.

Her pupils are blown wide for one second before she remembers she's supposed to hate me.

I see it before she buries it—*want*, plain and unmistakable.

Then it's gone completely, drowned under something much more visceral, and she shoves me hard enough that I have to plant a foot to keep from stumbling backward.

"Get *out*." Her voice cracks with how hard she's shaking, raw and furious, two spots of color high on her cheeks. "You don't get to watch me like that, you creep! You don't get to just stand there and…" Her hands curl into fists and she glares at me fiercely. "If you ever do that again I'll—"

She stops. I watch the fight go out of her sentence before it's finished. There's no family to call.

No door in this house I haven't already accounted for.

No leverage anywhere within reach that actually belongs to her, and she knows it, and the knowing makes her angrier than anything I've actually done.

Her hands are still curled into fists at her sides.

Her chest is heaving, and not from the treadmill anymore.

There's real fury in her face, but underneath the fury, there's something rawer that she'd hate for me to see.

Helplessness.

The grief of a person who realizes she’s not in control.

I could watch her like this for the rest of my life and never once get tired of it.

I don’t tell her that. Instead, I take out my phone instead.

“I didn’t come down here to watch you run.” I hold the phone out. “Though I won’t pretend I’m sorry I did. Watch this.”

She doesn’t move for a second as she eyes me and the phone warily. But curiosity wins out, and she takes it, peering down at the screen.

A brightly colored room appears on the screen.

There’s a bright blue rug with the alphabet curving around it and blocks are scattered about.

Sitting in the center of the rug is Seraphina, wearing a purple shirt with a unicorn on it.

Her dark curls are in two pigtails on the side of her head and she’s looking down at the blocks, her dark brows furrowed in a scowl.

Suddenly, she looks up at the person filming and glares fiercely.

“*No!*” she shouts before getting up and stomping her foot. “I need *help*!” She picks up a block and throws it, glaring even harder at the person off-screen.

A woman leans into frame, reaching for her, saying something too soft for the camera to catch.

Seraphina full-on shoves her away, screaming louder, and throws herself backward onto the rug, kicking both feet, fists pounding the floor like the floor is the one who knocked her tower down.

The woman doesn’t try again. She just waits, hands in her lap, letting it happen.

It takes almost a full minute.

Then, mid-scream, Seraphina stops.

She hiccups once and rubs her wet face before she sits up and picks up a block like nothing happened at all.

She looks at it before tossing it down and grabbing a doll and hugging it.

The timestamp reads today.

Katerina goes completely still.

“Play it again,” she whispers.

I let her watch it twice more and while she does so, I drink her in instead.

Her shoulders drop an inch and her breathing slows.

Her eyes are bright and wet, and she blinks hard, furious at her own body for doing it in front of me.

“She’s okay,” she says quietly to herself as her fingers trace the shape of Seraphina’s round cheek.

I incline my head. “She’s okay,” I confirm.

She hands the phone back like she doesn’t want to let it go. I pocket it before I say the rest.

“You’ll get a new video every three days,” I tell her. “That’s how you’ll know she’s alive.” I pause for a moment. She’s not going to like what I say next. “It’s also how I’ll know whether you’ve earned the next one.”

I wait a few seconds and watch as what I said process on her beautiful face.

“You son of a bitch,” she snarls. “You’re going to dangle her in front of me like a—like a *reward*? Like I’m a dog you’re training?” She takes a step toward me, chest heaving, and there’s nothing left in her voice other than rage. “You don’t get to do that. She is *not* a bargaining chip, she is a *little girl*, and if you think for one second I’m going to sit here and perform good behavior for you just to earn a video of a two year old crying, you can go straight to hell.”

“I think you’ll do exactly that,” I tell her, slightly amused at her vehemence. “Because you don’t have another option, and we both know it.”

She bares her teeth at me, hatred clear. “Fuck you,” she snarls.

I shrug. “Probably,” I retort, wanting to see her react. Her face goes nearly purple. “Not today, though.”

Her hand comes up before either of us sees it coming and my head jerks to the side with the force of the slap.

For one second there’s only the sharp sting of it. God*damn*, what a woman.

I catch her wrist before she can pull it back to hit me again.

“You don’t get to do that twice,” I say slowly, my cheek smarting as I walk her backward until her body hits the wall.

She goes rigid against it, chest heaving, eyes wild. I don’t let go of her wrist. I don’t step back. I’m close enough now to smell her sweat and something floral. I do my best to not take a deep breath.

“I let you have that one.” My mouth is at her ear, low enough she has to go still to hear it. “I won’t be that generous again.”

She shoves against me, trying to put distance between us, and the movement drags her hips against mine before either of us can stop it. A low and rough sound comes out of my mouth, and I have to close my eyes to keep from doing something in this room I can’t take back.

She freezes the instant she feels exactly what she’s done.

The hardness that’s rapidly tenting my pants.

“Careful,” I murmur into her hair, voice not as steady as I’d like. “Keep moving like that and we’ll both learn something about tonight neither of us planned on.”

She goes utterly still.

I take a breath and find my way back to the one thing I know how to hold onto, which is leverage, because leverage I can use even while every other part of me is screaming to close the last inch between us.

“Cut this out,” I say quietly, still struggling to maintain control, “or the next video you see of her is the last one. Do you understand me?”

She nods once. If looks could kill, I would be six feet under.

I let go of her wrist and step back. I'm immediately cold the moment I'm away from her delicious warmth but I straighten my shirt and I don't look at her mouth again. Then I turn to go.

"What are the other reasons?"

I stop and cock my head to the side. "Come again?" I slowly turn around.

She's still breathing hard, but her voice is steady now. "I'm not stupid. You told me at dinner this served more than one purpose. That I'm not the only reason. Either you tell me the rest right now, or I stop cooperating with anything you ask of me for the next twenty-six days. I mean it."

I look at her for a long moment.

I'm not deciding whether to tell her.

I'm deciding how much of it she gets tonight.

Then I sit down on the bench by the weight rack.

I haven't gotten this close to her on purpose since the study, and I can tell it throws her more than anything I've actually said.

"There are people in my organization who want Seraphina as leverage," I say. "The plan was to use her to start a war—get the Bratva and the Santoros and Brennans tearing each other apart over a missing child and clean up whatever was left when it was over. That plan was already moving before I ever touched it. I just got there first."

I hold her eyes and I can see the shock on her face.

"She's alive *because* of me, Katerina. Not despite me."

She stares at me, working it over, looking for the catch in it. "And that's supposed to make this better? Or is this just—" Her jaw tightens. "Is this manipulation? Are you just telling me whatever's going to keep me compliant?"

"Yes," I shrug. "Some of it is."

There’s no point lying to her. She’d see through it anyway, and a lie right now would set me back and I don’t have time for that.

“Everything I do involves manipulation, one way or another. That’s just who I am, and I’m not going to pretend otherwise tonight.” I lean forward. “But Seraphina really was in danger and I really am the reason she isn’t anymore. Both of those things can be true at the same time, even if one of them happens to work out well for me.”

Katerina scoffs and crosses her arms over her chest. “How am I supposed to believe any of that?”

I shrug. “You’re not.”

She stares at me in shock and I fight the smile.

“This isn’t about trust, Katerina. You don’t owe me any of that. You’ve got twenty-six days left here. However they go, that little girl goes home when they’re over, and you’ll have the rest of your life to figure out what you think of me. I’m not asking you to believe a word I say. I’m telling you the truth because I’d rather you have it than not.”

I stand. I’ve given her more tonight than I planned to, and there’s a real risk in staying in this room with her while she’s still flushed from the run, hair a mess, looking at me like she’s trying to figure out what I actually am.

“Are you going to hurt her?” Her voice catches me at the door. “Tell me the truth.”

I look back at her. “No.”

I mean that too.

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7

KATERINA

I can’t sleep, but then again, that’s the story of my life, right?

I lie on my back with the covers kicked halfway off and the video playing on a loop behind my eyes, over and over, like if I watch it enough times I can climb through the screen and just bring her back myself.

Seraphina in her purple unicorn shirt.

The scream.

The pounding fists.

The way she stopped mid-tantrum and just moved on, like a switch flipped, because she’s two and two year olds do that, and she’s *fine*, she’s fine, and the relief of knowing that is so enormous I don’t have room for anything else in my body.

Except I do and that’s the problem.

I have room for other things too, and they will not shut up.

He’s holding her over my head.

He gave me proof of life like he was doing me a kindness, and then he told me that the next one only comes if I *earn* it.

Every three days.

I gnash my teeth together in irritation.

Like she's a treat and I'm the animal, and the second I stop being a good enough animal for him he takes her back into the dark where I can't see her.

Fucking *asshole*.

I want to hate him.

I want that so badly it's a physical need.

And I do!

God, I do—I hate him with every single cell in my body for what he's doing to Emma and Leo.

For what he's doing to me, for the way he can talk about manipulation like it's a weather report and expect me to still trust the pieces of it he claims are true.

Then my brain, my absolute little *shit* of a brain, hands me the other video.

The one I didn't ask for.

His hands on my waist.

The way he caught me before I even knew I was falling.

The way he didn't hesitate—didn't do anything but *move*—and the exact half-second before I remembered to hate him again, when my whole body was pressed flush against his and my hands were on his shoulders and I felt his heart going as hard and fast as mine and I did not, God help me, feel one single ounce of revulsion.

I flop onto my stomach and shove my face into the pillow and let out a sound that is not becoming of a woman with two board certifications.

What is wrong with you?

I'm a *doctor.*

I have opened a man’s chest with my hands and kept him alive with sheer stubbornness.

I understand cortisol responses.

I understand adrenaline.

I know exactly what my body was doing when he caught me—a woman held against a big, dangerous man for a few too many seconds.

It’s chemistry.

It’s biology.

It’s *nothing*.

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling.

That doesn’t help. Neither does the dark. Neither does anything about this stupid room, including the sheets, which are somehow too soft.

Ugh. I groan and press the heels of my hands into my eyes so hard I see different colors. I’m not sleeping. I already know it. It’s just not happening tonight.

I sit up. I lie back down. I sit up again. There’s this awful jittery feeling under my skin and I can’t get rid of it. It feels like I’ve had too much coffee, except I haven’t had any coffee. Except what I’ve apparently had is Nico Barone.

“No,” I say out loud, sharply shaking my head. “No. I am *not* doing this.”

But my brain isn’t listening.

My brain wants to think about him.

About his shoulders, and the way they look under a fitted shirt. About how tall he is.

God, he’s what? Six foot three? Six foot four?

I’m five-eight and I felt *small* next to him in that gym.

I *never* feel small.

I’ve gone toe to toe with department heads who towered over me and I never felt my height.

But now that I’ve opened the door, my traitorous fuck ass brain is now running through the other physical attributes of Nico Barone. His tattooed forearms, all those dark lines running up and disappearing under his sleeves.

God, I wish I knew what those tattoos were.

What they mean.

What story do they tell?

I shiver again, feeling the phantom touch of his large hands, and I briefly touch my waist, remembering how they felt when he caught me.

They were steady and careful, and so much stronger than they needed to be for a woman who weighs what I weigh.

But then I remember shoving him away and whirling around and the first thing I had seen was his jaw.

His stupid, sharp stubbled jaw.

His mouth.

I bite my lip, hating myself.

God, his *mouth*.

He has unfairly full lips for a man and I hate the way they curve into a stupid smile right before he says something awful.

And his hair.

That dark, thick, always falling forward into his eyes a little hair.

He still has a full head of it and it’s still insanely dark for a man in his forties.

I would have thought he’d be dying it by now but no, that nearly black color is completely natural.

Dammit.

I can’t stay here any longer.

Water.

Yes, I need water.

I need to get up and move and do something with my hands before I lose my mind lying here, and water is the closest thing to a reasonable excuse I’ve got.

I don’t grab a robe. Why would I?

It’s four in the morning.

Everyone else is asleep.

I’m going—what? One hundred feet to a kitchen and coming right back? I look at myself in the mirror. I’m wearing an old tank top and sleep shorts with no bra on.

I shrug. It’s as good as it’s going to get.

I pad down the stairs barefoot on cool wood, one hand on the banister, still trying to shake the feel of him out of my skin and getting nowhere.

The house is dark and quiet, which is relieving.

I don’t really want to talk to anyone.

I just want to get rid of this nervous energy by drinking water then go back to my room so I can self-flagellate some more.

I turn the corner into the kitchen and nearly sigh with relief when I see the lights are off.

Moonlight is coming through the tall windows in cold silver rectangles.

I don’t bother with the overhead lights.

I know the layout well enough by now, and switching the light on feels like it would be an announcement I don’t want to make. I make my way to the fridge and pull it open.

Yellow light spills out over the floor while I bend down and dig for the water bottles on the bottom shelf.

“You should be sleeping.”

I whirl around so fast I don’t clear the fridge door and my head cracks into it.

“*Motherfucker*,” I hiss, one hand flying up to my scalp, eyes watering as pain explodes behind my eyes. “What in the ever loving *fuck*—son of a—Jesus *Christ*—”

“Are you okay?” He sounds concerned.

“I’m *fine*.” I’m not fine. My scalp is going to have a knot the size of an egg and my head is going to hurt like a bitch tomorrow.

Irritation floods through me even though I can’t really see him through my tears. “You could give a person a warning,” I snap, fighting the urge to cry out. “You could clear your throat. You could turn a *light* on.”

“I did try ‘you should be sleeping,’” he suggests unhelpfully.

Is he fucking serious right now? “That’s *not* a warning,” I snarl, my fingers nimbly moving through my hair until I can feel the tenderness on my scalp. Yep, that’s going to be a nice goose egg. “That’s a *sentence* out of the dark. Who does that?”

“I’m sorry.” He doesn’t sound sorry. He sounds like he’s trying not to laugh.

I blink hard and wipe my eyes with the back of my wrist, before I get my first clear look at him since he spoke.

That’s when I catch the tail end of a sheepish smile.

I nearly startle at it, even though my head hurts.

It’s warmer than anything I’ve seen on his face before, and something in my chest does a stupid little flip that has nothing to do with my throbbing head.

I hate that I noticed. I hate that he’s beautiful when he’s trying not to smile.

“I really didn’t mean to scare you,” he continues.

I turn my head, needing to *not* look at him right now. “Yeah, yeah,” I mutter before I decide to be brave and look at him again.

He’s sitting at the far end of the island in the dark, one hand wrapped loosely around a glass of water, watching me.

Now that I know where to look, the light from the still-open fridge is enough to see him.

He’s wearing low-slung gray sweatpants, a plain black t-shirt, with one bare foot hooked around the leg of the stool.

His hair is wet from a shower and pushed back off his forehead.

His jaw is shadowed with stubble.

The shirt is thin enough that I can see the shape of his shoulders through it, and one long line of ink where the sleeve rides up on his bicep.

My mouth dries.

I let the fridge swing closed.

The kitchen goes dim again, half-lit by moon and half by a little under-cabinet strip I hadn’t noticed was on. My scalp still hurts and my pulse is still hammering. My dignity is somewhere on the floor.

“Congratulations,” I mutter, rubbing at my head. “You succeeded.”

As Nico’s eyes also adjust to the dim light, I can feel his gaze sharpen.

His eyes slowly drop from my face down my throat, over my collarbones, over my tank top, over the strip of bare skin between the hem and the shorts, over my legs. Then back up.

I remember I’m *not* wearing a bra.

Oh Jesus H Christ, just *kill me now*.

When I made the decision to not wear a robe, it’s because I was going to the goddamn kitchen at four in the morning.

I never once considered the possibility that a man was going to be sitting in the dark, watching me bend into a fridge in a tank top I have owned since residency and washed so many times you can just about *see* through it—

Oh no.

Oh *no*.

I look down without meaning to. The under-cabinet light is not doing me any favors.

Neither is the cold of the fridge, which was open for a solid thirty seconds while I was hunting for water.

Every single thing about this moment is working against me.

I snap my arms across my chest so fast I nearly hit myself in the jaw.

To his credit, he doesn't smile at that.

Instead, he just very deliberately lifts his eyes back to my face and keeps them there like he's going to be a gentleman about this.

I'm not sure why that's worse than him deciding to stare at my protruding nipples.

Because he's not looking at me the way a stranger looks at a woman he shouldn't.

He's looking at me like he still can't believe I'm standing in his kitchen, in the middle of the night, in almost nothing—and now trying very hard not to.

I feel every inch of skin I didn't cover.

"So." He tilts his head slightly, his hand still wrapped around his glass. "Why are you up?"

I shrug, hoping I look relaxed even though I'm internally freaking the fuck out. "Couldn't sleep."

He raises a brow. "Want to try that one again? I don't believe you."

“Well I guess that’s too bad.” I turn my back on him, which, in hindsight, now gives him a fantastic view of my ass, but at least I don’t have to see his face. I walk to the sink and turn the tap on, filling a glass I don’t actually want. I drink from it just to have something to do with my hands. “It’s four a.m. People are awake at four a.m. for a lot of reasons.”

“Name one.”

“Insomnia,” I say immediately, something I’ve struggled with since medical school.

“Insomnia isn’t a reason. It’s a symptom.”

Oh for *fucks sake*. “Oh my god.” I set the glass down harder than I mean to. “Fine. I was thirsty.”

“Katerina.”

The way he says my name sets me on edge. It’s the way his deep voice wraps around each syllable of my name and I shiver involuntarily. I can feel the hardness of my nipples press against my crossed arms and thank *heavens* I turned away from him.

I close my eyes for a second. I am not going to say *you.* I would rather chew glass than say *you.* So I decide to tell him the other truth.

“Seraphina.” I let out a long breath. “I keep thinking about her. About the fact that grown men in your world think a two year old is useful.” I let that sentence hang there because even if his reasons were *noble*, he, too, thought a two year old was useful. “So no. Not sleeping.”

There’s only silence behind me.

“Do you believe me?” he finally asks. “About the threat.”

I don’t want to.

God, I don’t want to.

But I have spent ten years watching people lie in the worst moments of their lives, and whatever I saw on his face in that gym it wasn’t fake.

He wasn’t trying to sell me anything. He looked like he’d surprised himself by telling me the truth.

I turn around slowly, because I don’t trust my own face right now. His either.

“Yes.” It comes out smaller than I want it to and I swallow heavily. “Yes, I do.”

Something in his shoulders lets go, like he’d been holding himself too tight and my one word gave him permission to stop.

He pushes off the counter and starts toward me. He doesn’t walk like he usually does.

There’s none of the easy, unbotheredness when he’s holding all the cards. This is slower. Careful. Like he thinks I might spook and run if he does it wrong.

I don’t run. Instead, I stand there and let him come to me.

He stops close. Not touching, but close enough that I can smell soap and clean skin, and it’s the best thing I’ve smelled in days.

He’s tall enough that I have to tip my chin up to look at him.

My heart is beating so fast I’m pretty sure if I was attached to an EKG, the nurses would be flying in.

“I owe you an apology,” he says.

Oh, hell really *can* freeze over. I have to swallow several sarcastic retorts before I can answer. “For which part exactly?” I ask, my voice a little unsteady. “I have a laundry list of things you need to apologize for.”

His lips quirk and I steady myself. He’s going to say something that ruins me, I know it.

“The gym,” he says, his dark brown eyes never leaving mine. “Watching you. I told myself I came down there to give you the video. That was true. It was not the whole reason I stayed in the doorway as long as I did.” His hand comes up and I track its movement, not sure what he’s about to do. To

my surprise, he rubs the back of his neck, almost as if he's…embarrassed? Huh. Didn't think Nico Barone could feel that emotion.

"I'm sorry," he continues, and I blink, trying to re-focus. "I don't say that often, and I'm not saying it just to say it. I shouldn't have looked at you like that."

I stare at him. I blink a few times, trying to make sense of everything.

Nico Barone. Underboss. The man who took Seraphina.

The man who has calmly told me to my face that everything he does is manipulation.

The man who also told me he would put Seraphina's parents through continued torment if I didn't comply with him.

That man is standing in his kitchen, apologizing to me. And he's doing it so sincerely I believe every word of it.

I pinch the soft skin of my inner elbow, to ensure I'm not dreaming. There's a sharp pinch. Yep, not dreaming.

"Why *were* you there?" I ask. "And tell me the whole truth. Not the bullshit version you want me to hear."

He doesn't answer right away.

Instead, he takes another step.

He's so close.

Close enough that if either of us shifted an inch we would be touching. My mouth dries and my heart hammers traitorously. I can't take my eyes off him.

I can feel the heat coming off him and see the tattoo curling up his forearm. The muscle in his arm moves as he lifts one hand slowly and—very carefully, like he's giving me all the time in the world to stop him—brushes his knuckles down the side of my jaw.

I don't breathe. I don't stop him.

“Because I can’t stay away from you,” he says, low and steady, his knuckles still on my skin, “and I can’t stop looking at you.”

I stare at him in shock, my skin on fire from where he’s touched me.

My chest heaves as my brain finally realizes I need oxygen and it feels like there’s just not enough air in the world for what he’s just said.

Before I know it, my hands are in the front of his shirt and I’m dragging him down.

My mouth is on his before I’ve finished the thought.

The second I feel him kiss me back—not surprised, not hesitant, like he has been *waiting* for exactly this—every logical thing in my head goes silent, all at once, like someone flipped a breaker.

The rest of me is louder than it has ever been.

His hands come to my waist and then my hips and then he’s *lifting* me like I weigh nothing and setting me on the counter.

I hook a leg around him without meaning to, dragging him in between my thighs, and he groans against my mouth in a way that goes straight down to my core.

He kisses me like he’s been thinking about it for years. *Because he has*.

Nico’s mouth moves down my throat, and I make a sound I have never made in my life.

Every kiss, every scrape of his teeth, sends a jolt through me I can feel in my hands.

I gasp, gripping his shoulders, arching up for more, and I *hate* how much more I want, and I want it anyway.

His tongue traces the line of my collarbone, and my core clenches so hard my breath catches.

I can’t stand it. I drag his mouth back to mine, and this kiss is worse than the last one—deeper, angrier, both of us gone.

Our tongues meet and I bite his lower lip and pull. The growl that comes from him makes me wet *immediately*.

My hands slide under his shirt. God—his *body.* Broad shoulders, hard planes of muscle, a scar under his ribs I can feel with my fingertips before I can see it, and I want to know how he got every single one of them.

I run my nails down his back and he shudders, hips jerking against mine, and the filthy sound he makes against my throat is the most obscene thing I have ever heard.

He makes me feel—Christ, I don't even have the word.

Wanted, in a way that has nothing to do with love and everything to do with hunger.

Two years' worth of it, all of it aimed at me, and I can feel every single day of that hunger in the way his hands move on me, like he's trying to make up for lost time and doesn't know where to start.

His fingers dig into my hips and pull me flush against him, and I can feel his hardened cock, can feel how much he wants this, and I grind against him without deciding to, and the sound he makes—

"Katerina."

My fingers thread through his hair, tugging gently, and he responds with a growl that sends shivers down my spine.

"Fuck," I murmur against his lips, my voice breathy with want.

I fist the hem of his shirt and yank up.

He leans back just far enough to reach behind his neck and pull the shirt off in one motion, and my mouth actually goes dry.

I have seen good looking men before and have drooled over him. But Nico Barone?

Well, shit.

I take him in inch by inch, and every inch is worse for me than the last.

His shoulders are broad and thick with muscle across the tops and down into the cut of his arms.

His chest is hard and defined, marked with old scars.

There's a thin white line under his collarbone, another one across his ribs.

There are a plethora of small round ones I want to know more about but honestly, don't care about in this present moment.

His stomach is flat, muscle laddering down in a way that shouldn't be legal, disappearing into the low waistband of those sweatpants in a V that draws my eyes exactly where he wants them.

And the tattoos.

The *tattoos*.

My mouth goes dry again and I kind of wish I had drunk more water when I had the chance.

The few glimpses I got from his shirts gave me an idea of how extensive his tattoos were. Now that I've seen all of it, it takes my breath away.

They're beautiful. Whoever did it was an artist.

Nico has a full sleeve running from his right wrist up over his shoulder and across his upper chest, blackwork with fine detail and shading, and I can pick out pieces of it as my eyes move: an angel on his shoulder, wings spread, head bowed like something in mourning.

Roses climbing his forearm, dark and heavy. Latin text I can't quite read circling his bicep. There's something abstract and geometric down the inside of his arm.

A compass rose over his heart.

And low on his ribs, half-hidden and half-visible, what looks like the fragmented outline of a wrecked car.

That's the one my eyes stop on and I honestly stop breathing.

He watches me find it through heavy-lidded eyes and doesn't say anything.

He just breathes raggedly and lets me have the moment. When I finally drag my eyes back up to his face he is looking at me with such a hungry expression, it nearly sets me over the edge.

Then his hands are on the hem of my tank and his eyes are asking a question mine already answered.

“Yes,” I croak. “*Yes.*”

He pulls my shirt off me slowly and carefully, as if he thinks if he moves wrong I’ll change my mind, but I’m too desperate to want anything else.

The tank top hits the floor somewhere. His eyes drop to my chest and stay there, and the look on his face—dear sweet merciful heavens, the look on his *face*—does more to me than any of his hands have managed so far.

“Beautiful,” Nico whispers, licking his lips and staring at my breasts and upper body. “So fucking beautiful.” He bends his head and his mouth encircles a nipple. I gasp and clutch onto him, arching for more.

His tongue swirls against the bud, and my core pulses with need.

Nico releases the nipple, softly blows cool air on it, and lavishes attention to the other one, his fingers kneading into the flesh of my hips.

I can’t take it anymore. I force his mouth back to mine, our kiss becoming even more heated, tongues tangling together.

I suck on his tongue, loving how he moans into my mouth. I trace his muscles, smirking against his mouth as I feel him shudder and sharply inhale.

God, he has such a beautiful body.

Ripping my mouth away, I also bend my head, mapping out the scars and tattoos on his body with my tongue, feeling Nico’s hands wind into my hair as he jerks his hips into mine.

His hands roam my body with a desperation that mirrors my own. I grind against him, feeling the hard evidence of his desire, and it only fuels my own. “Katerina,” he breathes again, gripping me tighter and pulling me

closer. His fingers dig into my hips, guiding my movements, and I moan into his mouth, the sound vibrating between us.

His touch is electric, his kisses a drug I can't get enough of. His hands find my bare back, tracing the lines of my spine, and I arch into his touch, moaning softly.

I rock my hips, grinding against him in a rhythm that makes us both gasp. His hands slide to my hips, guiding my movements, his grip firm and possessive.

"I need to fuck you," he grits out, thrusting roughly against me and I cry out at the friction.

"Then take me," I whisper, and it's both an invitation and a plea.

His fingers trail up my thighs, dragging the fabric of my shorts with them, exposing more of my skin to the cool air.

The sensation sends shivers through me, anticipation pooling low in my belly.

With one swift movement, he tugs the shorts down my hips and tosses it aside, leaving me in just my underwear.

The heat in his gaze intensifies, and I can feel my pulse quicken in response.

His hands slide back down, fingertips grazing my skin, making me shiver.

He hooks his thumbs into the waistband of my panties, pulling them down slowly, agonizingly so, until they join the discarded shorts and tank top.

His eyes never leave mine, the intensity of his gaze making my heart race.

I lift myself slightly, my fingers moving to the waistband of his sweat pants.

I fumble for a moment, my hands trembling with desire and nervousness, before I manage to undo the tie.

With a determined tug, I pull his pants down, feeling the tension in his muscles as he lifts his hips to help.

His boxers follows quickly, revealing his hardened cock, and I can’t help but let out a soft moan at the sight of him.

Pressing myself against him, I can feel the heat of his arousal against me.

I lower myself slowly, exhaling sharply as he fills me, stretching and completing me in a way that makes me gasp.

My hands splay out on his chest for support, fingers digging into his skin as I adjust to the sensation of him inside me.

Nico’s grip on my waist tightens, his fingers digging in almost painfully, grounding me as I start to move.

The desperation in our movements is palpable, each thrust and grind a testament to the need that’s been building between us.

I can feel every inch of him, the way he fills me, the way he moves within me, each motion driving me closer to the edge.

Our breaths are ragged, mingling in the space between us as I ride him, my hips moving in a rhythm that matches the frantic beating of my heart.

His hands roam my body, one sliding up to cup my breast, his thumb brushing over my nipple and sending jolts of pleasure through me. I throw my head back and moan loudly.

His other hand remains on my waist, guiding me, urging me to move faster, harder.

The intensity of our connection is almost overwhelming, the kitchen filling with the sounds of our moans and the slapping of our skin.

Every movement, every touch, is filled with a need that borders on frantic.

As we move together, lost in each other, I can feel the world fade away until it’s just us, in this moment, together.

“Nico,” I moan, my voice raw with emotion. “I’m close.” The pressure is starting to mount, the sensation almost too much to bear.

His pace becomes more frantic, his grip on my waist almost painful as he slams me onto him.

The sensation is just too much, and I shatter over him, crying out as the waves of pleasure crash through me.

My body tightens around him, pulling him deeper as I convulse in ecstasy.

Nico’s rhythm falters, his breaths coming in harsh gasps.

I feel him swell inside me, and with a guttural moan, he thrusts deep one last time, his release hot and powerful.

He holds me tight against him, our bodies trembling with the intensity of it all.

I collapse onto Nico’s slick chest, feeling the steady beating of his heart against my ear.

It’s a soothing rhythm.

His lips press a tender kiss to the top of my head before he slides his head down so our foreheads are pressed together. Our breaths mingle as we try to come down from what was honestly the best sex of my life.

His hand is on my jaw, thumb moving very softly along my cheekbone. My mouth feels raw. My skin is still on fire everywhere he touched me, which is most places. Nico is looking at me with such tenderness on his face and that tenderness is what breaks me.

My eyes sting with tears. I’m not ashamed of what I’ve done. Shame I can work with. Shame I know how to handle.

This is *grief*.

Because I just did something I cannot take back. I crossed a line I have built my whole professional identity on the correct side of. I heal people.

I save the ones nobody else can save.

I do it every single day.

And this man—this man *takes* lives.

He takes children.

He took *me*.

And I just wrapped my legs around him and let him have me like a wanton whore.

Everything just got so much worse. *Everything*.

Nico pulls back, his gaze heavy. He doesn't look sad or disappointed. He looks, well, I don't even know.

"Katerina —" he starts to say but I wave my hand.

"Don't," I manage to get out, breathing through my nose to prevent myself from crying. "Don't talk to me."

I shove him away and leap off the counter.

My legs almost don't hold my weight, but I manage to not stumble too badly.

I robotically find my clothes and quickly pull them on, smoothing my shirt with hands that don't feel like mine. He reaches for my elbow, and I yank it away like his hand is a live wire.

"I said *don't*," I snarl, but the heat of my words is betrayed by the quaking in my voice. Tears burn at the corner of my eyes. "Don't say anything. Please. *Please* don't say anything to me right now."

Nico looks impassive, and I can't bring myself to try and interpret that look. I've probably hurt him, but I don't care. He hurt me by taking Seraphina. By manipulating me to be *here.*

I make myself walk, because running would mean admitting how badly I need to get out of this room and I do not want him to know how badly he's rattled me.

Somehow I get to the stairs and then somehow my door is there and I'm on the other side of it. I don't remember either of those things actually happening.

I make it to the edge of the bed before my legs give out, and I collapse on the rug as if a string has been cut.

My shoulders heave with sobs and I cover my face.

This isn't the controlled, careful crying I sometimes allow myself in an on-call room after a bad night, but the ugly silent whole-body kind, the kind that comes from somewhere much deeper.

Tonight I just slept with the man who took Seraphina. Tonight I slept with a man who kills people for fun while I do my very best to keep them alive.

Tonight I slept with a man who has the very loosest definition of the word "morals."

The worst part—the part I am going to pay for the rest of these twenty-six days and probably the rest of my life—is that I *wanted* to.

I *still* want to.

And I do not know how to cope with that.

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8

NICO

I don’t move for a long time after she leaves.

I stand in the middle of my kitchen at four-something in the morning, half-dressed, one hand braced on the counter she was on ten minutes ago, and I do not move.

I can’t.

My body is not cooperating with the idea of moving.

I can still feel her.

My skin remembers exactly where her hands were. My mouth is still warm from hers.

The whole right side of my ribs still feels the mark of her nails.

I can taste her on my tongue and I can smell her everywhere. In the air. On my hands. On my mouth.

And the sounds she made. *God*. I am going to hear the sounds she made for the rest of my life.

The little breath she took right before I put my mouth on her throat. The way she said my name into the space between us.

The whimper against the shell of my ear.

The way she said *yes*, twice, the sound so breathy with want that it makes my dick start to stir again.

I slept with Katerina Sokolov.

I say it in my head like it's a fact I need to prove to myself.

I slept with Katerina Sokolov.

The woman I have been half in love with for two years and fully obsessed with for all of them.

The woman I have watched buy coffee, cross streets, run in the rain, get on and off trains, sleep through her subway stop once, and never once believed I would be allowed to actually have.

I had her. On my counter. In my kitchen. In this house.

Then she looked at me like she was going to be sick, and she got off that counter, and she ran.

The remembering of that part is what finally makes me move.

I go upstairs. I do not go to her door even though I want to badly enough that I have to force my feet past it and down the hall to my own room. But being in my room is worse because there's no her in it, and I can smell her on my own skin instead.

I sit on the edge of the bed, but I don't turn a light on. I sit there in the dark and try to slow my heart down. It doesn't slow.

It has been pounding since she walked into the kitchen and it hasn't let up once—not through the kissing, the aftermath, the walk upstairs, not now, three floors and a hallway later, with her nowhere near me.

My chest is tight.

My skin still feels hot everywhere, in a way that has nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

I can feel my own pulse in my throat, in my hands, in my mouth where hers was.

I put my head in my hands. I still smell her on them. God—she is *everywhere*. The soap on my palms is her.

The inside of my wrists are her.

When I turn my head my own hair is her, because she had her hands in it.

And now I'm sitting in the dark wrecked from the inside out, and if I lie down on this bed I'm going to spend the rest of the night bringing her here in my head and pretending it's the same thing, and it isn't. It isn't even close.

She was *here*.

She was on me.

And she left.

She left. That's the thing that keeps hitting me in the chest fresh every time I try to shove it away. She kissed me and let me have her. But then she looked at me at the end of it like she'd made the worst mistake of her life, and she left.

After a while I make myself get up. I remove what's left of what I'm wearing and drop it, one piece at a time, on the chair by the wardrobe. I catch myself in the mirror on my way to the bathroom and I stop short.

Goddamn, I look like I've been hit by a car. That's fair. I feel like I have. My hair is a mess from Katerina running her fingers through it.

There's a red mark low on the left side of my throat where she bit me and a scratch running down my ribs where her nails caught me on the way down my back.

My eyes are dark and bloodshot and there's a shine to them I have not seen on my own face in a long time, maybe ever.

And my mouth…

With a trembling hand, I touch my lips.

My mouth still looks like it was kissed, red and swollen. I can still feel her breath on my mouth, the taste of her tongue…

I make myself drop my hand.

If I keep touching my own face like that I am going to lose whatever thin grip I have left on being a person.

And I can't do that because a new day is dawning whether I'm ready for it or not, and I have to be someone people can look at again. Which means at some point I have to go into the bathroom and rinse this off me.

I make myself move.

I linger in front of my shower and I don't turn it on. I can't make myself do it.

Washing her off is going to happen.

I have things to do today, people I need to be a professional in front of, but not right now.

Not this early.

Right now I would rather smell her than sleep, and I am not ready to give that up yet.

I have spent two years learning every single thing about Katerina Sokolov.

There was nothing about her that I didn't know from surveillance photos and background reports to a few weeks of hazy memories from a hospital bed.

I thought I knew every little thing I was going to get when she finally walked through my door.

I was wrong. God, I was so wrong.

The Katerina Sokolov that I thought I knew is nothing like the real one. She's so, so much better.

The real one argues with me.

The real one broke into my office because she'd rather burn her thirty days on a rescue attempt than sit quietly and wait to be handed information.

The real one hit me over a video of a two year old, let me pin her against a wall, then made herself stand there and not move because she is stubborn enough to lose exactly nothing in a fight she cannot win.

The real one has morals I did not fully account for. She saves lives, not because it's her job but because *that's who she is*.

She rescues people from the brink of death, and there is no room in that for a man like me.

She knows it.

And yet, she seemed to ignore all that tonight and kissed me anyway.

I groan and rest my head on the cool tile of the bathroom wall. I am so fucked.

I have never been more fucked in my entire life.

By seven a.m. I have finally showered and made myself presentable.

I am in my study staring at a screen full of intercepts my intelligence team has flagged overnight, and every single line of it makes me angrier.

Russo is closing in.

Motherfucker.

My eyes skim over the reports.

It's a list of Corsican operatives Russo's people have pulled in and questioned in the last seventy-two hours.

Money traced from accounts I know into properties I don't.

He's working through a list and checking who has the means.

He’s checking who had the motive, and he’s being *methodical* about it, which is what makes him a fucking nightmare and what has my hand tightening around the arm of the chair the further I read.

I recognize this playbook because it’s *mine* and now here it is, aimed at me, even if Russo doesn’t know it yet. I close my eyes for a second and make myself breathe, trying to utilize some of the breathing techniques I’ve been taught. It doesn’t help.

Marco Russo. Lieutenant. Corsican.

He’s in his mid-forties and he’s a smart son of a bitch. I’ve never trusted the bastard.

He has been chipping quietly at the Brennan–Santoro–Sokolov alliance for a while now.

At least five or six years, and I know his network because knowing everyone’s network is my *job*.

The second I look at the names Russo has pulled in for questioning, I know exactly what I’m looking at and I want to put my hands around his throat.

“Goddammit,” I mutter to myself, feeling my blood pressure skyrocket. “Goddammit motherfucking *fuck*.”

This isn’t a new problem.

It’s phase two of an old one.

Which means the son of a bitch has been planning this since before I even knew Katerina Sokolov’s name.

Phase one was Alexander Morozov—the Bratva traitor who double crossed Nikolai Sokolov.

We had been working with Alexander for *years* before he decided to get his stupid ass killed. Morozov had been partnered with this exact Corsican faction, working to rot the Sokolov organization from the inside.

It was fucking working, too, until Morozov fucked up and Maksim Sokolov’s wife—of all fucking people—took him down.

The Bratva took care of him and that was the end of Alexander Morozov.

But the faction didn’t stop. They just pivoted. To fucking *Russo*.

God*dammit*.

Because losing Morozov wasn’t the end of the plan.

It was just a bad investment. They wrote him off, learned from it, and moved on to phase two.

The plan is the same one it’s always been, just aimed from a new angle. Fracture the alliance.

Get the Bratva and the Irish and the Santoros to look at each other and see enemies.

Let them tear each other apart.

Then move in and clean up what’s left when they’ve done the work for you.

Seraphina was going to be the fracture point.

If she’d died—and Russo’s plan *was* for her to die in a way that let each family point at the others—the alliance would have shattered inside a week.

Leo Santoro would have come out of that grief looking for someone to kill, and he would have immediately blamed the Sokolovs for the breach on Maksim’s estate.

Cillian Brennan, under the direction of Connor Brennan, who would have been distraught at the loss of his granddaughter, would have declared war on the Sokolovs, and the three families would have spent the next year at each other’s throats while the Corsicans moved in behind the smoke.

That was the plan Russo was supposed to execute himself.

And instead, someone—see also: me—else got to Seraphina first, and pulled her out before Russo did.

Now the bastard is trying to figure out who did it.

I sit back in my chair and rub a hand down my face. My name has not come up in his intercepts yet, but it's only a matter of time.

Russo is patient but he is not slow, and I know he will figure it out who took Seraphina Santoro.

I did what I did quickly, because I had to. If I'd waited any longer that little girl would already be dead and I was not letting Seraphina Santoro die.

The phone on my desk buzzes and my eyes cut to it. Luca's name flashes on the screen. I seize it and answer on the first ring.

"Luca?"

"Nico."

He doesn't say anything else for a second, and that alone tells me it's bad. Dread curls into my gut.

Luca doesn't stall.

Whatever's coming, he's trying to figure out how to say it, and my stomach is already sinking before he opens his mouth again.

"Just tell me," I order him, heart thumping wildly.

Luca sighs heavily. "It's Dino. He's dead."

I close my eyes. "*Fuck.*"

"They pulled him out of the Hudson about twenty minutes ago," Luca continues quietly. "One shot to the head with Russo's insignia carved into his chest. Somebody took their time with it and I don't think the poor bastard was dead yet before they did it. It's a message, Nico. Anybody who had eyes on that safe house is a target now. They wanted us to know."

I don't remember standing up but suddenly I am, my ears buzzing.

I have one hand flat on the desk to hold myself steady, phone pressed to my ear, and I can't get a full breath in.

Dino was a goddamn *good* man. He was thirty-one years old.

His wife is eight months pregnant and they were going to name the kid after his grandfather if it was a boy.

He told me that a couple months ago, kind of embarrassed about it, at the last dinner we did as a crew.

“Where is he?” I manage, swallowing heavily.

“Bellevue,” Luca continues, sounding miserable. “I already made the call. They know we’re coming.”

I grope around my desk drawer, searching for my gun. “Come get me,” I tell my half-brother.

Luca sighs. “I was afraid you’d say that. I’m on my way. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Silence stretches between us and I know there’s something else Luca isn’t telling me. I brace for impact.

“Ana doesn’t know yet,” Luca finally says.

Goddammit. Ana, Dino’s wife, is about to find out her husband isn’t coming home. A sharp pain in my chest makes me sit back down.

“I’ll go to her myself,” I tell Luca. It has to be me. Dino deserves that respect. “After we leave the morgue. I’ll let her know and make sure she is aware we will take care of her.”

All I can hear is the sounds of Luca driving. “You sure?”

“I’m sure,” I tell him firmly. “She hears it from me.”

“Okay.” He pauses. “You okay?”

I let out a breath. “No. I’m really fucking not.”

Luca barks out a harsh laugh. “Yeah. I figured.”

I hang up before either of us has to say anything else.

I don’t remember getting in the car. I don’t remember Luca showing up at the estate to pick me up.

I remember the drive because I sat in the back with my phone in my hand and stared out the window at nothing. And I tried not to think about Katerina.

I couldn’t afford to think about Katerina.

I thought about her the whole way there anyway.

The guy at the morgue is somebody I’ve been paying off since the Bloomberg administration. He doesn’t ask questions. He just nods at Luca, unlocks the back cooler, and steps out of the way.

Dino is on the slab in the middle of the room. I stop in the doorway for a second while Luca closes the door behind us.

He looks smaller than I remember, but then again they always do.

His skin is that specific gray-blue that only comes from cold water, mottled at the temples where the blood settled.

His hair is still damp and stuck to his forehead in a way that would have driven him crazy.

Dino was vain as fuck about that hair, always pushing it back with his fingers when we were talking and telling me about the latest hair gel that was on the market.

But then I notice his open eyes.

Nobody closed them.

They’re just staring straight up at the ceiling, dulled over, empty in a way that’s fundamentally wrong to look at on a face I know well.

My stomach turns and I have to swallow before I look at anything else.

Behind me, Luca makes a small sound.

When I glance over, he’s already crossing himself, mouth pressed tight.

He flinches when he actually looks at Dino’s face, then makes himself keep looking.

I force myself to look away from his lifeless eyes.

There’s a small dark hole above his right eyebrow where the round went in.

But it’s not the head wound I’m looking at.

I walk over to the slab and pull the sheet down the rest of the way. Luca curses and I flinch at what we see.

“Jesus Christ,” I hear myself say.

The insignia is deeply carved into the middle of his chest. It’s all the way through the muscle in some places.

The lines are clean and steady, too.

Around the cuts, along the edges, the bruising is dark and swollen and unmistakable. My whole body goes cold.

“You were right,” I tell my brother, not bothering to look at him. “He was alive when that was carved into him.”

Luca curses again as he comes to stand next to me. “Coroner says the head shot happened last, after everything else. He was alive for the carving. All of it.”

I close my eyes and let out an uneven breath.

An hour of Russo’s guys holding him down.

An hour of a man I’ve known for twelve years—a man who came to my mother’s funeral, who stood in the back with his hat in his hands like an altar boy—knowing exactly who he was there for and what it was going to do to him.

An hour of him knowing this was his last one.

Neither of us say anything for a while.

Luca and I have seen a lot of bodies. We grew up on them, honestly.

There was a time in my twenties where I thought I'd built up enough calluses that nothing was going to reach me anymore.

Turns out the calluses only work when you don't know the guy.

"Christ." Luca's voice is rough next to me. "*Dino.*"

I nod numbly. "Yeah."

"He was a good soldier."

"He was."

"He was a good *guy.*"

I wish Luca would stop talking. Every one of Dino's positive attributes is like a knife twisting in my chest. "I know," I grit out.

We stand there another minute. Neither of us move.

"Ana can't see this," I say quietly. "You hear me? Whatever it costs, whoever we have to pay—she gets a closed casket." I turn to look into my brother's green eyes so he can see how serious I am. "She gets the version where he went fast. She does not need to know he suffered. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah." Luca clears his throat. "Yeah. I got it."

I sigh and turn back to the body. "Dino's kid's not even born yet."

Luca looks pained. "I know."

"How the fuck do you tell a woman like Ana that her husband went out like *this?*" I gesture to Dino's corpse.

"You don't," Luca says, looking at Dino. His jaw is trembling, a tell he's had since we were kids when he was trying to not react to something that was affecting him. "You tell her he loved her and that he was a hero. You tell her he went fast and you take the rest of it to the grave."

I glance over at him, but he doesn't look back. He's staring at Dino's chest.

I look back down at Dino.

The carving.

The bruising.

The cruelty of what was done to him.

And underneath the grief—underneath the sick, cold horror of what an hour of that must have felt like—something else is starting to move in me.

Something a lot uglier than any of the things I have been trying to be for Katerina Sokolov in the last week.

I have not been this angry in years.

Russo did this. Russo *chose* this.

He didn't need an hour to send a message.

Five, hell, *ten* minutes would have done it.

He didn't need to do it while Dino was still breathing.

He took his time on purpose, because he wanted me to see this, and know that he knew, and understand what he is willing to do to the people I care about.

Fine. He wanted my attention. He has it.

I reach out and close Dino's eyes with two fingers.

I fight a flinch when I touch him.

His skin is unnaturally cold and stiff.

The second my fingers touch him something inside me shifts.

It goes cold too.

All the heat I've been running on since Katerina walked into the kitchen at four a.m. drops out of me and leaves something else behind.

Something that matches him.

My rage is as cold as his body now, and I'll take that. Rage is good. Rage brings justice.

His eyelids don’t want to stay closed at first, but I press them until they do. Then I pull the sheet back up to his chin.

“Rest, Dino,” I tell him quietly. “I’ve got it from here. Ana and the baby will want for nothing. I can promise you that.”

I turn to Luca.

“Move Seraphina,” I order him, my mind racing as I work through my thoughts. “Tonight. Not the tertiary house. Pick something Dino didn’t know about. Pick something *none* of them knew about. New caretakers. New route. New comms. I want it small—you, me, one driver, one nurse. That’s it. Nobody outside those four people knows where she is. Not the crew that moves her. Not the guy who cleans the property. Nobody. If it’s not one of us four, they don’t get to know.”

“Understood.” He hesitates for a moment. “And where does Dr. Sokolov fit in all this?”

That’s the question I have been not asking myself since Luca called.

Because the whole point—the whole *point*—of the setup with Katerina has been that she gets a video every three days so she knows Seraphina is alive.

She’s already going to be furious at me this morning, for reasons that have nothing to do with any of this.

If I move Seraphina and if the next scheduled video doesn’t come, she is going to conclude that Seraphina is dead.

If I tell her, I am handing her a piece of intelligence about my operation that she absolutely should not have.

If Russo’s people get to her, which will happen over my dead body, she becomes a leverage point that has actual information behind her.

But if I don’t tell her, she thinks I have started hurting Seraphina, and everything I have been trying to build with her ends.

There’s no good answer.

There’s only the wrong one and the worse one.

I already know which one that is.

“She doesn’t need to know any of this,” I tell Luca. “None of it. Not Russo, not Dino, not the move. Nothing.”

Luca doesn’t say anything for a second, his green eyes skeptical. He sighs. “The next video isn’t going to happen on schedule, Nico.”

I’m aware of this. “I know.”

Luca raises an eyebrow, as if surprised by my flat effect. “She’s going to notice.”

There’s a spike of irritation at Luca’s continued words, but I stamp it down. “I know that too.”

He doesn’t push, but then again he never does when I get like this. That’s what happens when you grow up in the same house with somebody.

I pull my coat on and walk out of the morgue. I don’t look back at Dino, because if I look back at Dino I’m going to feel something I don’t have room for today.

The estate is quiet when I get back.

I take the west entrance because it doesn’t cut through the main hall, and I don’t want to run into anyone.

I want to get to my office, shut the door, and sit with what I know for an hour before I have to be a person again.

The west corridor is the long way around, but it drops me at the back of the house without cutting through the main hall, and right now I’ll take any detour I can get.

The problem with the west corridor is that it passes the library. I glance in as I walk by. I don’t mean to.

I do it automatically, the same way I always check a room I'm walking past, and I stop dead in the corridor.

Katerina's in there.

She's just inside the doorway, standing at one of the tall windows. Her back is to me and I can only see one of her hands from this angle.

It looks like she's holding a book open and it hasn't moved to turn a page since I glanced in.

She's just standing there staring out the window.

My eyes trail over the rest of her.

She's in a soft gray sweater and leggings.

Her hair is pulled back in a loose braid down her spine, a few pieces coming out of it at the base of her neck, and I feel my fingers twitch. I want to walk over there, pull that braid loose, and run my hand through her hair. The feeling is so strong I have to shove both hands in my pockets to prevent myself from doing something fucking stupid.

Suddenly, she stiffens and she slowly turns around. Her eyes widen when she sees it's me and I can tell that she has barely slept.

The dark circles under her eyes are more pronounced and her face is sallow.

Her lips look chapped, like she's been chewing on them, and her hair is not quite as neat as it looked from behind.

The loose braid is fraying at the crown, like she plaited it hours ago and hasn't bothered to fix it since.

She looks…*haggard*. She looks that way because of me.

Because early this morning, we had sex and she regretted it the second it was over.

She has clearly spent all day beating herself up about it. And it's my fault.

Any other morning it would gut me.

But this morning I have Dino’s blood on my hands and I can’t afford to let her see me right now.

Her lips part as if she’s about to say something.

I don’t let her.

With Herculean strength, I tear my eyes from her and keep walking.

I don’t stop until I’m in my study with the door shut behind me.

Even then I stand there with my forehead against the wood for a long time before I can make myself move.

It’s killing me to walk away from her looking like that. It really is.

But the thirty days I promised her are about to get a lot more complicated than either of us signed up for.

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9

KATERINA

I wake up and I feel sick.

Not hangover sick. Not flu sick. Something worse than that.

It's a full-body, bone-deep, wrong-in-the-world kind of sick, the kind you feel when you have done something you cannot take back and your body knew before you did.

I lie bed with my eyes closed and it takes me a few moments to remember why I feel like this.

Then I remember and I bolt upright, clamping a hand over my mouth.

Oh my god. Oh my *god.*

I slept with him.

My stomach heaves so hard I actually have to swing my legs off the bed and put my head between my knees.

I can't blame anything other than myself. I knew exactly what I was doing and there is no version of this where I get to look in the mirror later and pretend I didn't.

I slept with the man who kidnapped Seraphina Santoro.

I *slept* with him.

On his kitchen counter.

Voluntarily. Enthusiastically.

I *initiated it.*

I ran my nails down his back.

I bit his lip.

I moaned in his ear.

I said his name into his shoulder.

I writhed against him.

I came. I came for the man who is holding a two-year-old hostage.

I put my hands over my face and I make an inhuman sound. My stomach is churning.

My eyes are hot and wet and no amount of trying to will the tears away will work. It's like my body is trying to remind me that something happened.

And something *did* happen. Something I'm so fucking ashamed of.

I wince as I move my legs. My inner thighs are sore and there's a dull tender ache in between my legs. My mouth still feels bruised, even though I know that's not possible.

There's a tingling sensation on my neck that I just *know* is a hickey. I am covered in the evidence of what I did, and my body is refusing to let me pretend I imagined it.

You stupid, stupid idiot, I berate myself, my hands still over my face as I fight back the tears. *You pathetic, stupid woman.*

A sob manages to escape me and I bite my lips so hard I'm pretty sure I taste blood.

"What is *wrong* with you?" I tell myself angry, saying it the same way I would say it to a patient who came in for the third time with an infected

wound because she stopped taking the antibiotics her boyfriend told her she didn't need, a true story. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Katerina?"

I don't have an answer for that.

Eventually I make myself stand up and my legs wobble.

Bathroom. I need to go to the bathroom and rinse all this off.

Forcing my legs to move, I walk the length of the room toward the en suite and flip on the light.

When I see myself in the mirror over the sink, I actually flinch.

I…I do not look like me.

My face is pale and my hair is standing in all directions.

My lips are chapped. I gasp as I see the hickey low on my throat, close to my collarbone. "Fuck," I mutter as I press my fingers to it without meaning to.

Immediately, a memory of Nico's lips closing over my skin flashes in front of my eyes and I cringe, pulling my hand back like I've been burned.

I twist my body, trying to see if there are any other marks…*there*.

There's another one at the base of my shoulder. How on earth did it get there?

I don't recall Nico's mouth moving to that spot, but last night already has that hazy dream-like quality and I don't think I will be able to remember specific details.

I curl my hands around the sink basin and take a deep breath.

My cheeks are still flushed, hours later, as if my body has not caught up with the fact that he is not with me.

I don't recognize this…this *stranger*.

This strange woman who let her fucking captor have his way with her. Who wanted him.

You are a doctor, I chide myself, still unable to take my eyes off this strange woman. *You save lives. You are the person your patients cry to, the person people trust with the worst hours of their lives. You are not* this. *You are not a woman who lets herself be talked into a stranger's bed or kitchen counter. You are not a woman who sleeps with kidnappers. You are not a woman who—for fuck's sake, you are* not *the woman in this mirror. What did you do?*

What did I do? The evidence is all over me.

I can still smell Nico on me.

Unable to stand it, I quickly turn on the spout to the coldest water available and splash my face, hoping the iciness will shock my system and I will snap out of it.

It doesn't. *Fuck*. Nothing about looking at myself is going to help. I need to get all of him off me.

That is the only thing I know for sure.

I cannot spend another second walking around in the skin he touched last night.

The soreness, the marks, the smell of him still on my hair—I need it gone, and I need it gone *now*, even if it is only the beginning of what I have to answer for.

I turn the shower on as hot as it will go.

When the shower door is steamed up and it feels like I just walked outside into a New York summer, I get in.

The water is as hot as I can make it. I know there's the joke that women like to shower in boiling water, but I'm convinced that Satan himself would find this water to be too cool for him.

I stand under the water for a long time, until my skin turns pink then red, and when my nerves are finally starting to say *hey, we're kind of boiling alive here*, only then do I scrub myself clean, but it's not enough.

I’m not able to wash him off but I keep trying because it’s something to do, which means I don’t have to think.

I can still feel him and that scares the shit out of me.

I can wash and scrub and get my skin raw and I can *still* feel his hands on me.

His mouth.

The way his hand felt in my hair.

My body remembers everything and will not give me a moment’s reprieve.

Underneath the shame, some small and horrible part of me is not sorry.

Some small and horrible part of me would do it again if I were pushed and would like it *right now*, thank you very much.

That is what I can’t forgive myself for.

I can hate what I did and hate the man I did it with, but there is still this tiny screaming voice in the back of my head going *more, more, more,* and I do not know how to make it stop.

Overwhelmed, I sit down in the shower, hissing a bit at the coolness of the tile compared to my overheated skin.

But I ignore the momentary shock to my system and lean back, letting the water run over me while I fight the panic bubbling under my skin.

I am a doctor, dammit.

I have delivered devastating news to strangers and stayed on my feet through it. I have held a woman’s hand while her son died in front of us.

I do not fall apart.

I don’t have the luxury to do so.

I am the person other people fall apart in front of.

I don’t recognize the woman who is falling apart in this shower. I try to think my way out of it.

When something goes wrong in the OR I make a list and I logic my way through it.

So I start doing that now.

One: trauma bonding is real. I have seen it in patients.

Women who bring their abusers flowers in the ER waiting room. Men who take the blame for their own beatings.

The brain under sustained threat will do anything, *anything,* to survive, and one of the things it will do is convince you that the person hurting you is not really hurting you.

I have written about this phenomenon in continuing-education modules and done presentations on it.

Two: captivity creates false intimacy.

Same principle.

Small worlds shrink further, and when they shrink far enough there is only one other person in them, and eventually your brain will start reaching for that person because it has nowhere else to reach.

Three: sexual coercion is not always overt. You can consent enthusiastically to something you would never have chosen under other circumstances.

The consent is real.

The circumstances are not fair.

Both things can happen at once.

I have literally *told this* to women in exam rooms.

I know all of this and it does not help me because knowing about trauma bonding does not stop trauma bonding, any more than knowing about a rip current stops you from being swept out to sea. Neurochemistry is neurochemistry, and knowing my own biochemistry apparently does not save me from being a woman standing in this shower thinking about how his hands felt on me.

I hate myself. I hate myself in a way that I am not used to. I am not a person who wallows or beats herself up over decisions. I make a call in the OR, and if it was the wrong one I learn something from it, then I move on.

That's how I have survived.

But I don't know how to move on from this.

This wasn't a wrong call in a bad moment.

This was me, on his kitchen counter, with my hands in his hair, choosing him with my whole body.

There is no rationalization for that.

There is no *unavoidable circumstance.* There is only me and what I wanted, and what I wanted last night was him, and I don't know what to do about that.

Eventually I turn the water off, but I don't immediately get out of the shower because that feels too difficult. When I do get out, I wrap myself in a towel but I don't look in the mirror this time. I have already seen what I look like. I don't need to see it again.

With that, I pad over to the closet and pick out my clothes, which may as well be armor. Black leggings, a tank top, an oversized sweater that comes down to my knees that I brought from home.

I braid my wet hair down my back because I cannot make myself do anything else with it.

It comes out a bit sloppy because my hands are shaking while I braid.

Once that's done, I sit back down on the edge of my bed and I make a decision.

I am not going to let *this* happen again. I am going to avoid the hell out of Nico Barone. I am going to stay in my rooms as much as I can.

When I have to be out of them, I am going to keep as much distance between us as this house allows.

I am not going to eat meals with him. I am not going to sit in the same room with him.

I am not going to make eye contact with him.

I am not going to give him the chance to look at me the way he looked at me last night, because apparently when he looks at me like that I have the willpower of a wet napkin.

And I do not have it in me to make another mistake.

This is all for Seraphina. Nothing else.

I put my head in my hands again because that's all I can apparently do right now.

I stay in my rooms for the rest of that day.

I don't go down for dinner or for breakfast the next morning either. Someone leaves trays outside my door, but I don't touch them.

Somebody eventually takes them away.

I don't know who and I don't really care.

I try to read but I can't focus on the words. I try to work out because running always makes my mind go blank, but the sight of my bare arms reminds me of his hands on my arms and it makes me fall off the treadmill.

This time, Nico isn't there to save me so I slam roughly into the ground. And it fucking *hurts*.

I sit on the floor of that stupid perfect suite in his stupid perfect house, and I whisper to the ceiling, "You stupid, stupid bitch."

That's what I am. That's what I did. I'm a grown woman with two board certifications and I let a mafia captor—an actual, real-life, mafia captor—take me against a counter with my legs around him because he said horribly romantic words and looked at me with his big, sad brown eyes.

Are you actually kidding me right now, Katerina Alexandrovna? Because I don't know who you are anymore.

My internal voice sounds like my mother.

I'm really fucking glad she's not here to see me like this because she would have beat me within an inch of my life, and honestly I would deserve it.

My brain won't stop showing me the kitchen. That hazy, dream-like quality is gone.

Instead every time I close my eyes, the kitchen is there in unbelievable high-definition detail.

I remember everything.

The way his eyes went dark when he looked at me, how he said my name into my mouth, the way I climbed him like a fucking tree.

Worst of all, I remember how he looked at me afterward, like he couldn't believe his luck that I was here and…*his*.

God, I want to vomit as I press the heels of my hands into my eyes.

"Stop it," I order myself, trying to get my brain to heel. But my brain keeps going, cheerful as a mean little slideshow, replaying the literal worst hour of my life. "You don't want him," I tell myself as I stagger over to the mirror. My reflection stares back at me in the glass—a tired, hollow-eyed woman with a bad braid and pasty white skin.

But you do want him, a nasty part of me whispers gleefully. *You want him to fuck you again. You want him to go down on you. You want to scream his name, to feel his mouth on your—*

"*Shut up!*" I shout as I seize the closest thing to me and throw it at the mirror. The pillow bounces off harmlessly. My breaths are coming in gasps and my chest is heaving and I look like I've truly lost it.

Overwhelmed, I feel hot tears rush into my eyes.

This time, instead of fighting them, I bury my face in my hands and sob.

I try a new plan that doesn’t involve me hiding in my rooms.

The plan is simple: avoid him.

In theory, it should be easy because this house is enormous and I do not actually have to see him if I do not want to. I take my meals at odd hours.

I eat in the library instead of the dining room. I take the long way to the gardens so I do not pass his office.

When I hear his voice down a hall, I turn around and go the other way.

When I see him coming toward me in a corridor, I look at the floor and I keep walking.

I’m good at this game because it’s not the first time I’ve avoided a man in a building. I got very good at it as a resident with a certain attending who had a certain…*reputation*.

This is about reclaiming autonomy and drawing a line. Making sure the man understands that what happened in that kitchen was a mistake and that I am not going to make it a habit. This is what I tell myself and I almost believe it.

But deep down, I’m terrified of what will happen if I have to see him again because what happened in that kitchen was not a mistake in the way a slip in judgment is a mistake.

It was—God, I do not have a word for what it was. It was something I *wanted*, and there is something desperately wrong with a woman who wants someone like him.

For two days, I’m successful at avoiding him. But all good things must come to an end, I guess. On my third day of successful avoidance, I get too confident. I’m on my way back from taking my breakfast in the first floor parlor when I turn a corner and nearly jump out of my skin.

Nico is right there, standing at the other end of the corridor, hands in his pockets, like he has been waiting for me for a while.

I stop dead, my heart hammering. My mouth immediately dries and my breakfast threatens to come up my throat.

He doesn’t come toward me. He just stands there, watching me, and neither of us moves.

Even though I don’t want to, I study him. He looks…worn out. Tired in a way I have not seen him before. He hasn’t shaved based on the stubble along his jaw.

It gives him a rugged, masculine look and my toes curl in my shoes.

Stop it, Kat!

His hair is messy like he’s been running his hands through it.

His shoulders sit lower than they did last time I saw him, like something heavy has been sitting on them for days. There are dark circles under his eyes, and he looks like he has slept about as well as I have, which is to say not at all.

For just a second, something flickers on his face, then it’s gone and he is watching me carefully again.

“Katerina,” he says, his voice low and it makes the hairs on the back of my neck rise. No, no, I can’t do this. I *can’t.*

“Don’t.” My voice comes out smaller than I want and I clear it. “Whatever you are about to say, don’t say it. Please.”

“I wasn’t going to.” He reaches into the pocket of his jacket. “I just wanted to give you this.”

He holds out a photograph. I stare at it in his hand, the seconds stretching before us. I do not want to take it. I don’t want to be given anything by him right now.

But it’s a photograph, and there is only one person in this world it could be a photograph of.

My feet involuntarily move and I creep closer to him, heart in my throat.

I reach my hand out and take the photo, careful to not touch his fingers.

My eyes drop down to the photo and my breath catches.

It’s Seraphina.

She’s not in the same room that I saw in the video.

She’s wearing a bright yellow shirt and denim overalls.

Her hair is in two lopsided pigtails again and I can only imagine the fight that must have happened between the caretaker and Seraphina.

She’s holding a stuffed puppy that I imagine must be Pancake, the one Nico told me about.

She’s holding it against her chest in a possessive full-body grip and she’s grinning from ear to ear. Her mouth is open and her eyes are shining.

She looks…*happy*.

I can’t breathe as I drink her in before I notice something behind her. There’s a calendar tacked to the wall above her head. Today’s date is circled in red pen.

I put my other hand over my mouth.

A lump starts to appear in my throat, but I will myself not to cry.

I’ve done enough of that in the last few days and I don’t want to cry in front of Nico.

But my eyes start to burn and my traitorous nose starts to run a little, and I can’t stop looking at that little face.

That little laughing, unbothered, well-fed, safe face.

She is *okay.* Somebody is playing with her and dressing her. Somebody is circling today’s date on a calendar for me because I asked, in the middle of the worst night of my life, for proof that this had not all been for nothing.

I look up at Nico, my lips parted, and his face is not what I expected. For a fraction of a second—before the mask reappears—I see two things I didn’t expect to see on him.

Resignation, like he’s already accepted something I haven’t, and hope.

Then it’s gone and he watches me with that same cool look on his face.

I can almost believe I imagined this.

Almost.

“Why,” I say. My voice is hoarse. “Why are you showing me this?”

He shrugs. “Because you needed to know she was safe and that she is going to stay that way.” He sighs wearily and it’s the most human sound I’ve heard from him since…since the kitchen incident. “I told you I would keep my promise. Nothing will happen to Seraphina.”

There is no smirk on his face or anything that could be confused for flirtation. He is not touching me. Instead, he’s standing a respectful distance away, holding my eyes.

It hits me then.

He is telling me the truth and the realization hits me so hard, my knees buckle.

If he were a monster, the kind I thought—*think*—he is, he would have used this photograph.

He would have made me earn it. He would have made me apologize or thank him, or promise something, *anything*, in exchange for this proof.

He is not doing any of that.

Instead, he handed me a picture of a laughing, safe two year old, because he thought I needed to have it.

I look down at the photograph again.

Seraphina’s small face so trusting. And it’s then that I realize that my plan requires him to be the man I decided he was when I first met him.

And every day since, without asking me if it was okay, he has been quietly refusing to be that man.

I don’t know what to do with this. It’s like my entire worldview has just shifted.

I clutch the photograph against my chest with both hands, the same way Seraphina is clutching the puppy in the picture, like it's my lifeline. "Excuse me," I say dully before I turn around and walk away from him. The world has stopped spinning. Everything is frozen, except me.

I make it back to my rooms, closing the door and leaning against it. I look down at the photograph again.

And I finally, *finally* start to cry.

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10

NICO

There’s a stack of contracts in front of me that need my signature and I have read the same paragraph four times without absorbing a single word of it.

My pen is uncapped and has been for a while.

I keep staring at the same line about shipping terms and seeing something else instead.

Ana screaming.

I went to her myself the morning after the morgue. I told Luca I would, and I’m a man of my word.

Other leaders would send a subordinate to do the job of telling people their loved ones have died but not me. Not for one of mine.

Ana opened the door wearing one of Dino’s old shirts, her belly round and high under it.

My eyes were trained on her eight months pregnant belly. Dino had been so excited to become a father. And now this child will never know him.

Ana had startled when she saw me, her brown eyes growing wide as she clutched her cup of coffee tighter in her hands.

I could see her throat visibly bob and her face went white.

She knew what it meant for me to be at her home so early in the morning, especially when her husband wasn't home yet.

"Nico," she said, her eyes darting around as if Dino would magically appear by my side. "Where's Dino? He was supposed to call last night and he didn't."

Fuck me. I hated this part. But I couldn't tell her the worst news she'd ever heard standing in her doorway. That wasn't right. Dino wouldn't appreciate that.

"Can I come in, Ana?" I asked, my own voice a little gravelly.

Ana's face went even whiter and another woman who looked similar to Ana appeared.

This must be her sister.

The sister looked at me and gasped, her own face paling.

"Mr. Barone?" the sister asked anxiously while Ana started shaking her head, the coffee mug trembling in her hands.

"No," Ana croaked. "No, no, *no*."

Goddammit. I stepped inside and closed the door. The entire block shouldn't also hear that Ana has lost her husband before she'd had time to process it.

"I'm sorry, Ana," I said, my stomach twisting and my mouth filling with acid. "I'm so sorry, Ana. Dino's gone. They found him in the Hudson yesterday."

For a heartbeat, Ana said and did nothing, her face blank. Her sister cried out, hands flying to her mouth and eyes filling with tears. Ana didn't even blink and her coffee cup was so, *so* still. I eyed her, unsure of when the news would finally hit her.

No sooner than I thought that, Ana's face went even paler than before, as if she'd joined her husband in the afterlife. For one terrible moment, I thought

she was about to pass out and I steadied myself to grab her in case she fell.

The coffee cup dropped from Ana's hands and she screamed.

She screamed and screamed and it was the most horrible sound in the world.

I've heard grown men scream as they die but the wailing of a woman who has found out her husband is dead will haunt me for the rest of my days.

Ana doubled forward over her own stomach with both arms wrapped around it like she was trying to shield the baby from the sound of her own grief.

Her sister lunged forward and seized Ana, getting both arms around her before I could figure out what to do with my frozen body.

"Breathe, Ana," her sister said through tears. "*Breathe*, honey. Ana, *Ana*! You need to breathe!" But her words didn't permeate through Ana's hysterical wails and screams as she collapsed against her sister, one hand still locked over her belly like she could hold the baby together with her own grip.

Meanwhile, I was still standing there uselessly, staring at two women deep in their grief.

I can do horrible things.

I can make people disappear.

I can move money and bodies and entire operations without anyone knowing.

None of that meant anything then. I couldn't make that sound stop, no matter how badly I wanted to.

"My baby!" Ana wailed and my eyes cut immediately to Ana's belly in horror. Jesus *Christ*, is she in labor? "My baby—my baby d-doesn't have a father, Marie! The baby doesn't have a *father*. Dino will never know our baby!"

Eventually, I was able to tell Ana that she and her baby will worry for nothing. I assured her that they will be taken care of for as long as either of them needs it.

I also let her and her sister know—as they clutch each other—that whoever did this would answer for it.

I meant that one with everything I have.

“I’m so sorry, Ana,” I told a dull eyed Ana, which is a small, useless word for what I actually felt standing in her home, but it was the only one I had. I don’t think she even heard me at that moment. I don’t think anything I told her after she heard that her husband was dead actually registered to her. Not yet. Hopefully her sister will tell her.

Once I was assured that Ana would be okay with just her sister, I let myself out.

Her sister walked me to the door with red eyes and a tight, polite thank you and then I was gone.

My ears haven’t stopped ringing with the sounds of Ana’s screams since.

I rub my eyes and try to get back to the contract in front of me. I get through half a sentence before my head goes somewhere else entirely.

Katerina.

It’s been four days since she started avoiding me in earnest.

Four days of catching her at the far end of a hallway and watching her find a reason to turn around.

I keep thinking about how it felt to have her wrapped around me.

To love her.

To worship her.

Then she ran and she’s been avoiding me ever since.

I rub my eyes and try to get back to the contract, but the lines blur and the words are gibberish.

I sigh and knock away the document in irritation. God, I’m tired.

There’s a knock at the door and I snap my head up. Who on earth…?

“Enter,” I say in my most commanding voice.

My lieutenant comes in, holding a sealed envelope in his hands.

I eye it curiously but also dread sits low in my stomach. I can already tell this won’t be good news.

My lieutenant places the envelope on my desk, waits for me to nod, then he swiftly turns around and leaves.

Standing up, I cross the room and quickly lock the door before I stare at the envelope as if it’s a ticking time bomb.

I sit back down heavily and break the seal on the envelope with my thumb.

A single sheet of folded paper falls out and I examine it.

There’s no letterhead or signature. I unfold it and I start reading.

Russo is down to two names. Here’s where he stands on each one:

1. Stefan Vukovic. Serbian. You used him once, three years back, for a weapons deal that had nothing to do with any of this. Russo’s people are looking at him, but his network’s too small to have pulled off an extraction this clean. He’ll probably get cleared in 5–7 days.

2. You. Russo’s people have identified two of your three guys from the extraction. Dino was one before they got to him. Gio and Raul are now in hiding after Dino’s death. Capturing Dino was how they started pulling the thread toward you in the first place. He doesn’t have hard proof yet but is building toward it. Assume he already has eyes on you. If not now, within 72 hours.

My stomach drops out from under me as I read the letter’s contents then read it again and again.

Fuck me.

One line of text between me and a Serbian gun dealer I barely remember.

I’m on my feet before I decide to stand up.

“Fuck,” I say out loud to the empty room. I push a hand back through my hair and start walking the length of the office, back and forth, because sitting is not an option anymore.

Dino didn’t break.

I glance at the letter again and pause by the window. They had Dino for over an hour *and he didn’t break*. I know exactly what that hour looked like. I saw what was left of him on that slab. And he still didn’t give me up.

“You son of a bitch, Dino,” I whisper to myself as I grip the window sill. “You fucking *son of a bitch*.” I shake my head in disbelief. He held onto the one thing that mattered and it didn’t even save his life. And it’s not going to buy me much time either. Russo doesn’t need a confession. He’s already circling.

I look back down at the page. *Assume he already has eyes on you. If not now, within 72 hours.*

Meaning they could already be watching this house. Watching me. Maybe they were watching me in the kitchen when I fucked Katerina on the counter.

Katerina.

The thought of Russo’s people anywhere near Katerina makes my blood run cold.

Then hot.

My hand isn’t quite steady when I reach for the desk lighter.

I’ve already memorized the required information anyway and I can’t risk anyone stumbling upon the contents.

Especially since Katerina has proven herself to be nosy.

I glance at the letter again.

If this page exists five minutes from now, it’s a liability, and I have buried better men than me over smaller carelessness than a document like this left

sitting in a drawer.

I hold the corner to the lighter’s flame until it catches then drop it in the metal bowl I keep in the second drawer for exactly this.

I watch my own name curl black and vanish into the rest of it, and I don’t look away until there’s nothing left but ash and a thin string of smoke drifting up toward the vent.

The Serbian gets cleared in a week. Maybe less.

Then there’s only one name left on that list.

Mine.

Moving on Russo now is off the table.

I don’t have ironclad information that will neutralize him and besides, even if I did, it tips my hand and accelerates him, and Russo accelerating is what got Dino pulled out of the Hudson.

I am not going to be the reason someone else ends up next to him.

Waiting doesn’t work either.

Russo landing on me doesn’t just mean Russo comes for me.

It means he comes for everybody around me.

It means he figures out where Seraphina is and he eliminates her.

That leaves one option that I immediately don’t like but know it’s the right choice.

I need to bring Seraphina here.

Every time I move her, I widen the net of people who have seen her—drivers, nurses, random people who may be around.

Every one of those people is a target now.

Consolidating her at the estate collapses the whole thing to one location and the people I trust the most are already inside it.

I can easily get all the required stuff a two year old needs.

They still sleep in cribs, right?

And toys. I can get all that stuff.

It also allows Katerina to see Seraphina every day.

Katerina is going to be relieved and that’s the part I keep coming back to.

She has spent the entire time she’s here not sure where that baby actually is, trusting me on my word alone, and now she is going to be able to walk down a hall and see her with her own eyes.

That should feel like a good thing.

It kind of does.

But it also means the leverage is gone.

I built this whole arrangement on the fact that Seraphina’s safety was something only I controlled, something Katerina could not verify except through me—a video every three days, a photograph when I decided to hand one over, my word and nothing else.

That was never just kindness.

It was what was keeping her here and compliant, keeping her from doing something reckless.

The second that little girl is under this roof, in a room Katerina can walk into any time she wants, I lose that.

Katerina doesn’t need me to tell her the truth anymore.

She can just go look at it.

I don’t know yet what I think about losing that, but this is the only plan that makes sense.

I pick up the phone and call Luca.

“Yeah?” he answers, sounding like he’s chewing on something. I roll my eyes at my brother.

“Bring her here. Tonight at the latest.”

There’s dead silence on the line for a second.

“Bring who—the Santoro girl? *Here*? To the estate?”

“Yes.”

Luca sounds like he’s choking on whatever food he was eating. “Nico, are you out of your mind?” he demands. “You’ve got Katerina Sokolov in this house and a Corsican situation that’s one bad afternoon from blowing up. Russo’s people are closing in on you, and you want to bring the actual kidnapped child—the one that Russo wants to kill, if I can remind you—into the middle of it? Under the same roof?” Luca sputters. “What the *fuck*?”

“Yes,” I say simply, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Yes, that’s exactly it.”

“Nico, seriously, what the fuck?”

“The original plan isn’t working anymore,” I shoot back to Luca, irritation climbing into my voice. “Russo is closing in and I can’t keep anyone safe if they’re not within my direct eyesight. I can protect Seraphina if she’s under my roof. I can’t protect her if she’s somewhere else. Dino has proved that.”

Luca doesn’t say anything for a second.

“And Dr. Sokolov?” he asks finally. “Have you thought about what this does to her? To the two of you?”

I grit my teeth. Sometimes I really hate that I told Luca all about this. “I’ve thought about it,” I say evasively.

Luca scoffs in disbelief. “You’ve been using Seraphina’s location as the one thing keeping her here. You know that. I know that. The second that kid’s down the hall, Katerina doesn’t need you for anything anymore. She can see for herself. What’s left holding this together after that?”

“I *know* all of this,” I snap, my patience finally wearing thin. “You think I haven’t thought about this already? But what else am I to do? I’m not leaving that little girl to be picked off by fucking Russo because I want to stick to a fucking plan that’s clearly not working anymore! Dino was *killed* and his baby is fucking fatherless. I’m not going to keep letting people get killed just so I can keep leverage over a woman I—” I stop myself and breathe deeply. “Move her,” I order. “Tonight. End of discussion.”

There’s another pause and it’s longer this time.

“Okay,” Luca says finally, even though he doesn’t sound happy. “Okay. I’ll set it up.”

“Smallest crew possible,” I continue, drumming my fingers against the window, feeling the cool glass beneath my fingertips as I stare out at the garden. “Nobody outside us knows the route or the timing.”

“Understood.”

I hang up and lean my head against the window, my heart hammering.

Fuck me. Because now I have another problem.

With Russo closing in, I’ll have to let Katerina know.

She knows that someone is after Seraphina, but she doesn’t know who he is.

She doesn’t know about Dino.

About where Seraphina is.

She doesn’t know how much danger we are all in.

She doesn’t know because I have not told her and that makes me a complete hypocrite.

I told her honesty.

I told her thirty days.

I told her that I was going to try to be worth something to her, and I have not done a single thing that lives up to what I said.

Tell her.

The thought is right there, all day. Every time I try to work I hear it. *Tell her. Tell her. Tell her.*

But the less she knows, the safer she is. If Russo's people ever get to her, they will try to get the information out of her.

What they did to Dino will look like a cakewalk as to what they would do to Katerina. They would send her back to me in pieces. If they sent her back at all.

The thought of Katerina disappearing makes icy cold sweat drip down my spine and I have to sit down because my knees have gone weak.

I can't tell her everything, but I can tell her *something*.

And I will. Tonight. She won't be able to avoid me anymore.

Except finding her is much more fucking difficult than I imagined.

I check the gardens. She's not there. The gym and the library are empty. So are her rooms. My hands curl into fists as I stare at her quiet bedroom, my nails biting into my flesh.

Where the fuck *is she*? I pivot and head back downstairs, the sounds of my shoes slapping against the floor reverberating throughout the hall. I know how to move so quietly that not even a mouse could hear me. But I'm too irritated to do so right now. I need to find Katerina and I need to find her *now*.

I pass by the library again and happen to glance in there. She wasn't in there when I checked half an hour ago so why would she be in here now—

Except, there she is.

She has her back against one of the tall shelves and her legs stretched out in front of her, ankles crossed. She's in gray leggings and an oversized sweatshirt with the sleeves pulled down over her hands. Her brown hair is

up in a messy pile on top of her head, one strand loose against her neck and my eyes fixate on that strand of hair. My lips had been on that neck not too long ago. I had tasted her as she moaned and cried out my name…

Stop it, Nico.

I shake my head to get rid of the erotic thought and focus back on Katerina.

She's reading a medical journal that's open on her knees. I didn't even know we *had* medical journals here.

She looks like herself.

That thought stops me dead in my tracks. She has been many things in front of me since she's been here, and this is the first time I have seen her look like *herself.*

Like the off-duty surgeon she is reading something dense in comfortable clothes, hair up, feet crossed, guard down. She is relaxed. She is not watching for me.

She's just—reading.

In my library. In my house.

I should leave. She has spent the last few days making it very clear that she does not want me in a room with her, and if I am the kind of man I keep telling myself I want to be for her, I turn around and I let her have peace.

But I'm not that type of man. So I stand there and drink her in, filling myself with the sight of her.

"You know, it's kind of creepy when you stand there and stare at me without saying anything," Katerina's voice floats over to me as she flips a page, her eyes still not moving off her book.

To my horror, my ears start to burn. Am I…am I actually *embarrassed* she caught me? Jesus Christ, I'm losing my touch.

"How long have you been standing there?" Katerina asks casually, still not looking up at me.

I cross my arms and lean against the doorframe, crossing one foot over the other. I want her to think I'm not affected at all by her presence. "A minute," I respond. "Maybe two."

She finally looks up and she closes her book. She shifts her shoulders a bit and winces, like she's been sitting on the floor for a while now. How the hell did I miss her when I first went looking for her?

But that thought escapes me as her eyes travel over my face. I have not shaved or slept. I know how I look right now and she definitely sees it as her dark eyes narrow, her lips pursing.

"Did you want something?" she asks a bit rudely.

The truth is right on the tip of my tongue. *Yes, Russo is closing in and Seraphina is coming tonight. One of my most trusted men was tortured and killed because Russo has figured out that Dino was involved in the taking of Seraphina. I had to tell his pregnant wife he was dead and I can still hear her screams. It's been killing me that you've been avoiding me and—*

"No," I hear myself say, deciding at the last moment that it's best if I don't tell her anything. "No. Nothing."

Her dark eyebrows raise and it's obvious she doesn't believe me. From the look on her face, she's having an internal war as to whether she should demand an answer from me. I don't know what I would say if she tries to.

Finally, Katerina exhales and a strand of her hair flies up from the force of her breath. She sets her book aside and brings her knees up to her chest. I expect her to tell me to leave.

To my surprise, she doesn't. Instead, her posture relaxes and it looks like she's almost…welcoming me in? Heart in my throat, I push away from the door and walk in slowly, keeping my eyes on her.

She doesn't break her gaze as I sit down on the floor next to her with my back against the same shelf.

Even though my body is screaming to be close to her, I refuse it. I keep an arm's length of distance between us for her comfort.

Neither of us says anything for a while.

The library at this hour smells comforting, like old paper and the smell of a crackling fire. A log settles in the grate somewhere near us. I can hear her breathing beside me.

“You look tired,” she finally says, her voice quiet.

I shrug. “Yeah.”

Her eyes cut to mine. “Are you sleeping?”

“No.”

She nods as if she understands. “Since when?”

I open my mouth to give her the easy answer, but I decide not to lie. I can lie to her about the big things but it seems that I can’t lie about the small ones.

“A while,” I tell her, and she seems to understand exactly what I mean because she nods jerkily. Thankfully, she doesn’t press.

We sit there again in silence and it’s not all together unpleasant.

I honestly don’t remember the last time I have just sat somewhere with another person with no ulterior plans.

No planning or calculating or thinking three moves ahead. There’s nothing to do. Nothing to solve.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” I tell her, hoping I can startle her into giving me a truthful answer.

But my Katerina is better than that. Nikolai and Maksim have taught her better than that. She shrugs and picks at her sleeve. “Yeah.”

“For good reason?”

“Yeah.”

“I understand.” Because I do.

“Good.” She fidgets slightly before she exhales again and pivots to look at me. “Just so we’re clear, sitting on the floor next to you does not mean I am *not* still avoiding you.”

I fight a laugh, but it comes out as a snort. “Understood.”

Katerina fights a smile, seemingly pleased by my reaction and my quick agreement that she should still avoid me. I feel her look at me a few times before she says it.

“Nico.”

My heart jumps at how her lips form over every vowel and consonant of my name.

“You’re not telling me something.”

My heart jumps. Of course Katerina figured out that I’m not telling her something. My angel isn’t a brilliant doctor for nothing. She moves her body a fraction of an inch closer to me and I can barely breathe.

“There’s a lot I’m not telling you,” I blurt out, deciding to give her this tiny bit of honesty. To my surprise, she just nods.

She’s…she’s not going to demand answers? Slap me? Tell me that she deserves to know the truth?

She shifts closer again and I can start to feel the heat of her and the smell of her floral shampoo. My heart beats even faster and my mouth dries. She closes the six inches of distance until we’re barely touching. Katerina’s eyes dip toward my hand and she tentatively moves hers so it’s lightly touching mine.

I seriously can’t breathe.

“Whatever it is,” she says quietly and all I can focus on is the feel of her hand on mine. “You don’t have to carry it alone.”

That is the sentence that ruins me.

I’ve carried everything alone my whole life. I’ve told Luca only the things he needs to know. I’ve had to be a leader, someone my men can look up to.

My decisions are my own. Nobody has ever once offered to take any of it off me. Not a friend. Not a woman. Nobody.

She's the first.

And she's offering while she's still avoiding me. While she doesn't want to want me. Even knowing everything she does about me, something in her couldn't help caring anyway.

And that…that *ruins* me.

I look at her. The strand of hair loose against her neck. Her mouth. The two years I have wanted this woman rising up in me all at once, so fast it's dizzying. I don't want the truth right now. I don't want to talk. I want my hands on her.

She is already looking at me. Her eyes are shining, her lips are a little parted. I shift my hand so it completely covers hers, lacing our fingers together.

She does not move away.

Kiss her. My brain is screaming at me to not do this. I owe her this distance, it's the least I can give her after everything. And it's clearly what she wants, right? But here she is, nearly pressed against me, our fingers tangled together.

Don't do it.

Nah. Fuck it.

I lean in and I kiss her.

It's immediately different from what happened in the kitchen. It's soft and careful, like I'm asking a question. She tastes like chamomile and she must have been drinking tea before I found her. My other hand comes up to cup the side of her face.

She makes a small sound against my mouth and I swallow it whole. Then she's kissing me back, and her hand finds the collar of my shirt and fists in it, pulling me in instead of pushing me away, and every ounce of restraint I walked in here with is gone.

Her lips are soft but unyielding, matching me stroke for stroke, her hands fisting in my hair as though she's as desperate to taste me as I am to devour her.

Suddenly, I'm on top of her, pushing her into the floor of the library, the heat of the fire matching the blazing heat between us. Her gasp sends a shiver down my spine, but I'm too far gone to slow down. My hands slide down to her hips, gripping them tightly as though she might vanish if I let go. The fabric of her leggings moves against my skin as I explore every inch of her.

Something primitive in me roars at claiming what I've been watching for so long, for getting a taste of. Her body fits against mine perfectly, all soft curves and sharp edges.

When I bite her lower lip, dragging my teeth slowly across the plump flesh, she moans, a low, throaty sound that echoes in the empty space around us and nearly undoes me. Her nails dig into my scalp, sending sparks of pleasure-pain through me as she pulls me impossibly closer, her body molding against mine like we were made for this moment.

Her legs shift, brushing against mine, and I take the hint, wrapping her thighs around my waist. She gasps against my mouth, her chest heaving as I press into her, pinning her firmly in place with the weight of my body.

My lips trail fire along her jawline, down the column of her throat. Her pulse thrums beneath my tongue, wild and frantic, matching the pounding of my heart. I drag my teeth against her skin, not hard enough to mark but enough to leave her trembling. Her hands clutch at my shoulders, pulling me closer, as though she can't bear even an inch of distance between us.

"Katerina," I growl against her skin, the sound rough and unrecognizable even to myself.

Her fingers tug me back up, and our mouths collide again, fiercer this time, more desperate. Her lips are swollen now, her taste darker, richer, like something forbidden. The rhythm of our kiss turns chaotic, a mess of tongues and teeth and ragged breaths, but neither of us cares.

Her body arches into me, her curves pressing against every hard edge of mine. I grip her tighter, my fingers tracing the curve of her waist and the dip of her spine, committing her to memory as though I could forget. She moans again, softer this time, a sound that vibrates through my chest and sets my nerves on fire.

When we finally break apart for air, her cheeks are flushed, her hair even more disheveled, strands falling around her face. Her eyes are wild, pupils blown wide with desire, and her lips—those perfect lips—are kiss-swollen and glistening.

“W-what are we doing?” she manages, but her body betrays her as she pulls me closer.

My laugh is dark against her throat. “This,” I murmur as I nip at her pulse point, causing her to shiver, her heart racing beneath my lips. This woman, who I’ve been pining and yearning for two years, comes undone so beautifully under my touch.

The taste of her, the feel of her body against mine, the way she responds to every touch—it’s better than anything I ever could have imagined. Her hands clutch at my shoulders as I trail kisses down her neck, each gasp a victory.

“Tell me to stop,” I rasp, my lips brushing her ear before trailing down her jawline, tasting the salt of her skin. My mouth lingers on her throat, where her pulse flutters like a trapped bird, and I press open-mouthed kisses to the column of her neck.

Her response is immediate, a breathless command that sends a thrill through me. “Don’t you dare,” she whispers, her voice low and ragged, nails digging into my shoulders. “Don’t you fucking dare stop.”

Victory, I internally crow as I push her legs off me to frantically tug at her leggings, yanking her pants and underwear down in two quick movements. I struggle for a second to get them off her shapely legs and she chuckles as she watches me wrestle with her clothes.

“Fucking pants,” I mutter as I get her leggings and underwear around her ankles. “Should be illegal to be so goddamn tight.”

“Like you’re complaining about the way they hug my ass.” Katerina’s eyes are heavy lidded, a smirk playing on her swollen lips as she watches me.

Fuck no, I’m not. Eventually I win the battle and I take in the sight of her bare lower half. The sight of her, disheveled and waiting, is enough to nearly unravel me.

Her hands work frantically at my shirt, pulling it free from my waistband. The scrape of her nails across my bare skin sends fire racing down my spine, and I groan as her palms flatten against my chest, exploring me with the same need I feel coursing through my veins.

The room fills with the sound of our mingled breaths, quick and shallow, and the whisper of fabric as it’s shed in haste. Her skin is soft beneath my hands, impossibly warm, and I take my time mapping every inch of her, savoring the way she gasps, the way her body moves beneath mine.

Katerina moans and tips her head back, which is all the encouragement I need. I yank her shirt up before removing it entirely along with her bra, leaving her completely naked in front of me. Her body is flush with arousal and her nipples harden even further under my gaze.

She lets out a shuddering gasp when my hands return to her breasts. She arches her back, which has the unintended—but not unfortunate—side effect of pushing her breasts further into my hands. Bowing my head to her chest, I lavish hot, open-mouth kisses on her body, starting on her sternum before moving toward her left breast.

“Nico,” she whimpers.

God, I’ll never get sick of hearing her saying my name. I have mercy on her, blowing over her sensitive nub before taking it into my mouth. The sharp contrast between the air of the library and my mouth causes Katerina to cry in pleasure. I hum in approval at the noise, the animalistic side of me wanting to hear exactly what I’m doing to her.

The pleasurable sounds. The cries. The screams. I want to hear how good I am making her feel. Her hands find their way into my hair again. One hand grips and tugs to make sure my mouth stays where it is, while her free hand strokes the hairs at the nape of my neck.

But that’s not allowed. *I’m* in charge. Growling, I reach out for her wrists, grabbing them and roughly pinning them against the floor.

To my delight, she is immediately pliant.

Satisfied, I gently scrape my teeth along her hardened nipple, from base to the tip. The shuddering gasps and moans of my name make it clear that she likes this. I detach my mouth from her left breast, kissing across her chest to lavish equal attention on its neglected twin.

My hips begin subconsciously rutting against her. Every pleasurable sound Katerina makes goes straight to my dick, and I need some fucking relief. But I hold myself back. I’m not a teenager anymore. I don’t want this to end before it even begins or embarrass myself. I’ve been given a gift and I intend to utilize every inch of it.

Katerina protests when my mouth and hands leave her body altogether. She looks at me, her chest heaving, her erect nipples gleaming.

“Why did you stop?” she demands.

I smirk before forcing her legs open, leaving her utterly exposed to my hungry eyes. My fingers lightly dance around her thighs and lower stomach, always dancing closer to where she clearly wants me, but never quite there.

“Nico!” Katerina gasps, her hips thrusting up.

I can’t resist my fingers taking an occasional teasing swipe at her clit, causing her to hiss in pleasure.

Eventually, I stop my teasing as my right hand fully cups her entrance.

I watch as she begins grinding herself against my hand, the heel of my hand providing the right amount of pressure and pleasure.

Katerina spread her legs wider, exposing herself more to me. “Nico,” she exclaims in breathy moans, telling me that I was doing everything exactly right.

Slowly, I slip my index finger into her, groaning at the way she clenches around me straightaway. Fuck, she feels like heaven. Her hips move in time

with me, guiding me. I curl my finger, teasing her G-spot and making her moan at the pleasure.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she pants, her hands scrabbling for purchase against the floor. “Nico, *please*!”

Listening to her plea, I slide another finger inside of her. I take in the moans and gasps she releases as my fingers play her like a violin, moving deeper, finding spots that drive her fucking wild.

“Fuck, Katerina, that’s it,” I groan when I feel her clenching around my fingers. “That’s it.”

But before she comes, I remove my fingers from her. I want—no—*need* to taste her. The scent of her arousal overwhelms my senses. I softly nip at her inner thighs before moving my mouth to where we both want it.

My tongue laps at her clit, tasting her juices, making me moan in pleasure at her taste. I close my lips around her clit, sucking gently.

“Nico!” Katerina gasps again, her hips grinding against my mouth. “I’m going to—I’m going to—”

With a shuddering cry, Katerina’s thighs clench around my head, trapping me against her as she rides out her high.

I work her through her climax, lapping at the bit of wetness that escapes.

When she collapses against the floor, I carefully withdraw my fingers, sucking the leftover fluids off them.

I will never get enough of her taste. I already want more.

Shedding my pants, I allow my aching cock to spring free. Katerina leans up against her elbows, her eyes glittering as she takes me in.

I smirk. “Like what you see?”

Instead of answering me, she yanks me forward, capturing my lips in a searing kiss. I press the tip of my cock against her entrance and she moans again, grinding her hips against me in a way that makes me curse.

“Don’t fucking tease me,” she snarls against my mouth and I delight at the filthy words. “I need you.”

Those three words do me in. *I need you*.

When I finally enter her, the sound she makes is pure surrender—a broken cry that echoes through the library, carving itself into my memory.

I bury my face in the curve of her neck, my own restraint shattering as she meets me thrust for thrust, her body rising to mine like a wave cresting over and over again.

Her nails score my back, her legs tightening around me as if she’s afraid I’ll disappear.

The intensity of it all—the heat, the desperation, the way she moans my name—drives me closer to the edge.

“Don’t stop,” Katerina whimpers, her face screwed up in ecstasy. “Faster, Nico. Faster!”

My hips stutter as I find a faster, more furious pace. I feel and hear the tell-tale signs that she is approaching another orgasm.

Her moans and cries become more and more pronounced.

Each movement feels like a claim, a vow made in the language of bodies, and I’m consumed by her—by *us*—until nothing else exists.

Grabbing her hand, I guide it down between us, growling, “I want to see you touch yourself.”

Katerina moans at my command, immediately moving her hand further down to where we’re joined. I look down, watching as her slim fingers tease and rub her clit in time with my thrusts. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

“Fuck, fuck fuck!” I hiss before I tug her back, causing Katerina to fully arch under me as I mark her skin, claiming her as mine.

“Nico, I…” Katerina’s voice cuts off with a cry, her body shuddering.

“Come for me, baby,” I growl into her ear. “Let me feel you.”

That is the permission she seemingly needs. Her whole body begins to shake as her orgasm overtakes her. Her legs tighten around me as I continue thrusting into her, seeking my own release.

I capture her lips in a searing kiss, my thrusts becoming sloppier as I ride out my high.

I collapse against her, our gasps mingling as I try to calm my racing heart. Katerina's chest rises and falls rapidly as my dick rapidly starts to soften and I feel my cum start to leak out of her.

Katerina lightly taps me on the shoulder and I take the hint, rolling off her so my back is on the floor too, only a few inches from her.

Sweat rolls down my face and my skin sticks to the hardwood floor. I stare at the ceiling. Everything in me is screaming.

Say it now, my brain screams to me.

Right now, while she's still warm beside you. Tell her about Russo. Tell her about Dino. Tell her Seraphina is coming tonight. Tell her all of it, right now, while she is still lying here having just—for God's sakes man, she offered to help you carry this burden!

I open my mouth to do it.

"Nico?"

Katerina isn't looking at me as she's also staring at the ceiling, her hair plastered to her forehead, her ponytail holder just barely holding on.

"Hmm?"

"Is—" She swallows. "Are you sure you don't want to talk to me about what's on your mind?"

The truth is *right fucking there*.

All I need to do is just open my mouth and let the words come out, except when I try, it's like I'm struck dumb. But I know if I tell her right now, whatever moment we had—what we are currently having—will be gone.

And I can't…I can't bear the thought of that right now.

“No,” I tell her, shaking my head. “No, nothing.”

Liar, my brain screams to me, but I hush it.

She’s quiet for a moment. Then her hand reaches for mine and I lace our fingers together, bringing our joined hands to my mouth to press a kiss to her knuckles.

I can feel her decide not to push, and I hate myself for how relieved that makes me.

I am selfish about her. I have stopped even pretending I’m not.

Tomorrow, I tell myself. Tomorrow I’ll tell her. When there’s more time. When I’ve figured out how to say it so it doesn’t take this away from us before it’s even started.

I press my mouth to our hands again.

The lie tastes like ash.

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11

KATERINA

TICK. TICK. TICK.

The clock on the nightstand is the only sound in the room and I have been listening to it for what feels like hours.

I drift off somewhere around two, in a kind of thin, hazy sleep that doesn’t actually feel like sleep, more like floating just under the surface of it, then I’m awake again twenty minutes later, staring at the same shadow on the ceiling, bone-tired and wide awake at the same time.

My sleep schedule has been a disaster for years and I blame undergrad and med school and residency, but especially residency.

Years of studying until the wee hours in the morning and then years of five a.m. rounds does something to a body that never really goes away.

Even here, my eyes pop open at six without an alarm, and I lie there for a while just staring at the ceiling, thinking about work.

I miss my job. It makes sense, right? I spent more than half my life studying and working for this moment and now it’s been taken away from me.

In my haste to get out of my house in time, I never bothered to notify the hospital that I was going to take a leave of absence.

Tears prick the corners of my eyes and I screw my eyes shut, not wanting to cry again.

But it’s hard not to.

I miss the smell of the hospital.

I miss my pager going crazy, the sounds of the OR.

I miss Dawn heckling me over donuts at the nurses’ station and Priya’s random hilarious memes.

I wonder, not for the first time, whether they’ve filled my spot yet.

Did they think I quit?

Did anyone do a wellness check?

If I ever make it back, will there even be a place for me?

Or will I get quietly replaced and forgotten?

The way empty chairs at a hospital always get filled by somebody else eventually.

No, don’t think like that, I tell myself firmly. *It doesn’t help anything at six in the morning.*

I lie there until six-thirty, then I get up, shower, and pull on leggings and a sports bra, planning to go for a run before the house wakes up.

I’ve learned this estate’s rhythms by now. Nobody’s up before eight.

The halls are always empty, the light always gray and quiet, and I can move through the place like it’s mine for an hour.

I head downstairs still half asleep, moving slow and sluggish the way I always do before my body catches up with the idea of being awake.

I carry my running shoes with me, the marble cool under my socked feet. The house is quiet. Almost too quiet.

Then I hear it.

A shriek. High, sharp, and delighted.

I freeze on the bottom stair. *What the hell was that?*

For a second my sleep-fogged brain runs through possibilities that don't make sense—a bird, a pipe, a television left on somewhere—then it comes again, and this time there's no mistaking it.

My head whips toward the direction of the noise and I don't even breathe, as if that'll prevent me from hearing that noise again.

It's…it's a *child*. A child's laugh is coming from somewhere toward the back of the house.

My stomach drops straight through the floor.

A child.

I start toward the sound at a jog, but then I start to pick up the pace.

My socked foot skids on the marble a few strides in and I nearly go down completely, arms pinwheeling, one hand slapping the wall hard enough to sting. "Shit —" I hiss, catching myself against the wall, chest heaving.

I look down at the running shoes still dangling uselessly from my fingers and shove my feet into them right there in the hallway, not bothering to untie them first, jamming my heels down into the backs while I hop on one foot and then the other. "Stupid fucking shoes—come *on* —"

Then I'm sprinting down the hall, past the dining room, past closed doors, toward the back of the house where the sound keeps coming.

It's closer now and unmistakably a child's laugh.

It can't be her.

That thought runs on loop underneath the panic.

I've explored this house repeatedly the entire time I've been here, just in case I ever needed a hiding spot or figured out a way to escape.

There has never been a child here.

There has never been so much as a single toy, a single small shoe, one shred of evidence that anyone younger than me had ever set foot on this property.

Nico had made sure I knew this. That Seraphina and I would *never* be in the same house, let alone the same room, until the thirty days were up.

Seraphina was his leverage to ensure I stayed in my lane.

He threatened that if I didn't do exactly what he wanted, he would make sure Leo and Emma never saw their daughter again…

So this can't be her.

It can't be.

There's no way this can be Seraphina.

But I follow the sound anyway, heart in my throat, because some reckless, hoping part of me needs to see for myself that it isn't.

It leads me to a room I have never seen before, off a hallway I didn't even know existed. I pause in disbelief, trying to calm my gasps and my galloping heart rate. What the *hell*? I thought I explored every inch of this goddamn place…

I stop dead in the doorway because someone has turned this room into a nursery overnight.

Soft mats cover the floor.

There's a low shelf stacked with books and toys and a window seat piled with cushions in yellow and green. A white and pink playhouse sits in the corner of the room along with numerous baby dolls and other stuffed animals.

In the middle of all of it, surrounded by the entire upended contents of a wicker toy basket, is Seraphina Santoro.

She is real. She is right here, in the flesh, throwing plastic blocks over her shoulder with both hands and shouting, at the top of her lungs, "*Yay mess!*"

A woman I've never seen before sits on a small chair a few feet from the chaos, watching Seraphina with an indulgent smile on her face. She has the calm, unbothered patience of somebody who has clearly done this before, many times, for many children. She's older, maybe in her sixties, with

white-streaked dark hair pulled back in a low bun, reading glasses pushed up on top of her head like she'd been doing something before Seraphina demanded her full attention.

She's dressed plainly but comfortably— a cardigan, soft-soled shoes, and loose pants. The uniform of someone whose whole job is getting down on the floor with small children. There's a warmth in her face that doesn't match anything else I've encountered in this house. This is genuine warmth, not paid-to-be-nice warmth, the kind you only get from someone who has spent a career loving other people's children like her own.

She glances up at me and gives a small nod, like she already knows exactly who I am and isn't the least bit surprised I found my way here.

I don't move, but then again, I don't think I would be able to even if I could. I just stand in the doorway, looking at this child I have thought about every single day since I found out she was missing, this child I agreed to disappear into a stranger's house for.

My eyes fill with tears again and I take in a sharp inhale, my body nearly trembling as I drink her in.

She's beautiful and pictures of her don't do her justice.

She looks just like her father with wild dark curls, unruly in every direction and dark, deep-set eyes.

This child looks like Leonardo Santoro with a wig on.

But there's something in the set of her mouth, something stubborn and a little wicked, that is pure Brennan, and I already know that this child is going to give her parents absolute hell for the next sixteen years.

A whimper escapes my mouth and I clamp a hand over it. But it's too late, Seraphina looks up.

She goes still, one block still in her fist, and studies me—head slightly tilted, eyes narrowed, like she is deciding exactly how much of her time I am worth.

It is such a perfect, exact copy of an expression I have seen on Emma Santoro's face—at a gala Kolya and Maksim once dragged me to—that I actually take a small step back.

Instinct kicks in immediately to get down on her level so I can talk to her.

That's rule number one with kids this age, except the second I start to crouch, I remember with horror that I am wearing a sports bra and a pair of leggings and nothing else and I am about to get down on the floor in front of a two year old like this.

Oh *fuck me*.

My face goes hot. "Oh—I should—I'm not really dressed for —" I straighten halfway back up, tugging uselessly at the hem of a shirt I am not wearing, and feeling my face turn even hotter. God, I must be redder than a goddamn tomato. "I didn't think I'd be—I was going for a run, I wasn't expecting—"

The woman on the chair watches me flounder with open amusement, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh, don't worry about that." Her voice is warm and a little dry. "If Seraphina made the rules around here, we'd all be naked. That one fights clothes like no other." She nods affectionately at the toddler who is still watching me curiously. "Half the time I can't even get her pajamas on the right way around before she's had enough of me."

I look down at Seraphina sitting in the middle of her wreckage in pink teddy bear pajamas.

It's only then do I realize they're on backward.

The little embroidered bears march across her shoulder blades instead of her chest, the snap closures riding up the back of her neck.

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it.

"Are you," I ask Seraphina seriously, a smirk playing on my lips, "some kind of tiny exhibitionist?"

Seraphina, delighted by the attention regardless of content, shrieks with laughter and throws another block. “No!”

The woman rolls her eyes good-naturedly. “I raised three boys. I have never in my life met a child who loves being naked as much as this one.” She shakes her head, smiling. “Backward pajamas is a good day, believe me.”

I’m nodding along, laughing and then, without warning, my eyes are hot and my throat is tight and I realize with mortification that I am also about to cry.

They’re not sad tears. They’re tears of relief. She’s *here.* She’s real and whole and giggling over blocks in backward pajamas, and some fist that has been closed around my chest for two weeks finally, *finally* starts to loosen.

But underneath the relief there’s a question I can’t stop turning over. Why now? Why here? He told me she would never come to this house. He was clear—and cruel—about that.

But now she’s on the floor of his home in a room somebody clearly built for her overnight.

Care has gone into everything from the furnishings and toys to the caretaker.

She’s raised three sons.

I bet she was picked specifically for that purpose and because it’s clear from her face that she loves Seraphina.

Nico has done everything to bring every comfort to this child and something warm and unwelcome moves through me.

It feels dangerously close to gratitude toward the man I am supposed to consider a monster.

I stamp it down before it can go any further and shake my head.

It’s time for me to introduce myself to Seraphina properly.

I crouch down, sports bra and all. “Hi,” I say softly, the same way I talk to scared kids in the ER. “Hi Seraphina. I like your toys.”

Seraphina purses her lips, glancing at me and the toys.

Then she holds up a block like an offering.

That's all it takes.

Ten minutes later I am sitting cross-legged on the mat with a picture book in my lap, reading the same four pages over and over because Seraphina keeps grabbing the corner and flipping back to her favorite one, a duck in rain boots, shrieking with laughter every single time.

I can't help but smile at her baby giggle and I hug her tightly, so *so* relieved she's here.

"Again," she demands, when I finish it for the fifth time. "Read *again*."

"Again," I agree, and start over. I can't deny this child anything.

Eventually she declares herself, with great authority, "Done with book!" and hauls me by two fingers toward a plastic tea set laid out on a corner of the mat.

She thrusts a tiny cup into my hand and looks at me expectantly.

I can't help but smile as I remember the Instagram photo Emma had posted of Seraphina and Leo together. Tea party must be a favorite game.

"Tea?" I ask.

She grunts and pushes my hands toward my mouth. "You dwink!" she orders, staring me down.

Ah, I see what she wants me to do but goddamn is she bossy. I can't stop my smile. What a tiny overlord. "I drink," I agree and tip the cup back, pretending to savor the imaginary liquid. "So yummy!"

Seraphina flashes me a wide, beaming smile and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

We have a tea party and by a tea party, I mean, she demands I pour her infinite glasses of pretend tea then demands I drink all those cups of tea.

If this were a real tea party, I probably would have peed my pants by now from all the liquid I've consumed.

This goes on for a while, and somewhere in the middle of pouring imaginary tea for the thirty millionth time I realize I am…*happy.*

The last time I felt this way was before Nikolai called me and turned my world upside down. God, that feels like a lifetime ago.

I'm so engrossed in making sure Seraphina stays happy, I don't hear him come in.

I only know because Seraphina's whole face changes. She spots something over my shoulder, drops her teacup, and throws both arms straight up in the air like a tiny queen greeting a subject.

"Nico!" she shouts, already scrambling to her feet and hurtling across the mats toward the doorway, arms still up, demanding to be picked up before she's even gotten there.

I mouth the name back at no one, confused. *Nico?* How does she even know that name? How does she know him? What is going *on*?

The woman leans in close to me while Seraphina makes her run for it, clearly seeing the confusion on my face. "He came by most mornings," she says quietly just for me. "He would play with her and give her attention while also making sure she had everything she needed." She glances at me sideways. "I take it you didn't know that?"

I stare at her. Nobody told me that.

He—he would visit her. He checked in on a child he swore meant nothing to him beyond what she could get him.

Not only that, but he took the time to *play* with her too.

And it clearly made an impression because Seraphina looks delighted to see him. I…I don't know what to do with that information.

My body grows warm, as if all those imaginary cups of tea were suddenly real.

I turn toward the door, still stunned, and find him. He’s in the doorway, one shoulder against the frame.

The dark circles under his eyes are even more pronounced and his jaw is tight. His mouth is doing nothing I’ve seen before.

There’s no-almost smile, no smirk, nothing I’ve come to expect from him. Instead, his full lips are pressed in a flat line and they’re a little pale.

His dark eyes are wide with shock when he sees me with Seraphina, like he’s been caught at something. Then his eyebrows pull in, low and creased, the exact look my patients’ families get in the hallway right before they ask me if their person is going to make it.

Then Seraphina slams into his legs, both arms wrapped around his knee, and he looks down at her.

Whatever was on his face a second ago gets shoved somewhere else fast, and he bends down and picks her up in one easy motion, settling her on his hip like he’s done it a hundred times, which apparently he has.

She immediately grabs a fistful of his shirt and starts babbling something about the tea party, pointing back at the mat with total authority, and he nods along like every word of it is critically important information.

He doesn’t look at me while he does it.

He murmurs something to her I can’t hear, pats the top of her head, and sets her back down.

She races off toward the toys, already forgetting he exists, the way two year olds do.

Then his eyes find mine.

Whatever I saw a moment ago is gone, folded back under that calm, easy mask he wears like a second skin.

He straightens, gives me the smallest nod and walks away without saying a single word.

I watch the empty doorway for a second too long, feeling…dejected.

Where is the man who had his way with me on the library floor the other day?

The one who claims he's obsessed with me?

For some reason, I want to call out to him and ask him to come back.

Somehow, I think I miss him.

"Pwincess," Seraphina announces, tugging my sleeve, already bored of the tea party, onto the next demand. "*Pwincess* now."

"Okay," I say, glad to have some type of distraction from my thoughts. "Princess now."

But for the rest of the morning—through the tea party's abrupt cancellation, breakfast, a truly ambitious game of dress-up, and Seraphina falling asleep mid-sentence against my shoulder an hour later—I keep thinking about that look on his face.

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12

NICO

Days later, Luca comes in with the morning briefing himself instead of sending it up with anyone else, which tells me before he even opens his mouth that it’s bad.

I do a double take when I see my brother.

Damn, he looks like hell.

If I remember correctly, he’s still wearing the same clothes as yesterday, or close to it.

There’s a shadow of stubble coming in dark along his jaw, darker than mine ever grows, and his eyes have that flat, overcaffeinated look he gets when he’s been up half the night reading intercepts by himself instead of waking me for them.

He drops into the chair across from my desk and he lands hard enough that the chair legs scrape against the floor.

He slides a folder across the desk at me.

“Read it,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. “I’ll wait.”

Giving him an odd look, I open it while still holding my coffee. I expect the usual—troop movements, money, nothing that needs more than five minutes before I move on with my day.

Russo's network larger than previously assessed.

I read that line twice before I set my coffee down without looking where it lands.

Some of it spills over the rim and pools on the desk but I don't care, because I'm already three lines further in and my jaw is getting tighter with every one of them.

My heart's picked up, and there's a slow, steady thrum in my ears.

"He's better funded than we thought," I say flatly, sounding as if I'm far away. "Better organized."

"Keep going." Luca hasn't moved from his position on the chair, his arms dangling between his legs.

He's watching my face intently instead of the page, like he already knows exactly where I am in it.

I keep going.

Then I stop, because the next line has my own crew in it, and I read it a third time to make sure I'm reading it right.

"Somebody's talking to him," I look up at him in horror. "Somebody on the inside and we still don't know who."

"I know." His jaw is tight, a muscle jumping at the corner of it. "I read it before I brought it up."

"Motherfucker," I hiss, anger coursing through me before I slam my hand flat on the desk hard enough to sting.

What's left in the coffee cup jumps and rattles against the saucer.

"Who?" My pulse is going so hard now, I can feel it in my throat. "Who has that kind of access? Who's been around long enough to know what this page knows?"

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing all morning,” Luca says, dragging both hands down his face before he answers, like he’s trying to physically push the exhaustion out of it. “I don’t like any of the answers that I come up with.”

I gesture impatiently with my hand. “Say it anyway.”

“Gio’s been short on cash since his divorce,” Luca says, ticking names off his fingers. “Sal’s kid needs surgery money nobody in this family’s offered to cover yet. Rossi’s been asking more questions than usual about the Russo situation specifically, which could be nothing or—”

“Or it could be him asking so he knows how close we are to catching him.” I push back from the desk, stand up, and start pacing because sitting still with this information is something I’m not capable of doing. “Any of them could be it. All three of them have access. All three of them have a reason.”

Luca watches me pace, following me with his eyes. “You want me to start digging?”

I nod. “Quietly. I don’t want whoever it is to know we’re looking.” I stop at the window, both hands braced on the sill. “These are my guys, Luca. Men I’ve trusted with my life. And one of them is betraying me. Betraying the family.”

Luca doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t have to.

I know he’s thinking the same thing I am—that we’ve both known these men for years and we’re not going to like whoever it turns out to be.

“I don’t like where this is going,” he finally says.

“Neither do I. Go. Start asking around as quietly as you can.”

He nods and gets up, and I hear the door shut behind him.

I sit back down and shove the folder into the drawer, slamming it hard enough that something on the shelf behind me rattles.

I cannot afford to keep staring at that list of names this morning, not with everything else.

That’s when I notice there’s still paper on my desk.

Cocking my head to the side, I pick it up.

There was a second page to the briefing, one Luca hadn’t flagged, or hadn’t wanted to bring up in front of me yet. I examine it.

It’s a fragment of Russo’s people asking questions about my known associates. Who they are.

What they’d be willing to give up under pressure.

I read it again and it feels like I was just plunged into an icy river.

I fold the paper up small and put it in my pocket instead, because I need to think about it more before I decide what to do with it.

I can’t think about any of this right now.

I have a full day in front of me.

I have a trauma surgeon and a Bratva-adjacent toddler both currently living under my roof, and somewhere between all of that I still have to run an actual criminal organization that a man named Russo is trying very hard to burn to the ground.

I eat dinner alone that night.

Katerina’s been eating with Seraphina in the early evening the last few days.

I’ve seen it on the cameras, the two of them at the little table in the nursery, Seraphina throwing more food than she eats and I haven’t figured out a way to insert myself into that without it being obvious that I want to.

So I don’t.

I eat alone in the dining room like an idiot and I tell myself it’s fine.

It is not fine. But I eat anyway.

I’m in my study after, working, when I hear her in the hallway. I know her footsteps by now.

They’re lighter than my guys and quicker too. The door opens without a knock.

She’s in leggings and a t-shirt, hair pulled back in a low ponytail with a few pieces falling loose around her face.

Her cheeks are a little flushed like she jogged here then walked the last few feet so it wouldn’t be obvious.

I’ve got a map of half the state of New York spread across the desk when the door opens, red pins marking every property Russo’s people have been spotted near this past week, notes scrawled in the margins about which of my other houses might be safe enough to move Seraphina to if this one gets compromised.

It’s not something I want Katerina looking at.

I try to close the map, but I’m half a second too slow.

Her eyes go straight to the desk before I get it shut, taking in as much as she can in the two seconds she has: the pins, the handwriting, the shape of the state she’d recognize without trying.

Then the folder’s closed.

Too late. I know it’s too late by the way her face changes.

She’s still in the doorway, one hand on the frame, and her eyes come up off the desk and onto my face, narrowed now, working something out.

“What is that?” she asks, gesturing toward my desk.

“Nothing,” I tell her gruffly. Usually I would be thrilled she would be in the same room as me, but for the first time since I saw her two years ago I wish she weren’t here. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

Fuck me.

That was the wrong answer.

I know it the second it’s out of my mouth.

She rears back as if she were slapped and her jaw sets, her shoulders go rigid, and the flush that was already in her cheeks from walking fast turns into something angrier.

Foot meet mouth. *Fuuuuuck.*

“Nothing I need to—” Her eyes are flashing and she crosses her arms across her chest, glaring at me. “You know what, no. *No*. I am so sick of that sentence.”

I stand up, hands up as if trying to placate her. “Katerina, if you could just listen—”

“No,” she snaps. “No, *you* listen to *me*. And for the five thousandth time, my name is *Kat*!” She takes a deep breath and I brace myself for impact. “I am not one of your soldiers,” she tells me as she steps all the way in and nearly slams the door shut behind her. “You don’t get to tell me *nothing you need to worry about* every single time something happens in this house. I have been trying—since the kitchen and the library…” Her cheeks are getting rosy. “I have been trying to actually work with you. To not run. To not hate you every waking minute even though I have every right to.” She takes another breath and I’m frozen, listening to every word come out of her mouth. “I deserve to know what is happening around me and in the house I am currently trapped in. That is not a lot to ask.”

She’s right.

I know she’s right before she’s even finished the sentence, and something about hearing it out loud, from her, in that voice, makes it impossible to keep doing what I’ve been doing.

I sit back heavily in my chair and gesture to the chair in front of me, the same one Luca always sits in.

“Sit down,” I say quietly.

Katerina’s eyes dart toward the chair before she looks up at me, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. I smile gently, if not a little strained. “This isn’t a trick, Katerina.”

She scowls at my refusal to call her by that infernal nickname, but she crosses the room and sits, spine straight arms still crossed over her chest,

So I tell her everything.

Well, not *everything*. I don't tell her about what I learned this morning or that somebody inside my own crew is talking to my enemy.

She doesn't need to know that.

Not yet, maybe not ever.

But I tell her about Russo and the extraction and how it was never only about her, about the plan to use Seraphina to start a war and let the Corsicans clean up after.

I tell her about the two names on Russo's list narrowing down to one.

I tell her about Dino.

The morgue.

The insignia.

She flinches when I talk about Ana but other than that, she remains silent, listening intently.

By the time I stop talking, she's silent and I brace for whatever's coming, whether that be tears, anger, or her walking straight back out that door and never speaking to me again.

To my surprise, she doesn't do any of that.

She turns her head, tapping a finger against her lip and my eyes are fixated on that single digit, as I struggle to maintain my composure.

"How much time do we have?" she asks finally.

That wasn't the question I was expecting, and I blink owlishly at her as I struggle to compute what she just said. "I don't know," I tell her honestly.

Katerina frowns and I expect her to get up then and leave, the weight of all of it to finally be too much.

But she doesn’t. Instead, she settles back into the chair instead, and a familiar focused look creeps on her face.

I’ve seen that look before in photographs and I’ve even seen it in person when I was her patient at the hospital. It’s a look that says she’s going to give orders and nobody better dare argue with her.

I’ve never had it turned on me before and it kind of turns me on.

“Why do you work for them?” she asks as she plays with the hem of her shirt and it takes everything in me to not watch. “The Corsicans, I mean. You clearly have your own lines and your own version of right and wrong. You saved Seraphina from what would have been automatic death and you brought her here.” She cuts her eyes toward me and raises a brow as if to say “don’t even try to deny it.” She continues, “So why work for people who don’t share them?”

For a moment, I’m speechless. Nobody’s asked me that in a long time.

Actually now that I think of it, maybe ever, not like that. And certainly not looking for an actual answer.

“Loyalty’s simpler than conscience,” I tell her. “You have it or you don’t. I made my choices young and I’ve been living with them since.”

Katerina scoffs and rolls her eyes. “That’s such bullshit, Nico."

I blink.

“Again, you saved a two year old from being murdered to start a war,” she says as she pulls the chair closer. “You’ve had someone watching her every day since and it sounds like you’ve put in genuine effort as to who could watch her. You brought her into your own house and built a goddamn nursery for her with every toy and comfort imaginable. And you want me to believe you’re just some guy who does what he’s told because it’s easier than thinking about it?”

She snorts and crosses her arms. “Try again.”

“Fine.” I lean back in my chair, a bit annoyed and impressed she sniffed me out. “I had a choice. I’ve had plenty of them. I made the easy one every

time, because loyalty doesn't ask anything hard of you. It just asks you to show up." I shrug. "Deciding what's actually right, on my own, without somebody telling me—that's harder. I stopped doing that a long time ago."

She doesn't say anything, but her gaze is locked on mine.

"That's still bullshit," she says but there's no real heat behind her words. "You've been deciding what's right this whole time. You just don't want to admit it, because then you'd have to explain why you still work for people like that."

I don't have a good answer for that one and she knows it, based on the smirk curving around that gorgeous mouth of hers. She tilts her head to the side, her gaze becoming sharper.

"But yet you've stalked me for two years," she says slowly and my body burns at the word *stalking*. "You've had cameras everywhere following me. I've never truly been alone, have I?"

"I prefer the term, 'keeping an eye on you', but yes, you're overall correct."

She stares at me, waiting for the part where I apologize, but I don't give it to her.

"I'm not going to pretend I'm sorry about it," I say unapologetically. "It's the reason you're sitting in that chair right now instead of some stranger who wouldn't know how to keep you safe. I'm not proud of how I got here, but I'm not ashamed of it either."

She looks at me a long moment, jaw tight and her fingers twitching, like she's deciding whether to throw something at me.

"That sounds like someone who settled," she says instead. "Instead of choosing something different."

"Maybe. But you don't walk away from a life like mine unless you've got something worth walking toward." I meet her eyes, willing her to see the extent of my feelings. "I never had that. Not until recently."

I don't say the rest—that "recently" means her, that it's meant her since she decided a stranger's life was worth fighting for—but I don't have to. From

the way her breathing hitches, she's understood.

The tension in the room is thick.

She's not looking at the desk anymore.

Not the folder, not the map, not anything in this room except me.

I can see her fighting the urge to come closer and my mouth dries at that.

Her eyes drop to my mouth then snap back up, like she's mad at herself for looking.

She scowls as her hands curl at her sides. She doesn't know yet if she's going to leave or come closer. My heart hammers.

Please don't leave. Stay with me.

She doesn't leave the room. Instead, she abruptly stands up, the chair skittering backward.

Her breathing has changed. It's shallow and quick and there's a flush climbing up her throat that has nothing to do with anger anymore.

She takes one step toward the desk before she stops. I watch her war with herself, my mouth dry.

"This is a terrible idea," she says, and her voice isn't steady at all.

I swallow. "Probably."

She scowls at me. "I hate you a little."

A smile crosses my face. I can take a little. It's better than a lot. "I know."

"That's not going to stop me, is it?"

"No," I respond, feeling my whole body light up. "I don't think it is."

She's around the desk before I've fully processed she's moving, and I turn my chair to face her.

Then her hands are fisted in my shirt and she's hauling me up out of the chair and her mouth is on mine, hard and hungry, like she's been holding

this back for days and can’t any longer.

I don’t know which one of us started it. I stop caring the second her hands slide into my hair and pull.

I get my hands on her waist and pull her into my lap, and she comes willingly, straddling me, her knees braced on either side of my hips. *God,* I have wanted this—wanted *her*, exactly like this, since the first night she sat across from me in this house hating every single thing about me and I still couldn’t stop watching her mouth.

She gasps against my mouth, and I swallow the sound, kissing her harder, deeper.

My other hand finds her waist, pulling her flush against me.

She’s soft and warm and perfect, and I’ve been starving for this without even realizing it.

“Nico,” she breathes against my lips, and hearing my name in that voice—breathy and desperate and wanting—makes something snap inside me.

I lift her easily, setting her on the edge of my desk. My desk paraphernalia scatters, but I don’t care.

All I care about is her, the feel of her, the way she’s wrapping her legs around my waist and pulling me closer.

My hands find the hem of her shirt, pulling it up and dragging my hands down her stomach, feeling her muscles twitch and clench. Desire hits me so hard I nearly stagger.

“I want you,” I growl against her throat, kissing down the column of her neck. “If you don’t want me, now is the time to say something.”

“Shut up,” she gasps, her head falling back to give me better access. “Please don’t stop.”

That’s all I need to hear.

My mouth finds hers again, and the kiss is slower.

Deeper. Less desperate and more—more something I can’t name.

Something that feels dangerously close to worship.

I push her shirt off, and she helps me, tossing it unceremoniously on the floor.

Her leggings are next, leaving her in just her baby blue underwear, and I have to stop and just look at her.

She's beautiful. So beautiful it makes my chest ache.

Her skin glows in the lamplight and her ponytail is messy, more strands of her wavy hair falling around her.

Only one thought crashes though me.

Mine. She's mine.

"What?" she whispers, and I realize I'm staring.

"Huh?" I ask stupidly, my brain drunk on her.

"You're staring at me," she says, her face turning slightly pink as she starts to cover herself. Wait, she can't be self-conscious, right?

I stare at her, unable to comprehend what she's saying until it hits me. "Beautiful," I interrupt, catching her hands and pulling them away. "You're so fucking beautiful, Katerina. Do you have any idea—" I stop, because finishing that sentence would reveal too much.

But she sees something in my eyes that makes her breath catch and she reaches for me, intending to pull me back down, but I pull back.

Hurt flashes in her eyes, but I'm kissing down her body until I'm kneeling in front of her, lifting her foot to my shoulder.

Katerina's eyes are wide as I let my tongue drag heavily over the side of her calf, but they close and her hands come to her chest as I reach the inside of her knee.

I pause there, licking and sucking and biting gently at the sensitive skin, and she's *writhing*.

I can’t help but smirk at that and lean down to give her other leg the same treatment.

I’m nothing if not meticulous.

I’m holding both legs down and her hips are twisting and her breasts are shuddering and—

“Please.”

My mouth leaves her knee as the syllable sinks in.

Yes. *That*. I do love it when Katerina begs.

Her eyes open and she looks at me before my left hand slides up the insides of her thighs.

She arches toward me as my fingers slip under the edge of her underwear.

“God, you’re so wet,” I say without thinking, and she presses her pussy into my hand with a moan.

Withdrawing my hand, I slide her underwear down and toss it impatiently over my shoulder.

She’s bare and gleaming in front of me and my mouth nearly waters at the sight.

Oh, the things I plan to do to her.

I get up and lean over her, running my tongue along her collar bone as my fingers slip back between her legs.

I can feel her cunt clench as I push a finger into her and she cries out, her hips moving up to take my finger deeper.

Katerina works herself onto my finger as I lean my head over to her breasts and take a pink nipple into my mouth, rolling the bud between my teeth.

She cries out again and I give her a second finger, pumping them in a slow rhythm as she twists on the desk.

“God,” she moans.

I let go of her nipple, exhaling slightly on the swollen pink nub before lavishing attention onto the other one.

She quivers around my fingers and I squeeze the heel of my hand onto her clit, and her eyes roll up.

“God,” she says again, and I feel her tremble.

I purposefully nip hard at her breast, enjoying the sounds of her moans and groans.

“Please, please, please,” she babbles as she rocks her hips against my hand and I smirk as I suck on her nipple even harder.

She lets out a guttural moan as she comes, and I work my fingers through the wave of spasms.

Even though we’ve had sex twice already, I appreciate fully for the first time how fucking tight she is and my cock twitches eagerly.

I keep my tongue against her breast as I watch her other breast shake with the tremors.

Her cries quiet slowly, and I release her nipple from my mouth.

I press hard over her g-spot to trigger a clenching aftershock before I remove my fingers, just because I can.

Katerina gives a contended sigh, but I’m not letting up.

I slide down her body and close my mouth over the top of her hip bone. Her eyes fly open, and her hands clutch at the back of my head.

Her hips roll up again, and I’m sure that she’s clenching around nothing.

I didn’t realize her hips were so goddamn *sensitive*. I tuck that knowledge away.

I trail kisses down her front, toward the crease of her thigh. Settling my weight in between her legs, I use my fingers to gently spread her open and I nearly come at the sight.

She’s glistening from her first orgasm and I resist the urge to plunge my tongue straight in.

I trace the edge of one of her lips with a fingertip.

“You smell so good,” I murmur before I remove my finger and trace the same path with the tip of my tongue.

Katerina sighs at the warmth and wetness.

I let my lips close over it and suck, caressing her gently inside my mouth with my tongue.

Her chest is heaving again and I can’t help but laugh softly.

We haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.

I trace the lip along the other side with my finger before following it with my mouth.

Her hips roll up into my face, and she’s moaning on nearly every breath.

The fact that she’s enjoying this so much makes me harder than I’ve ever been before. My tongue sweeps along the bottom edge of her slit and the sweet tang of her arousal fills my mouth.

I wrap my arm around her thighs as I delve between her folds and she cries out before slapping a hand over her mouth.

I lap at her again and again—each time pushing deeper.

Her hips are rolling against me on every stroke now. Fucking herself on my face.

Katerina cries out suddenly, and I realize it’s from the vibration of me moaning into her. I’ve been grinding my hips against the edge of the desk and I can feel the damp stain of pre-come in my boxers.

I don’t fucking care.

I moan again.

Her back arches, and I bring one of my hands back down to stroke over her lips again.

They are so soft and sweet and perfect, and I'm alternating lick, stroke, kiss, suck over every inch of her.

She's begging again but I can hardly hear her over my own fractured murmurs.

"—fucking delectable pussy, Katerina—"

"Oh, *fuck*—"

"—like heaven—"

"*Oh, god*—"

"—no one will ever taste you again but me—"

"*Nico, please*—"

I hear that one though.

Loud and clear.

It ignites a fire in my gut and sends a jolt to my brain, and I remember that this is about making her forget everything except my name.

"Say that again."

She whines high in the back of her throat, but she obeys.

"Please, Nico."

I finally close my lips over her clit, and I can hardly believe the noises she makes. I can't think of a suitable word for it. Something desperate and disbelieving.

I'm rolling the flat of my tongue against her in time with her hips, and I know she must be close.

I consider sliding a finger inside her again, but no—I want her to know that she doesn't need it.

That, because she let me have my way, I’m going to tear her apart with only my mouth.

When she comes, I have her clit between my lips, and she clamps her thighs around my head.

Both of her hands are tight in my hair, and I think she might fucking scalp me from the way that she pulls as she fucks herself against me. And I don’t care.

I keep my mouth tight on her, and every pulse is reverberating through her cunt like a fucking tuning fork. I can feel each one on my chin, even as her slick soaks it.

Her whole body is humming with pleasure, and I don’t stop until she drops her legs back to the bed.

I press a final kiss to her clit, smiling at the feel of it retreating from my touch and the sound of her soft cry.

I watch her carefully as I stand up to remove my clothes.

Katerina is still writhing slightly as she sighs and moves her hands over her body. Her hair—

I look down in a panic. The front of my boxers are completely soaked. I worry for one stupid second that somehow I’ve already come, that I’ve been stealthily undone by Katerina’s perfect fucking pussy.

But my cock throbs greedily in my hand as I draw it out, and a clear bead of pre-come gathers at the tip before I even have a chance to squeeze.

Kicking off my underwear, I gather her into my arms and carry her over to the couch on the other side of my office.

Lying her on the soft material, I take one of her hands and slide it over me, letting her fingers trail across the tip first, mixing the fresh fluid with the rest already slicking the underside.

My teeth grit at the feel of her skin sliding over mine, and I let out a shaky breath at the memory of her tight cunt clenching around my fingers.

My eyes follow her hand as she pumps me slowly with a loose fist, and she only looks up when I rest my palm over her belly.

“You ready?” I ask softly.

She nods, biting her lip in anticipation and I groan. My cock *throbs* impatiently.

I mean to hold her gaze as I enter her, but when I feel her thighs pulling back from mine, opening for me, I can’t help sitting back on my heels and looking down.

I can’t resist tracing my fingers one more time along her slit—dipping them in, just barely, for a taste of what’s waiting for me.

I spread her lips and watch as the head of my cock slides inside.

She keens at the stretch and I withdraw, anchoring my hands at the backs of her thighs, under her knees, holding them down.

I push back in, just as slowly, and watch her open around me.

“Oh god—fuck, like that.”

My fingers dig into her legs in response.

I pulse my hips, thrusting in that same shallow way—forcing her to spread around the tip over and over. I felt with my finger that her g-spot is low, close to her entrance.

As I give her just a bit more length, I know the flared base of my head is rubbing over it.

“Oh my god…that’s—it’s—oh fuck—”

Her eyes are squeezed shut, and her hands are pressing against my stomach. Holding me back, keeping me in place, as I drive hard against her inner wall over and over.

“Oh, fuck, Nico, don’t stop—”

She doesn’t need to worry. I know exactly what I’m doing. Fucking her like no one else would ever think to fuck her—with my cock barely inside her.

It takes all my control not to slide home deep into her perfect tight, wet cunt, but this isn't about me. This is about *her*.

And that's exactly what I see in her eyes when they fly open.

When she watches in open-mouthed shock as I push her over the edge with less than half of what I have to give her.

Her legs push against my hands, and I let go.

I let her move beneath me exactly how she needs to ride the waves of pleasure.

She's pulsing around me, again and again, and the bottom edge of her slit is pressing against the underside of my head on every one.

And *that*.

I hadn't accounted for that.

"Fuck," I bite out.

I'd thought to tease her a bit more before giving her the rest, but I can't stay like this.

And the thought of pulling out is too painful to even consider.

So I push into her with the aftershocks still rippling around me, and she cries out again.

I bottom out inside, and her eyes find mine as her hips come flush with her thighs.

I wonder if she can see it on my face as my mouth falls open.

I wonder if she knows that she feels like…like *everything*.

I think she might know when she yanks my arms out from under me and my weight falls on top of her.

I think she has an idea when she puts both hands on my jaw and kisses me like her life depends on it.

I think there’s no possible way she doesn’t know when I roll my hips and groan into her mouth.

Her hands find my back as I start to move, and she holds me tight to her chest. But I break the kiss as I begin to search.

There is one more spot I need to find.

Because while I don’t know how many men she’s been with since before I started watching her—and I don’t *want* to know—I want to be the *last* one she ever will be.

Once I find this spot, it’ll be her downfall.

I look for it in the crease of her brow.

I listen for it in the space between her breaths.

I feel for it in the dig of her nails across my skin.

When I find it, I know it’s over.

I pound against it, again and again, and I nearly laugh when she realizes it after I do.

“Oh, fuck, right there!”

“You like that?” I ask, fighting the smirk on my lips.

“Yes, fuck, yes, yes.”

“How does it feel?” I don’t know why I ask that. I know it’s good.

“So fucking good. Your cock…”

My cock? What about it? Suddenly I’m desperate to know.

“Tell me how it feels,” I demand.

She gasps. “Oh god, it’s so…big.”

Fuck yes. Now I’m *definitely* smirking.

“So deep, so full,” she moans.

“That’s right,” I snarl. “*Take it*.”

“Want to feel you…”

“Yes, feel it.”

“… come inside me.”

I think a small explosion actually occurs in my brain when I remember that I’m going to come, too.

This is her last one.

When I feel her clench on my cock this time, I’m going to fill her sweet cunt so full of me she’ll taste it on her tongue—

“Fuck,” I mutter again as that thought nearly pushes me over.

She moans loudly, and I wonder if she can feel me throbbing.

I mentally shake my head. This isn’t about me.

I look back down to where we’re joined, where I’m pounding into her. Her breasts are bouncing on every thrust, and I push her just a little bit faster.

“I’m the only person you’re ever going to fuck again.”

“Fuck, it’s so good.” She’s babbling again.

“No one else will compare to me.”

“Oh my god, I’m going to come again.”

“No one else.”

“Oh, god, Nico, please don’t stop.”

As if I could stop. I’d have to die first.

My eyes fall closed, and I let myself really feel the grip of her walls as I slide between them.

The supple stretch.

The perfect squeeze.

“Oh, fuck, I’m coming!” Her voice is near hysterical, halfway between crying and laughing, but I don’t care.

I let go as her first tremors flutter around me, and the pulsing of my cock drives her over the edge.

The pleasure is blinding as it rips through me like lightning—up through my thighs and down my spine.

Her pussy is relentless, clamping down on me over and over, and long, low groans are pouring off my lips as I feel her growing slick with my come.

Her hands are still tight on my back as my hips jerk into her, and her chest shudders against me with sobs of relief.

I bury my face in her neck as I follow her, my whole body shuddering with release.

In that moment of complete vulnerability, something escapes my lips that I didn’t mean to say.

Something I can’t take back.

“I need you.”

The words are muffled against her skin, barely audible, but I feel her go still beneath me and hear her breath catch.

We stay like that for a long moment, both of us breathing hard, both of us trying to process what just happened.

“What else aren’t you telling me?” Katerina asks and I go still.

My mind runs through every version of the answer—the fragment in the drawer, the name I haven’t found yet, the fact that somebody is betraying me—and none of it comes out.

“Give me a few days,” I say instead.

She’s quiet for a second.

She lifts her head and looks at me, and there’s no anger in it, no accusation. Instead, she nods.

“Okay.” She settles back against my chest. “I’m holding you to that.”

It doesn’t sound like a threat.

That’s what makes it one.

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13

KATERINA

Day twenty, and something's…*off*.

I realize it on my run, which I've now started to do outside the house as the treadmill bores me.

There's usually one guard at the tree line by the east hedge, a guy named Duncan who nods at me and doesn't say much.

This morning there are three men where Duncan used to stand alone.

I see it from thirty yards out and my stride falters, one foot catching slightly wrong on the gravel before I correct it.

My pulse, already up from the run, kicks into something sharper.

None of them nod.

One of them turns his whole body to track me as I pass and my mouth dries.

Nobody has ever bothered doing that before.

My skin goes tight down the back of my neck, that heightened awareness I haven't had since the night I first got in that car outside my brownstone.

Something happened.

I keep running because I don’t want them to realize I’ve noticed the change.

My heart is going harder than the pace should account for by the time I loop back around toward the gate, and I count two more faces I’ve never seen before.

In the three weeks of being here, I’ve memorized every inch of this property. None of these people are familiar.

I know this place.

I know where the cameras are and where the blind spots used to be and how many steps it takes to get from the pool house to the kitchen door.

And overnight, without a word to me, somebody rewrote it all.

I don’t stop running until I’m back at the house, breathing hard, hands braced on my knees at the bottom of the steps, and it isn’t just the run that’s got my heart hammering like this.

Nico’s different too, and it’s not just the guards making me paranoid.

He still comes to find me and Seraphina most evenings.

He still sits through her chaos at the dinner table with more patience than I would have ever guessed a man like him has in him, nodding along while she sings, messes with her food, and stubbornly refuses to eat anything that isn’t macaroni and cheese or chicken nuggets.

But something’s different, and it’s not just the guards.

Normally when he looks at me across that table, I *feel* it—that slow, deliberate attention, like he’s been waiting all day just to look at me properly.

Two nights ago he pulled me into the pantry off the kitchen mid-dinner because he said he couldn’t wait until Seraphina went down.

I still think about it more than I should, the way his hands felt fisted in my hair, the low sound he made against my throat like I was something he’d been starving for.

My whole body still runs hot remembering it.

That’s not who’s sitting across from me tonight.

Tonight his eyes keep sliding past me instead of landing on me.

His phone’s face-up on the table, which is new.

He used to leave it face-down because nothing on that screen ever beat whatever I was saying.

Now his eyes are always glancing toward it, as if expecting a message at any second.

Twice this week I’ve walked into a room and found him standing at a window, jaw tense, listening for something I can’t hear.

Both times he didn’t notice me until I said his name, and both times it took him a second too long to actually look at me, like he had to swim back up from somewhere before he could.

I hate it more than I hate the guards, honestly. I got used to being what he looks at without even trying to.

I didn’t ask for that. I *definitely* didn’t expect to miss it this fast.

“Everything okay?” I ask him casually over dinner, testing the waters.

“Fine,” he says shortly. He reaches for his wine instead of meeting my eyes. But that’s what concerns me the most. Not the word “fine,” but the fact that he won’t look at me saying it when looking at me is usually the one thing this man can’t seem to help doing.

I don’t push. Pushing gets me “*soon*” and a face that makes me not want to try twice.

So instead I watch him not eat his dinner and watch Seraphina swipe a piece of bread right off his plate without him even blinking.

Instead, I focus on Seraphina. At least she’s honest about what she wants, which is currently all my attention, all the time, forever.

She’s apparently decided I’m hers.

If I leave a room without her explicit approval or order, she comes barreling after me on those short little legs, screaming loud enough that three different guards have poked their heads in to check nobody's dying.

Everything is hers now—my chair at breakfast, my bracelets, which she steals and wears, my attention, which she guards jealously from anyone else in the house, including, memorably, Nico himself, who got a firm little hand shoved in his face and a flat "*mine*" when he tried to talk to me while I was reading her a book.

It's not just my stuff she takes.

Over the last few days, Seraphina has presented to me the following: a smooth gray stone from the fountain, one of the guard's walkie-talkies, lifted right off his belt and I had to sheepishly return while she screamed bloody murder behind me, half a soggy graham cracker offered up with such glee that I ate it anyway even though I wanted to gag at how *wet* it was.

What?

I'm not a monster.

My entire day revolves around her now, and there's a kind of peace in it I didn't expect to find in this house.

This little creature needs my total presence and hands back her total trust in return, no games, no agenda, no nothing.

But it's not always peace.

She's been crying for her mother a lot recently. I can't figure out what triggers her, but when it happens it's tragic.

"Want Mama," she wails during bedtime.

She had been in a foul mood all evening, fighting her caretaker Marta and I about *everything*.

Her tantrums had been exhausting. "Want Mama, want Mama, where's Mama, where's *Daddy*—"

“I know, baby. I know.” I pull her into my lap and rock her the way I’ve learned she likes, one hand on the back of her head. “Mama loves you so much. Mama’s coming.”

“*Now?*” She looks up at me, brown eyes wide with hope, absolutely certain I have the power to make it true. “Mama come *now?*”

“Soon.” I don’t actually know if that’s true anymore, not with the guards doubling and Nico so busy I barely see him. But I say it anyway, but Seraphina deserves to know that her parents will see her again.

She fell asleep curled into my arms and I cried into her soft hair. There is no version of this that isn’t a tragedy.

She should be home and tucked into her bed, after being rocked to sleep by her mother.

She should be waking up to her own mother’s face and rough housing with her father.

Instead she’s here, because some piece of shit named *Russo* plotted to kill her.

I would do anything to get her home and I’m determined to do so.

But there’s something else wrong, and it has to do with me.

I’ve chalked it up to stress because, well, *look* at this entire situation. But there are other symptoms that are starting to make me panic a little.

I’ve been more nauseous than usual and there’s ebbs and flows to it.

My breasts have been tender too and taking my bra off in the evenings soemtimes hurts.

I’ve also been really tired.

Granted, I’m always tired because you know, *doctor*, but this is a different type of bone-tired.

I’ve found myself dozing while helping to put Seraphina down for a nap and have even passed out in the library, a book over my face.

Each symptom on its own means nothing.

Stress does strange things. Captivity does worse things.

All of these things are easily explainable.

Until this morning, after I've gone to the bathroom, I realize my period is late.

Very late.

And in that moment, it's like the earth is standing still as my frozen fingers release the toilet paper that was clutched in my head.

I watch it flutter to the ground but don't really register any of it.

When was my period supposed to arrive?

My mouth dries as I start doing the mental math.

My period has always been kind of wonky and I've never been completely regular, but even for me this is late.

I shake my head once I land on my figure.

"No," I murmur to myself, maybe a touch frantically. "No, that can't be right."

So I do the math again. And again. But here's the problem. I've always been good at math—I took a differential equations class in college for fun—so I know my figures aren't wrong.

But I desperately *want* them to be wrong and after the fourth time I've run the calculations, I know I've got to stop because the numbers aren't changing.

I stop breathing. *No. There's no way.*

Except *yes*, there *is* a way and it's happened multiple times, including the very first time, over two weeks ago on a kitchen counter and neither of us thought about anything as practical as protection because neither of us was thinking about anything except each other.

My knees feel weak and I grip the counter, trying to calm my breathing as it comes in gasps.

Stop it, I tell myself firmly. *You don't know anything yet. Stress delays cycles all the time. This proves* nothing.

But I don't believe myself.

I'm a *doctor* for god's sake.

I know exactly how crappy that argument is because I've heard terrified teenagers make that same argument at the clinic I used to intern at when they were trying to convince themselves they weren't…that they weren't…

God, I can't even *say* it.

But just like I would tell those terrified teenagers that the only way to know is to take a test, I need to take my own advice.

And the only one who can help me is Dr. Ferrante.

Dr. Fernando Ferrante is the estate doctor and apparently has been for years.

I only met him my second week here, when Nico finally admitted the house kept a physician on retainer and I nearly laughed in his face at the absurdity of it.

But then again, it made sense.

Maksim and Kolya keep a doctor on retainer too.

At one point, they'd wanted it to be me, but I very quickly shot them down.

I liked Dr. Ferrante the moment I met him.

He's older with a full head of white hair and large glasses that make him look like an owl.

He's a quiet man, but when he talks you want to listen to him.

He's very, *very* good at his job and I am a little intimidated by him, if I'm being honest.

He’s never once asked me a personal question in three weeks, which in this house is practically a love language.

Sometimes he pulls me into an actual consult, just to hear another opinion, and I get to be a doctor again for twenty minutes instead of whatever else I am here.

He’s loaned me two medical journals off his own shelf, dog-eared to articles he thought I’d find interesting, and we’ve spent more than one afternoon just talking, arguing about a case, and complaining about a diagnosis some ER attending clearly missed.

He treats me like a colleague instead of a curiosity, and after three weeks of being looked at like a specimen by everyone else in this house, I respect that more than I can say.

I find him after lunch, in the small clinic room off the east wing, already packing up for the day.

He looks up when I knock on the open door frame, and his whole face lights up.

“Dr. Sokolov,” he says warmly as he sets down the folder he’s holding. “What can I do for you?”

My heart hammers. I’m not really sure what I’m going to say to him. *I need a pregnancy test, do you have one?* Seems a bit…blunt to say the least. I rack my brain, trying to think of something else as the seconds tick by and Dr. Ferrante looks at me with curiosity.

Think, Kat. Think!

“I banged my wrist on the playroom doorframe,” I blurt out, nearly wincing at how stupid it sounds. It’s half true. There’s an actual bruise there, from an unrelated door, but it’s still purple enough to be convincing.

Dr. Ferrante raises a bushy brow. I can almost hear him thinking *and you want me to look at a bruise?*

I flash him a smile that probably looks like a grimace. “It really hurts,” I protest.

Dr. Ferrante's eyebrows move even higher, but he moves the folder out of the way and pats the exam table. "Let's take a look." His cool hands take my wrist in both hands, turning it over to check the range of motion. "Does that hurt?"

I force a wince. "A little."

"Hmm." Dr. Ferrante glances at me skeptically before he lets go of my wrist. "You'll live." He goes back to packing his bag. "Ice it tonight if it's still tender and it'll be better in a day or so. But you knew that already. So is there another, more truthful reason why you're visiting me?"

Goddammit Fernando. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. It's like I'm paralyzed.

He pauses with a stethoscope halfway into his bag and looks at me properly. Concern creases his features and he stops what he's doing.

"Kat," he says gently and I startle because he has *never* called me that. It's always been Dr. Sokolov. "What's going on?"

I stand there for a second too long, working up the courage to speak what's at the tip of my tongue.

"Do you have a pregnancy test?" I say quickly, like I'm ripping off a Band-Aid.

Dr. Ferrante pauses and one eyebrow goes up again. He opens his mouth as if to say something and I desperately hope he *doesn't.*

Thankfully, he closes his mouth, sets the stethoscope down and crosses to a cabinet where he opens a drawer and pulls out a box. He sets it on the exam table in front of me without another word.

I could kiss him for that. I dip my hand into the box and pull out two wrapped pregnancy tests before I stuff them in the waistband of my leggings.

I leave Dr. Ferrante's office without another word, jogging upstairs to my room. Logic dictates that I should take the tests now but that isn't happening.

I was brave enough to get the tests, but I haven't plucked up the courage to actually *take* them.

So instead, I take the coward's way out. I shove the tests in my underwear drawer and head downstairs to find Seraphina, because apparently when faced with a life-altering question, my move is to go build a block tower with a toddler and pretend the tests don't exist.

For two hours, I play with Seraphina. We build block towers and I read book after book to her.

We play princesses and watch a Disney movie. I'm not really present for any of it, but Seraphina doesn't notice, because she's too enraptured with Cinderella.

At one point, sitting on the couch while she's snuggled into me, I try to picture myself as a mother.

I can't. Not even a little.

It's not the idea that repulses me. It's that I've never even considered it. I had always told myself that a family would come once I was established at work, so I busied myself with my career and never looked back.

My life had no room for anyone who needed me at three in the morning for anything other than a gunshot wound. And dating was out of the question considering I was rarely ever home. *Someday*, I would think to myself.

But the years flew by and then I was thirty.

Then thirty-two with no husband or even a boyfriend. I had a job that ate every spare hour I had.

I knew that even if I found a boyfriend, I would at least want to date for a year and live together for a year before we even considered marriage.

By then, I would be pushing mid to high thirties at minimum and my chances of conceiving would start to dwindle.

Someday quietly stopped being a plan and turned into something that probably wasn't happening to me.

I made peace with that a while ago. I am *not* at peace with it right now.

Seraphina goes down for a nap at one-thirty, fighting it for a few minutes before losing completely, and the second her door clicks shut I'm rushing back up to my room.

I take the steps two at a time, my heart in my throat before I've even reached my own room.

Once I get there, I lock the door and grab the two tests out of my underwear drawer.

Disappearing into my bathroom, I lock that door too and read the instructions twice, even though this isn't my first rodeo taking a pregnancy test.

I take a test, sit on the edge of the tub, and let the three minutes on the timer run. Then I let myself spiral, because I have nothing else to do.

Could I do this? Could I actually be somebody's mother?

Could I actually keep another human being alive outside of a hospital, without a set task and a clear endpoint and somebody else waiting to take my shift?

Hell, I don't even have a cat.

I've never owned an animal in my life. I don't know the first thing about taking care of a baby beyond the medical side.

And if it's real—what does that make Nico?

He's been my captor and then…a lover, I guess, even though the word *lover* makes me want to gag.

I'm not sure exactly how I feel about him.

I haven't finished sorting through it.

What do I do? If I am pregnant, do I keep the baby?

When the thirty days are up and I choose to leave, does that mean Nico will stop watching me?

I already know the answer is no.

He would see my stomach changing and he would know the baby is his. He already knows everything else about me.

Then a thought slides in that makes my stomach drop straight through the floor.

What if he planned this?

What if the whole point of this was making sure I couldn't just walk away when the thirty days ran out?

A camera in my apartment is one thing.

A baby doesn't end.

A baby is eighteen years of him having a reason to know exactly where I am, what I'm doing, and exactly who I'm with, forever.

It's eighteen years of him using the baby as a pawn to ensure I forever remain compliant.

Oh my god.

I press both hands over my face, feeling the start of a panic attack.

No. Stop it. He didn't do that. He couldn't have.

Except I don't actually know that. I don't know anything about this man that he hasn't chosen to let me know.

And the horror of that thought—that I might be carrying something he engineered, on purpose, the same way he's engineered everything else that's happened to me since that phone call—makes me feel nauseous.

The timer goes off.

I look down, breaths coming faster.

Two pink lines.

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NICO

The rain lashes against the windows, an angry staccato that matches my mood. It’s early, the rest of the house just beginning to rise, but sleep eluded me hours ago.

Now I sit at my desk, staring at the neat stacks of paperwork without really seeing them.

Contracts, shipping manifests, memorandums—the legitimate veneer on the face of a criminal enterprise.

I reach for my coffee, take a sip, and grimace.

It’s gone cold, the mug half-full and forgotten in the tumult of my thoughts.

With a sigh, I set it back on the desk, nudging aside the latest shipping contract.

The words blur together, all those carefully worded clauses and addendums, a language I know like breathing but can’t focus on. Not today.

Instead, my eyes drift to the second monitor, to the live feed from the nursery.

It’s become a habit, lately, keeping that small window open in the corner of my eye.

A lifeline, tethering me to something brighter when the shadows grow too long.

The scene on the screen steals a smile from me before I quite realize it's happening. Seraphina, a blur of dark curls and wild energy, bouncing on chubby legs.

Her laughter, silent but unmistakable, as she toddles determinedly after something just out of frame. And then—Katerina.

She comes into view like the sun breaking through storm clouds, her hair a dark curtain, her smile bright.

She's luminous.

She's laughing too, scooping Seraphina up and spinning her around, her lips shaping words I can't hear but long to.

Almost without thought, I reach out and unmute the feed, letting their mingled joy spill into the too-quiet room.

For a moment, I let myself just watch them, something in my chest aching with the simple beauty of it.

Two years.

For two years, I've wanted her with an intensity I've never felt before.

Even then, even when all I had were glimpses through cameras and car windows, snatches of her voice, the elegant lines of her profile.

I wanted, and it brought me no joy, only a constant, throbbing ache.

But now she's *here*. In my home, in my *life*, in all the places I never dared hope to have her.

And it's everything.

She's everything.

This maddening, miraculous woman, with her stubborn compassion and her unshakable strength, her gentle hands and her spine of steel.

I watch as Seraphina launches herself at Katerina, small arms outstretched, and Katerina catches her, going dramatically sprawling onto the playroom rug.

Peals of delighted childish laughter echo through the speaker, and I feel my own smile widen in response.

This. These stolen moments of uncomplicated happiness. I'd almost forgotten what that felt like.

What it meant to smile just because.

To feel something bright and buoyant kindling in my chest, untainted by the bloodstained demands of my world.

I'm in love with her.

The knowledge sits in my chest like a second heart, full and heavy and undeniable. I've known for a while, if I'm honest with myself. But I've refused to name it, because words have weight, and weight makes things real, and real things can be lost. Can be taken.

But watching her now, breathless and radiant, her hair a tangled corona on the carpet, Seraphina sprawled giggling on her chest, I can't remember why I ever fought it.

Can't fathom any reason to keep those words unspoken, not when they pulse in my blood.

I love her. I love her. And maybe, if I'm undeservedly lucky, I'll get the chance to tell her. To shape this feeling into words and actions.

A buzz from my phone shatters the moment, jarring in the quiet.

I glance at the screen reflexively, already knowing it won't be good news.

It never is, not this early, not with that particular ringtone. The name on the display kicks the smile right off my face.

Luca.

I let it ring once, twice, a third time. Childish, maybe, this fleeting urge to ignore it. To cling to the last fractured edges of that fragile peace.

But I know better.

Whatever waits on the other end of that call, it won't disappear just because I don't answer.

"Yeah?" The word feels heavy on my tongue as I finally pick up, my eyes never leaving the security feed as I watch Katerina scoop Seraphina up and settle her on her hip.

"You need to see something." Luca's voice is tight, strangled almost with an unfamiliar cadence. Dread curls, cold and slick, in my gut. "I'm sending it now. Read it before you say anything."

I want to argue and demand he spit it out, to stop drawing this out, but there's something in his voice that stills my tongue. "Luca, what—"

"Just read it, Nico." He hangs up before I can respond, the click of the disconnecting call unnaturally loud in my ear.

The message comes through a beat later. I open it warily, my heartbeat a drumbeat of trepidation against my ribs. Then I read it once, twice, three times, the words searing themselves into my brain.

Russo has identified you. He knows Seraphina Santoro is with you. He knows you're not loyal to the cause.

The breath leaves me in a rush, the room spinning dizzyingly around me.

I grip the edge of my desk, white-knuckled, fighting the surge of nausea.

Fuck.

This should be good news.

Russo knows too much, but he doesn't know where I am, doesn't know about Katerina.

But I know him. I know how he operates. This isn't a message meant to frighten.

It's a promise of what's to come.

I’m still reeling from the message when the door flies open without warning. Luca strides in, his usually impassive face etched with lines of stress and exhaustion.

He must have come straight from wherever he was when he called, because his phone is still clenched in his hand, his knuckles white with the force of his grip.

He kicks the door shut behind him but makes no move to sit, his body thrumming with barely leashed agitation.

“You’ve read it?” He jerks his chin toward my phone, the words clipped and harsh.

I nod, a single sharp dip of my head. “I read it.”

“There’s more.” Luca drags a hand over his face, and the gesture is so weary, so uncharacteristically vulnerable, that it sends a new spike of dread through me. “We found him. The leak.”

Every muscle in my body goes taut, a livewire of sudden, vicious tension. “Who?”

“William Caruso.”

The name hangs in the air between us. I turn it over in my mind, searching for a face to match the syllables, but there’s nothing. The name is as strange to me as his face.

“Caruso,” I repeat, my brow furrowing. “I don’t know him.”

“You wouldn’t,” Luca says, a grim twist to his mouth. “He’s in logistics and been with us eleven years, but nothing high profile. Schedules shipments, plans routes, that sort of shit.”

Eleven years. Over a decade of service, of supposed loyalty. And now this. Betrayal. The thought settles like lead in my stomach.

“He’s not inner circle,” I say slowly. Even to my own ears, my voice sounds distant, muffled by the roaring static of my thoughts. “What could he even know that would be worth selling?”

Luca’s jaw clenches, a muscle jumping in his cheek. “Enough to paint a target on Dino’s back and to put your name on Russo’s hit list.” His eyes, when they meet mine, are hard as flint. “It doesn’t matter how low level he was, Nico. He had access, and he used it to betray us.”

I lean back in my chair, letting my eyes fall shut for a long moment and trying to process and sort through the snarled tangle of fury and confusion.

It doesn’t make sense.

But then again, it never does, in the end. The reasons always fall short, somehow.

Money or fear or blackmail or some twisted cocktail of all three. We’ll find out which it was, and it won’t change a goddamn thing.

William Caruso made his choice.

He sold us out, and Dino paid the price. And now it’s time for him to answer for what he’s done.

I open my eyes, meeting Luca’s gaze across the desk.

When I speak, my voice is low and carefully controlled, but there’s an undercurrent of anger beneath the words.

“Bring him to me.”

Luca nods, a sharp, satisfied jerk of his head.

He’s already turning back toward the door, his hand reaching for the handle.

Ready, as always, to carry out my orders. To do what needs to be done.

Luca’s men picked him up outside a bar in Sunset Park twenty minutes after I gave my order.

Two guys took him off the sidewalk before he’d even finished his cigarette.

By the time they walked him down into the cellar, his lip’s split, one eye’s already starting to swell, and his shirt’s torn at the collar from where somebody grabbed him and didn’t let go.

“I didn’t do anything,” he’s protesting over and over to anybody who’ll listen, which is no one. “I don’t know what this is, I didn’t *do* anything. Please, somebody tell me what I’m supposed to have done—”

He in the old wine cellar under the west wing. Nobody uses it anymore.

Pipes leak, temperature control’s been broken for a decade, and the walls are thick old stone that swallow sound instead of carrying it.

It’s good acoustics for the wrong reasons.

Nobody up in the house is going to hear a thing.

It’s cold down here.

Cold enough that I can see my own breath, and Caruso’s shaking before anybody’s laid another hand on him.

Luca gets him zip-tied to the chair, right underneath the one bare bulb hanging over a drain in the floor.

Caruso’s crying by now, snot and blood trickling down his face, and he still hasn’t stopped saying he didn’t do anything.

That tells me something right there.

Someone who’s actually done nothing wrong gets angry and demands answers.

They don’t just keep saying the same four words on a loop like he’s hoping repetition turns into proof.

I shrug out of my jacket and toss it aside. It lands on the damp stone floor, but I hardly notice.

All my attention is focused on the traitor in front of me. I roll up my sleeves with deliberate motions, letting Caruso watch every movement.

“Eleven years, Caruso.” My voice is a low growl, tight with fury. “Eleven fucking years, and this is how you repay me? Dino’s dead because of you. Carved up and dumped in the river like garbage.”

“No, no, I swear it wasn’t me!” Caruso babbles, straining against his bonds. “I’m being set up, I wouldn’t betray you like this, I—”

“Then who did?” I snap, slamming my hand down on the back of his chair. He flinches violently. “Give me a name, Caruso. Right now.”

But he just keeps shaking his head and stammering out the same weak denials.

I’ve heard it all before, from every gutless rat who thought they could double-cross me and walk away.

The rage is building in me with every word out of his mouth.

Eleven years this bastard worked for me and promised me his loyalty, but it was all a lie.

He betrayed us to Russo. He’s the reason Dino is dead.

I signal to the guards, and they yank Caruso up straight in the chair, gripping his arms to hold him in place. Luca watches silently from the corner, his face expressionless.

He knows what’s coming. We’ve done this dance before.

I don’t enjoy what comes next. I want that on record, even if it’s only in my own mind, even if no one in this room would ever believe it. But Caruso made his choice.

He betrayed the family. And now he’s going to give me what I need to know, one way or another.

I start with his hands.

One quick, brutal motion and the crack of breaking bone echoes off the cellar walls, nearly drowned out by Caruso’s agonized scream.

It’s the most efficient way to start by inflicting serious pain without causing any permanent damage. Yet.

“Let’s try this again,” I say coldly. “Tell me what you told Russo. Tell me how deep this goes. And maybe, just maybe, you walk out of here alive.”

But in my heart, I know he won’t. He sealed his fate the second he betrayed me.

Before this is over, I’ll carve the truth out of him piece by piece and then I’ll burn Russo and everyone else involved to ashes.

No one betrays Nico Barone and lives. *No one.*

The room reeks of blood, sweat, shit and fear by the time Caruso finally starts to crack. His breathing comes in ragged gasps, his head lolling until Luca jerks it back up by the hair, forcing him to meet my gaze.

I can tell he’s close to breaking. I’ve been in enough rooms like this to know the signs.

And then, right on the edge, he says something I never expected.

“It wasn’t me,” he chokes out, his voice a ruined mess. “I just passed on what I was told. It wasn’t me who—”

“Who told you?” I demand, leaning in close.

He’s sobbing now, barely coherent. I grab his jaw, wrenching his face up into the harsh light.

“*Who*?”

“Luca.” The name falls from his split lips like a plea. “Luca’s the one… feeding Russo. I swear on my mother, I swear to God, it’s Luca…”

The silence that follows is deafening. I feel Luca go still as a statue behind me, not even drawing breath.

For one fraction of a second, something inside me plummets through my feet. But only for a second. I turn to look at Luca.

He’s gone pale, his jaw clenched so tight I can see a muscle jumping in his cheek.

But his eyes when they meet mine are steady, full of the same disgust and fury I feel churning in my own gut.

I know this play. I've seen it countless times.

When a man's got no truth left to bargain with, when the pain's stripped everything else away, he'll grasp for the most vicious lie he can spit out.

As if a lie big enough and ugly enough might buy him one more minute of mercy.

It won't. It never does. But I understand the animal instinct of it, even if I don't believe a single poisonous word. Luca's my brother. My trusted friend.

He's bled for this family, for me, more times than I can count.

I turn back to Caruso, grabbing a fistful of his hair and wrenching his head back until he's looking up at me.

"You fucking liar," I snarl, my voice low and vicious. "You think I'll believe that shit? Luca's my brother. He's bled for this family, for me, more times than a rat like you could count."

I lean in closer, close enough to smell the blood and the piss and the fear rolling off him.

"The desperate lies of a dead man walking don't get to touch that," I croon. "I won't allow it."

I let go of his hair with a rough jerk, watching his head loll forward.

Then I step back, letting my disgust show plain on my face.

"Luca," I say, not taking my eyes off Caruso. "Let's finish this."

Luca steps up beside me, his presence solid and reassuring. A constant I can count on, even in the midst of all this filth.

Together, we finish what we came here to do.

I stay under the scalding spray longer than I need to, watching the last traces of blood swirl down the drain, trying not to think about the fact that this—the cellar, the screams, the stench of a decade's loyalty crumbling to ashes—is the one part of my life I can never explain to Katerina.

She knows what her family is, what flows through her veins whether she wants it or not. But she's spent years building walls between herself and this world, one emergency room shift at a time, and I've just come from a room with a dead man's blood caked under my nails.

There's no version of today's truth I can give her.

I'm still grappling with that when the second message comes, just past noon, a hundred times worse than the first.

A scrap, a fragment, plucked from the ether of some burner network Russo's men use and wipe every few hours. Caught more by chance than skill.

Six words. Half a phrase, hacked off at both ends.

…Barone has the doctor too…

The blood turns to ice in my veins as the words sink in, colder than it's been since that night on the street, bleeding out under the hands of a stranger.

They know about her.

Not everything, but enough to put a target on her back. My hands shake as I set down the page, a tremor I can't seem to stop. I press my palms flat to the desk, dragging in one breath after another until I can think past the red haze of panic.

If they find her, if they even get close, I know exactly what they'll do. I saw what they did to Dino, and he was a soldier who knew the risks. My Katerina's not part of this. All she did was save a dying man at the side of the road, because that's who she is. And now they know she's a pressure point they can use against me.

I'm moving before I've fully decided to stand, driven by a fierce, desperate need to keep her safe.

I call down to security, my voice tight but controlled. Double the guard rotation. Then double it again, until it feels almost sufficient. Perimeter checks every twenty minutes.

A man outside her door day and night, close enough to hear trouble, far enough not to make her feel caged. No one enters or leaves without my express permission.

I change her protocols and tighten her security. No runs outside the gym, no trips near the front gate. Nothing that puts her in view of the road or the world beyond these walls.

And I don’t tell her why.

That omission sits like a stone in my chest, but I carry it anyway. Because telling her why means telling her what I left out. How close the danger is.

Her own name in the mouth of men who peel flesh from bone to get what they want. I swore I’d give her the truth, and I meant it.

But this truth—this truth could sign her death warrant if it so much as touches her thoughts. I can’t square that with keeping my promise, not when I’m still struggling to voice it even inside my own head.

I go searching for her that night, a tightness in my chest that won’t ease until I see her, until I know she’s safe. I’m half-convinced I can give her a piece of the truth. Not all of it, but something. Enough that the extra security measures don’t leave her restless and questioning in the dark.

Her room is empty. For a moment, my heart seizes, a cold fist clenching around it. I check the gym next, then the library, the kitchen, the places she frequents. With each empty room, panic starts to claw at the edges of my control, icy tendrils of dread curling in my gut.

Then it hits me. *Seraphina*. Of course she’s with Seraphina.

I head for the nursery, my pace quickening with each step. As I draw closer, I hear it—the soft, melodic murmur of Katerina’s voice. Relief crashes over me like a wave. I approach silently, easing the door open just a crack. The scene that greets me steals the breath from my lungs.

Katerina, curled in the rocking chair by the window, haloed by the soft golden glow of the lamp. She’s beautiful like this, her wavy hair tumbling over her shoulders, her face soft and serene.

Seraphina is nestled in her arms, wearing pale yellow footed pajamas dotted with tiny white stars.

The toddler is fighting sleep, her riotous dark curls mussed, her eyes heavy-lidded. But she clings to Katerina, one small hand fisted in the fabric of her shirt, as if she can anchor herself to this moment through sheer stubborn will.

And Katerina reads to her, her voice a soothing lullaby in the quiet room.

“Goodnight room, goodnight moon. Goodnight cow jumping over the moon…”

It’s a scene of such perfect, innocent peace that it makes something ache deep in my chest.

Seraphina gazes up at Katerina, adoration shining in her sleepy eyes, like Katerina is the center of her entire universe. And Katerina looks back at her with so much tender affection that it takes my breath away.

I stand there in the hallway, one hand raised to knock, to push open the door and step into that achingly domestic tableau. But I can’t make myself do it. I can’t walk into that sanctuary and shatter their peace with the cruel edges of my world. I can’t taint that perfect, fragile moment with blood and threats and the gut-wrenching knowledge of how much I stand to lose.

The words to tell her, to explain any of it, are trapped in my throat, jagged shards of truth that I can’t give voice to. Not without watching them cut her to the bone.

So I don’t. I let my hand fall back to my side, a leaden weight. I turn and walk away, every step an act of will. Back to my study, back to the maps and the messages and the terrible, creeping certainty that no matter what I do, I can’t keep this darkness from touching them forever.

I promised Katerina honesty. I swore to her that I would tell her the truth.

But right now, watching her cradle Seraphina, seeing the love that shines so clear and bright between them, I’m a coward. A goddamn coward, because I can’t bring myself to cast a shadow over that light. Not tonight.

Maybe not ever, if it means keeping them safe. Keeping them whole.

Even if it means shattering every vow I’ve ever made to the woman I love.

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15

KATERINA

I’m exhausted.

It’s a bone-deep weariness that has settled into every cell of my body, weighing me down like lead.

And it’s not just physical, though the nausea and the hormones certainly aren’t helping. No, this is an emotional exhaustion, the kind that comes from carrying a secret that feels too big for your own skin.

It’s been less than a day since I found out, since those two little lines turned my world upside down.

Less than a day and already I feel like I’m drowning under the weight of it.

I’m pregnant. With Nico’s baby.

The thought still sends a dizzying mix of emotions swirling through me—fear, confusion, a tentative flicker of something that might be joy if I let it. But I don’t. I can’t. Not yet. Not when everything is still so raw and new and terrifying.

We’re having dinner in the smaller dining room, just the two of us.

The formal dining room felt too grand and impersonal, so we’ve taken to eating here instead. It’s cozier, more intimate with its deep burgundy walls

and the gleaming dark wood of the table. Usually, I find comfort in that.

Tonight, it feels suffocating.

Seraphina has already been put to bed, her little face soft with sleep as I tucked her in.

I envy her that peace, that blissful unawareness. What I wouldn't give to close my eyes and drift away, to let the world fade into hazy dreams just for a little while.

But I can't. The food on my plate seems to mock me, the rich scents turning my stomach. I push it around with my fork, trying to feign interest, but I can feel Nico's eyes on me. Watching. Assessing. He doesn't miss a thing, my captor. My…whatever he is now.

I risk a glance up at him, taking in the strong lines of his face, the way his dark hair falls across his brow.

He's handsome, undeniably so, with those high cheekbones and the jaw that could cut glass. But there's a hardness to him, an edge that never quite softens, not even in moments like these.

The wine in my glass sits untouched, a deep, tempting crimson. I can practically feel Nico's gaze zeroing in on that, on the way my hand hasn't strayed toward the stem all evening. He knows my habits now. I usually enjoy a glass or two with dinner. The absence of that ritual hasn't gone unnoticed.

Suddenly, it's all too much. The weight of his stare, the secret clawing at my throat, the roiling nausea in my gut.

I can't do this anymore. I can't sit here and pretend like my world hasn't just been flipped on its axis.

I set my fork down with a clatter, the sound harsh in the quiet room. Nico's eyes snap to mine, a question in their dark depths.

"I'm pregnant," I blurt out, ripping off the Band-Aid.

The words hang in the air between us and I watch as shock ripples across his face. For a moment, he's utterly still, frozen in place as the revelation

sinks in.

I brace myself for his reaction, my heart pounding against my ribs. Anger, maybe. Or excitement, that fierce, possessive joy that terrifies me even more.

He's been obsessed with me for two years, after all. The idea of me carrying his child, of being tied to him in such a visceral, permanent way—I can't even let myself imagine how that might feel to him.

But he surprises me.

He carefully sets his own fork down and meets my gaze head-on.

"What do you want to do, Katerina?"

Something in me snaps at the sound of my full name, at the careful, measured tone of his voice.

It's like he's talking to a skittish animal, trying not to spook me.

"Don't call me that," I hiss, my hands curling into fists on the table. "I've told you a hundred times, Nico. It's *Kat*. Just Kat."

He doesn't even blink at the venom in my voice. If anything, he looks annoyed, like my insistence on this point is nothing more than a petty inconvenience.

"And I've told you, *Katerina*, that I prefer your full name," he says impatiently. "I don't see why that should change now."

I'm on my feet before I realize I've moved, my chair scraping harshly against the floor. "Because everything has changed, Nico! I'm pregnant. With *your* child. And you're still hung up on this…this ridiculous power play with my name?"

His jaw tightens, a muscle ticking beneath the skin. "It's not a power play, Katerina. It's a matter of respect. Of acknowledging the history between us, the significance of what we have."

A harsh laugh rips from my throat. "Respect? History? Is that what you call stalking me for two years, obsessing over me like some twisted version of a

lovesick puppy? Is that the history you want to acknowledge?”

His eyes flash, a dangerous glint that sends a shiver down my spine.

But he doesn’t deny it, and I wouldn’t expect him to.

“This is what you always wanted, isn’t it?” I spit, the words tasting like bile on my tongue. “To trap me, to tie me to you forever. This pregnancy, this baby…it’s all just part of your sick little plan.”

He’s on his feet in an instant, his hand slamming down on the table with enough force to rattle the dishes. “Do not presume to know what I want, Katerina.” His voice is clipped and my self-preservation bleats in fear. “Or what I’ve planned.”

I match his glare with one of my own, refusing to back down. “Oh, I think I know *exactly* what you want, Nico. You want control. Over me, over my life, over every damn choice I make. And now you’ve got it, haven’t you? The ultimate leash, growing inside me.”

His nostrils flare, his lips pressing into a thin line. “You give me too much credit, Katerina. As if I could have planned for this. As if I could have predicted that you would be so…*receptive* to my attentions.”

I feel my cheeks flush with a mix of anger and humiliation. This fucker. “How dare you,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “How *dare* you try to make this my fault, my responsibility.”

“Oh, I’m not trying to make it anything, Katerina. I’m merely pointing out that you were hardly a reluctant participant in the activities that led us here.” His smirk is vicious, his eyes glinting with amusement. “As I recall, you were quite…*enthusiastic* in your responses.”

Something snaps inside me, a white-hot fury that obliterates all rational thought.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’ve snatched up my fork and hurled it at his head with all the strength I can muster.

He catches it effortlessly, his fingers wrapping around the tines mere inches from his face.

For a moment, we just stare at each other, chests heaving, the air between us crackling with tension.

I clench my jaw so hard my teeth ache. “Fuck you, Nico,” I snarl. “Fuck you and your twisted little mind games. I’m done playing by your rules.”

I turn on my heel, ready to storm out of the room, but his voice stops me in my tracks.

“Katerina, wait.”

There’s something in his tone, a note of urgency that I’ve never heard before.

Against my better judgment, I pause, my hand on the doorknob. I turn back to face him, and the sight of him almost makes me forget how to breathe.

He’s still standing by the table, one hand braced against the back of his chair as if it’s the only thing keeping him upright.

His usually impeccable suit is rumpled, his tie loosened and askew. But it’s his face that truly gives me pause.

Gone is the cool, collected mask he always wears.

Gone is the arrogant smirk, the glint of cruel amusement in his eyes. Instead, he looks…shattered.

Lost.

His brow is furrowed, his lips parted as if he’s struggling to find the right words.

For the first time since I’ve known him, Nico looks human. Vulnerable, even. It’s a startling realization, one that sends a strange pang through my chest.

“What do you want me to say?” he asks, and his voice is rough and ragged around the edges. “That I’m happy about this? That I’m ready to be a father? I’m just as blindsided by this as you are.”

I stare at him, trying to reconcile this version of Nico with the one I thought I knew.

The one who was always in control, always three steps ahead. But the man in front of me now, he looks just as lost as I feel.

“Then why the hell did you ask me what I want to do?” I demand, my own voice shaking. “As if I have any idea—as if I’ve had more than a few hours to process this?”

He rakes a hand through his hair, leaving it standing on end.

It’s such a genuinely frustrated gesture and it makes something twist painfully in my gut.

“Because I’m trying, Katerina. I’m trying to give you a choice, to let you have some control over what happens next.”

A bitter laugh escapes me. “Control? That’s rich, coming from you. But fine, you want to know what I want? I want time, Nico. Time to think, to process, to come to terms with the fact that my life has just been turned upside down.”

He nods, his jaw tight. But there’s a glimmer of something in his eyes, something that looks almost like…understanding. “Then that’s what you’ll have,” he says, almost gently. “As much time as you need. I’ll make sure of it.”

I stare at him, searching his face for any hint of deception, any sign that this is just another manipulation.

But all I see is sincerity, a raw honesty that I never thought him capable of.

It’s too much. I can’t deal with the implications of what it means.

“I…I need to go,” I manage, my voice cracking. “I can’t do this right now.”

I flee the room before he can respond, practically running up the stairs to my bedroom.

The moment the door closes behind me, I collapse against it, sobs wracking my body as the tears I’ve been holding back finally break free.

I cry for the life growing inside me, for the impossible choice I now face.

I cry for the fear that grips me, the terror of facing this alone, cut off from everyone I love.

Maksim, Nikolai…God, they're going to be *furious* when they find out.

The thought of facing their reaction, their disappointment and anger, makes my stomach churn.

But most of all, I cry for myself. For the woman I used to be, the life I used to have.

The certainty and control that have been ripped away from me, leaving me adrift in a sea of chaos and confusion.

And through it all, a single, traitorous thought keeps circling in my mind, taunting me with its awful truth.

I have feelings for Nico.

The man who stalked me, gave me no choice but to come here, who now holds my future in his hands.

The man who is part of a world I've spent my entire life running from.

As a doctor, I've sworn an oath to preserve life, to do no harm.

But Nico…Nico deals in death and destruction. His hands are stained with blood, his soul marred by the unspeakable things he's done.

And yet, somewhere along the way, I've let him in.

I've let myself *feel* something for him, something that goes beyond mere captive and captor.

The realization sickens me, shame and self-loathing rising in my throat like bile. What kind of person does that make me?

I wrap my arms around myself, hugging my knees to my chest as I rock back and forth on the floor.

I've never felt so alone, so utterly lost and helpless.

I don't know how to do this.

I don’t know how to reconcile the woman I am with the feelings I have for the man who’s taken everything from me.

I don’t know how long I sit there, huddled against the door, tears streaming down my face.

Time seems to lose all meaning, drowned out by the chaos of my thoughts and the ache in my chest.

A knock at the door startles me out of my misery. I freeze, holding my breath, hoping whoever it is will just go away.

But then his voice comes through the wood, low and insistent. “Katerina. Open the door.”

Oh goddammit, of course it’s Nico. The one person I don’t want to face right now, the one person I need to be as far away from as possible.

“Go away,” I manage, my voice hoarse from crying. “I don’t want to see you right now.”

Silence. For a moment, I think maybe he’s actually listening to me for once. Maybe he’s going to respect my wishes and leave me alone.

Yeah, if pigs fly. Nico doesn’t ask permission.

He takes what he wants, no matter what someone else may want.

I scramble to my feet, backing away from the door just as it swings open. He’s standing there, his large frame filling the doorway, his hand still on the knob.

“Clearly, you don’t know the meaning of the word ‘no,’” I snap, crossing my arms over my chest tightly. It’s a flimsy barrier, but it’s all I have right now.

His eyes find me immediately, taking in my tear-stained face and my defensive posture.

Something flashes across his face, an emotion I can’t quite name. It looks almost like concern.

“Why are you crying?” he asks, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. That movement irritates me. As if he has every right to be here and demand answers from me.

Bright and hot anger flares in me at his audacity. “Why am I *crying*?” I ask in disbelief, staring at him like he’s grown three heads. “Are you serious right now? I just told you I’m *pregnant*, Nico. Pregnant with your child. And all you can say is ‘what do you want to do?’ As if it’s just another problem to be solved, another mess for you to clean up.”

He takes a step toward me, his hands held out in a placating gesture. “Katerina, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just…I’m just as shocked as you are. I wasn’t expecting this.”

“And you think I was?” I laugh, the sound harsh and brittle. “You think I was ready for my life to be turned upside down? For my body, my future, to be hijacked by a man I barely know?”

His jaw tightens, his eyes flashing. “You know me, Katerina. Maybe not in the way you want to, but you know the man I am. The things I’m capable of.”

I stare at him, incredulous. “Do I? Do I really? Let’s talk about the facts, shall we? I know you’ve been obsessed with me for two years. You’ve stalked me. You kidnapped a two year old from my cousin’s backyard—yes, I *know* that someone else was already planning to take her, but you could have warned *her parents*. You could have warned Maksim and Nikolai. But no, you stole Seraphina Santoro to not only save her but to also get to me, right?”

Nico says nothing, just staring at me with a blank expression on his face and that makes me angrier. *Admit it*, dammit!

“And now,” I roughly poke toward him. “You have the audacity to act surprised when your actions have consequences.”

He’s in front of me in two strides, his hands gripping my upper arms. “Is that really what you think of me?” He nearly snarls, his eyes locked on mine. “That I’m some kind of monster, incapable of feeling anything real?”

I meet his gaze head-on, refusing to back down. “I don’t know what to think, Nico. I don’t know what’s real and what’s just another part of your twisted game.”

His fingers tighten on my arms, his eyes boring into mine. “This is real, Katerina. This thing between us, this…connection. It’s the realest thing I’ve ever felt.”

I try to pull away, but his grip is implacable. “How can I believe that? How can I trust anything you say, when all you’ve ever done is lie and manipulate?”

“I’ve never lied to you,” he growls, his face inches from mine. “I may not have told you everything, but I’ve never lied. And I’m not lying now.”

Rage bubbles up in me. How dare he? How dare he stand there and pretend that keeping things from me, that hiding the truth, isn’t the same as lying?

I lash out, aiming a kick at his shin. He dodges, his grip on my arms tightening to the point of pain.

“Lying by omission is still lying, you bastard,” I hiss, struggling against his hold. “You’ve been manipulating me from the start, playing your sick little games, and I’m done. I’m done with your secrets and your half-truths.”

I wrench one arm free, shoving hard at his chest. “Get off me. Get off me and get *out*.”

His eyes flash dangerously. “I’m not going anywhere, Katerina. Not until you listen to me.”

“Listen to you?” I laugh, the sound harsh and mocking. “Why should I listen to anything you say? You’re a liar, Nico. A liar and a monster.”

His jaw clenches, a muscle ticking in his cheek. “I’m not a monster. I’ve done monstrous things, yes, but that’s not all I am. That’s not all *this* is.”

“Then what is it?” I demand, my voice rising. “What is this, Nico? Because it looks like a twisted game of obsession and control.”

“It’s not a game!” he roars, his composure finally snapping. “It’s never *been* a game, Katerina! Not to me.”

He releases me abruptly, turning away and raking a hand through his hair.

I can see the tension in every line of his body, the barely leashed fury and frustration.

“You have no idea what you do to me,” he says, his voice low and raw. “No idea how much I’ve risked, how much I’ve sacrificed, just to keep you safe. To keep you with me.”

I stare at him, my heart pounding in my throat. “I never asked for that. I never asked for any of this.”

He whirls back to face me, his eyes blazing. “No, you didn’t. But here we are, Katerina. Here we are, and there’s no going back. Not for me. Not anymore.”

He advances on me, crowding me back against the wall. His hands come up to frame my face, his touch searing my skin. “I can’t change what I am, Katerina. I can’t change the things I’ve done. But I can’t let you go. I won’t.”

I stare up at him, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

There’s something wild and desperate and terrifyingly intense.

It sends a shiver down my spine, a heat curling in my belly.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “I can’t be what you want me to be.”

His thumb brushes over my lower lip, his gaze following the movement. “You already are, Katerina. You’re everything.”

Then, before I can respond, before I can even draw a breath, he’s kissing me. His mouth is hot and demanding on mine, his tongue sweeping in to claim me, to possess me.

I should push him away and tell him to get the hell away from me. But my body betrays me, melting into him, my hands fisting in his shirt to pull him closer.

He groans into the kiss, his hands sliding down my back to cup my ass, hauling me against him. I can feel him, hard and insistent, pressing into my stomach. The evidence of his need, his want, is unmistakable.

It's too much, too fast. I tear my mouth from his, panting harshly. "Nico, wait. We can't…we shouldn't…"

"We can," he murmurs, his lips trailing down my neck, his teeth grazing my pulse point. "And we should."

His hands are everywhere, tugging at my clothes with a desperate urgency. I hear tearing as Nico rips away my shirt, his palms hot and callused against my skin. I arch into his touch, my own hands fumbling with his belt, his zipper, seeking the hard heat of him.

He groans into my mouth as I wrap my fingers around his length, stroking him from base to tip.

He's so, so hard, pulsing with need.

I swirl my thumb over the sensitive head, smearing the bead of moisture that's gathered there, and he bucks into my touch with a guttural curse.

"Fuck, Katerina," he pants, tearing his mouth from mine to trail hot, open-mouthed kisses down my neck. He finds the sensitive spot just below my ear and sucks hard, his teeth scraping over my skin.

I know it will leave a mark, a brand of his possession, and the thought sends a dark thrill through me.

He yanks my bra down, exposing my breasts to his hungry gaze.

His hands cup the sensitive flesh, kneading and squeezing, his thumbs brushing over my nipples until they pebble and tighten.

I moan, arching into his touch, my head falling back against the wall.

He takes advantage of my exposed throat, nipping and sucking a path down to my collarbones.

His mouth is hot and wet on my skin, his tongue soothing the sting of his teeth.

I'm lost in a haze of sensation, my body thrumming with need.

He releases my breasts, his hands sliding down my sides to hook under my thighs.

In one smooth motion, he lifts me, pinning me to the wall with the weight of his body.

I wrap my legs around his waist instinctively, grinding my aching center against the rigid length of him.

We both groan at the contact, the layers of fabric between us an infuriating barrier.

He rocks into me, his hips setting a bruising pace, and I meet him thrust for thrust.

It’s not enough, the friction too rough, too dry, but I’m too far gone to care.

“More,” I pant, my nails digging into his shoulders. “Nico, please…”

He growls, a sound of pure male satisfaction, and reaches between us to yank my pants and underwear down my legs.

The cool air against my overheated skin makes me gasp, but it’s quickly replaced by the scorching heat of his touch.

His fingers find me slick and swollen, already so close to the edge just from this.

He strokes me with a kind of reverence, his touch light and teasing, a stark contrast to the rough desperation of moments before.

“So wet,” he murmurs, his voice a low rumble against my throat. “So perfect. Is this all for me, Katerina? Are you this ready, this desperate, just for me?”

“Yes,” I sob, grinding down onto his hand. “Only for you. Please, Nico, I need…”

I break off with a choked cry as he thrusts two fingers deep inside me, his thumb pressing hard against my clit.

He sets a punishing rhythm, pumping into me hard and fast, curling his fingers to hit that spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

I'm climbing higher and higher, my body wound tight as a bowstring.

I'm right on the edge, teetering on that knife's edge of pleasure and pain, when he suddenly withdraws his fingers.

I let out a wordless sound of protest, my hips chasing his touch, but then he's there, the blunt head of his cock pressing against my entrance.

He pauses for a moment, his forehead resting against mine, his breath hot and harsh against my lips.

"Look at me," he commands, his voice rough with strain. "I want to see your eyes when I take you, when I make you mine."

I force my eyes open, meeting his gaze.

The intensity I see there steals my breath, the raw hunger, the aching need.

It's a mirror of everything I'm feeling, everything I'm desperate for.

"Yours," I whisper. "Always yours."

And then he's surging forward, sheathing himself inside me in one hard, deep stroke.

I cry out at the sudden fullness, my nails scoring down his back, my heels digging into his ass to urge him deeper.

He sets a brutal pace, pounding into me with a force that borders on violence.

The wall scrapes against my back with every thrust, the pain a delicious counterpoint to the searing pleasure.

I'm lost in him, in the feeling of him moving inside me, claiming me, branding me as his own.

"Fuck, you feel so good," he pants, his face buried in the crook of my neck. "So fucking tight, so perfect. I could stay buried inside you forever."

His words, the raw possession in his voice, send me hurtling toward the edge.

My body tightens around him, my orgasm building like a tidal wave, unstoppable and all-consuming.

“Let go, Katerina,” he growls, his hand snaking between us to rub hard circles on my clit. “Come for me. Come on my cock like a good girl.”

His filthy words, the command in his tone, are my undoing. I shatter with a scream, my body convulsing around him as wave after wave of ecstasy crashes over me.

He follows me over the edge with a roar, his hips slamming into mine as he spills himself deep inside me.

We stay like that for a long moment, locked together, trembling in the aftermath.

His head rests against my shoulder, his harsh breaths gusting over my sweat-slicked skin. I run my hands through his hair, savoring the closeness, the connection.

Finally, with a groan, he pulls out of me, the sudden emptiness making me whimper.

He soothes me with a gentle kiss, his hands running over my body as if to reassure himself that I’m okay.

To my surprise, he doesn’t set me down. Instead, he wraps my legs more securely around his waist and carries me to the bed, never breaking our embrace.

The tenderness of the gesture, so at odds with the rough passion of moments before, makes my heart clench.

He lays me down on the soft sheets, his body covering mine. For a moment, he just looks at me, his eyes roaming over my face as if he’s trying to memorize every detail.

Then, slowly, reluctantly, he starts to pull away. I tighten my grip on him, a sudden panic seizing me at the thought of him leaving.

“Stay,” I whisper, hating the neediness in my voice but unable to hold it back. “Please, Nico. Stay with me.”

He hesitates, and I can see the conflict in his eyes. The desire to stay warring with the instinct to run, to protect himself from the vulnerability of this moment.

Then something in his expression softens. He nods, a small, almost imperceptible gesture, and settles back down beside me. He pulls me into his arms, my head resting on his chest, my leg thrown over his hip.

We lie there in silence for a long moment, just breathing each other in. His heartbeat is steady under my ear, a soothing rhythm that makes my eyelids grow heavy.

But even as my body relaxes, my mind is racing. Because I know, with a sudden, terrifying clarity, that this is a turning point. That if I don’t ask now, if I don’t seize this moment of raw, unguarded honesty, I might never get another chance.

“Nico,” I murmur, my fingers tracing idle patterns on his chest. “There’s so much I don’t know about you. So much you haven’t told me.”

I feel him tense beneath me, his breath hitching almost imperceptibly. For a moment, I think he’s going to pull away, to shut me out like he always does.

But then he sighs. A heavy, weary sound that seems to come from the depths of his soul.

“I know,” he says softly, his hand coming up to stroke my hair. “And I want to tell you, Katerina. I know I promised you the truth.”

I prop myself up on my elbow, looking down at him. “Then tell me. Right now, Nico. No more secrets, no more half-truths.”

He meets my gaze, and I see the conflict warring in him. “I will,” he promises, his voice rough with emotion. “But not tonight. In the morning, when we’re both clear-headed and can really talk…I’ll tell you everything.”

I search his face, looking for any hint of deception, any sign that this is just another manipulation. But all I see is sincerity, a desperate, aching need for

me to understand.

So I nod, settling back down into his embrace. “In the morning,” I agree, my eyes drifting shut. “I’ll hold you to that.”

His arms tighten around me, his lips pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. “I know you will,” he murmurs, a hint of amusement in his voice. “You never let me get away with anything, do you?”

“Never,” I mumble, already half-asleep. “Someone has to keep you in line.”

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16

NICO

I drift into consciousness slowly. The first thing I notice is the tickle of hair against my nose, the scent of jasmine and vanilla filling my lungs. The second is the soft, pliant body pressed against mine, all curves and sleepy heat.

My eyes flutter open, and I find myself staring at a tangle of chestnut waves, spilling across my pillow. For a moment, I'm disoriented, my mind still hazy with sleep and dreams.

Then it all comes rushing back. Last night. Katerina. Her telling me she's pregnant, our fight, sex against the wall. And then…*this*. Falling asleep with her in my arms, her head on my chest, her breath ghosting over my skin.

I've never shared my bed like this. Hell, I've never allowed myself the vulnerability of waking up with someone.

Sex, yes. Plenty of it.

But intimacy?

It's always been too dangerous, too much of a risk. I've bedded women then told them to leave.

But with Katerina, God, with her, I want it all. The good, the bad, the terrifying in-between. I want to wake up like this every morning, watch the

sunlight play over her skin and know that she's mine.

Mine. The word echoes through my mind. Mine to hold, mine to protect. Mine to love, in a way I've never loved anyone.

I take a moment to just drink her in, to memorize every detail. The dark fan of her lashes against her cheek, the delicate curve of her nose. The way her lips part slightly in sleep, soft and pink and utterly kissable.

My gaze drifts lower, over the elegant line of her neck, the swell of her breasts, the dip of her waist. It settles on her stomach, still flat and toned, no hint yet of the life growing inside.

Our *baby*. Our *child*.

The thought hits me like a punch to the gut, stealing the breath from my lungs. I've never considered fatherhood or imagined myself as a parent. In my world, in my life, it always seemed like an impossibility, a dream too far out of reach to even contemplate.

But now, faced with the reality of it, I find myself wanting it with a desperation that scares me. I want to see Katerina grow round with my child, to feel our baby kick beneath my palm. I want first steps and first words, skinned knees and bedtime stories. I want the mess and the chaos and the boundless, terrifying love of it all.

And I want it with her. *Only* her.

But what if she doesn't want it with me? It's like cold water is dumped on me. She's having my baby, yes, but that doesn't mean she's mine. Not in the way I want her to be, not in the way I need her to be.

She could still walk away and raise our child without me. With her family's resources, with the might of the Sokolov empire behind her, I might never see either of them again.

The idea of Maksim and Nikolai whisking her away, of losing her and our baby, it makes my blood run cold. Makes the beast inside me rear its head and roar its fury.

Like hell will anyone take them from me. Like hell will I let her go without a fight. I'll burn the whole fucking world down first, tear apart anyone who tries to—

Katerina stirs, her eyelids fluttering open. For a moment, she looks confused, her brow furrowing as she takes in her surroundings. Then her gaze lands on me, and I watch the memories play out across her face. Surprise, uncertainty, then a slow, creeping flush that stains her cheeks a delicate pink.

"Morning," I murmur, my voice still rough with sleep.

"Morning," she echoes, a shy smile tugging at her lips. "I wasn't expecting…" She trails off, gesturing vaguely at our entwined bodies. I can't help but grin, a rush of male satisfaction warming my blood.

"I'd say this was pretty inevitable, wouldn't you?" I tease, running my hand down the smooth expanse of her back. "Given the way you were all over me last night…"

She gasps, smacking me on the chest. "I was not! You…you…oh my god."

Her eyes go wide as she seems to register her own nakedness, the intimate press of skin on skin. With a mortified squeak, she dives under the covers, burrowing into the darkness.

I can't help but laugh, tugging playfully at the comforter to expose her bare back to me. I dart out of the way of her hands. "It's not like I haven't seen it all before, Katerina. In fact, I seem to remember paying very close attention to every…single…inch."

I punctuate each word with a kiss, trailing my lips down the line of her spine. She shivers, goosebumps rising on her skin.

"Nico!" Her voice is muffled by the blankets, but I can hear the laughter threaded through the scolding tone. "Stop that! And close your eyes, I need to find my clothes."

I oblige, rolling onto my back and slinging my arm over my face. "As the lady commands."

I hear the rustle of fabric, the soft pad of her feet on the carpet. It takes every ounce of my self-control not to peek and drink in the sight of her lovely body in the golden morning light. The urge to pull her back into bed, to lose myself in her warmth and softness, is almost overwhelming.

But I want her to trust me and feel safe with me. So I keep my eyes closed, even as every cell in my body screams for more of her.

“Okay, you can look now.”

I open my eyes to find her perched on the edge of the bed, wearing my shirt from last night. It swamps her smaller frame, falling to mid-thigh, and the sight of her in my clothes sends a possessive thrill through me.

“You know, as much as I appreciate you putting clothes on for my benefit, I think I prefer you without them,” I say, my voice dropping to a low rumble as I sit up, my eyes raking over her.

She flushes, but there’s a spark of challenge in her eyes. “Well, someone ripped my shirt last night, so I didn’t have much choice, did I?”

I grin, entirely unrepentant. “I don’t recall you complaining at the time. In fact, I distinctly remember you urging me on.”

Her blush deepens, but she lifts her chin defiantly. “Yes, well. Don’t let it go to your head. We have things to discuss, remember? Promises you made...”

The playful atmosphere evaporates, replaced by a tension that has nothing to do with desire. I sober, rubbing a hand over my face as I swing my legs over the side of the bed.

“I remember,” I say quietly, meeting her gaze. “And I meant what I said, Katerina. No more secrets, no more lies. It’s time for the rest of the truth.”

And so I tell her.

Everything.

The intercepts, Russo’s file on her, the danger that looms over both of us.

I watch her face as I speak, fascinated by the play of emotions across her features.

Shock, fear, anger, and determination flicker through her eyes, each emotion vivid and unguarded. In my world, people learn early to shutter their feelings, to present a mask of cool indifference no matter the situation.

But not Katerina.

She wears her heart on her sleeve, every thought and feeling broadcast for anyone to see when she's not in her serious doctor mode. It's one of the things I love most about her, that refreshing honesty, that inability to hide what she's thinking or feeling.

When I finish, she's quiet for a long moment, her eyes distant as she processes everything I've told her. I watch the thoughts chase themselves across her face, the emotions that tug at the corners of her mouth, and the furrow between her brows.

Finally, she speaks, her voice soft but steady. "How long have you known?"

I wince, but I don't look away. "A few days," I admit, my voice low. "I should have told you sooner, Katerina."

She nods, a sharp jerk of her chin. Then she's on her feet, pacing to the window, her arms wrapped tight around her middle. I watch her, drinking in the sight of her silhouetted against the bright morning sky.

The way the light catches in her hair, turns her skin to gold. The tense line of her shoulders, the way her fingers clench and unclench at her sides.

God, I love her. I love her with a depth and desperation that terrifies me. It makes me want to wrap her in my arms and never let go. The thought of losing her, of anything happening to her, it's a black pit of dread that yawns open inside me, threatening to swallow me whole.

Finally, she turns back to me, her eyes bright and fierce. "Everything you've done, the thirty days, bringing me here, the terms, was any of it to protect me, Nico? Or was it all just about Seraphina?"

I push to my feet, needing to move and pace. The question hangs heavy in the air between us, weighted with all the things we've left unsaid.

“At first, no,” I say roughly, forcing the words out past the tightness in my throat. “At first it was about Seraphina, about keeping her safe from the faction. But Katerina, it was always about you, too. From the moment you saved my life, you’ve been under my skin, in my blood.”

I rake a hand through my hair, struggling to find the right words, to make her understand. “Those two years, watching you, learning everything I could about you… It was an obsession, I can admit that. A need I couldn’t control or shake. I thought…” I shake my head. “I thought if I could just have you here, with me, even for a little while, maybe you could see me beyond what you thought you knew about me.”

I step closer, my hands coming up to frame her face and I stare into her wide eyes. “I never wanted to let you go, Katerina. Not then, not now. These thirty days? They were never about getting you out of my system. They were about showing you who I am, who I could be. For you. *With* you.”

She stares at me, her eyes searching mine. “And who are you, Nico?” Her hands come up to cover mine before she steps away. “Who are you, really? Because I feel like I don’t know you at all.”

I drop my hands, turning away from her, my jaw clenched tight. “You know me,” I say in a strained voice. “You know the parts that matter.”

“Do I?” She moves around me, forcing me to meet her gaze. “Because it feels like there’s a lot you’re not telling me. A lot you’re still holding back.”

I scowl, frustration and fear warring in my chest. “What do you want from me, Katerina? What do you want me to say?”

“The truth!” She throws her hands up, her eyes flashing. “I want the full truth, Nico. About how you feel, about what you want. About what I am to you.”

I stare at her, my heart pounding against my ribs. The truth. She wants the truth.

“What things, Nico? What do you feel for me?” she presses.

I look away, my jaw clenching. I'm not good at this, at putting my emotions into words. It feels too raw, too vulnerable, like exposing the soft underbelly of my soul.

But she deserves my soul. Even if it flays me open and changes everything between us.

"I love you," I say, my voice hoarse, heart pounding. "I love you so much it fucking *hurts*, Katerina. The thought of losing you, of anything happening to you, it kills me. It fucking *destroys* me."

Her eyes widen with shock. I watch as she processes my words, as the reality of what I'm saying sinks in.

She swallows heavily, her throat working. "Nico," she says weakly.

"I know," I cut her off, not wanting to hear her pity. "I know you probably don't feel the same way and that's okay. I've done really shitty things and loving me isn't easy. But you asked for the truth and I'm giving it to you—"

"Nico, stop." She crosses the room to me, her hands coming up to frame my face. Her touch is soft, soothing the ragged edges of my soul. "I—I don't know how I feel," she says slowly. "This, between us…it's complicated, especially now that I'm pregnant." Her face pinkens a little. "I have to reconcile the man I know you can be with the things you've done. The things you're still doing."

This fucking sucks to hear, but I don't pull away. I owe her this honesty, this unflinching assessment of who and what I am.

"But that doesn't mean I don't care for you," she continues, her thumb brushing over my cheekbone. "That doesn't mean there isn't…something here. I just—I need time, Nico. Time to sort through it all, to figure out what it means."

I nod, leaning into her touch despite myself. "I understand," I murmur, my eyes closing. "I'm not asking for anything, Katerina. I just needed you to know why I didn't tell you about the danger sooner."

She's quiet for a moment, her breath warm against my lips. "Were you trying to protect me, Nico? Or were you protecting yourself from the

conversation?”

I nearly stumble backward at her question. I open my eyes, meeting her gaze head-on.

“Both,” I admit. “I wanted to keep you safe and shield you from the threat. But I was also scared of losing you too. But yeah, a lot of it was to keep you safe.”

Katerina scowls at me, her eyes flashing with annoyance. “You need to stop doing that,” she snaps, crossing her arms over her chest. “Stop trying to protect me by keeping me in the dark. I’m not some fragile flower, Nico. I can handle myself.”

I nearly snort in disbelief. I know she’s strong, but the thought of her in danger, of any harm coming to her is like a red haze descending over my vision.

“I know you can,” I tell her. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

Katerina rolls her eyes. “I don’t need your protection, Nico.”

My brow furrows as I stare at her in disbelief. “Katerina,” I say slowly, as if explaining to a child. “You’re not part of this world. You don’t know the first thing about protecting yourself from the kinds of threats we’re facing.”

She jerks back as if I’ve slapped her, hurt and anger warring in her eyes. “How dare you,” she hisses, her hands balling into fists at her sides. “How dare you dismiss me like that, like I’m some naive little girl playing at being tough.”

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. “That’s not what I meant,” I say wearily, even though it kind of is. “I know what I’m doing, Katerina. This is my world, my life. And I’m telling you, you’re not ready for it.”

“And you think you are?” she demands, her voice rising. “You think just because you’re some big, bad mafia underboss, you’ve got it all figured out? That you can just handle everything on your own, no matter the cost?”

“Yes,” I snap, my own temper flaring. “That’s exactly what I think. Because that’s my *job*, Katerina. That’s what I was trained for, what I was born for. Protecting what’s mine, no matter the price. Just like it’s your cousin’s job too.”

She stares at me for a long moment, her chest heaving, her eyes bright. “And what about what I want?” she asks finally. “What about what *I* need?”

I close my eyes, a dull ache spreading through my chest. “What you need,” I say quietly, “is to stay alive. To stay safe. And I’m going to make sure that happens, whether you like it or not.”

There’s a beat of silence, a moment that stretches like an eternity. Then, without another word, she turns on her heel and walks out, slamming the door shut behind her.

Later that afternoon, I find myself locked in my study, pouring over maps and intel reports, trying to piece together a plan to neutralize Russo’s network. It’s a daunting task, a tangled web of alliances and enmities that span half the country.

I rub a hand over my face, feeling the beginnings of a headache throbbing at my temples. I know what I have to do, but the thought of it, of the deals I’ll have to strike and the favors I’ll have to call in, it makes my skin crawl.

Because I can’t do this alone. As much as I might want to, as much as every instinct in me rebels against the idea, I’m going to need help. I’m going to need resources, manpower, the kind of backing only the other families can provide.

The Sokolovs. The Brennans. The Santoros.

Fuck me.

Leo Santoro, Seraphina’s father. The man who would like nothing more than to put a bullet between my eyes for daring to lay a hand on his

precious daughter. And Cillian Brennan, her uncle, who no doubt shares that sentiment.

Then there's Maksim and Nikolai Sokolov. I think there probably would be a fight between Leo and the Sokolovs on who would want to tear me apart first. The irony isn't lost on me that the key to keeping Katerina and our child safe might just lie in the hands of the very people who hate me most in this world.

But what choice do I have? Russo's a threat to all of us. If I'm going to take him down and protect what's mine I can't afford to let silly grudges stand in my way.

At the end of the day, there's nothing I won't do to keep Katerina and our baby safe. No line I won't cross, no devil I won't bargain with.

I lean back in my chair, a humorless laugh escaping my lips. Brennan, Santoro, the Sokolovs…it's like a fucking cosmic joke at my expense. The four men who have the most reason to want me dead, and here I am, getting ready to play nice and ask for their help.

If there's a god out there, he must be laughing his ass off right about now.

But hey, at least I'll be in good company in hell. I'm pretty sure they've got a special place reserved for guys like me, right between the traitors and the hypocrites.

The thought brings a grim smile to my face. Time to start making calls.

Fuck my life.

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17

KATERINA

The days drag by in a haze of unease, the memory of my confrontation with Nico a constant weight in the pit of my stomach. I try to lose myself in the routine of caring for Seraphina, but even the simplest tasks are overlaid with a veneer of anxiety.

Seraphina, of course, is oblivious to the tension simmering beneath the surface. At two years old, she's a whirlwind of energy and mischief, her vivacious spirit and clever mind keeping me constantly on my toes.

"Kat, look!" she chirps, tugging on my hand to get my attention. "I drawed a picture!"

She thrusts a piece of paper at me, a riot of colorful scribbles and shapes. I can make out what might be a sun, a flower, and a stick figure with wild brown scribbles for hair.

"Is that me?" I ask, pointing to the figure. Seraphina nods, her little face glowing with pride.

"Uh-huh! That's Nico, and a doggy, and…"

She prattles on, pointing out each element of her masterpiece with an enthusiasm that makes my heart ache. I find myself wondering, not for the

first time, how Leo Santoro is going to handle this little spitfire when she's a teenager.

"He's gonna go gray before he's forty," I mutter under my breath, shaking my head. Seraphina looks up at me, her head cocked in curiosity. Sometimes I forget just how intelligent Seraphina is. Her language skills are *way* more advanced than any other toddler I know.

"Gray?" she asks in confusion, dark eyebrows furrowed.

"Nothing, girly pop," I say quickly, forcing a smile. "Your daddy's just in for a wild ride, that's all."

She accepts this with a solemn nod, as if she's understood what I said. Then she's off again, dashing across the room to grab another toy.

I watch her play, trying to ignore the nausea churning in my gut. Morning sickness has been hitting me hard the past few days, and the constant low-grade stress isn't helping.

How am I going to do this?

How am I going to be a mother when the thought of being responsible for another life terrifies me down to my bones?

Whenever I've had to deal with screaming children in the ER, I've been the first one to flee the room, leaving the comforting to the nurses and the parents.

The idea of being on the other side of that equation, of being the one who has to soothe and comfort and nurture, it makes my palms sweat and my heart race.

What am I supposed to do when the baby is screaming and I don't know how to soothe them? What if I fuck it up? What if the baby grows up and hates me?

But I don't have a choice. This baby—*Nico's* baby—is coming, whether I'm ready or not.

"Kat!" Seraphina's voice jolts me out of my spiraling thoughts.

She’s standing by the window, her little nose pressed against the glass, her riotous curls already falling out of the ponytail that Marta put them in. “Outside! I wanna go outside!”

I hesitate, glancing at the overcast sky. But the thought of spending another minute cooped up in this house, with nothing but my own fears for company is enough to propel me to my feet.

“Okay, Bee,” I say, using the nickname I’ve grown fond of. The way the nickname began is a bit ridiculous. She was Seraphina, then Seraphina Bumbalina, then Bumblebee, and now Bee. “Let’s go get some fresh air.”

She squeals in delight, already racing for the door. I follow at a more sedate pace, grabbing a light jacket and shoes on the way.

The grounds are quiet, the only sound the crunch of gravel beneath our feet and the distant chirping of birds. Seraphina takes off immediately, darting among the flower beds and shrubs with gleeful abandon.

I settle myself on a low stone wall, keeping a watchful eye on her antics. She’s chattering away to herself, making up stories and adventures starring her various stuffed animals.

For a moment, I let myself relax, breathing in the cool, crisp air. My mind wanders, as it so often does these days, to Nico.

It’s still hard for me to reconcile the man I’ve come to know with the infamous mafia underboss who kidnapped Seraphina and held me captive.

There’s a darkness in him, a ruthless edge that both terrifies and thrills me.

But there’s also a tenderness, a fierce protectiveness that makes my heart ache in ways I never thought possible.

I know I shouldn’t feel this way.

I know I should hate him for everything he’s done, but somehow, against all reason, I don’t. Somehow, in the midst of all this chaos and danger, I’ve found myself falling for him.

That terrifies me more than anything else.

How can I face my family, my friends, and tell them that I'm carrying the child of the man who tore their lives apart? How can I look Maksim and Nikolai in the eye, knowing the betrayal they'll see staring back at them?

My stomach lurches at the thought with a sickening wave of guilt and fear. The Bratva may not be my world, but Maksim and Nikolai…they're all I have left. The only family I can claim as my own.

Will they turn their backs on me, once they know the truth? Will I lose them, just like I've lost so much else? And what about Aria? Danny? The new baby that must have arrived by now? A niece or nephew I may never get to meet, if Maksim decides I'm no longer welcome in their lives.

The thought is like a knife to my heart, a pain so sharp and sudden that it steals my breath. I close my eyes against the sting of tears, trying to will away the ache in my chest.

But then, slowly, an uneasiness starts to prickle at the back of my neck. There's a sense of wrongness, of something out of place.

My eyes fly open, scanning the perimeter of the garden with a growing sense of dread. It takes me a moment to realize what's missing.

The guard. The one who's always stationed at the entrance, a silent, looming presence.

He's gone.

My heart starts to pound, a sickening lurch in my chest. I stand up, my eyes frantically searching for Seraphina.

"Seraphina!" I call, trying to keep my voice calm and level despite the fear clawing at my throat. "Come here, Bee. It's time to go inside."

But she's not listening, too caught up in her imaginary world to heed the urgency in my tone. She darts behind a tall hedge, her giggles floating back to me on the breeze.

"Catch me, Kat!" she squeals, her little feet pattering on the gravel path.

I force a smile, even as my heart pounds a sickening rhythm in my chest. "Okay, Bee," I say, playing along. "I'm coming to get you!"

I start toward the hedge, my steps measured and careful. I don’t want to frighten her, and I don’t want her to realize that this is anything more than a game. But with every step, the sense of wrongness grows, a prickling unease that settles in the pit of my stomach. The grounds are too quiet, the only sound is the distant chirping of birds and the rasp of my own breath in my lungs.

Then I hear it. A shout, coming from the direction of the main gate. Then another, and another, the voices harsh and angry.

My blood runs cold, a sickening lurch of fear. I freeze, straining my ears, trying to make out the words.

“…breach in the perimeter…”

“…multiple hostiles…”

“…find the girl!”

Oh god. Oh god, no.

They’re here. They’ve found us.

I break into a run, my heart slamming against my ribs. “Seraphina!” I scream, abandoning any pretense of calm. “Seraphina, come here *now*!”

But she’s still giggling, darting deeper into the maze of hedges. She thinks it’s all part of the game. She doesn’t know. She doesn’t understand.

I run faster, my lungs burning and my legs aching. I round a corner, then another, the twists and turns of the path seeming to mock me with every step.

And then I hear it. The roar of an engine, growing louder by the second. The squeal of tires on gravel, the slam of car doors.

They’re in the garden. They’re *here*.

“Seraphina!” I scream again, my voice cracking with desperation. “Baby, *please*! We have to go inside!”

I round another corner, my breath coming in sharp, painful gasps. There she is, crouched behind a rose bush, her little face alight with mischief.

“You finded me!” she crows, leaping to her feet. “Your turn!”

I don’t answer. I just snatch her up into my arms and start running again, back toward the house. The faint sounds of shouting get louder. Seraphina starts to squirm in my arms, her playful mood shifting to confusion and fear.

“Kat?” she whimpers, her little hands clutching at my shirt. “What’s wrong? I scared.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” I pant, even though it’s the furthest thing from the truth. “We’re just…we’re playing a new game now, okay? We have to see who can get inside the fastest.”

I feel her nod against my shoulder, her tiny body trembling. “Okay,” she whispers, her voice small and frightened. “I fastest, Kat.”

I tighten my grip on her, blinking back the tears that burn my eyes. “I know you are, baby,” I murmur, pressing a fierce kiss to her temple. “I know you are.”

Then I’m running again, the house looming up ahead of us like a beacon of safety. If I can just get her inside, if I can just get her to the panic room…

But even as the thought crosses my mind, I hear it. The crack of gunfire, splitting the air like a thunderbolt.

Seraphina screams, her cry of terror piercing my heart. I stumble, nearly losing my footing on the gravel path.

But I can’t stop. I can’t falter. I have to get Seraphina inside. I have to keep her *safe*.

But even as I’m racing toward the house, I see them. Men, scaling the east wall like it’s nothing, dropping into the garden with a fluid grace that speaks of training and purpose.

They’re not Nico’s men, I realize with horror. They’re not here to protect us.

I burst through the front door, startling Marta, Seraphina’s nanny, from her panic in the foyer as she searches for us. She takes one look at my face, at the way I’m clutching Seraphina, and leaps to her feet.

“Take her,” I gasp, practically throwing Seraphina into her arms. “Take her to the panic room and lock the door. Don’t open it for anyone except Nico, understand?”

She nods, her face pale but determined. Seraphina starts to wail, her little hands reaching for me, but I force myself to step back.

“Kat! No, Kat! Come back!”

“I have to, baby,” I choke out, tears burning my eyes. “I have to keep you safe. Now be a good girl and go with Marta, okay? I’ll see you soon.”

I press a fierce kiss to her forehead, breathing in the sweet smell of her hair. Then I’m turning, running back out into the chaos.

I can hear Seraphina screaming for me, the sound like a knife to my heart. But I keep going. I need to lead the men away from the house. Away from her.

I dart toward the garden maze, the towering hedges looming up around me like the walls of a prison. My lungs are on fire, my legs screaming with every pounding step, but I don’t dare slow down. I can’t. Not with Seraphina’s life on the line.

I chance a glance over my shoulder, catching a glimpse of the men pouring into the garden. They’re fanning out, their eyes hard and their weapons drawn, ready to hunt me down like an animal.

But I’m not going to make it easy for them.

“Hey, assholes!” I scream, my voice ragged. I gesture to myself, thankful I wore leggings and a tank top and my running shoes. Sometimes wearing athleisure all the time pays off. “You want me? Come and get me!”

Then I’m off, tearing through the maze like the hounds of hell are on my heels. The brambles snag at my clothes, thorny fingers raking across my skin, but I barely feel the sting. All I can focus on is the pounding of my heart, the burn of the air in my lungs, the desperate need to keep moving, to stay one step ahead.

I take a sharp left, then a right, then another left, trying to lose myself in the twists and turns. But I can hear them behind me, their shouts and curses getting closer by the second. They're gaining on me, the thud of their boots echoing off the gravel like a drumbeat of doom.

I think of Nikolai, of Maksim, of the lessons they drilled into me over the years, even when I didn't want any of them. They had insisted I needed them. "One day," Kolya had told me after I had told him for the fiftieth time that I didn't need any lessons, "you'll thank me for this."

Yeah, that moment has arrived. Thank you, Kolya. Thank you, Maksim. Hopefully one day I'll be able to thank you for that.

Nikolai had taught me how to disappear in a crowd, how to blend into the shadows and become just another face in the throng. "The key is to move with purpose," he had told me, after he got it into his head that I was in danger for insert-X-reason-here. "Act like you belong, like you have somewhere to be. Don't look back, don't hesitate. Just keep moving."

I channel that now, letting my feet carry me forward with a determined stride, even as my heart pounds a frantic rhythm in my chest. I keep my head down, my eyes focused on the path ahead, trusting my peripheral vision to warn me of any threats.

Maksim's lessons echo in my mind, too.

Although he isn't as paranoid as Nikolai, he still thought it was necessary to teach me how to defend myself.

We spent hours in the gym as he taught me how to fall, roll, and how to use an opponent's momentum against them. "Stay low," he always said, his hands firm on my shoulders as he guided me through the motions when I would whine that I didn't want to do this anymore. "Keep your center of gravity close to the ground. And never, *ever* stop moving."

Thank you, Maks, I think to myself as I duck and weave through the maze like a rabbit through the underbrush. I stay crouched, my knees bent and my arms loose at my sides, ready to pivot or lunge at a moment's notice.

When I reach a fork in the path, I don't hesitate. "*When in doubt, go left,*" Kolya had told me once, a wry smile tugging at his lips. "*Most people*

instinctively turn right. Be unpredictable."

I veer left, my feet skidding on the gravel as I make the sharp turn. I can hear the shouts of the men behind me, as they hurtle to the right, their footsteps getting fainter. But I don't let myself look back or try to confirm if any of them followed me to the left.

Instead, I focus on my breathing, on the burn of the air in my lungs and the pounding of my heart in my ears. I think of Maksim's training, the endless hours of cardio and endurance drills. *"Your body is a machine,"* he had said. *"Push it to the limit, and then push it some more. You're stronger than you know."*

I cling to that now, letting the memory of his faith in me fuel my aching muscles and my flagging spirits. I am strong. I am a survivor. And I will *not* let them take me without a fight.

Up ahead, I see a low hedge, the branches dense and tangled. I don't break stride or let myself hesitate. *Don't disappoint Kolya*, my brain screams.

I gather myself, my thighs tensing as I prepare to spring. Then I'm launching myself into the air, my hands reaching out to grab the top of the hedge and my legs tucking up beneath me.

For a moment, I'm flying, suspended in the space between heartbeats.

Then I'm falling, my body twisting automatically to absorb the impact. I land hard on the other side, my ankle rolling painfully as it takes my weight.

I bite back a cry, my vision swimming with sudden tears. But I can't stop. I can't let the pain slow me down.

I just have to last long enough for Nico to come. Just a little more time. Nico's face floods my mind with that fierce, protective love that blazes in his eyes whenever he looks at me. I can almost feel his arms around me, strong and safe.

He'll come for me. I know he will. He'll move heaven and earth to find me and bring me home.

So I grit my teeth and push myself back to my feet, ignoring the white-hot lance of agony that shoots up my leg. I take a deep breath, letting Maksim's voice fill my head once more.

"*Pain is temporary*," he told me once, as I struggled to catch my breath after a particularly brutal sparring session. *"It's just a signal from your body. Acknowledge it, and then let it go. Focus on the goal, on what matters most."*

What matters most. Seraphina. Nico. Our baby. My family.

I let that thought fill me up, let it drown out the pain and the fear and the overwhelming exhaustion. I'm moving again, running faster, harder, my legs pumping and my heart pounding as I fly through the maze like a woman possessed.

I will not let them catch me. I will not let them win.

I am Katerina Sokolov, and I will not be broken.

Not now. Not ever.

I round another corner, my lungs burning and my legs shaking with fatigue. But what I see next makes me nearly scream with horror.

A dead end. A solid wall of hedges, too high to climb and too thick to break through.

No. No, no, *no*.

I skid to a halt, my heart in my throat and my blood turning to ice in my veins. This can't be happening. I can't be trapped, not now, not when I'm so close.

I spin around, desperately searching for another way out. But there is none. Just the path I came from, and the sound of footsteps getting closer by the second.

Then someone's there, filling the entrance to the dead end. He's huge, easily six and a half feet tall, with arms the size of tree trunks and a face that looks like it was carved from granite.

He grins at me, a slow, cruel smile that makes my stomach churn with fear and revulsion. “End of the line, princess,” he drawls. “Time to stop running.”

I back away, my hands curling into fists at my sides. I may be trapped, but I’m not helpless. Nikolai and Maksim taught me how to fight, how to use an opponent’s size and strength against them.

I just have to stay calm and focused. Wait for an opening then strike hard and fast.

“Come any closer and I’ll scream,” I warn him, my voice steady despite the terror clawing at my throat. “I’ll bring the whole fucking house down on your head.”

He laughs, a harsh, ugly sound that makes my skin crawl. “Go ahead, sweetheart. Scream all you want. No one’s coming to save you.”

He takes a step forward, his hands flexing at his sides like he’s imagining how it will feel to wrap them around my neck. I tense, every muscle in my body coiled and ready to spring.

“Last chance,” he says, his eyes glittering with feral delight. “Come quietly, and maybe I won’t hurt you too bad.”

I bare my teeth in a snarl, channeling every ounce of Sokolov steel in my veins. “Fuck you,” I hiss, then I’m launching myself at him with a raw, primal scream.

I aim low, just like Maksim taught me, driving my shoulder into his gut and slamming my knee up between his legs with all the force I can muster. He grunts in pain, doubling over, and for a moment, I think I’ve done it, I’ve taken him down.

But his hand is closing around my arm, his fingers digging into my flesh like iron bands. He yanks me toward him, spinning me around and slamming me face-first into the hedge.

I taste blood, feel the sharp sting of thorns tearing at my skin. But I don’t stop fighting, don’t stop struggling. I claw at his eyes, his face, anything I can reach.

He swears, his grip loosening for a split second and I take my chance, wrenching myself free and spinning around to face him.

But he’s too fast, too strong. His fist catches me in the jaw, a brutal, backhanded blow that snaps my head to the side and sends me staggering. I reel, my vision blurring and my ears ringing. I try to blink away the stars, to focus through the pain, but it’s too much, too fast.

He lunges for me again, his hands outstretched like claws. I try to dodge, to slip past him, but my movements are sluggish and uncoordinated.

His fingers close around my arm once more, yanking me toward him with a vicious jerk. I scream, thrashing and kicking with every ounce of strength I have left. I claw at his face, my nails raking down his cheek, drawing blood. But he barely seems to feel it.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” the man says, not at all sounding sorry. “Boss’s orders.”

In slow motion, I see his fist, hurtling toward my face. Pain explodes behind my eyes, a white-hot burst that sends me spiraling. I’m falling, the world tilting and spinning around me. I try to catch myself, but my limbs won’t obey or do anything but twitch and shudder uselessly.

The last thing I see before the darkness takes me is his face, looming over me, a cell phone already at his ear. His lips are moving, forming words, but I can’t hear them. I squint, watching as his mouth forms the word…*Luca*.

The void rushes up to claim me, a black tide of unconsciousness that drags me under and pulls me down, down, down into the depths of oblivion. I try to cling to something, to anything that might tether me to the waking world. But there’s no anchor. No lifeline.

Just the fading echoes of my own thoughts, the whispered fragments of the names that mean everything to me.

Seraphina. Nico.

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I failed you. I failed us all.

Then even that is gone, swallowed up by the endless, aching dark.

And I know no more.

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18

LUCA

I’m in my office, my phone pressed to my ear, listening to Luca’s voicemail for the third fucking time this morning. The man’s been dodging my calls all day, always with some excuse about meetings or shipments or whatever other bullshit he thinks will placate me.

It won’t. Not today. Not with Russo closing in. I need Luca on his A-game. He needs to be ready to move at a moment’s notice.

But apparently, that’s too much to fucking ask.

I’m just about to hang up and hurl my phone across the room when the alarms start blaring through the compound. For a split second, I’m frozen, my mind refusing to process what my ears are telling me. This can’t be happening. It has to be a malfunction, a fucking glitch in the system.

But reality crashes over me like a tidal wave. This is real. This is *happening*.

We’re under attack.

I’m on my feet and running before I’ve fully formed the thought, my heart slamming against my ribs and blood roaring in my ears. The worst-case scenarios flood my mind as I sprint through the halls, each one more horrific than the last.

Intruders on the grounds. Armed and ruthless, cutting through my defenses like they're made of fucking tissue paper. And if they're here, if they've breached the perimeter...

Katerina. Oh god, *Katerina*.

A white-hot blade of panic sears through me and steals the breath from my lungs. If they find her, if they get to her before I do…

I can't even finish the thought. I can't let myself imagine the unimaginable.

I'm shouting orders as I run, my voice raw and hoarse with an emotion I can barely recognize as my own. "Lock down the estate! I want every available man on the grounds, now! And someone find Katerina Sokolov, goddammit!"

But even as the words leave my lips, I know. I can feel it, a cold, leaden weight in the pit of my stomach.

Something's wrong. Something's very, *very* wrong.

For the alarms to be blaring like this, it means the unthinkable has happened. There's a real threat, a genuine breach of our defenses.

And if that's the case, if there are intruders on the grounds…

I need to find Katerina and make sure she's safe.

She has to be here somewhere. In the house, in her room, maybe already hunkered down in the safe room with Seraphina. She's smart, she's resourceful.

But even as I cling to that fragile reassurance, I can feel the icy fingers of dread clawing at my spine. Because if she is here, if she is safe…

I burst into the foyer just as Seraphina's nanny, Marta, comes stumbling in from the opposite direction, the little girl wailing in her arms. Her face is ashen, her eyes wide and wild with terror, and for a moment, I can't breathe because Katerina isn't there with them. And Katerina wouldn't leave Seraphina for anything.

No. No, no, *no*.

“Where is she?” I demand, my hands clenching into fists at my sides even though I want to shake Marta. “Where’s Katerina?”

Marta shakes her head, tears streaming down her face. “I don’t...I don’t know,” she sobs, her voice breaking. “She—she told me to take Seraphina and get her to the safe room. Then she ran out. Into the gardens.”

My blood turns to ice in my veins. The *gardens*. Katerina is alone. Unprotected.

My feet pound against the marble as I race for the back of the house. I can hear my men behind me, shouting and cursing, the sharp click of rounds being chambered and safeties being flicked off.

But it’s all distant and muffled, like I’m hearing it from underwater.

All I can focus on is the pounding of my own heart, the sickening surge of adrenaline that floods my system and sets every nerve alight with dread.

I have to find her.

I have to get to her before…

I slam through the patio doors, the sunlight hitting me.

For a moment, I’m blinded, my eyes struggling to adjust to the sudden brightness.

Then I see it.

The black SUV, tearing across the south lawn, gravel spraying from beneath its tires.

It’s moving fast, too fast, and even from here I can see the glint of gunmetal through the open windows.

They have her. They have Katerina.

The realization drives the air from my lungs in a ragged, agonized gasp.

For a split second, I’m paralyzed by a fear so profound it borders on madness.

The rage hits, a white-hot blast of fury that sears through my veins like molten lava.

It bursts from my throat in a roar that hardly sounds human, a sound of such primal, animalistic anguish that it scarcely seems possible it came from me.

My feet fly over the grass, my lungs burning and my heart slamming against my ribs. I can hear the shouts of my men behind me, the pounding of their own footsteps as they race to catch up.

But it's too late. The SUV is already tearing through the front gates, leaving nothing but a cloud of dust and the acrid stench of burning rubber in its wake.

They're gone. She's gone.

I stumble to a halt, my chest heaving and my hands shaking.

I can feel the scream building in my throat again. But before it can tear free, there's a rough hand on my shoulder.

I spin, my fist already cocked back to strike, and find myself face to face with my head of security.

"Report," I snarl, the word tasting like blood and bile on my tongue. "What the fuck happened?"

He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "Four assailants, heavily armed. They breached the perimeter on the south wall and made straight for the gardens. We engaged, but…"

He hesitates, his eyes flicking away from mine. I know what he's going to say before the words even leave his lips.

"They took her, boss. Dr. Sokolov. We found signs of a struggle in the maze, blood on the gravel. They must have overwhelmed her, dragged her out…"

The rest of his words fade into a dull, distant buzz. Blood on the gravel. Signs of a struggle.

God, what have they done to her?

The rage that swells up in me is like nothing I've ever felt before.

It's a living, breathing thing, a beast that claws at my insides and howls for vengeance.

It wants blood, wants to rend and tear and destroy until the world is painted red with the suffering of those who dared to touch what's mine.

But even as it surges through me, hot and hungry and all-consuming, there's something else beneath it.

Something colder, sharper, more insidious.

Fear. Bone-deep, soul-searing *fear*.

This isn't just anyone they've taken. This is Katerina. *My* Katerina. The woman who holds my heart in her hands, the mother of my unborn child.

If I lose her…if they hurt her…

No. I won't let myself finish the thought.

I have to find her. I have to get her back.

No matter the cost.

It's been hours since they took her, since I watched that black SUV tear out of my driveway and disappear.

Hours of pacing, of barking orders, of turning over every fucking stone in this city to find her.

But it's nowhere near enough.

Every minute that ticks by is another minute she's out there, alone and hurt and at the mercy of men who would break her just to break me.

Every second is an eternity, a fucking symphony of all my worst fears come to life.

I can’t do this. I can’t just sit here uselessly, while the woman I love is in the hands of my worst enemy. I won’t survive it. Not if I lose her. Not like this. I need help. I need resources, connections, the kind of firepower and influence that can shake the very foundations of this city until Katerina falls out.

My hands clench into fists. As much as I hate to admit it, I need the Sokolovs.

My hand is steady as I dial the number, even as my heart pounds a sickening rhythm against my ribs. It rings once, twice, and then the line clicks open.

“Nico Barone.” Nikolai’s voice is as cold as I remember. “You have ten seconds to tell me why the fuck you’re calling before I hang up.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the words I never wanted to say. “It’s Katerina,” I bite out. “She’s been taken.”

Silence. A beat, two, stretching out like an eternity.

“What the fuck did you just say?” Maksim’s voice is low and deadly, but I’m not surprised to hear him. Nikolai must have patched him in when he saw my name pop up.

I close my eyes, the image of Katerina’s face swimming behind my lids. Her smile, her laugh, the way her eyes flash with challenge and fire...

“Marco Russo took her right off my fucking estate. They breached the perimeter, stormed the gardens—”

“What the hell was she doing on your estate in the first place?” Nikolai demands, his voice rising with barely contained fury. “We’ve been looking for her and Seraphina—” There’s a pause as the pieces finally click into place and I wait for the explosion. It doesn’t take long.

“You took Seraphina!” Nikolai roars as I pull the phone away from my ear. “You’re the one who only wanted to negotiate with Katerina! It was *you*! Now you’re telling me they were with you this whole time?”

Well yes, that's exactly what it is. I took them and hid them away. I played my games, thinking I was invincible. That no one would find me and I would get my thirty days with my angel.

And now Katerina is paying the price.

"I did what I had to do," I snap, my patience fraying under the weight of their accusations. "I'm not going to apologize for what I did. I had my reasons for taking Seraphina Santoro and Katerina."

"By kidnapping a child?" Maksim cuts in, his voice brittle. "By using an innocent girl as a bargaining chip?"

I feel a surge of irritation rush under my skin. We don't have fucking *time* for this. We don't have the luxury of debating ethics and morality while Katerina is out there, alone and hurt and in the hands of a man who wants to hurt me.

"Listen to me very carefully, Maksim," I say, my voice low and dangerous. "I did what I needed to do. Whether you want to believe me or not, *I* kept Seraphina from certain death—"

"You did no such thing—" Nikolai says loudly but I interrupt him, leaning forward, hands braced on my desk like I can will them to understand through sheer force of intent.

"I'm not going to stand here and justify myself to you," I say even louder to talk over Nikolai. "Not now, not with Katerina's life on the line. So you can either get on board, or you can get the fuck out of my way."

"Where's Seraphina?" Nikolai asks.

"Seraphina is safe," I say, annoyed that we're focusing on the child when Katerina is more important. "She's here with me and under guard. No one will touch her."

"How can we trust that?" Maksim butts in. "You just said Katerina was taken by a Marco Russo. Tell me exactly what happened."

"Russo took her," I say, the words hard to get out. "She got Seraphina to safety, but instead of running inside the house she led them away."

“That sounds like Kat,” Maksim mutters but Nikolai makes a harsh sound to cut off his brother.

“Continue, Barone,” Nikolai says in a clipped voice.

“They overpowered her,” I continue, feeling ill at the thought of someone hitting Katerina. “They knocked her out and dragged her into a car.”

I rake a hand through my hair, the memory of that black SUV tearing across the lawn searing behind my eyes. The scream of the tires, the plume of dust and gravel, the sickening lurch of helplessness as I watched it disappear…

“What have you done to try and find her?” Nikolai demands. “How long ago was she taken?”

“I’ve done every fucking thing I can to find her since she was taken four hours ago,” I shoot back, irritated that Nikolai seems to think I’ve just been sitting here twiddling my fucking thumbs. “I’ve turned over every stone, called in every favor, but Russo’s gone to ground. I don’t know where he’s taken her.”

The silence that follows is deafening, a yawning void that stretches out like a chasm between us.

“Four…*hours*?” Maksim asks faintly. “Our cousin has been missing for four *fucking* hours and *now* you call us?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Because I don’t know what else to do.”

I can almost hear the gears turning in their heads, the icy calculation as they process the information. Nikolai, his mind already whirring with strategies and contingencies, the cold, ruthless machinery of a man who’s spent a lifetime in this game. And Maksim, the barely leashed violence simmering beneath his skin, the coiled tension of a predator waiting to strike.

Maksim’s voice cuts through the silence. “If she is harmed,” he says, his voice nearly trembling with rage, “if they lay a single finger on her—you and Russo will end the same way, Barone.”

I close my eyes, the image of Katerina’s face swimming behind my lids. Her beautiful smile, the way she looks at me like I’m something more than

the monster I know myself to be.

“Agreed,” I say because it’s true. If something has happened to my love, I won’t be able to survive. I will welcome death. “But I need your help, Maksim. I need your resources, Nikolai. Your connections. I can’t…I can’t do this alone.”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the words I never wanted to say. It’s an admission of weakness, of vulnerability, in front of the men who might rival me in ruthlessness and cunning. “Are you in? Will you help me bring her home?”

There’s another pause. I can hear the muffled sound of voices in the background, the rapid-fire exchange of words in Russian.

Nikolai's voice returns. “We’re in, Barone. Give us a few hours. We’ll find her.”

The line goes dead. For a long moment, I just stand there, the phone pressed to my ear, my eyes staring sightlessly out the window.

The grounds are quiet now, the chaos of the breach replaced by an eerie, unnatural stillness.

The sun is setting, painting the sky in shades of red like blood and fire, a mocking echo of the fury that burns in my veins.

We’ll find her. We *have* to find her.

Because if we don’t...if I lose her...

I don’t know how I’ll survive it. I don’t know how I’ll keep breathing, keep putting one foot in front of the other, in a world without her in it.

She’s everything. My heart, my soul, the very fucking air in my lungs.

And I will burn the world to ash before I let her go.

So I stand there, my hands clenched into fists at my sides, my eyes fixed on the horizon like I can will her back to me through sheer desperation alone.

The minutes tick by, each one a lifetime of agony and uncertainty. I’m back in my study, going over all the information I have while directing my men,

my mind churning with worst-case scenarios and sickening possibilities.

They have her. They have Katerina.

The thought is unbearable but as I watch the sun sink below the treeline, the shadows lengthening, I hope beyond hope that the next time my phone rings, we'll have finally found her.

That she's coming home.

To me.

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19

KATERINA

The lights are blinding, the sterile white of the OR walls closing in around me.

The patient lies on the table, face obscured by the surgical drape, a still, silent form amidst the chaos.

I look down at my hands, at the scalpel gripped between my gloved fingers.

The blade is slick with blood, the crimson stain spreading across the pristine blue of my gown. There's so much of it, too much. It's everywhere, coating the instruments, the drapes, the floor, and me.

I can't remember how I got here. How did I get to this moment? But I know, with a bone-deep, sickening certainty, that I'm losing them.

Despite all my skills, all my training, the life beneath my hands is slipping away.

The monitors scream a cacophony of alarms and warning tones. The patient's vitals are crashing, their heartbeat a frantic, erratic rhythm that I can feel beneath my fingertips.

I call out for help desperately, my voice echoing off the walls of the empty room.

But no one comes. I’m alone, just me and this faceless, dying patient. The weight of their life, the responsibility, it crashes over me like a tidal wave, threatening to pull me under.

I work frantically, my hands moving on autopilot, attempting procedures I can barely remember the names of. Chest compressions, intubation, defibrillation and each action is more desperate than the last, each one failing to stem the inexorable tide of death.

The blood keeps coming, welling up from some unseen wound, some damage I can’t find. It coats my hands and arms, warm and slick and endless. The coppery scent of it fills my nostrils, my lungs, until I’m choking on it, drowning in it.

Then, above the screaming of the monitors, above the pounding of my own heart, I hear it. A cold and cruel laugh, echoing through the room like a death knell.

I look up, my blood-soaked hands frozen in mid-air. There, across the operating table, stands a figure. They’re dressed all in black, face hidden in shadow. But I can feel their eyes on me, and can feel the weight of their malevolent gaze.

They speak, their voice a rasping whisper that cuts through the chaos like a blade.

“You can’t save them, Doctor. You can’t save any of them.”

I open my mouth to respond, but the words won’t come. They stick in my throat, choking me, as the figure begins to move. It circles the table, drawing closer with each measured step.

“You’re not good enough. You’re not strong enough. You’re going to fail, just like you always do.”

I shake my head, tears blurring my vision. I try to run, but I’m frozen, paralyzed by a terror that goes beyond reason.

The figure looms over me now, their face inches from mine. Even though I can’t see their features, I know they’re smiling and it’s a cruel, twisted thing, full of malice and hunger.

The figure reaches out, their cold hand closing around my throat, squeezing, cutting off my air. I can feel the strength going out of me, I can feel the darkness closing in…

I jolt awake, the dream shattering around me, only to be plunged into a reality that's so much worse. Pain hits me like a tidal wave. My head feels like it's been cleaved in two, a sickening, pulsing throb emanating from behind my right ear. Even the dim light of wherever I am sends spikes of agony lancing through my skull, stabbing at my eyes.

Nausea surges up my throat, hot and acrid. *Concussion*, some distant, clinical part of my brain supplies. *Blunt force trauma*. The diagnosis would be almost laughable in its uselessness, if the situation wasn't so terrifyingly far from funny.

I try to move, but I can't. I look down and gasp in horror. My wrists and ankles are bound. I'm flat on my back, strapped to a narrow bed, and the restraints—holy *shit*, I recognize them.

They're padded cuffs, the kind we use on combative patients in the ER. The irony of that familiarity, here and now, is a horror all its own.

I pull at the restraints, testing them. They don't give even an inch. I pull harder, thrashing now, my heart slamming against my ribs in a frantic, desperate rhythm, but the movement sends fresh waves of pain crashing through my skull, my vision swimming with black spots. I have to stop and breathe through it.

My breaths are shallow and ragged, my mouth filling with saliva. Fuck me, I'm going to be sick.

My eyes dart around the room. I don't remember how I got here. The last thing I remember is the shoving Seraphina to Marta and running through the gardens. I remember the evil look on that man's face right before he hit me. Then nothing. A blank, a terrifying void where something was done to me. To my head.

I have no idea how long I've been gone, and I certainly have no idea where I am or if Seraphina is safe.

The not knowing, the helplessness is a separate agony, layered on top of the fear and the pain.

My hand curls instinctively toward my stomach toward the tiny, fragile life growing inside me.

But I can’t reach and despair settles over me. I can’t protect them. I can’t do anything.

The tears come then, hot and blinding, tracking sideways into my hair at that small failure. I can’t even wipe them away because of my bound hands. I can’t even hide this moment of weakness from whoever might be watching. I bite my lip, trying to stifle my sobs.

Suddenly, the lock clicks and I whip my head around, hissing at the pain that lances through my head. I go rigid, my breath catching in my throat.

A strange man enters, almost casual in his movements. He’s not tall or physically imposing, but there’s something about his presence that fills the space that seems to suck the air from the room.

He pulls a chair up to my bedside, the metal legs scraping against the concrete floor.

The sound sets my teeth on edge and a shiver races down my spine.

He sits, crossing one leg over the other, his hands folded neatly in his lap.

I force myself to look at him and take in the details. Mid-forties, I’d guess, with a face that’s almost aggressively average.

Brown hair, brown eyes, and forgettable features. He’s someone who could blend into any crowd and disappear without a trace.

But his eyes…

I swallow heavily, feeling fear climb through me. There’s nothing average about his eyes.

They’re cold and flat, utterly devoid of warmth or empathy.

They sweep over me calculatingly like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to solve. Or a lab rat he’s about to dissect.

“Dr. Katerina Sokolov,” he says calmly, almost pleasantly as if we’re meeting over coffee, not in this nightmare of a room. “I’ve been looking forward to this conversation for quite some time.”

I swallow hard, trying to find my voice. “W-Who are you?” I rasp, my voice hoarse and scratchy. “What do you want from me?”

He smiles, but it’s a thin, humorless stretch of his lips. “My name is Marco Russo. And as for what I want, well…” He shrugs. “That’s a bit of a complex question, isn’t it?”

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, gaze boring into mine. “But let’s start with the simple answer. I want *you*, Dr. Sokolov. I want you to be the instrument of my ascension, the key that unlocks the future I’ve been building toward for years.”

I stare at him, my heart pounding in my throat. “I don’t…I don’t understand. I’m just a doctor. I’m not a part of your world.”

Russo laughs, and it’s a quiet, chilling sound that makes the hairs on the back of my neck rise. “Oh, but you are, Katerina—can I call you Katerina? Or would you prefer Kat?”

I startle at that and the humorless smile on his face grows. “Yes, *Dr.* Sokolov, I know a lot about you. You’ve been a part of this since the moment you saved Nico Barone’s life and he saw something he couldn’t resist.”

He sits back, his fingers steepled under his chin. “Nico’s been obsessed with you for years, you know. Watching you, learning every detail of your life. A man like him, a man with his power and his enemies, he doesn’t let himself get attached. Not to anything or anyone.”

His smile widens and it reminds me of a shark. “But you.” He shakes his head. “You got under his skin. You became his weakness, his blind spot. And now, you’re going to be his downfall.”

I shake my head, tears burning at the back of my eyes. “No. No, you’re wrong. Nico doesn’t…he wouldn’t…”

“Wouldn’t what?” Russo cuts in almost pleasantly. “Wouldn’t risk everything for you? Wouldn’t burn his world down just to keep you safe?”

He leans in again, his breath hot against my cheek. “He already has, Katerina,” he whispers.

Russo leans back in his chair, his posture relaxed, but his eyes glitter with a cruel, knowing light, like a cat toying with a mouse it’s about to devour.

“You know, Katerina,” he says conversationally. “I’ve always admired Nico Barone. His cunning, his ruthlessness. The way he can make brutal choices and never flinch.” Russo’s gaze bores into mine. “But taking the Santoro girl? That wasn’t a hard choice. That was a *weakness*.”

I shake my head, confusion and dread warring in my gut. “What are you talking about? Nico *saved* Seraphina. He protected an innocent child.”

Russo laughs and it’s a sharp, mocking sound that echoes off the bare walls of the room. “Is that what you think? That Nico Barone, the Butcher of Brooklyn, suddenly grew a conscience?” He shakes his head, his smile widening. “No, Katerina. Nico didn’t take the girl out of the goodness of his heart. He took her to get to *you*. To have an excuse to bring you under his control.”

I stare at him, my heart pounding a sickening rhythm against my ribs. “You’re nuts,” I whisper. “I’m—I’m *nothing* to Nico. Again, I’m just a doctor. I really have no stake in this game.”

Russo *tsks*, the sound chiding, almost pitying. “Come now, Katerina. Let’s not play these games. We both know you’re far more than just a doctor to Nico Barone.”

He stands, pacing the room with slow, measured steps. His shoes click against the concrete.

“Every man in our world has a weakness,” he says, his voice taking on a lecturing tone, like a professor explaining a particularly fascinating concept. “A fracture point, to use medical terms. A chink in their armor that can be exploited, if you know where to look.”

He pauses, turning to face me with a malicious smile. “Your cousin Maksim, for example. His weaknesses are his wife and children. The people he loves more than life itself.”

My blood runs cold, a sick, twisting dread coiling in my gut. Maksim. Aria. The kids. The thought of them in the crosshairs of this madman’s schemes is enough to make me want to beg for their safety.

But I bite my tongue until I taste blood, swallowing down the plea that wants to rise in my throat. I won’t give him the satisfaction to see how deeply his words have cut.

Russo continues, oblivious or indifferent to my inner turmoil. “And Nikolai? His weaknesses are even closer to home. Maksim, his beloved brother. And you, his precious baby cousin.”

He stops in front of me, leaning down until his face is inches from mine. I can smell his breath, coffee and cigarettes and something rotten and foul. I hold my breath because otherwise I’ll gag.

“Finding Nico’s weakness, now *that* took patience. It took time and resources and a very particular set of skills. But in the end, it was worth it. Because in the end, it led me to *you*.” He pokes me on the nose and I try to turn my face away to escape the intensity of his gaze and the suffocating closeness of him. But his hand shoots out, gripping my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes.

“You’re the key, Katerina,” he whispers, his thumb brushing over my lower lip in a grotesque parody of tenderness. “The key to unlocking Nico Barone’s downfall. And I intend to use you to your full potential.”

I jerk my head back, revulsion and terror rising like bile in my throat. “You’re wrong,” I choke out, the words tasting like ash on my tongue. “I’m *no one*. I don’t matter to Nico, or to anyone else in your sick, twisted world.”

Russo just smiles, a cold, pitiless thing. “Oh, but you *do*, Katerina. Right now, you’re the single most valuable object in the northeastern United States. And I plan to exploit that value to its utmost.”

He steps back, rubbing his hands together like a craftsman preparing for a particularly delicate task. “I’m going to break you,” he says, his voice almost dreamy and reverent. “I’m going to take you apart, piece by excruciating piece. Then I’m going to send those pieces back to your beloved cousins, to your precious Nico.”

Tremors wrack my body so hard the restraints rattle against the bed frame. “You’re a monster,” I whisper, horrified at what I’m hearing. “A fucking monster.”

Russo shrugs, unconcerned. “Perhaps. But I’m a monster with a vision. And you, Katerina, you’re going to help me bring that vision to life.”

He starts to lay it out, his voice soft, almost hypnotic. The way he’ll use me to lure Nico in, to make him sloppy, reckless with rage and grief. Then he’ll strike when Nico is at his weakest, wiping him and his empire off the map like so much dirt off a boot.

Then, once Nico is gone…

“The girl,” Russo murmurs, his eyes distant, unfocused. “Seraphina. So young, so impressionable. With the right guidance and influence she could be molded into something extraordinary. A weapon honed to a razor’s edge, to cut down all who stand in our way.”

He smiles, and it’s a slow, dreamy thing. “Imagine it, Katerina. A new generation, rising from the ashes of the old. The Russo dynasty, stretching out into infinity. And all of it, *all of it* thanks to you.”

I can’t breathe or think. The horror of it, the sheer, unmitigated evil, it’s too much. It’s too much to bear.

This can’t be happening. It can’t be *real*.

That’s it.

This is clearly just a really bad fucking nightmare.

I’m going to close my eyes then open them and I’ll be back in my bed.

Whether that’s at Nico’s or at mine, I really don’t care.

Close my eyes. Open my eyes. I’m still in the same place. Fuck. This is truly a living nightmare.

Russo steps back, straightening his suit and staring down at me affectionately. “You should rest, Katerina,” he says, his voice returning to that almost gentle tone. “Conserve your strength. We have a long road ahead of us, and I need you in peak condition for what’s to come.”

He moves toward the door, his footsteps echoing in the sudden, ringing silence. At the threshold, he pauses, looking back at me over his shoulder.

“Your suffering, your sacrifice, it’s going to change the world,” he says, almost reverently. “Take comfort in that. It’s more than most people ever get to claim.”

Then he’s gone, the door swinging shut behind him with a clang that feels like the sealing of a tomb. I lie there in the dark, my breath coming in shallow, hiccupping gasps. Hot and bitter tears stream down my face soaking into the thin pillow beneath my head.

I’m going to die here. I’m going to die, and it’s going to be slow and painful and utterly, *utterly* meaningless.

But even as despair threatens to swallow me whole, I cling to one tiny, fragile shard of light in the overwhelming darkness.

Nico.

He’s coming for me. He has to be. He won’t let Russo win. He won’t let him use me as a pawn in this sick, twisted game.

He’ll find me. He’ll save me.

He has to.

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NICO

The twelve hours working with Maksim and Nikolai are the longest of my life. Each minute drags by with agonizing slowness. I don’t stop searching for Katerina.

I don’t eat.

The very concept of rest or sustenance feels like a cruel joke, a mockery of the agony that’s tearing me apart from the inside out.

My mind is consumed by one thought, one driving, desperate need: to bring back the woman I love. To know Katerina’s safe and she’s mine.

I try not to think about what she might be enduring while I pace the halls of my estate like a caged animal.

I try not to imagine the horrors Russo could be inflicting upon her, the pain and fear she must be drowning in. But the images come anyway, relentless and merciless, each one a fresh knife twisting in my gut.

I should have protected her better. I should have seen this coming. Russo knew it was me that took Seraphina and they also knew about Katerina.

My nails dig into the flesh of my palms. *You stupid fucking, arrogant idiot. Because of your recklessness, she’s paying the price.*

The guilt gnaws at my insides, whispering poisonous recriminations in my ear.

It mingles with the fear, the sickening dread of what I might find when I finally reach her, until I can barely breathe through the weight of it all.

And through it all, there's another worry.

Luca.

He's still nowhere to be found.

His absence feels like a gaping wound, a vulnerability I can't afford. Not now, not with Katerina's life on the line.

But I can't focus on that.

I can't let myself be distracted by anything but the task at hand. Luca's disappearance will have to wait. *Everything* will have to wait until Katerina is safe again.

At Nikolai's next call, I'm wound so tight I nearly snap the phone in half answering it.

"We found her," he says without preamble, his voice taut with a tension that mirrors my own. "She's at a farmhouse, about two hours north of the city. We've got the location, the layout, the guard rotations. Everything we need."

Relief crashes over me and it's so intense it borders on painful. We *found* her. We know where she is. After hours of fruitless searching, I finally have a target. A purpose.

"I'm coming with you," I bite out, already striding toward the door, my free hand clenched into a fist at my side. "I'm going to be there when we get her out."

Nikolai pauses and I freeze. This fucker better not be saying that I'm not coming. "Maksim and I are leading the charge," Nikolai says, his tone cold and uncompromising. "We're not negotiating on this, Barone. She's *our* family. *We're* going to be the ones to bring her back."

I grit my teeth, a hot surge of anger rising in my throat. I don't give a fuck who leads the charge so long as we get Katerina back, but I do *not* like Nikolai's tone.

The urge to argue and assert my own claim is ready to come out, but I force it back.

Arguing with them won't get me the coordinates to where she is and the more we argue, the more time Russo has with Katerina.

"I understand," I spit, the words tasting like ash. "I'll follow your lead. But I'm going to be there, Nikolai. I need to see her, to know she's safe."

"You'll be lucky if seeing her is all we let you do," Nikolai snarls, his composure slipping for a moment. I can hear the seething fury beneath his words, the barely-leashed violence. "If it were up to me, Barone, I'd put a fucking bullet in your skull and leave you to rot. You brought this down on her, on all of us."

Oh for fuck's sake. This isn't the time for a pissing contest.

"I understand your anger, Nikolai," I say, my voice cool and controlled despite the rage simmering beneath my skin. "But don't mistake me for one of your underlings. I'm not asking for permission. I'm telling you how it's going to be."

I pause, letting my words sink in. "Katerina is mine, just as much as she's yours. I may not share your blood, but I share your goal. We're going to bring her back, and we're going to make Russo pay for ever daring to touch her."

There's a long, tense silence on the other end of the line. I can almost hear Nikolai's teeth grinding, the force of his fury palpable even through the phone.

"Don't test me, Barone," he growls, each word dripping with menace. "You're on thin fucking ice as it is. The only reason you're still breathing is because we need you to get Katerina back and you still have Seraphina."

A dark, humorless chuckle escapes my lips. "Oh, I'm well aware," I drawl mockingly. "But let's be clear, Nikolai. You need me just as much as I need

you. We’re in this together, whether you like it or not.”

I lean forward, my voice dropping to a low, dangerous purr. “So let’s put aside our differences, just for now, shall we? Let’s focus on what matters—getting Katerina back and making Russo wish he’d never been born. And then, once she’s safe…”

I trail off, letting the implication hang heavy in the air. “Well, we can sort out the rest later. With blood, if necessary.”

Another long, fraught pause. I can practically hear Nikolai’s mind working as he weighs his options.

“Fine,” he spits out. “We do this together, for Katerina’s sake. But mark my words, Barone.” His voice drops to a growl. “When this is over, we’re going to have a reckoning. And you’d better hope you’re as good as you think you are.”

I smile coldly. “Oh, I am, Nikolai. I am. Now, let’s go get our girl back.”

With that, the line goes dead, leaving me alone with the burning, unshakable determination to bring Katerina home—and to rain down hell on anyone who stands in my way.

The drive to the staging point is a blur. The landscape rushes by, farmland and forest reduced to smears of darkness at the edges of my tunnel vision. My drivers are blowing by every traffic law imaginable but it’s still not enough. We need to go faster. Every second we waste is another second Katerina is going through unspeakable horrors.

It’s only when we pull into the clearing, gravel spraying from beneath my tires, that the enormity of what we’re about to do hits me. The place is a hive of activity, cars and vans and trucks parked in circles, men moving between them with purposeful strides. The air hums with the electric crackle of impending violence, of blood about to be spilled.

I see the Sokolov brothers immediately, towering figures at the center of the maelstrom. Maksim is geared up like a soldier, Kevlar vest over black fatigues, a bristling array of weapons strapped to every limb.

His face is like stone, his eyes burning.

His entire persona promises hell to anyone foolish enough to cross him. Nikolai stands beside him, his posture more relaxed but no less deadly. As the head of the Bratva, he exudes an aura of unflinching authority.

Maksim sees me coming, followed by the men I've hand-chosen to bring, and he nudges his brother roughly, pointing in my direction.

I smirk and shove my hands into my pockets, waiting for the show to begin. The Sokolov brothers stride forward in my direction.

"Barone," Maksim spits out. "You've got some fucking nerve showing your face here."

I meet his gaze head-on, refusing to be cowed. "Spare me the posturing, Maksim," I drawl. "We both know why I'm here."

Maksim's face twists into a snarl, his fists clenching at his sides. "My cousin," he growls. "you put her in this position, Barone. You and your fucking arrogance."

I feel my own anger rising and this time, I don't stamp it down. "And I'm here to get her out," I snap back. "So maybe we can save the pissing contest for after we bring her home safe."

Nikolai steps forward, his gray eyes as cold as a winter's day. "You're here because we allow it, Barone," he says, his voice deceptively soft. "Never forget that. Katerina is *our* blood. You are nothing to her."

I bare my teeth in a mirthless grin. "She's her own woman," I counter, meeting Nikolai's gaze without flinching. "Not a piece of property to be fought over. And right now, she needs all of us. So let's focus on that, shall we?"

For a moment, the tension is so thick it's almost suffocating. It's worse in person than over the phone, swapping intel as we searched for Katerina.

Maksim looks like he's seconds away from launching himself at me, consequences be damned. But then Leo Santoro is there, shoving his way between us.

His face is a mask of pure, unadulterated fury as he grabs me by the front of my shirt and slams me back against the side of my car. "*You*," he snarls, his voice shaking with rage. "You took my daughter. I should fucking kill you where you stand."

Instantly, guns are drawn on all sides, a ring of muzzles pointed at vital organs. The air crackles with the promise of imminent bloodshed.

But I just laugh, the sound harsh and mocking in the tense silence. With a deft twist, I slip out of Leo's grip, shoving him back a step.

"You're welcome to try," I taunt, straightening my shirt with deliberate nonchalance. "But maybe we can save the dick-measuring for after we get Katerina back, yeah? I don't know about you, but I'd rather expend my energy on the bastards who took her, not on this pointless bullshit."

Leo looks like he's about to lunge for me again, but his brother-in-law—and cousin-in-law too, I swear the Santoro-Brennan family lineage is a wreath, not a tree—Cillian Brennan lays a restraining hand on his shoulder. "He's right," Cillian says, his voice tight with barely-suppressed fury as he shoots me a look of barely concealed loathing. "As much as I'd love to see you put a bullet in him, Leo, we need to focus on Katerina. She's what matters now. Then we can get Seraphina."

Leo looks like he disagrees *strongly* with that assessment, but he nods curtly, breathing sharply out of his nostrils. He looks at his men. "Arms down," he snarls while Cillian and Nikolai order the same for their own men.

Slowly and grudgingly, the guns are lowered. The tension eases, but only slightly. It's clear that this is a temporary truce at best, a ceasefire born of necessity rather than any true accord.

But it's enough. It has to be.

The briefing is quick after that, Maksim laying out the plan. It's simple: hit hard, hit fast, and leave nothing standing. We'll come at the farmhouse from

all sides, Maksim taking point with his team while Cillian, Leo, and I flank. Nikolai will run coordination from the command van, feeding us intel and adapting on the fly.

It's more firepower than the target likely warrants, but none of us are taking chances. Not with Katerina's life on the line.

As we prepare to move out, I catch Nikolai's eye. For a moment, we just stare at each other, a wealth of unspoken threats and promises passing between us.

"Bring her back," he says at last, his voice low and intense. "Bring her back or don't bother coming back at all."

I incline my head, a mocking half-bow. "Your wish is my command, Your Highness," I drawl before I stride toward my vehicle, get in, and take off with single-minded purpose.

The time for talk is over. Now, there is only the mission.

Only Katerina.

As we draw closer to our destination, the landscape begins to change. The tidy farms and quaint villages give way to wilder, more rugged terrain.

Dense forest presses in on either side of the narrow country lanes, the trees looming over us.

Finally, we're there.

The farmhouse looms, its whitewashed walls and sagging porch at odds with the aura of menace that seems to radiate from every weathered board and cracked shutter.

It's an old farmhouse that looks like it was built by the hands of the first owner. I'm not sure why my first thought was that this place looks like the setting for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but it sets my teeth on edge. Katerina is in here.

The moment the vehicles roll to a stop, we're spilling out into the night. The cool night air hits me, the scent of damp earth and rotting leaves filling my nostrils.

Gunfire erupts immediately, muzzle flashes strobing in the darkness. Bullets whine past my head, thudding into the ground at my feet.

“Take cover!” Maksim roars, his voice barely audible over the deafening chatter of automatic weapons.

We scatter, diving behind vehicles and trees, returning fire with a vengeance. I catch a glimpse of Leo’s men flanking the house, while Brennan, Sokolov, and my men get into position.

I’m not fucking waiting here. I sprint toward the house, my gun barking in my hand, my blood singing with the thrill of violence.

A man looms up in front of me, his face contorted in a snarl, his rifle swinging toward me.

I don’t hesitate.

My knife flashes out with a quick, brutal slash across his throat. He goes down gurgling, his hot blood splattering across my face.

I leap over his twitching body and keep running. More men pour out of the house, shouting and firing. I take them down, my gun and knife working in perfect harmony.

We burst through the front door like a battering ram, splinters flying, hinges screeching in protest. Maksim is first through the breach, his massive frame filling the doorway, his rifle already barking in his hands.

He’s a force of nature, unstoppable and unrelenting, cutting down the first wave of guards before they can even react.

God he’s such a scary motherfucker. It’s hard to believe he actually gave all of this up to be a family man.

Immediately, a thought of Maksim Sokolov wearing a pink apron with *KISS THE COOK* flies into my mind and it takes everything in me to not double over with laughter.

Focus, you idiot.

I’m right on Maksim’s heels, my own weapon spitting fire, the kick of the recoil a familiar shock up my arms.

We fan out into the foyer, taking cover behind overturned furniture as more of Russo’s men pour in from adjoining rooms.

It’s chaos, a deafening din of gunfire and screams, shattering glass and splintering wood.

The air reeks of cordite and blood, a cloying, copper-rich stench that coats the back of my throat.

Behind us, Cillian and Leo charge in with their own teams, their eyes alight with a cold, focused fury.

They peel off to either side, sweeping through the ground floor, the chatter of their weapons a constant, staccato counterpoint to the bellows and groans of the dying.

A bullet whistles past my ear, and it’s close enough to ruffle my hair.

I spin, dropping to one knee, my gun already tracking the shooter. He’s crouched at the top of the stairs, using the bannister for cover as he tries to pick us off.

Fucker.

I put a round through his forehead before he can fire again, and a neat black hole appears just above his right eye. He slumps forward, his rifle clattering down the steps, his body tumbling after it in a limp, boneless sprawl.

“Upstairs!” I roar, already bounding up the steps two and three at a time.

My heart is a jackhammer in my chest, adrenaline surging through my veins like an electric current.

Katerina is up there somewhere, alone and probably in pain, and every second I waste down here is a second she spends in hell.

But the upper floor is a killing field, a narrow, blood-slick corridor with death waiting around every corner.

Russo’s men are dug in deep, popping out of doorways and alcoves, forcing us to fight for every inch of ground.

I take a round in the shoulder, the impact spinning me half around, the pain a white-hot lance through my flesh. “Fuck!” I bark, gritting my teeth. But there’s no time to do anything but keep fighting and cutting a path through the carnage to the woman I love.

Maksim is a machine beside me, his face bloodied. His rifle is a blur of motion as he repeatedly pivots and fires.

Cillian and Leo are right behind us, their own weapons adding to the deafening fusillade, the walls and floor and ceiling erupting in a hail of plaster and gore.

Then, suddenly, it’s over.

The last of Russo’s men falls, his chest a ruined mess of blood and bone, and the silence that follows is so sudden it’s almost more deafening than the gunfire.

Before the body hits the floor, I’m kicking in doors, my heart in my throat. “*Katerina!*” I scream, hoping she can answer me. “*Katerina!*”

Empty room after empty room greets me, each one a fresh stab of fear, of despair, until…

There. At the end of the hall.

One last door remains shut. I slam through it like a battering ram, the hinges shrieking in protest, the frame shattering beneath the onslaught. And there, in the center of the room, lit by a single bare bulb dangling from the ceiling…

Katerina.

For a moment, I stare at her, taking her in. She’s bound to the bed, her wrists and ankles secured with thick leather cuffs.

Her hair is a tangled mess, her face streaked with tears and blood.

One eye is swollen shut, a mottled purple bruise vivid against her pallid skin. Her lip is split, her cheek bearing the livid imprint of a hand.

But it's the other marks that send a searing rage burning through my veins.

The raw, bleeding welts that crisscross her arms and legs, disappearing beneath the tattered remains of her clothes. The dark, finger-shaped bruises that encircle her throat.

I'm at her side in an instant, my hands shaking as I tear at her restraints, my vision blurring with tears I don't even try to hide. She stares up at me, her eyes wide and disbelieving, like she can't quite trust that I'm real.

"N-Nico?" she whispers hoarsely, as if she's been screaming for hours. "Is it…is it really you?"

"It's me, baby," I choke out, my voice cracking on the words. "I'm here. You're safe now. I've got you."

The restraints come free and she surges upward with a sob, throwing her arms around my neck and clinging to me like she'll never let go. I gather her to my chest, crushing her against me, breathing her in.

"I knew you'd come," she whispers, her lips brushing my ear. "I knew you'd find me."

I bury my face in her hair, my shoulders shaking with silent sobs. "Always," I rasp. "Always, my love. I will *always* come for you."

Suddenly, I hear footsteps in the hall and the creak of floorboards under a heavy tread. I spin, pushing Katerina behind me, my gun leaping into my hand.

But it's Maksim who appears in the doorway, his face a mask of blood and grime, his eyes wild and haunted. But when his gaze lands on Katerina as she pokes around me and sees her alive and whole, the relief that washes over his features is tangible.

He sags against the doorframe, his breath leaving him in a shuddering rush.

"Oh, thank god," he whispers, his voice hoarse and ragged. "*Katya.*"

Katerina makes a small, wounded sound at the sight of him, her hand coming up to cover her mouth. I can only imagine what she must be feeling, seeing her cousin like this.

Her eyes are wide as she takes him in and I realize she's probably never seen Maksim the Enforcer.

She's only ever known him as her cousin. It must be trippy, I imagine, seeing the blood he's spilled all for her sake.

"Maksim? Is Nikolai—is he…?" She steps around me, stopping just in front of me as she takes it all in, and I wrap my arms around her.

Maksim's face softens for a moment. "He's fine, Kat. He's downstairs, securing the perimeter."

Relief washes over her face, as she leans forward, her eyes wild. "Aria," she gasps out. "Did she give birth? Is it a boy or a girl? How's Daniel?"

"Yes, she gave birth. It's a girl," Maksim says, and there's a hint of a smile in his voice despite the gravity of the situation. "Her name is Anastasia and she's healthy and perfect. Aria's recovering well. Daniel is besotted with his little sister."

Tears spill down Katerina's cheeks, but there's joy mingled with the pain now. "A *girl*," she whispers, a big grin on her chapped lips. "I knew it."

I hold her tighter, pressing my lips to her hair, my heart aching with the force of my love for her. Even though she's hurt and most likely concussed, her first thoughts are for her family.

But Maksim is eyeing the way we cling to each other, his lip curling in a sneer of distaste. There's a hardness in his gaze as it flicks to me, a cold, simmering fury that promises retribution.

"There will be time for answers later," he says, the warmth gone from his voice. "We need to move. Russo's gone, Barone. He slipped the net and disappeared down a back road before Leo's men could close in."

Russo's gone. It's like a bucket of ice water to the face that chases away the fragile warmth of the moment before. Russo escaped.

Katerina shudders against me and rage surges through me. The urge to hunt him down and tear him apart with my bare hands is strong. But I can't.

Not now with Katerina so broken in my arms. I just hold her tighter, trying to pour all my love into our embrace.

"We'll find him," I vow, smoothing her hair, my fingers catching on the snarls. "We'll hunt him down and make him pay for what he's done."

Maksim nods, a short, sharp jerk of his head. But there's something else in his eyes now, something that sends a chill racing down my spine. It looks like reluctance and pity. The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

"There's more, Barone," he says, almost gently. "It's about your half-brother, Luca."

My heart seizes in my chest, a cold fist of dread closing around my throat. No. God, please no. Not Luca. Not my brother.

I brace myself for the blow I know is coming, for the words that will shatter my world all over again. He's dead. He died saving Katerina, or trying to stop Russo, or…

But the words that come are somehow worse. So much worse.

"He's the one, Nico," Maksim says, and there's a bitter twist to his lips. "He's the traitor. He's been working with Russo all along, feeding him information. He's the reason they got to Katerina. He's the reason why your men have ended up dead and how Russo found out you have Seraphina."

For a moment, I stare at Maksim in mute, stunned horror. Luca. My brother, my right hand. A *traitor*. A Judas, a backstabbing snake.

White-hot rage sears through me, mingling with the gut-wrenching relief and the soul-deep terror of how close I came to losing everything. I want to break something, to feel bones snapping under my fists, to paint the walls with blood and ruin.

Katerina shaking in my arms brings me out of my blood lust. I can't do that. Not now. Later. Once I've had a chance to digest everything that's happened today.

So I swallow it down, and force it back, locking it away in the darkest, coldest corner of my heart. There will be a reckoning, I promise myself. I will get my revenge. But for right now, I need to focus on Katerina and getting her back home.

I lift Katerina into my arms, cradling her against my chest like she's the most precious thing in the world. And she is. She's everything to me. She clings to me, burying her face in the crook of my neck, her breath hot and ragged against my skin. I can feel the tremors running through her, the aftershocks of terror and pain that wrack her battered body.

Maksim steps forward, his hands outstretched. "I'll take her," he says, his voice gruff but not unkind. "You've done enough, Barone."

But I just clutch Katerina tighter, a snarl twisting my lips. "No," I growl, and there's no mistaking the threat in my tone. "She stays with me."

Maksim's eyes flash, his jaw clenching with barely suppressed fury, but he doesn't argue. He knows better than to get between me and what's mine.

I carry Katerina down the stairs, shielding her from the worst of the carnage with my body.

The house is a nightmare landscape of blood and broken bodies, but I barely see it. All my focus is on the woman in my arms.

Outside, the yard is swarming with activity. Nikolai, Leo, Cillian stand together, talking quietly amongst themselves. They turn as one when I emerge, their gazes locking onto Katerina's limp form.

Nikolai takes a step forward, his expression wild and desperate. "Katya," he breathes, his face white. I've never seen Nikolai look so…*human* before.

But then he sees the way I'm holding her, the intimate, possessive curl of my arms around her body and he stops dead, his face twisting with anger. He understands what this all means and the snarl that tears from his throat banishes any humanness I saw not even a second earlier.

"Not now," I tell him impatiently. "I'm taking her home. She needs rest and medical attention. Everything else can wait."

For a moment, I think Nikolai might finally snap and lunge for my throat, damn the consequences. But he doesn't. Instead, he gives me a short, sharp jerk of his head.

Leo watches in fury, and I know it's time. The thirty days are nearly over, but cutting them short is needed.

I carry Katerina to the waiting car, slipping into the back seat with her still clutched tight to my chest. She whimpers as I settle her in my lap, her fingers tangling in my shirt, her face pressing hard into the crook of my neck.

"Drive," I bark at my driver, then we're moving, the farmhouse and its horrors receding behind us.

In the darkness of the car, Katerina shivers against me, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. I tighten my arms around her, murmuring reassurances into her hair.

"I've got you, love," I whisper. "You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you. Never again."

But she just presses closer, her lips brushing my ear again as she speaks. "He–he was going to send me back in pieces," she breathes, her voice thin with pain and exhaustion. "Russo. He said…he said he'd break me."

Red rage washes through me, so intense it borders on madness. I need to make Russo and Luca suffer a thousand times over for every moment of fear and agony they put her through.

I swallow down my emotions and hold Katerina tighter, my lips brushing her temple. "He'll never touch you again," I promise. "I'm going to make the rest of his life very, *very* short."

She nods against my chest, her breath hitching on a sob. Then her body goes slack and her breathing slows. Panic surges through me. I can't let her fall asleep. She most definitely has a concussion and even I know you can't let a concussed patient sleep.

"Katerina," I say urgently, shaking her. "Katerina, wake up."

But Katerina refuses to wake up, her eyes closed.

So I do the only thing I know that will wake her up.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” I say casually. “I really don’t think the baby should be vaccinated. Maybe those anti-vaxxers have a point. I mean, do we really know what’s in those shots? Could be all sorts of nasty stuff.”

For a moment, there’s no response. Then Katerina stirs, her head lifting from my shoulder, her eyes narrowing as she glares up at me.

“*What* did you just say?” she demands, her voice rough with exhaustion but still sharp with indignation.

I shrug, fighting back a grin. Got her. “I’m just saying, maybe we should be more skeptical of the medical establishment. They don’t always have our best interests at heart, you know.”

Katerina pushes herself upright, wincing a little as the movement jostles her injuries. But there’s fire in her eyes now, a spark of life that warms me to my core.

“I swear to god, you better be fucking with me. That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” she snaps, jabbing a finger into my chest. “Vaccines are one of the greatest public health achievements in history. They’ve saved millions of lives and eradicated diseases that used to decimate entire populations. And the science behind them is rock solid, Nico. It’s not some conspiracy theory cooked up by Big Pharma.” She scowls. “I will not allow my child to walk through life not being vaccinated! I will not! And there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

I hold up my hands in mock surrender, unable to keep the smile from my face any longer. “Okay, okay, I yield. You’ve convinced me, Dr. Sokolov.”

She glares at me a moment longer, but I can see the corners of her mouth twitching, fighting against a smile of her own. “You’re an ass,” she grumbles, but there’s no real feeling in it.

“True,” I agree easily. “But I’m your ass. And I got you talking, didn’t I?”

Katerina’s expression softens, understanding dawning in her brown eyes. “You were trying to keep me awake,” she murmurs. “You were worried about the concussion.”

I nod, sobering a little as I brush a strand of hair back from her face. “I can’t lose you, Katerina,” I say quietly. “Not now. Not ever. So yeah, I’ll play dirty if I have to. I’ll piss you off, I’ll argue with you until you’re ready to strangle me—whatever it takes to keep you with me.”

She leans into my touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. “You really are an ass,” she whispers. But there’s affection in her tone and a tenderness that makes my heart clench in my chest.

“And you love me for it,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her forehead, my heart pounding.

She hums a little, a sleepy sound of agreement. But then she’s forcing her eyes open again, visibly struggling against the pull of exhaustion. “Talk to me,” she tells me. “Keep me awake.”

So I do. I tell her stories, memories from my childhood and funny stories from my school days. I tell her about the first time I ever saw her, even down to remembering what she wore. And through it all, I keep touching her—my hands in her hair, my lips on her brow, my heartbeat steady and strong beneath her ear.

Somewhere in the long, dark hours of that drive, she stirs against me.

“I knew you’d come for me,” she rasps, her voice slightly slurred. “I knew you’d find me.”

Some last, stubborn wall around my heart cracks at those words, a final barrier between me and the overwhelming tide of emotion that threatens to sweep me away.

Even in her darkest hour, she knew I would come for her. She trusted me, *believed* in me. I close my eyes against the sudden sting of tears, my throat working as I swallow past the lump that rises to choke me. I clutch her closer, my arms banding around like I could make her a part of me through sheer force of will.

“Always,” I whisper back. “Always, Katerina. No matter what. Until the end of my days and beyond, I will always come for you. I will *always* find you.”

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KATERINA

I wince as Dr. Ferrante gently probes the bruise on my temple, his fingers cool and professional against my skin. Despite his careful touch, I can't help but flinch, a hiss of pain escaping through my clenched teeth.

"Sorry, Dr. Sokolov," he murmurs, his voice low and soothing. "I know it's tender, but I need to check for any signs of fracture or more serious injury."

I grit my teeth, forcing myself to hold still as he continues his examination.

It's not just the physical pain that's setting my nerves on edge, though. It's the whole situation—being on the other side of the stethoscope, so to speak.

I'm not used to being the patient, and I don't much like it.

Dr. Ferrante seems to sense my discomfort, because he flashes me a sympathetic smile as he steps back, making a few notes on his clipboard. "I know it's not easy for you, being on this end of things," he says gently. "But you're doing great, Dr. Sokolov. Just try to relax and let me do my job, okay?"

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to nod. "Okay," I mutter, my voice coming out a little rougher than I'd like. "What's the verdict, doc? Am I going to live?"

He chuckles softly, shaking his head. “I think you’ll pull through and your baby is healthy,” he assures me. “But you do need rest, and plenty of it. That concussion is no joke, Dr. Sokolov. You need strict bedrest for at least the next 24 hours, and we’ll need to keep a close eye on your symptoms.”

I open my mouth to argue, but he holds up a hand, forestalling my protests. “I know, I know. You’re a tough cookie, Dr. Sokolov. But even tough cookies need to take it easy sometimes. Doctor’s orders.”

I sigh, slumping back against the pillows. “Fine,” I grumble. “But I’m *not* going to the hospital. I can rest just as well here.”

Dr. Ferrante frowns, looking like he wants to argue.

Then he glances over at Nico, who’s been hovering anxiously at my bedside throughout the entire examination.

Something unspoken passes between them, and the doctor nods, relenting.

“All right,” he sighs. “We can hold off on the hospital for now. But if your symptoms worsen, or if you develop any new ones, I want you in the ER immediately. No arguments. Understood?”

“Understood,” I echo, too tired and sore to put up much of a fight.

Dr. Ferrante nods, satisfied. He gathers up his things, murmuring a few final instructions to Nico before taking his leave. The moment the door closes behind him, Nico is at my side, his hands gentle as he helps me settle more comfortably against the pillows.

“You heard the man,” he murmurs, his lips brushing my temple as he pulls the covers up around my shoulders. “Rest. That’s an order, Katerina.”

Despite everything, I find myself smiling. Trust Nico to turn a doctor’s recommendation into a command. I let my eyes drift closed, already feeling the pull of exhaustion tugging at my mind. But as I start to slip under, a thought occurs to me.

“Nico,” I mumble, forcing my eyes open again. “What happened? While I was…gone. How did you find me?”

He goes still beside me, his body tensing. For a moment, I think he might not answer. But then he sighs, his hand coming up to stroke my hair in a soothing, repetitive motion.

“I called your cousins,” he says quietly. “I told them everything. About Seraphina, about you. I didn’t have a choice, Katerina. I needed their help. I couldn’t…” His voice cracks, raw with emotion. “I couldn’t lose you.”

My heart clenches at the pain and vulnerability in his voice. I reach for him, my hand finding his in the semi-darkness. “You didn’t,” I whisper. “You found me, Nico. You *saved* me.”

He brings our joined hands to his lips, pressing a fervent kiss to my knuckles. “Always,” he vows. “I will *always* find you, Katerina. No matter what. No matter how.”

We lapse into silence then, just holding each other, taking comfort in the steady rise and fall of our shared breathing. But as the minutes tick by, I realize something and I sit up, wincing as my head pounds.

“If you told Nikolai and Maksim about Seraphina,” I say slowly, “then that means…”

“They know where she is,” Nico finishes for me, nodding. “And they’re coming, along with her parents.”

My stomach drops at the words, a nauseating swoop of dread and anticipation. It’s not that I’m not happy for Seraphina and her parents, of course I am. This has been the whole point. For Seraphina and her parents to be reunited. Seraphina needs to go home to her family.

But some small, selfish part of me has grown used to having her here. I’ve come to care for her, to love her, in a way I never expected. Saying goodbye to my Bee will be harder than I thought.

Nico seems to sense my turbulent emotions, because he pulls me closer, tucking my head under his chin. “It’s going to be okay,” he murmurs. “You did good, Katerina. You kept her safe. You gave her back to her family. That’s what matters.”

I nod against his chest, blinking back the sudden sting of tears. He’s right, but that doesn’t make it any easier.

The next hour passes in a blur of restless dozing and groggy, pain-muddled waking.

True to his word, Nico rouses me, checking my pupils, asking me basic questions. I

t’s annoying, being prodded awake just as I’m starting to drift off.

But I know he’s only doing it out of love and concern for my wellbeing. So I endure it with as much grace as I can muster, which admittedly isn’t much.

There’s a sudden, sharp knock at the door, startling me out of my drowsy haze.

Nico tenses beside me, his arm tightening around my shoulders. But after a moment, he calls out a curt, “Enter,” his voice tight.

The door swings open and Nico’s comforting weight disappears as he greets whomever it is at the door.

I can hear the low murmur of voices, the words indistinct but the tone urgent.

I strain to make out what they’re saying, but the pounding in my head and the rustling of sheets as I struggle to sit up makes it impossible to decipher.

After a few moments, the door closes again, and Nico turns to me, his expression grave. “The Santoros and your cousins are almost here,” he says quietly. “They’re pulling soon.”

I nod, swallowing hard against the sudden lump in my throat. This is it, then. The moment I have to let her go.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself, and start to swing my legs over the side of the bed. But Nico’s hand on my shoulder stops me, his grip gentle but firm.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his brow furrowed with concern. “Katerina, you’re in no condition to get up. You need to rest.”

I shake my head, ignoring the wave of dizziness that washes over me at the motion. “I need to be there,” I insist, hating how raspy my voice is. “When they take her. I need to—I need to say goodbye.”

Nico’s frown deepens, and I can see the conflict playing out across his handsome face. The desire to protect me warring with his understanding of how much this means to me.

“Katerina,” he starts, his tone a mix of exasperation and tenderness. “You can barely sit up without passing out. How do you expect to make it downstairs, let alone—”

“I’ll manage,” I cut in. “I *have* to, Nico. Please. Don’t make me miss this. Don’t make me let her go without…without seeing her one last time.”

My voice breaks on the last words, tears burning at the back of my eyes. Nico stares at me for a long moment, his gaze searching. Then, slowly, he nods.

“Okay,” he murmurs, his hand coming up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing away the single tear that escapes down my cheek. “Okay, we’ll do this your way. But I swear to god, Katerina, if you keel over on me…”

He lets the threat hang unfinished, but I can hear the worry beneath the gruffness. It makes my heart clench in my chest, even as I manage a watery smile.

“I won’t,” I promise him. “I’ll lean on you, okay? Just…just help me get downstairs. I can make it. I know I can.”

Nico sighs, but there’s a glimmer of rueful affection in his eyes as he slides his arm around my waist, taking my weight as I gingerly stand.

“You’re too stubborn for your own damn good, you know that?” he grumbles as we start our slow, halting progress out of the room and down the hall. But he keeps me steady, his body a solid, reassuring presence at my side.

Every step is agony, my body screaming with the effort, but I push through it, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, and Nico's solid warmth at my side.

We make our way down the grand staircase, each step feeling like a mountain to climb.

But finally, *finally*, we reach the bottom, and Nico guides me gently into the foyer.

Marta is there waiting for us, Seraphina balanced on her hip. The moment the little girl sees me, her whole face lights up, her eyes widening with joy and excitement.

"Kat!" she squeals, her voice high and bright. She wriggles in Marta's arms, reaching for me with chubby, grasping hands. Marta steps forward, ready to pass her over, but hesitates when she sees the way I'm leaning on Nico, the pallor of my face and the bruises marring my skin.

"Are you sure you can," she starts, her brow creased with concern.

But I'm already reaching for Seraphina, my arms aching to hold her. "I'm sure," I say, my voice brooking no argument. "Please, Marta. Let me."

Marta nods, her expression softening with understanding. She steps closer and carefully transfers Seraphina into my waiting embrace.

The moment her little body settles against mine, it's like a missing piece of my soul slots back into place.

I sink down onto one of the plush benches lining the foyer, cradling her to my chest, breathing in the sweet, familiar scent of her.

"I missed you so much, Bee," I murmur into her hair, my voice choked with emotion. "So, so much."

Seraphina pulls back a little, her small hands coming up to pat my cheeks, her touch gentle and clumsy. "Missed you, Kat," she says solemnly. "Where you *go*? I look everywhere!"

The simple, innocent question is like a knife to the heart. I swallow hard, blinking back the sudden sting of tears. "I know, Bee. I'm sorry. I…I had to

go away for a little while. But I'm back now, okay? I came back for you."

Seraphina looks puzzled by this, as if not truly understanding what I'm saying. But then she leans in, pressing a wet, smacking kiss to my cheek. "I love you, Kat."

Oh god. Oh god, it *hurts*. It hurts so much to hear those words and feel the fierce, unconditional love in her embrace because I know what's coming.

I know that in a few short minutes, I'll have to let her go.

But I can't think about that now.

Instead, I hold her tighter, rocking her gently back and forth, memorizing every tiny detail of this moment.

The weight of her in my arms, the softness of her hair against my cheek, the sweet smell of her breath.

"I love you too, Bee," I whisper fiercely. "I love you so, so much. Don't you ever forget that, okay? No matter what happens, no matter where you go, I will *always* love you."

She smiles, her little fingers playing idly with the ends of my hair. I close my eyes, pressing my lips to the crown of her head. I know that in a few short years, she likely won't remember me at all, and thankfully won't remember any of this.

But that's okay. She'll be safe and loved and happy, back with the family who adores her.

We step out onto the front porch, the cool night air washing over my flushed skin. There's a small crowd gathered in the driveway—my cousins, the Brennans, and the Santoros. I hear a ragged gasp and Leo is holding his tearful wife up.

"My baby!" Emma is moaning. "Leo, get my baby!"

A tearful Valentina Brennan grabs Emma while Leo rushes forward toward his daughter.

“Seraphina,” he croaks out, his voice breaking. “Oh god, baby girl. Daddy’s here. Daddy’s got you.” He snatches her from my arms with a speed that leaves me breathless and he crushes her to his chest, burying his face in her hair, his shoulders shaking with great, heaving sobs.

Emma is right there with him, throwing herself at her husband and daughter.

She peppers Seraphina’s face with kisses, laughing and crying all at once, her hands shaking as she smooths them over every inch of her little girl, reassuring herself that she’s real, that she’s here.

Watching them, the sheer, overwhelming force of their love and relief, it’s like a fist squeezing around my heart.

Tears stream down my face, blurring my vision. I’m so incredibly, incandescently happy for them.

Seraphina surfaces from her parents’ embrace after a long, tearful moment. She twists in Leo’s arms, her eyes searching until they find me again.

When she spots me, her whole face creases into a bright, beaming smile, and she waves one small hand in my direction.

“Bye-bye, Kat!” she chirps, her voice high and so, *so* precious. “Love you!”

It’s like a knife to the chest, but I force a smile in return, waving back at her even as my chin wobbles with the effort of holding back my sobs.

I would walk into that farmhouse a hundred times over, endure a thousand hurts and horrors, if it meant making this moment happen again.

“Bye-bye, Bee,” I manage to get out. “I love you too. So, so much. Don’t you ever forget that, okay?”

She grins at me widely and nods. Then she’s turning back to her parents, chattering excitedly, already getting lost in the glow of their adoration.

Leo guides his family away, back to my cousins and their guards.

But just as I start to sag against Nico in relief and exhaustion, the no one leaves. With a sinking feeling in my gut, I realize that Seraphina’s

homecoming was only part one.

The families have come for Nico.

My heart lodges in my throat as I glance up at him, taking in the stoic set of his jaw, the grim resignation in his eyes. He knows what's coming. He's prepared for it.

But I'm not. I'm not prepared at all.

Leo returns without Emma and Seraphina, his face a mask of barely contained fury. He stops a few feet away, his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists at his sides.

"My daughter is clearly safe and well cared for," he grits out. "And that's the *only* fucking reason you're still breathing, Barone."

Nico says nothing but inclines his head in a slight nod. It only seems to enrage Leo further.

"But there needs to be a reckoning," he snarls, taking a step forward. "You used a two year old to feed your own sick obsession. You stole *my child* to get your filthy hands on Katerina. And whatever you did after, it doesn't erase what you did before."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cillian, Maksim, and Nikolai's hands drift toward their jackets, toward the guns I know are holstered there.

Nico sees it too, but he doesn't react. He just stands there, shoulders squared, accepting the condemnation and the threat of violence.

It's like…it's like he believes he deserves it, I realize with a jolt of horror. Like he's already decided he's not going to fight for himself, for us.

That breaks something in me. Before I even realize what I'm doing, I'm stepping forward, putting myself between Nico and the men who want to hurt him.

The whole yard goes still, a collective intake of breath. I can see the shock and horror on my cousins' faces. Nico stiffens behind me.

“Katerina,” Nikolai says slowly, his voice strained. “What are you *doing*? Move away from him.”

I shake my head, planting my feet more firmly. “No,” I say, and my voice rings out clear and strong despite the hammering of my heart. “No, I won’t. Seraphina is alive because of this man. She’s safe, because of him.”

Leo makes a scoffing noise, but I barrel on before he can interrupt. “Russo would have sent her home in a box,” I tell him, watching the color drain from his face at the words. “He would have made sure you found her, broken and lifeless, so that you would blame each other and tear each other apart in your grief and your rage.”

I turn to face the others, my gaze sweeping over them, imploring. “But Nico stopped that. He *saved* her. Yes, he kidnapped her, but he did it to *protect* her.”

Nikolai takes a step forward, his hand outstretched. “Katya,” he says pleadingly. “Come here. Come away from him.”

But I just shake my head again, tears blurring my vision. “I can’t,” I whisper. “I won’t. I’m staying with him, Nikolai. I love him.”

Nico goes rigid behind me, and I hear his sharp intake of breath. Every eye in the yard is now fixed on me, wide with shock.

“*Katya*,” Maksim breathes, and there’s so much pain, so much horrified understanding in that single word. “What have you done?”

I meet his gaze head-on, unflinching. “What I had to,” I tell him simply. “What my heart demanded. Just like you did, cousin, when you found Aria.”

He flinches at that, but I still see the anger and hate.

So I turn to the one person who might understand. The one person who knows, better than anyone, the lengths a mother will go to for her child.

“Emma,” I say softly, holding her horrified and judgmental gaze. “You have Seraphina back because of Nico. She’s in your arms right now, safe and whole, because of him. If Russo had taken her, you never would have seen

her again. She either would have returned to you as a corpse or he would have turned her into a weapon. Seraphina was never in any danger here. Nico was always going to return her to you."

I see something flicker in her green eyes, some hint of softening. I press on, pouring every ounce of my desperate, aching love into the words.

"Please," I beg her. "Let me have this. Let me have *him*."

For a long, breathless moment, she just stares at me but then, slowly, she nods, a simple dip of her chin. She steps up to her husband, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. Leo stiffens, his jaw working, but he doesn't shrug her off.

There's a long, tense silence. "He lives," he grinds out, each word sounding like he's regretting saying them. "But *only* because he protected my daughter. He kept her safe when I couldn't."

Nikolai makes a noise of protest, but Leo cuts him off with a sharp look. "We're letting this go, Nikolai," he says, and there's a note of finality in his voice. "For Seraphina's sake. For Katerina's."

Nikolai's jaw clenches, his eyes flashing with fury. But after a moment, he nods, a single, sharp jerk of his head.

"Fine," he bites out even though Maksim looks dismayed. "But hear me, Barone. If you *ever* hurt her, if you ever give me a single reason to think she's not safe with you again, the truce is over. And I will end you myself. Am I clear?"

Nico steps forward then, his shoulder brushing mine. "If I ever hurt her," he says quietly, "I'll let you."

There's a moment of heavy silence, and then, one by one, the men start to turn away and head back to their cars, their postures stiff with reluctance and simmering anger.

But they're *going*. They're actually leaving, letting us be.

The families leave, their cars kicking up dust as they peel out of the driveway. I watch them go, a mixture of relief and trepidation churning in

my gut. It's *over*.

I know Russo is still out there, but I have to take the victories when they come.

But it's not just Russo I have to worry about. Or even Nico's half-brother, Luca. There will be fallout from this.

My cousins acquiesced too quickly.

I can't even imagine what they're feeling right now and how much rage there is. I'm afraid to even think of the consequences.

I turn to Nico, ready to voice my fears and doubts, but the words die on my tongue when I see the look on his face.

I take an involuntary step back at the tight, controlled fury, and the barely leashed anger.

"What the *hell* were you thinking?" he grits out, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "Do you have any idea what you've done? What you've given up for me?"

I stiffen, my own temper sparking to life. "I was thinking that I love you," I snap back. "That I wasn't going to stand there and watch them kill you for sins you've already atoned for."

He makes a harsh, scoffing sound. "Atoned for? Katerina, I kidnapped a *child*. I used an innocent girl as a pawn in my own selfish game. There's no atoning for that."

"But you protected her!" I argue, my voice rising. "You kept her safe! You made sure she got home to her family. That has to count for *something*."

He shakes his head, a bitter, mirthless smile twisting his lips. "It doesn't change what I did. It doesn't erase the fact that I'm a monster, Katerina. A monster who doesn't deserve you, or this life, or any kind of happiness."

I stare at him in disbelief. "That's what this is about, isn't it?" I whisper, my mouth dry. "You'll burn down the world to keep me safe, but you'll let someone put a bullet in your head because some part of you decided a long time ago that you deserve to die alone."

He flinches, his eyes squeezing shut. But he doesn’t deny it.

I step closer, my hands coming up to frame his face, forcing him to look at me. “You spent two years deciding you loved me,” I tell him fiercely. “I had thirty days. Thirty days, along with a kidnapping, a concussion, and a man threatening to send me back to you in pieces.”

He shudders under my touch, and it hurts me to see the raw, wrenching anguish that flashes across his face. But I don’t stop.

“So don’t you dare tell me I didn’t have to do that,” I continue, my voice shaking but strong. “I did it because I wanted to. I wanted something just for me, just because it was mine. And goddammit, Nico…it’s *you*. You’re what I want. What I choose. No matter the cost.”

He stares at me for a long, breathless moment and then, with a sound that’s half sob, half growl, he’s kissing me.

His mouth slants over mine, hot and desperate, his arms crushing me against him like he wants to pull me into his very skin.

I kiss him back just as fiercely, pouring every ounce of my love and bone-deep belonging into the press of my lips, the slide of my tongue.

Telling him without words that I’m here, that I’m his, that nothing and no one will ever change that.

When we finally break apart, we’re both breathing hard, our foreheads resting together.

Nico’s eyes are closed, his lashes wet with tears.

“What happens now?” I ask softly, tracing the line of his jaw with gentle fingers. “Russo and Luca are still out there. And even though the families stood down, they haven’t forgiven you.”

He sighs, his breath warm against my cheek. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I don’t know what comes next, or how we’re going to navigate all of this.”

He pulls back a little, just enough to meet my gaze. “But what I do know,” he continues, his thumbs brushing away my tears, “is that I have you. We

have each other. And together…together, we can face anything. We can survive anything."

I nod, a small, watery smile tugging at my lips. "I love you," I tell him.

He kisses me again, soft and sweet, then he's taking my hand, lacing our fingers together as we start to walk back toward the house.

But halfway there, he pauses, a sudden thought seeming to strike him.

"You didn't tell them," he says, glancing down at my still-flat stomach. "About the baby."

I laugh, the sound bright and warm in the cool night air. "I think I gave my cousins enough heart attacks for one day," I tease, tugging him back into motion. "If I'd told them I was pregnant too, they might have actually keeled over on the spot."

Nico barks out a laugh and I find it's my favorite sound. "Fair enough," he concedes, shaking his head. "I guess we can save that particular bombshell for another day."

"Exactly," I agree, leaning into his side and kissing the underside of his jaw. "One crisis at a time."

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EPILOGUE: KATERINA

Six months. It’s been six months since that fateful night that changed everything. Sometimes, it feels like a lifetime ago.

Others, like it was just yesterday.

But no matter how much time passes, one thing remains constant: Nico.

His love, his presence, his unwavering devotion. To me, to our unborn child, to the life we’re making together.

I’m standing at the nurses’ station, finishing up some charts before my shift ends. It’s been a long day, but a good one.

I’m back at Columbia Presbyterian, doing the work I love, helping people, saving lives.

It wasn’t easy coming back after everything that happened.

There were whispers, rumors, sideways glances, and pointed questions.

But I held my head high. I proved myself, day after day, patient after patient.

And slowly, things started to feel normal again. Or at least, as normal as they can be, with my belly swelling bigger by the week, a constant reminder of how much my life has changed.

I rub a hand over my stomach, feeling a gentle kick against my palm. “Easy there, little one,” I murmur. “We’re almost done for the day.”

“Talking to yourself again, Dr. Sokolov?” a teasing voice says from behind me.

I turn, a smile already tugging at my lips. “Just having a chat with the baby, Dawn,” I reply, arching an eyebrow at my favorite nurse. “Got to start the medical education early, you know.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Heaven help us all, another Sokolov in the making,” she jokes as she sits down with a groan, rubbing her legs. “You heading out soon?”

I nod, glancing at the clock. “Just need to finish this last chart, then I’m officially off duty.”

“Good,” she says, her expression turning a bit more serious. “You need your rest, Dr. S. Don’t overdo it, okay?”

I soften, touched by her concern. “I won’t,” I assure her. “I promise.”

She nods, satisfied, but then the phone rings and she answers it. I turn back to my charts, making my final notes, my mind already starting to drift to thoughts of home. Of a warm meal and a soft bed and Nico’s arms around me.

As if summoned by my thoughts, I suddenly feel a familiar presence behind me.

A large, warm hand settles on my hip, another coming to rest on my belly. I lean back instinctively, my body molding to the hard lines and planes of the man I love.

Then realization hits, and I spin around, my eyes wide. “Nico!” I hiss, glancing around furtively. “What are you doing here? How did you even get past security?"

He smirks, that infuriatingly sexy half-smile that never fails to make my knees weak. “I have my ways,” he says with a nonchalant shrug. “Besides, I couldn’t wait to see you. Missed you too much.”

I soften, even as I shake my head in exasperation. “You’re impossible,” I mutter, but I can’t keep the fondness from my voice.

“Impossibly charming, you mean,” he counters, his grin widening.

I roll my eyes, but before I can retort, I catch sight of Dawn over Nico’s shoulder. She’s frozen mid-conversation, the phone dangling forgotten from her hand, her eyes wide and her mouth forming a perfect “O” of shock.

I bite back a laugh as she mouths a very emphatic “Damn!” in my direction, her gaze raking appreciatively over Nico’s tall, muscular frame.

And really, I can’t blame her.

He’s an arrestingly handsome man, with his chiseled jawline and piercing eyes, broad shoulders and narrow hips.

The charcoal grey button-down he’s wearing stretches across his chest in a way that makes my mouth go dry, and the sleeves are rolled up to reveal strong, tattooed forearms.

He looks like he just stepped off the pages of a magazine, like some high-fashion model slumming it in the real world. But there’s an edge to him too, a dangerous, coiled energy that speaks of the things he’s done.

It’s a potent combination, raw masculinity and refined elegance, and it never fails to set my blood buzzing and my heart racing. Even now, after all we’ve been through.

Dawn finally seems to recover herself, shaking off her daze and hanging up the phone. She saunters over to us, a mischievous twinkle in her eye that immediately puts me on guard.

“Well, well, well,” she drawls, planting a hand on her hip and giving Nico a very obvious once-over. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure. I’m Dawn, Dr. Sokolov’s *favorite* nurse. And you must be the infamous Nico.”

Nico blinks, looking momentarily thrown by Dawn’s forward approach. “Uh, yes,” he manages, extending a hand somewhat awkwardly. “Nice to meet you.”

Dawn takes his hand, but instead of shaking it she uses the grip to tug him closer, her smile turning decidedly flirtatious. “Oh, the pleasure is all mine,” she purrs, batting her lashes. “I’ve heard so much about you, handsome. All good things, I assure you.”

Nico shoots me a confused look. I press my lips together, trying desperately not to laugh at his discomfort.

The man stares down mob bosses and contract killers without blinking, but put him in front of a flirty nurse in my workplace and he’s hesitating so he doesn’t ruin my workplace reputation.

It’s endearing as hell, and it makes me fall for him just a little bit harder.

But I decide to take pity on him, stepping forward and winding my arm through his, my engagement ring glinting pointedly under the fluorescent lights. “Hands off, Dawn,” I say with a playful warning look. “This one’s all mine.”

Dawn heaves an exaggerated sigh, releasing Nico’s hand with a wink. “Can’t blame a girl for trying,” she says with a grin. “You sure know how to pick ‘em, Dr. S. Tall, dark, and yummy as hell.”

“And taken,” I remind her, bumping my hip against Nico’s. “Very, *very* taken.”

Dawn snorts, waving a dismissive hand. “Details,” she says airily. Then her grin sharpens, turning sly. “But I expect an invitation to the wedding. And a dance with Prince Charming here. Gotta see if he can keep up with me on the dance floor as well as he obviously does in the bedr—”

“Okay!” I cut her off, my cheeks flaming as Nico chokes. “On that note, we’re leaving. Shift’s over, time to head home.”

I start tugging Nico away, ignoring Dawn’s cackle of laughter behind us. Nico strides after me, smirking.

“What just happened?” he asks as we step into the elevator, the doors sliding shut on Dawn’s gleeful, waving form.

I just shake my head, torn between amusement and exasperation. “Hurricane Dawn,” I quip. “You’ll get used to her. Probably. Maybe.”

Nico makes a vaguely horrified noise. “I’m not sure I want to,” he mutters.

I laugh, leaning into his side as the elevator begins its descent. “Too bad,” I tease. “She’s part of the package. You’re marrying into the crazy, remember?”

His arm comes around me, pulling me closer, and I feel him press a smile into my hair. “Happily,” he murmurs. “Every single day, for the rest of our lives.” He kisses my temple. “Let’s go home.”

Home.

The word fills me with a rush of warmth and contentment.

I sold my brownstone and Nico and I moved into a condo on the outskirts of the city.

It’s close enough for me to get to the hospital and for Nico to keep an eye on his legitimate business interests since he left the Corsicans. But it’s far enough away to give us some distance from the families.

This tentative peace we’ve brokered hasn’t been easy.

My cousins, Leo, and Cillian look at Nico and they still see the man who used a child for his own ends, however noble those ends might have been.

But I have to give it to them.

They’re trying—slowly and grudgingly—to see him as I do. To recognize the good in him, the honor and the love and the fierce, protective loyalty.

Emma, bless her, has been a big part of that. After those first few tense weeks, she reached out and invited me to the Santoro estate to see Seraphina.

I think she needed to see for herself the bond that had formed between me and her daughter.

When she saw the way Seraphina’s face lit up at the sight of me, the way she clung to me and babbled excitedly, something shifted. A softening, an

understanding.

She’s been our advocate ever since, gently and not so gently pushing for acceptance. I’ve been able to visit with Aria, Daniel, and the baby, but Maksim is always there, keeping a close eye on me.

Nikolai still refuses to see me, which does hurt my feelings, but I’m hopeful things will change once Nikolai finally sees how happy I am.

It’s a slow process, but I’m hopeful that one day, we’ll be able to bring our child into a world where there’s no more bad blood or old wounds festering under the surface.

A world where the only thing that matters is love.

Family.

The ties that bind us all together, for better or for worse.

Nico’s hand on the small of my back guides me out of the hospital, to where his car waits at the curb. He opens the door for me and helps me ease into the passenger seat, his touch gentle and reverent on my belly.

“How are you feeling?” he asks as he slides behind the wheel, his eyes searching my face. “How’s our little troublemaker today?”

I laugh, resting my hand over his where it lies on my stomach. “Active,” I reply ruefully. “I think we may have a future soccer star on our hands.”

His grin is blinding with joy. “That’s my girl,” he says softly. “Or boy. Whoever they turn out to be, they’re going to be amazing. Just like their mother.”

Tears prick my eyes at his words, at the sheer, unbridled adoration in his gaze. “Nico,” I whisper, my voice choked with emotion.

He lifts my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles. “I love you,” he murmurs against my skin. “I love you so much, Katerina. You’ve given me everything. Everything I never thought I could have, everything I never thought I deserved.”

I cup his cheek, stroking my thumb over the rough stubble and the strong line of his jaw. “You do deserve it,” I tell him fiercely. “You deserve this life, this love, this family. Never doubt that, Nico. Never doubt how much you mean to me. To us.”

He turns his head, pressing a kiss to my palm, his eyes shining. “I won’t,” he vows. “I swear, Katerina. I’ll spend the rest of my life being worthy of this. Of you, of our baby. I’ll be the man you believe me to be.”

“You already are,” I assure him, leaning in to rest my forehead against his. “You already are, my love.”

We stay like that for a long moment, just breathing each other in, savoring the closeness, the connection. Then Nico starts the car, pulling out into the flow of traffic, heading for home.

As we drive, my mind drifts to the shadows still lingering at the edges of our happiness. There’s been no trace of Russo or Luca, no whisper of their whereabouts or their plans. It worries me and I know it bothers Nico too, even if he doesn’t say it. I can see it in the tightness around his eyes sometimes, the way his jaw clenches when he thinks I’m not looking.

But we can’t live in fear of what might be. We can only cherish what we have now. And as Nico parks the car outside our condo building, as he helps me waddle laughingly to the elevator and then through our front door, I feel that truth settle deep into my bones.

This is what matters. These small, perfect moments. The laughter, the love, the teasing arguments over what to have for dinner.

“Thai,” I insist as I kick off my Crocs, rubbing the small of my back with a groan. “I’m craving Pad See Ew like you wouldn’t believe.”

Nico wrinkles his nose, as he reaches out to take over the massaging of my aching muscles. “You know I can’t stand Thai food,” he grumbles. “All that lemongrass and ginger. It’s just wrong.”

I shoot him a glare over my shoulder. “Your pregnant fiancée wants Thai,” I say pointedly. “And what the pregnant fiancée wants, the pregnant fiancée gets.”

He heaves a put-upon sigh, but I can see the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Fine,” he relents. “Thai it is. But I’m getting spring rolls, and you can’t steal any of them this time.”

I grin, victorious, and lean back to press a smacking kiss to his cheek. “Deal.”

Dinner is a lively affair, full of laughter and good-natured bickering. We chat about my day at the hospital, about the new restaurant account Nico’s working on. We speculate about whether the baby is a boy or a girl, tossing around increasingly ridiculous name suggestions until we’re both red-faced and wheezing with mirth.

It’s easy and achingly domestic in a way I never knew I craved until I had it. As we clean up and settle in for the night, and I slip into bed beside the man I love, I feel a rush of pure, bone-deep contentment.

Nico’s chest is a solid wall of warmth against my back. His arm drapes over my hip, his hand splaying possessively over the swell of my belly. He strokes gently, his calloused fingertips tracing intricate patterns over the taut, stretched skin.

“I love you,” he murmurs, his lips brushing the shell of my ear, sending delicious shivers racing down my spine. “So damn much.”

I hum, a soft, contented sound, and turn my head to catch his lips with mine. The kiss is sweet, almost chaste, a gentle press of mouths that feels like coming home. “I love you too,” I whisper against his lips. “More than anything.”

But then his tongue flicks out, tracing the seam of my lips, and the kiss suddenly turns heated and hungry.

His hand slides up from my belly to cup my breast, his thumb swiping over the sensitive peak, coaxing it to aching hardness. I moan into his mouth, my back arching, pressing myself more firmly into his touch.

He groans in response, a low, guttural sound that I feel all the way to my core. His hips flex against my backside, the hard, insistent press of his arousal nestling into the crease of my thighs.

“Nico,” I breathe, my voice hitching on a gasp as his fingers pluck and tease at my nipple. “Please.”

He takes his time undressing me, his hands skimming over every inch of skin as it’s revealed, mapping the changes in my body, the new curves and swells.

He lavishes attention on my breasts, grown heavy and sensitive with pregnancy, until I’m panting and writhing against him, my fingers clenched in his hair.

When his hand finally dips between my thighs and his fingers part my slick folds and find the throbbing, aching center of me, I nearly sob with relief.

He strokes me expertly, circling and flicking and rubbing, winding me tighter and tighter until I’m balancing on the knife’s edge of pleasure, my body drawn taut as a bowstring.

“That’s it, baby,” he rasps, his voice rough with lust. “Let go for me. Let me feel you.”

And I do. I shatter in his arms, my head thrown back on a silent scream as ecstasy crashes over me in dizzying waves. He works me through it, his fingers never stopping their skillful dance, until I’m boneless and trembling, my skin sheened with sweat.

But he’s not done with me yet. He urges me onto my side, spooning up behind me, his chest pressed to my back and his hips cradling my bottom. I feel the blunt, broad head of his cock nudge against my entrance, and then with a slow, inexorable thrust, he’s inside me.

I gasp, my body instinctively clenching around the thick intrusion.

No matter how many times we do this, it always feels like the first time.

It always steals my breath and makes my heart stutter wildly against my ribs.

He starts to move with shallow strokes that tease and torment and make me ache for more.

His hand splays over my belly, holding me steady as he rocks into me, his lips tracing the column of my throat, the curve of my shoulder.

“You feel so good,” he groans, his voice strained with the effort of holding back, of keeping his movements controlled. “So perfect. Like you were made for me.”

I reach back, sinking my fingers into his hair, holding him to me as I start to move with him, matching him thrust for thrust.

The change in angle makes him slide even deeper, hitting that hidden spot inside me that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

“Nico,” I keen, my nails raking over his scalp. “God, *yes*. Right there, don’t stop.”

He growls, a feral, primal sound, and his hips snap forward, driving into me harder and faster.

The pleasure is building again, coiling tighter and tighter in my core, my body tensing and shaking with the force of it.

“Come for me, Katerina,” he commands, his teeth grazing the hinge of my jaw. “Let me feel you come apart on my cock.”

His rough and filthy words full of dark promise are my undoing. I come with a hoarse cry, my body clamping down on him like a vice, my vision whiting out with the intensity of my release.

He follows me over the edge, my name a broken shout on his lips, his hips stuttering as he empties himself deep inside me.

I feel the hot rush of his release and the way his body shudders and tenses. It prolongs my own pleasure, and I clench and ripple around him in delicious aftershocks.

We stay like that for a long moment, our bodies still joined, our hearts pounding in sync as we float down from the high. Nico’s hand strokes soothingly over my belly, grounding me.

“I love you,” he murmurs again, pressing a soft, tender kiss to my temple. “More than my own life. More than anything in this world or the next.”

Tears sting my eyes and my throat clogs because I know it's true. I feel it in every touch, every kiss, every whispered word of devotion.

This man, this fierce, beautiful, damaged *man*…he is my everything. My heart, my soul, my home.

I card my fingers through Nico's damp hair, scratching lightly at his scalp the way I know he likes.

He practically purrs, nuzzling deeper into the crook of my neck. And as I hold him and breathe in the scent of him, the warm, musky smell of sex, my mind drifts back over the long, winding road that brought us here.

The pain, the heartbreak, the trials that at times felt insurmountable.

But we overcame them. We survived, we endured, and we came out the other side stronger than ever.

What started as a dark obsession, as a twisted game of power and control, became something else entirely. It became love. Redemption, for both of us.

Nico's love saved me in more ways than I can count. And in loving him back, in choosing him, I know I saved something in him too. Some lost, broken piece of his soul that he thought was long beyond repair.

We healed each other. We made each other whole.

As I drift toward sleep, wrapped in the arms of the man who holds my heart, I know that will never change.

This is our happy ending. Our forever love.

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EXTENDED EPILOGUE: LUCA

I toss the file onto the passenger seat as I pull out of the garage, the tires of my Aston Martin squealing against the concrete. *Sienna Cross*. The name leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, a reminder of my brother's failures.

Nico had one job. One simple fucking task. Find David Cross's daughter, extract her father's secrets, and tie up the loose ends. But he couldn't even do that right.

No, he had to go and fall for Katerina Sokolov. Sorry, *Dr.* Katerina Sokolov. He had to let that pretty doctor bat her lashes and spread her legs, and suddenly he's a changed man. Suddenly he's too good for the family, too pure for this life.

It makes me sick, remembering how he would preach to me.

How he would look down his nose at the things we had to do, the blood we had to spill.

As if he was any better.

I saw the look on his face when we saw Dino's body for the first time. He never had the stomach for this life, not really.

He just played the part, until Katerina fucking Sokolov ripped it away and exposed him for the weak, sniveling coward he is.

Pathetic.

I should have put a bullet in Katerina's head from the start. It would have saved us all a lot of trouble.

And the Santoro kid, too. They were loose ends, all of them, and entirely expendable. But Nico was weak. And now I'm left to clean up his mess.

Russo was a mess too, in the end. Too unpredictable, too unhinged. He thought he could play us all.

He found out how wrong he was and what happens when you cross Luca Barone.

I took care of him myself, five months ago. Took care of him the way the old school guys took care of Jimmy Hoffa. One more loose end, tied up neat and tidy.

And the best part? Nico and the others are still tearing apart the world looking for him.

The Sokolovs, the Brennans, the Santoros—they're all *so* desperate to find the man who hurt their precious Katerina and Seraphina.

They don't know that he's already fish food. It brings me a twisted sort of joy, knowing that they're still looking over their shoulders while I'm the one who pulled the trigger. The one who ended the great Marco Russo.

I glance at the file again as I merge onto the highway, the photo of Sienna Cross staring up at me.

She's pretty enough, in a girl-next-door sort of way. But it's her eyes that catch me.

There's a defiance there, a strength that seems out of place on such a soft, innocent face.

I wonder if that's what appealed to her partner. The file says he's dead now, some kind of accident. How convenient.

Ah well. One less complication to deal with. I would have had to kill him anyway in order to get to Sienna, so at least that was taken care of for me.

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel as the miles fly by, the city giving way to suburbs, then to open countryside. The safe house is in Montana, of all places. The middle of nowhere, no one around for miles.

The perfect place to stash a valuable asset. Or to make someone disappear.

Not that it matters. By morning, Sienna Cross will be my captive and I'll have the secrets, the leverage, that the Camorra is so desperate for.

They're paying handsomely for the privilege. If I pull this off, I'll finally step out of Nico's shadow and take my rightful place at the top of the food chain.

No more playing second fiddle to the golden boy. No more gritting my teeth and bowing to his every whim. It's *my* turn now. My chance to show them all what I'm really made of.

And I won't let it slip through my fingers. Not for anything, or anyone.

I park the car at the private airstrip, grabbing my bag from the trunk. There's a light breeze that plays with some of the hair around my ears as I glance up.

The plane is waiting for me. The pilot nods to me as I board, the door sealing shut behind me with a hiss.

I settle into my seat, pouring myself a generous glass of scotch from the bar. The engines roar to life, the ground falling away as we lift off into the night sky.

I pull out the file again, studying Sienna's picture in the dim cabin light. Nine months pregnant. Alone and unprotected. It almost feels too easy.

But I know better than to underestimate a target. I know better than to let my guard down, even for a second.

This is business, plain and simple.

The job comes first, no matter what, even if it's personal too. Taking down Sienna Cross isn't just about the money or the power. It's about proving that I'm better than Nico. Stronger, smarter, more ruthless.

It’s about taking what’s mine and burning the rest to the ground.

I toss back my drink, relishing the burn of the alcohol down my throat. Just a few more hours, and it will all be over. A few more hours, and Sienna Cross will be mine.

I trace my finger over her photographed face, a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. *Pretty little Sienna. You have no idea what’s coming for you.*

But you will. Soon enough, you will.

I lean back in my seat, closing my eyes as the plane carries me toward my destiny.

Toward the future I’ve always known was mine.

All I have to do is reach out and take it.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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