

Chapter 1

I was planning to show up at this stupid team-building event, hang around quietly for a bit, then sneak out before anyone noticed. Maybe chat a little with Vicky and Lena—gossip about Nossy and, of course, discuss Sokolov, our CEO. The same Sokolov who, thanks to my loose tongue, the whole company now calls Winter Soldier behind his back. Well, what do you expect when the man always looks like a frozen cyborg? Even glancing his way is risky—you might get frostbite from the glare. Thankfully, I work on another floor and almost never run into him. And I wasn't planning to tonight either, I swear!

But something went wrong...

My phone came to life just as I stepped out of the shower. It pinged once and started blinking insistently, signaling that I had a message waiting.

I didn't even need to check who it was. The notification sound was all too familiar. I had set it myself six months ago, and since then I'd been hearing it far too regularly—day or night—whenever my boss decided it was time to dump another task on me.

I sighed and opened the messenger.

Nossy 7:01 PM

"Grab me a coffee on your way."

Nossy 7:02 PM

"Caramel latte."

Nossy 7:03 PM

"And don't be late!!!"

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. It didn't help. I wanted to chuck my phone off the balcony and never be online again.

I exhaled, gently placed the phone on the nightstand, and—

"AARRRGHHH!!!" I roared at the top of my lungs. That felt a little better.

I glared at the innocent device like it had personally betrayed me.

For the record, I signed up to be an architect—not someone's coffee delivery girl!

For the record, I *have* a name, and after six months of working together, it shouldn't be that hard to remember! And don't even get me started on a magical word every child knows: *please*!

Also for the record, Nossy's real name isn't even Nossy—it's Eleanor G. Nossington. I mean, what kind of parents come up with that? Were they horror novelists or something? That name sounds like it should haunt your nightmares. No wonder the whole office has been calling her Nossy behind her back for the past six months.

Yeah, when I was a freshman dreaming of joining a young, fast-growing company like Sparrow, this was not what I had in mind. I studied hard, started working by sophomore year, and had a solid portfolio by the time I graduated. And all of that for what? To fetch coffee for some smug tyrant?!

Team building, my ass. Oh, I'll give them team building all right! I'll show them just what kind of team building I can do!

I grumbled while getting ready, not realizing how right I was going to be. Oh, I'd give them a show, all right. Every single promise—kept. That's the kind of girl I am.

I nearly missed my stop. Fell asleep on the bus. Got cozy, rested my head against the window, and... barely managed to jump off in time! Thank God the driver hit a pothole—banged my forehead on the glass, which is what woke me up. I jumped onto the sidewalk, narrowly avoiding a puddle. Spun around, trying to spot the sports complex. Oh crap—still need to grab that coffee!

I was running on empty. Working myself to the bone, literally. Days were spent slaving away on Nossy's endless, mind-numbingly simple floor plans—she didn't trust me with anything else, of course. And nights? Nights were for my *real* projects. Private clients. And there were plenty. Honestly, I had a waitlist. Word of mouth worked better than any ad campaign, and I even had to turn down some gigs. Truth be told, my job at Sparrow gave me absolutely nothing—except the satisfaction of checking off a dumb college dream.

Back in school, Sokolov was the stuff of legend. The girls would sigh and swoon—young, handsome, rich! The guys looked at him with hope: if Sokolov made it, maybe they could too. I have to admit, the CEO and founder of Sparrow was, in fact, young and handsome. That much was true. But what impressed me more was his mind. His talent. His drive. Starting a construction company from scratch and landing billion-dollar contracts in just a few years? *That's* what I wanted to learn from him. *That's* what I dreamed about.

Little did I know that, as an intern at Sparrow, the only thing I'd be learning was how to deliver coffee to a bitter old lady who fancied herself a creative genius.

And now—this team-building thing. Whose genius idea was it to book an outrageously expensive sports complex so we could bond by chucking balls over a net instead of actually resting? Only someone as frozen-solid as our Winter Soldier could've come up with that. I tried everything to get out of it. Told Nossy that me and sports were incompatible. That I was guaranteed to trip, fall, break both arms—and maybe someone else's too. Bit of a lie. My coordination's fine. I just really didn't want to go.

"The boss said everyone comes, so everyone comes!" Nossy croaked that morning. And that was that.

The lobby of the luxury sports complex sparkled with chrome and mirrors. Everything was flashy, over-the-top. And completely empty. Because, of course, I was late. At that point it was already clear that hiding in the corner wasn't going to happen. Still, I clung to the hope that I could hand off the coffee, make sure Nossy *saw* me, and then sneak back home—to my energy drinks and yet another half-finished freelance project.

I quickly changed shoes and rushed to drop off my things. The coat check lady, looking like she'd just stepped out of a fashion magazine, smiled sweetly as she took my jacket and pointed me where to go.

I cautiously made my way to the elevator. The beach volleyball court was on the third floor. I heard the music the moment the doors slid open.

And when I stepped inside—I froze.

In the center of the hall stood a wide stretch of sand with a volleyball net. Around it, on polished marble flooring, were tables—set and ready. My colleagues sat at them, dressed to the nines. Waiters in crisp white shirts flitted about, music played in the background... Hold on. Is this a corporate party? And I'm the only idiot who showed up in a tracksuit? Why here, though? Why a sports complex and not a restaurant? None of this makes sense...

I looked around, disoriented, and spotted Nossy at one of the tables. She was sitting with her buddy, the chief accountant, while a tall waiter stood frozen in front of her, holding a bottle of champagne.

Target acquired. Nothing can stop me now. I bolted straight toward my boss, laser-focused. When I reached the table, I tapped the waiter on the shoulder and said,

"Excuse me—coming through."

Then I handed the coffee to Nossy—only to be met with her wide, stunned eyes. And she wasn't looking at me. She was staring past me, somewhere behind my back.

Still clueless, but already feeling a cold prickle between my shoulder blades, I turned around.

Slowly. Cautiously. Or so I thought.

But the coffee had other plans.

The lid popped off, and a perfect caramel foam arc landed right on the white dress shirt of the "waiter."

Who, upon closer inspection, turned out to be Roman Sokolov himself.

Oh. My. God.

Chapter 2

We stand there for what feels like forever—at least thirty full seconds—just staring into each other's eyes. And it's only now that I really get a good look at him. Gaunt face, a hint of stubble on his cheeks. Straight nose. Perfect lips... And that stare—sharp, piercing. Like it's peeling my soul inside out.

"Did you think I was a waiter?" he asked.

"Oh my God..." I dumbly repeated the only thought looping in my brain. And then, even dumber, added, "So *that's* why..."

He raised an eyebrow, and I shut my overly chatty mouth just in time—before the rest of that thought could slip out: "...*I got chills down my spine!*" When the Winter Soldier is standing behind you, it's a miracle your back doesn't freeze over.

Sokolov glanced down at the damage I'd done. And wow—it was bad. Like someone had full-on thrown up caramel foam across his shirt.

"I'm so sorry!" I whispered, horrified.

"Oh God!" Nossy screeched behind me. "Of course it's you! Why did you even bring coffee in here?!"

The nerve. I spun around, totally shocked—and nearly reenacted the coffee disaster, cup and all.

"What?! You're the one who—"

"Careful!" A hand gently caught my wrist. Another pried the cup from my suddenly numb fingers and placed it safely on the table. "Someone else might get hurt."

Warm, my brain noted stupidly, as I stared at the long fingers wrapped around my wrist. Fingers that, for some reason, Sokolov wasn't in a hurry to let go. He even had his thumb resting right on my pulse, as if taking my heart rate—currently spiking out of control.

"Right." I finally snapped out of it and pulled my hand away. "I... I'm really sorry! I didn't mean to! It just... happened. Ridiculous. I'm so sorry again!"

He was studying me with interest, listening to my flurry of apologies. Then, the sharp line of his mouth twitched—just a little.

Was that... a smile?

So he wasn't angry?

I exhaled. And, hoping to seal the deal, I glanced around and blurted:

"Oh—let's go over there!"

And before he could change his mind, I grabbed his arm and marched him toward the elevator. Near the exit, I'd spotted a door marked with a simple "WC."

Apparently, quick thinking had abandoned the boss entirely. Or maybe it was contagious—transmitted from me via airborne embarrassment. I don't know. Either way, he followed me in total silence, all the way to the sparkling restroom where mirrors competed with the lights for who could shine brighter.

Only then did he pull his hand away and lean on the counter by the sinks. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave me that now-familiar raised eyebrow.

"So... what exactly are we doing here?" he asked, scanning me from head to toe. "Not that I'm complaining. You're a lovely woman. But regular apologies would've been enough."

At first, I didn't get it.

I turned on the faucet, grabbed a terry towel from the chrome basket, wet it, and stepped toward Roman Sokolov. The plan was to wipe off the hideous brown streaks on his shirt.

"Here, let me just—"

That's when it hit me. I froze, then shut my eyes, heat flooding my face. *Oh my God, is he serious?!* He thought I brought him to the bathroom... for *that*?!

I let out a breath and opened my eyes, fully expecting my death glare to turn him to stone. Nope. Didn't work. That smug bastard was standing there grinning at me. And the worst part? I found myself thinking—has anyone ever *seen* this man smile before? Because if someone had told me he was capable of it, I wouldn't have believed them.

Yet here he was. Smiling.

"Alright, I'll do it myself," Sokolov said, taking pity on me. He pulled the towel from my fingers and started dabbing at the stain. The shirt soaked instantly, clinging to his chest.

I actually swallowed. Or at least I think I did. Watching those long fingers glide over the wet fabric—again and again—sent another wave of chills through me. What is wrong with me? Fever? Cold sweats? Both?

Sokolov clicked his tongue in annoyance, clearly unimpressed with the results.

"Well, I was going to play anyway," he said, tossing the towel onto the counter. "I'll just change into a T-shirt. No big deal. Let's go."

"Wait—hold on! You've got..."

What the hell am I doing?

Before I could stop myself, I reached out and gently pulled him back—just so I could fasten the button he'd popped loose in his towel battle.

And of course, that was the exact moment someone decided they needed the bathroom. The door swung open, and in walked an attractive woman—wearing jeans and a loose turtleneck, which immediately earned her points in my book. Finally! Someone in normal clothes. Not a white dress shirt at a beach volleyball game.

"Oh! Sorry," she said with a smile. "Didn't know anyone was in here. Roman, aren't you going to introduce us?"

There was a noticeable French R rolling through her words.

"Ahem. Yes, of course. Sabrina, this is..." He trailed off—clearly having no idea what my name was. I took pity on him.

"Eva," I said, offering my hand. "Nice to meet you!"

"Likewise!" The woman beamed at me with a warm, genuine smile.

"Bit of a strange place to meet someone," Roman muttered. "But alright. Eva, allow me to introduce Sabrina—our potential partner. If she likes our projects, we might be working together long-term in Krasnodar."

"Oh, really?" That was news to me. But I could already see the possibilities. For the company—and maybe for me. "That's amazing! Maybe I could help too?"

"What do you do?" Sabrina asked.

"I'm an architect!"

"That's wonderful!" She looked at Roman like I'd just told her I build houses with magic. "Roman, I'd love to see Eva's drawings sometime."

"I'll bring you my portfolio!" I promised, practically bouncing on my toes. Could it be? Was my servitude to Nossy finally coming to an end? I might have just been reborn.

Roman, however, didn't seem to share my enthusiasm. His lips curled into something resembling a smile—but his eyes stayed cold. Sharp. And very clearly said: "*Who asked you, overachiever?*"

This time, *I* was the one raising an eyebrow. I nodded politely to Roman and Sabrina, then strolled out, closing the door behind me. Couldn't help it—I leaned back against it for a second, trying to catch my breath.

What. A. Night.

And to think—I almost didn't come.

"Charming girl you have there, Roman!" I heard Sabrina say through the door. "So natural. And very beautiful. You're lucky to have her!"

"Yes," came Roman's voice after a brief pause (because there's *no way* he actually said that himself!). "I couldn't agree more."

Chapter 3

“Oh, hey, Eva! Come join us!” Leo from marketing waved cheerfully, motioning me over to the group.

I walked over on wooden legs to the table where Vicky, Sokolov’s secretary, Lena, our supply manager, and Leo were sitting. I greeted them automatically, but all I could think about was one thing: why hadn’t Sokolov told Sabrina the truth? That I wasn’t his girlfriend. That we barely even knew each other!

Maybe he really did think I’d do anything for my career. That I’d dragged him into the bathroom to...

My cheeks burned with heat. God, Eva, you absolute idiot. Will you *ever* learn? Dreaming about escaping Nossy—what a joke! After today’s little performance, the Soldier is just going to fire you. For ruining his shirt. For being pushy with Sabrina. For your ridiculous assumptions...

Everyone at the company knew Sokolov didn’t do office romances. And girls who had stars in their eyes didn’t last long. He kept a strict, untouchable image. No drama, no distractions. We even had a clause in our employment contracts banning romantic relationships between employees. *“To ensure full focus on one’s professional duties,”* as it said.

I let out a breath. Damn. I probably needed to explain that it was all just a coincidence... but how? And what if he didn’t believe me?

Then another thought: do I even want to keep this job?

I sat down at the table without a word. My coworkers gave me puzzled looks. I poured myself half a glass of wine and knocked it back. I rarely drank, but I desperately needed something to calm my nerves.

I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d eaten. So the wine hit fast. My head started buzzing, and a kind of reckless lightness filled my chest. Everything felt so... simple. And suddenly, the whole coffee-and-Sokolov incident seemed so absurd it was hilarious. I snorted, then burst out laughing.

I mean, come on! What a story! And whatever—let him fire me. I should’ve quit Sparrow ages ago. At least I’d leave with flair, as the girl who mistook the CEO for a waiter!

I was choking with laughter while my coworkers stared at me in alarm.

“What did the Winter Soldier do to her?” Vicky whispered, her voice dramatic and grave. The others shrugged one by one, and that sent me into another fit of nervous giggles.

“How lively you all are!” came an unfamiliar voice from behind me. “Mind if I join? It’s dreadfully dull over there!”

Without waiting for an invitation, the man pulled out a chair and sat down right next to me, flashing a warm smile my way. I automatically grinned back—all thirty-two teeth on full display. He looked to be in his forties. Dark hair, striking, masculine features. Clean-shaven, unlike Sokolov. And

smiling. This guy clearly wasn't a fan of boredom. The corners of his mouth naturally tilted upward, and laugh lines framed his eyes like he lived for good conversations. I liked him instantly.

Didn't stay a stranger for long, either.

"Igor," he said, offering his hand. "Mikhailov, if the name rings any bells."

My eyebrows lifted in recognition. Oh, it rang plenty. Igor Mikhailov—owner of the largest construction supply company Sparrow ever worked with. One of Sokolov's most important business partners.

"Eva," I said, shaking his hand. Then introduced the rest of the table. And Igor, with zero pretension, shook hands with each one of them just like he did with me. What a nice guy. Not like a certain ice-eyed robot.

The conversation flowed instantly, effortlessly. Igor was easy to talk to—he told little stories from his life, cracked jokes nonstop, and had us laughing like old friends. It was refreshing to see someone so down-to-earth, especially someone with his status. And, of course, right in the middle of all this fun... Everyone at the table fell silent and suddenly froze like a group of startled meerkats.

The wine in me wasn't just lingering—it had been joined by another glass, which Igor and I had downed in a cheerful toast to new acquaintances. That, and the reckless freedom of a doomed employee—because let's face it, I was 100% getting fired after today—was the only explanation I had later for what happened next.

Looking Vicky straight in her wide-eyed stare, I loudly asked, "He's right behind me, isn't he?"

She nodded, terrified. I turned around.

Sokolov had changed clothes. And my eyes landed smack on his abs, clearly outlined under a white T-shirt. For some reason, it took real effort to tear my gaze away. When I did, I looked up to meet his face—deliberately pleasant, eyes set on some point beyond me. Who he thought he was fooling, I had no idea. He looked furious. The whole table had gone sheep-still at the sight of him.

But I had nothing left to lose. Either he'd fire me—and wasn't that already a done deal?—or he'd keep his cool for the sake of appearances in front of his partners.

So I turned toward Igor and announced with a bright, sunny smile,

"See? I told you—Roman set all this up just to get closer to us. To break the ice with his team. Because in a good company, all coworkers are like one big family, right?"

"Of course," he said. Then he lowered his gaze—and I flinched. No smile. Eyes locked on mine as he asked, "Vicky, Lena, how are you doing?"

I caught a glimpse of the girls nodding in sync—clearly having no idea what he'd just asked. Igor glanced between me and Roman, visibly intrigued.

"They seem frightened," I noted in my best nature-documentary voice. "But that's perfectly normal! Roman Sokolov's subordinates possess an uncanny instinct. They can sense a predator from a mile away. That's why they act all tense around the boss, agreeing with his every word."

Pushing the absurdity further, I raised my hand and called out to the girls,

“Smile and wave, girls! Smile and wave!”

They immediately beamed and gave Roman a little wave.

Jaw clenched, he grabbed my wrist, yanked me out from behind the table, and dragged me off.

“What the hell?!” I protested, trying to pull away. “Ow! What are you doing? People are watching!”

“No, what the hell are *you* doing?!” Roman shot back, livid. “Why are you making me look like an idiot?”

“Not an idiot,” I shrugged, “a tyrant and a despot. But don’t worry, you don’t need me for that —you’re doing a bang-up job all by yourself.”

He looked speechless. Clearly not used to people talking to him this way. Well, too bad! He’s the one who announced this little team-building event, now let him enjoy it. We’re about to get so close, it’s gonna hurt.

“I’m going to kill you,” he said suddenly, perfectly calm.

“Absolutely,” I whispered, placing my hand on his chest. I let my fingers drift across the fabric of his tight T-shirt, tracing the dip between his collarbones. Roman froze, like he’d momentarily forgotten where he was. “No doubt. But not today, because right now your potential partner thinks I’m your girlfriend.”

I nodded toward the table, where Sabrina was chatting with Nossy. Then glanced over Roman’s shoulder.

The team sat there looking at me like I’d grown a halo.

“You’re my hero!” Leo mouthed, raising his fists above his head like I’d just won the Olympics. Message received: *Eva, we’ll never forget you.*

Only Igor realized I might need saving.

“So, Roman, you ready?” he asked, rising from the table. “Let’s go play.”

“Let’s go,” Roman replied, not taking his eyes off me. His gaze was dark, but maybe... just maybe... a little thoughtful, too? “We’re picking teams. You!” He pointed straight at me. “You’re on mine.”

Chapter 4

Oh God, what? Me?! Play?! I wasn't planning to play at all! Besides, I was running on zero sleep and wine, and the world was still kind of swaying in front of my eyes. But the look on the boss's face made me hesitate.

And once again, Igor—bless him—came to the rescue.

"Sorry, Roman," he said, smiling sincerely and spreading his hands. "But you're a bit late. I already asked Eva to join my team."

"Oh, is that so? No problem," Roman nodded with a tight smile. His eyes, however, narrowed and darkened like an angry cat's. "Let's go then."

He turned sharply and headed for the center of the court. I just stood there for a second, staring at his athletic frame.

"Come on," Igor winked. "You'll have plenty of time to admire him later."

"To be honest," I mumbled, embarrassed, "I have no idea how to play. I'll just slow you down."

"No worries!" His smile was absolutely disarming. "It's a friendly game, not a championship."

Still unsure, I glanced toward the court, but took Igor's gallantly offered hand.

By then, everyone had split into two teams. Roman picked Sabrina, Vicky, Leo, and a couple of the sportier guys. Igor ended up with a bunch of girls—including me, who was clearly going to be useless.

"Stick close behind me, Eva," Igor suggested. "If the ball comes at you, just hit it back. Like this."

He showed me how to position my hands to avoid injury, and the game started.

It was immediately clear this was a Roman vs. Igor kind of game. They were flying across the court, firing passes back and forth while the rest of us could only stare, completely baffled. Not that I minded—I backed away to the edge of the court to stay out of the way. But the others tried to join in, mostly just getting in each other's way. Roman, meanwhile, was like a man possessed—he was slamming the ball with so much force that it made a hollow thud, like it was about to pop.

At one point, he sent it flying over the net with such power that Igor didn't have time to react.

And then everything happened so fast: I saw the ball hurtling toward my face, completely forgot Igor's instructions, shrieked, and threw up my hands in a panic. It hit me like a torpedo and knocked me flat on my back.

Pain exploded at the back of my head, the world shattered into pieces—and then it all just went dark.

"Eva! Eva, wake up!"

"Don't just stand there—call an ambulance!"

“Eva!!!”

“Roman, move.”

“Back off!”

“I said move! She needs air!”

“Eva, come on, wake up!”

Why does my head hurt so much... Why are they all shouting? That voice sounds familiar. Wait—is that Sokolov? How does he even know my name?

And what the hell is going on?

I opened my eyes and tried to sit up. What’s with the crowd? Where am I?

“Thank God! Are you okay? Eva?”

Sokolov was hovering over me like a hawk. I coughed. My head exploded with pain—and then it all came rushing back. Volleyball. The ball. Flying straight at my face. Darkness.

“Well, sure, you said you’d kill me, but I didn’t think you meant *this* fast,” I muttered.

I tried to sit up again. The pain was sharp in the back of my head, even though I was pretty sure the ball hit my forehead...

“Where does it hurt? Are you okay?”

Roman gently turned my head, checking the back. It felt like it was on fire. I waved him off.

“I’m fine.”

My voice sounded like a whispering ghost.

“Don’t move—I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“No!” The cry slipped out before I could stop it. “Not you! I’ve had enough team building for today!”

And then it hit me: I’d just called the Winter Soldier “you.” *Again.*

“She’s fine. I’ll take her,” Igor said from behind Roman.

“I said I’ll do it myself. End of discussion.”

He snapped like a whip. Even Igor fell quiet. In the sudden silence, I could hear my own heartbeat echoing in my ears. Thump-thump-thump. Must be from the fall?

I tried getting up again, but the world tilted sideways.

“I said don’t move.” Roman’s scowl was back in full force. “I’m carrying you to the car.”

“There’s no need for that! I’ll be fine in a minute, and—”

But as soon as I tried to stand, my head spun again and I collapsed right back into the sand.

Roman cursed under his breath. Pretty sure it was something about stubborn, foolish girls, but I didn't catch the exact words.

"Hold on to me."

Sokolov scooped me up like I weighed nothing and strode toward the exit. Two female staffers from the sports complex flitted around us, rushing to open doors, offering water, an ambulance, or painkillers. Maybe they were afraid I'd sue the place, or maybe they genuinely wanted to help. I wrapped my arms around Sokolov's neck, breathing in the scent of his cologne, mixed with that sharp, warm masculine smell. And it felt... strangely comforting. I wanted him to carry me forever, just like this. I wanted to keep breathing him in.

Get a grip, girl. That ball really did a number on your head.

A car chirped as someone unlocked it—Igor ran ahead to open the door of Roman's sleek black Mercedes. He gently settled me into the front seat. One of the gym girls draped a blanket over my shoulders, and Vicky handed me my backpack. The door slammed shut—and then we were off, Roman tearing down the road like we were in a race.

We sped through the city, streaks of light sliding across the windshield. I snuck glances at Roman and couldn't help but notice something had shifted in his face. When exactly did the Winter Soldier mask slip? The man gripping the wheel was made of fire. Veins bulged across his tense knuckles. A dark lock of hair fell over his forehead. A muscle twitched in his jaw. His profile looked carved from stone, but the corners of his mouth trembled just slightly. Was he nervous? Angry? What was going on with him?

And God, he was still in that T-shirt. The heat radiating from him rivaled the heated seats.

The world wouldn't hold still—it kept warping and spinning. I closed my eyes for a moment, and when I opened them again, I wasn't in the car anymore. I was staring up at bright lights on a white-paneled ceiling. Roman was carrying me again, and once more, my arms were wrapped around his neck.

People in scrubs rushed toward us, but the world kept spinning and spinning. Or maybe it was just the two of us, flying off into the unknown.

"Stay with me, Eva!" His eyes—deep brown anchors—held me in place, kept me from slipping away. That voice... no trace of harshness now, only worry.

"I'm scared," I whispered. "Hold on to me, or I'll fall... This ride's too fast."

But then Roman set me down somewhere, and the world spun even harder. It was going to tear us apart, fling us into separate universes where we'd never find each other again.

I couldn't breathe. My heart pounded with panic.

I cried out and clutched Roman's hand like my life depended on it.

"Don't go!" I whispered through a shaky breath. "Please... just don't let me go!"

The gurney jolted, and we had to let go. The moment our fingers parted, the world went dark.

Chapter 5

A small room with a single bed. Dim light. A soft glow spread from the bedside lamp. The window had turned a pale gray with the early morning light.

But neither the hospital room, nor the fact that I had absolutely *no memory* of how I ended up here, nor even the gauze bandage wrapped around my numb scalp felt as surreal as the man snoozing in the chair beside me. Roman Sokolov—Winter Soldier and CEO of Sparrow—was fast asleep on my bed, his dark-haired head resting on his arms.

Umm. So... does this mean I *won't* get fired after all?

Bits and pieces of last night were starting to come back to me. The team-building event. Spilled coffee. A ball slamming into my head. A blur of bright lights flashing past the car window. After that, everything was a fog. I think Sokolov carried me here... laid me on a gurney... And then what? More importantly—why did he stay? Guilt, maybe?

I could only imagine what I looked like right now. Head wrapped in gauze, strands of scarecrow hair sticking out from my makeshift turban. Probably dark circles under my eyes, too. Mmm, just *perfect* for strutting my stuff in front of the sexy boss! So much for the no-office-romance policy—clearly, Sokolov will be powerless to resist me now!

A nervous little laugh escaped my chest, and Roman stirred at once. He lifted his head, blinking drowsily at me. Then he sat up straight and rubbed his forehead.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

Oh god. This is worse than I thought. He’s even more irresistible half-asleep! That messy hair, the red mark on his cheek... All the things that would make a normal person look like a disaster somehow made him even more attractive. Like some mysterious spell had turned a cold robot into a real, vulnerable human being.

I have this one ridiculous quirk. It tends to ruin my life, but I just can’t get rid of it. When I get nervous, I start laughing. And when I get *really* nervous—I start joking like a complete idiot.

So naturally, seeing Sokolov all relaxed and post-nap next to me, I got horribly flustered. And the only thing my brain could come up with was to lean toward him and whisper in a tragic voice:

“Who are you?!”

His eyes flew wide open, now fully awake.

“You don’t remember me?!”

A dark strand of hair fell across his eye. He stared at me—part confused, part worried.

Nope, I can’t resist this. I reached out, touched the strand lightly with my fingers, brushed it from his face, and repeated:

“Who *are* you... and what have you done with my scary, stone-cold boss?!”

He clicked his tongue and flopped back into the chair, covering his face with his hand—but I saw his shoulders start to shake. Between laughs, he managed to choke out:

“God, you’re going to drive me insane!”

I just shrugged with a grin. Well, you work with what you’ve got. And considering my current list of charms consisted of a swollen face and a gauze turban, my best bet was clearly a sense of humor.

Wait. Why do I even want to impress him? That wasn’t part of the plan!

Smiling faintly, I asked,

“So really, what are you doing here?”

He stopped laughing, though the smile stayed glued to his face. And wow, did it suit him.

“You asked me to stay. Don’t you remember?”

I shrugged again. Maybe I had asked, I didn’t remember. But why did he stay? As if answering my thoughts, he explained,

“I wanted to contact your family, let them know you were here. But Victoria didn’t have any of their details. And I thought it would be wrong to leave you like this. Especially since this was entirely my fault.”

Ah. So that’s what it was. A bitter heat spread through my chest, like I’d actually believed—for one silly second—that he wanted to be here. I inhaled sharply and smiled wider.

“Well, I’m alive and practically healthy, so there’s no need for you to stay anymore.”

With polite interest, I fixed my gaze just above the neckline of his t-shirt, where a vein pulsed gently in his sun-kissed neck. A truly beautiful sight—I could look at it all day. I didn’t have the strength to look any higher anyway.

“Hey,” he said, taking my hand. I had no choice but to lift my eyes to his. “You can drop the formal tone. After everything that happened last night...”

“You’re obligated to marry me now?” I burst out with exaggerated delight—then instantly felt the heat flood my cheeks. “Oh god, I was joking, obviously.”

“Really?” Sokolov said thoughtfully. “Damn. And here I was, trying to figure out which registry office opens earliest. I mean, who in their right mind would pass up a girl like you?”

And the guy—the audacity!—went and adjusted the bandage on my temple!

I stared at him in silent disbelief.

“U-N-B-E-L-I-E-V-A-B-L-E! Roman Sokolov knows how to joke!”

“No one’s going to believe you,” he chuckled.

I just shook my head. Amazing. All it took was a blow to the head for the Winter Soldier to show his human side.

"Listen," he suddenly frowned, his tone turning serious. "I really am sorry. For all of it. I don't even understand how it happened."

"You mean you didn't do it on purpose?" I said, mock-shocked. "And here I thought you were just being true to your word—you did say you'd kill me!"

"You're definitely feeling better," he smirked. "The sarcasm's back."

"Alright!" I slapped my palm over his hand. It just sort of happened—automatic, natural. But then we both looked down at our intertwined fingers. Then back up. Our eyes met. I pulled my hand away, cheeks burning again, and, pretending nothing had happened, said, "Alright! You're forgiven—but only on one condition."

He instantly frowned, slipping back into business mode. Gave me a questioning look.

I scooted closer and enunciated each word like a commandment:

"You have to admit that organizing that team-building event was a *terrible* idea!"

And I thoroughly enjoyed watching the smile creep back onto that annoyingly handsome face. What, did he think I was going to demand compensation for the head injury? Or actually make him marry me? Why'd he get so tense? Is he just used to everyone wanting something from him?

Meanwhile, outside, daylight had fully settled in. Sokolov stood up and walked around the room a bit, stretching out his stiff limbs. I tracked his little stroll, quickly looking away every time he turned in my direction. He was still in his t-shirt and joggers. The thin fabric clung to his muscled frame; every move made his muscles ripple under his skin. Graceful. Like a panther. I could watch him for hours.

The spell was broken by a man in blue medical scrubs striding into the room.

"Well, how's our volleyball champ doing?" he asked cheerfully as he popped his head in.

"Ready for the next round!" I chirped.

"Well, look at you, full of energy!" the doctor grinned. "Already thinking about going home, huh? I'd recommend staying at least a couple more days. You've got a mild concussion and three stitches on the back of your head. Doesn't look too serious at first glance, but your test results show that your body's run down. And I don't like that. I'd really prefer to monitor you and run a few more tests."

"Oh, no, that's totally unnecessary!" I protested. "I just... you know, overdid it a little. Haven't been sleeping well lately. I'll catch up on rest over the weekend and be good as new!"

"Good as new? Please. Fresh as a daisy, maybe—after a thunderstorm." the doctor shot back, beaming. "No weekends for you! I'll let you go only on one condition—minimum one week of sick leave!"

He turned to Sokolov with mock sternness. "Roman! I'm putting this entirely on your shoulders!"

He nodded calmly.

"She's not setting foot in the office for at least a week."

Oh, fantastic. They were already conspiring against me! A whole week?! I promised that portfolio to Sabrina! That might be my only shot at escaping Nossy's tyranny!

Well, whatever. First things first—get out of here. I'll deal with the rest later.

Chapter 6

"I get knocked down, but I get up again, you're never gonna keep me down..."

The song—absurdly perfect for what I've just been through—is blasting from the speakers, and I'm singing at full volume, swaying just a little in the passenger seat. The painkillers are still working, I've had a full night's sleep, and I feel fantastic.

Roman glances sideways at me, half-suspicious, but his fingers tap the rhythm on the steering wheel.

"When we get home," he mutters as the song ends, "I need the name of whatever they gave you at that clinic. And a double dose."

"Pffft," I snort, smug. "Sorry—born this way. You wouldn't survive it."

He smirks and shakes his head, probably wondering what kind of cosmic punishment landed me on his team. But it's fine. He'll drop me off now, and we'll go our separate ways.

So why does that thought sting a little? Somehow, impossibly, I'd gotten used to this version of him—the warm, human one hiding behind the Winter Soldier mask.

When we pulled up in front of my building, Roman got out and opened the door for me. It was drizzling, and the only thing I had on was the gym blanket I'd smuggled out from the sports complex.

He, on the other hand, was still rocking just a T-shirt like it was mid-July—not a hint of discomfort on his face.

"Which floor?" he asked, scanning the high-rise. "I'll walk you up."

I wanted to say no, but his stubborn look made me sigh and shrug. Hey, if the man wanted to be a gentleman, who was I to stop him?

We headed for the entrance, and he stayed close, watching like a hawk to make sure I didn't trip over anything.

The elevator that arrived was the tiniest one in existence. Roman stepped aside, let me in first, then squeezed in after me. We stood so close I could feel the heat radiating off his body. His cologne mixed with his natural scent—clean, sharp, and something distinctly his. I was pressed between him and the elevator wall, and sure, there was a bit of space left by the door—I could have stepped back and put some distance between us...But for some reason, he didn't move. And I could feel his gaze on my face. My neck. My curves...

Something tightened inside me. Oh no. Girl, pull it together! Or what? Gonna invite him in for coffee?

Immediately, that treacherous little voice inside me perked up: "And why not?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to steady my breath. Because! That's why! He banned workplace relationships for a reason! Ninety percent of the time they ended badly! And even if they didn't—what kind of relationship were we talking about here? Roman Sokolov switched girlfriends like TV channels. I'd never once heard of him having a steady girlfriend. And being someone's one-night distraction? No, thanks. Not my thing.

The elevator stopped, and the doors slid open. Roman stepped out first and moved aside, letting me pass. Was he seriously walking me all the way to my apartment? Oh boy.

I dug around in my backpack a bit longer than necessary, pretending to search for my keys. Roman waited patiently, hands shoved into his pockets. Why was he still here? Why wasn't he leaving? The nerves bubbling under my skin kept tugging at the corners of my lips. Finally, the lock clicked, and I stepped inside, flipping on the lights. Roman hovered on the threshold like a vampire waiting to be invited in.

"Um." I shifted awkwardly. "I'd offer you coffee, but I think it'd be awkward for both of us."

"I wouldn't say no to coffee," he replied quickly. He pulled his hands from his pockets... and stuffed them right back in.

And that's when it hit me: he was nervous too. Wait, what? Roman Sokolov. Nervous. This was the man who kept a poker face after winning a billion-dollar contract to build a luxury mall. I blinked at him, stunned. Nervous. Because of me? No way. That was ridiculous. I knew exactly what kind of women someone like Roman went for: tall, sleek, high-maintenance types. Legs for days. Languid stares. Lips full of filler and secrets. Not girls with bandaged heads and hospital blankets draped over their shoulders.

No, I know I'm naturally beautiful. From my father, I inherited light, almost white-blond hair; from my mother—a delicate, wide-eyed face. "Living doll!" screamed the headlines in European fashion magazines about ten years ago. "Slavic angel." My mom adored those magazines, bought stacks of them...

For a moment, I paused, trying to name the emotion creeping in. Regret? Satisfaction? Hard to tell. My mother, a former model forced to retire early because of me, had poured all her ambition into my childhood. She never missed a casting, never skipped a shoot. And she did it—turned me into a star of the child modeling world.

Back then, I thought it was my dream. But when I grew up, I realized it had always been hers. I wanted something else entirely—proof that I was worth more than just a pretty face.

From a young age, I'd mastered what most girls only figured out much later: how to command a room. I knew how to walk in and make heads turn. But I used that trick rarely—because I hated the way they looked at me. Like I was just a hot piece of prey. Predator stares, judging the outside and never once wondering what was underneath. So I kept things simple: jeans, hoodies, no makeup. If a man liked me like this—wrapped in a blanket, hair a mess under the bandages, sweatpants still caked with sand—he'd need to have a very particular type. Roman Sokolov wasn't standing here because of some sudden burning attraction. So what was he still doing here?

All those thoughts flashed through my head in a second. Then I stepped aside.

"Well... come on in."

Roman's presence made my already tiny apartment feel even smaller. He stood there, looking around—and did he look... lost? No way. Mr. Ice-Cold Poker Face himself, our personal Winter Soldier, suddenly didn't know where to put himself. Good. Let him see how regular people live for once. I bet he's never set foot in a studio apartment in his entire spoiled-rotten life.

Yeah, it's tiny and way out on the edge of the city. But it's mine. I worked myself half to death designing other people's houses and cutting every corner possible, just to get the mortgage on the shortest plan. In a couple more years, this little fortress will be all mine. I picked out every piece of furniture, set everything up exactly how I like it. And I'm damn proud of it.

"You... uh..." Roman glanced around. "You live in this little box?"

"Hey, you're a guest," I reminded him, jabbing a finger into his chest. "So don't insult my baby."

"You're right," he nodded solemnly. "But seriously, I'm already getting claustrophobic in here."

"Oh, please! Just come in, will you? I'll be right back."

I grabbed the first pair of jeans and a sweater I saw in the closet and darted into the bathroom. Leaned my forehead against the door and exhaled. A nervous laugh escaped me. I mean, come on—Roman Sokolov, CEO of a billion-dollar construction empire, was standing in the middle of my tiny studio apartment looking like he was afraid to touch anything.

I giggled. Then slapped a hand over my mouth and flipped on the hairdryer so I could laugh freely behind the noise.

Okay, now what do I do with him? Offer him tea? Why is he even here?

And, of course, my brain helpfully conjured up some... other ideas. Things to do with the Winter Soldier in a small apartment. Say, on the couch. Or the table. Maybe even the windowsill. You know, it's not that cramped after all.

I jolted and wagged a finger at my reflection. "Eva, stop it. You're acting like a cat in heat."

My reflection stared back with sad blue eyes framed by shadows. Looking real good, Eva. I reached for my concealer, then tossed it aside with a scowl. What's the point? He's already seen me in all my glory. He'd definitely notice the pathetic attempt at a quick fix.

No, thank you. I don't need any more humiliation today.

Maybe I could just stay in the bathroom a little longer. With any luck, he'd really catch a case of claustrophobia and make a run for it. That'd be nice.

But when I finally came out fifteen minutes later, he was still there—hands in his pockets, staring out the window.

I froze.

No-no-no-no-no. Eva, you idiot. Now he's definitely going to fire you. Oh God...

A sigh slipped from my lips, and Roman turned around.

“You’ve got some interesting balcony decor,” he said dryly.

I had no comeback. Not when the side wall of the balcony had a dartboard on it... complete with a photo of Roman, full of tiny holes.

Chapter 7

In the funeral silence of my apartment, the only sound was my spoon clinking against the edge of my teacup. Roman was drinking his coffee black.

I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't dare look up from the table. God, this was awkward. I hadn't wanted him to come inside, and for good reason. I'd completely forgotten about that photo. It went up during a burst of frustration with how unfair things were at the company. The anger at Sokolov had passed—but the photo stayed. And honestly? It was kind of funny. How could I have known he'd suddenly show up?

"Do you really hate me that much?"

His voice wasn't angry or sarcastic. If anything, he sounded... thoughtful.

I glanced up, cautiously.

"Uh... no. Of course not. Hate? No way. That's just... you know, a coping mechanism."

He gave a low snort.

"No, really! You know in Japan, some offices have punching bags with their boss's face on them. It helps people blow off steam without hurting anyone."

"Oh, seriously? Maybe we should get one. You might actually enjoy it."

"Look, I didn't mean to offend you..."

"You don't say."

"Ugh!" I was starting to get mad. "This is my apartment. I can hang whatever I want in here. And I never imagined you'd ever set foot in it!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes, exactly! You didn't have to walk me home. Or drag me to that stupid team-building thing. I didn't even want to go last night! None of us did! But everyone's too scared of you to say it! And you don't get to treat people like this. Sure, we work for you—but we're not your property!"

With every word, his face hardened. His eyes darkened. I should've shut up—but something in me snapped, and it all came pouring out. How I was always working—late nights, weekends, even when I was sick. How the idea of a promotion felt like a cruel joke. How Nossy kept stealing credit for other people's projects, and no one dared complain, because getting through to the almighty Sokolov was harder than quitting. I told him how demeaning it felt, how his commands were absolute—even when they had nothing to do with work. I just stood there, unloading all of it right in his face. He said nothing, just stared, jaw clenched, lips pressed into a razor-thin line, his knuckles white around the coffee mug.

Winter Soldier, my ass. Did this man feel anything besides bruised ego?

Finally, I ran out of steam and shut my mouth. He didn't say a word. Just kept looking past me, expression unreadable—stone-faced and still.

And that's when it hit me—like *really* hit me. Oh God. I'd just unleashed hell on one of the most powerful people in construction. If he so much as snapped his fingers, I'd never land another project again. He could not only fire me—he could bury my entire future in architecture.

A cold shiver ran down my back. God, what a complete idiot I was. Would I ever learn to shut up and pick my words more carefully? Especially around my boss? But seriously—this was on him! What was he even doing here, showing up at my place in those damn sweatpants and that T-shirt with nothing underneath? Sitting there all... sexy and distracting. He totally threw me off my game, that's why I forgot who I was talking to!

Oh crap. Now what? Apologize? Yeah, right.

"Got it all out of your system?" he finally said. He set the mug down carefully and stood. "Thank you. You've given me a lot to think about. Glad I stopped by. Thanks for the coffee."

Like a robot. I swear.

A wave of despair hit me. Honestly, it would've been better if he'd yelled at me. Thrown the mug. Snapped. Acted like a normal human being. *Anything* would've been better than standing there, empty-eyed, politely thanking me for tearing him to shreds. That just made me feel worse.

"No need to walk me out," he added in that same mechanical tone. "Also, take it easy next week. Remember what the doctor said. Take care, Eva."

I stood frozen at the table, unable to say a word. Only when the door clicked shut behind him did I let out a growl and hurl my spoon at the wall.

"Take care?!"

Seriously?

He might as well have said '*See you around!*'

I started pacing in circles. My head began to throb, but I didn't care. What now? Should I just write a resignation letter before he finds an excuse to fire me? Is there an official clause for 'insulting the CEO'? Probably not—but who knows. I should ask Vicky. Then again—screw it. What difference would it make? I *needed* this job. Sure, most of my income came from freelance gigs, but it wasn't nearly enough to cover the mortgage. God, every day was like a rollercoaster lately.

The pain in my head got worse. I took a pill, stripped down, and climbed into bed—but sleep wouldn't come. I kept tossing and turning, my stitched-up head pulsing with each heartbeat. My chest ached too, like my heart was clenching tighter with every breath.

One minute I was furious, the next—I was genuinely sorry. Maybe Sokolov wasn't as bad as I'd thought. The truth was, we had a simple management chain: each department had its own head who answered directly to him. The rest of us—small fry—answered to them. Maybe he hadn't even known what was going on.

Okay, fine—maybe someone needed to open his eyes. But *not* like that. Not by yelling at him like some unhinged maniac. I should've been polite. Professional.

Oh, Eva... When will you learn that your sharp tongue always gets you in trouble?

Eventually, I drifted off.

I spent all of Sunday in bed, binging TV shows and popping painkillers. The same thoughts looped over and over. By the end of the day, I'd made a decision: I *would* apologize. Not because I was scared of losing my job, but just... because it was the decent thing to do.

And I'd hand in my resignation. It was fine. This was a metropolis, after all. I'd find something else. Just making that decision gave me some peace, and the rest of the day passed quietly.

Then, Monday morning, I got a message from Vicky.

"Evaaaa, you're seriously missing the drama here! Winter Soldier's lost his damn mind! He's doing some kind of massive purge! Fired Nossy—can you believe it?! Put Danny in her place for now. Made a couple more shakeups. The department heads are sitting in the waiting room shaking like chihuahuas. Me and Lena have no idea what to expect—he's clearly in one of those moods today. Half the office might be gone by lunch! What's he gonna do, hire all new people?? And what are we supposed to do? Evaaaa... Tell me you have nothing to do with this?!"

Chapter 8

I was lacing up my boots in a panic, jabbing the laces into the wrong holes like a lunatic. After finally wrangling them into submission, I checked myself in the mirror. Eh. Good enough. I'd taken the bandage off yesterday and now had my hair twisted up into a loose bun to hide the stitches on the back of my head. Okay, dark circles—concealer. What else? Too pale—touch of blush. Not too much. Natural. Like I'm just this effortlessly fresh person, you know?

One more critical once-over. Loose-fit blue jeans, striped sweater. Totally normal. Classic me.

But Vicky's message kept flashing before my eyes: *"Tell me you have nothing to do with this?!"*

Oh, sweet, naive Vicky. I had *everything* to do with it. Because it was pretty damn clear that after our little heart-to-heart, Sokolov lost his mind and went on a firing spree. Fine, I won't pretend to feel bad for Nossy. Honestly? I was a tiny bit smug. Just a pinch. Barely noticeable. But the others? Why should they get caught in the crossfire? Of course the managers were all shaking in their overpriced shoes—Sokolov pays decently, even by big-city standards. No one wants to lose a job like that, not even if it comes with a control-freak boss straight out of a dystopian startup.

Ugh, that damn sharp tongue of mine!

I had to fix this. The plan was simple—go to the office, apologize to Sokolov, tell him to stop firing people because *I* was the one who crossed the line. And anyway, he didn't need to fire me either, because I'd just quit. Problem solved. Most importantly—my girls shouldn't suffer for this. They had nothing to do with it and didn't deserve to end up collateral damage.

My phone pinged—taxi had arrived. As much as I was trying to save money lately, I had the common sense not to take the subway. I wasn't exactly back to one hundred percent. My head barely ached now, mostly the stitches just itched. And sometimes I still got lightheaded—but I'd figured out the trick: close your eyes, lower your head, maybe sit down. Wait thirty seconds. Passes like magic. Otherwise, I was fine.

Until I got in the damn car. Motion sick in five minutes flat. It was stuffy, the driver had some depressing country-pop mashup blaring from the speakers—like heartbreak on repeat, and I was *this* close to screaming. Thank God it wasn't rush hour yet—we made it without much traffic.

The office was buzzing like a kicked-over beehive. Seemed like everyone had been affected by the shakeup in one way or another. People were gathered in little clusters around desks, nobody working.

"Eva!" Lena broke away from one of the groups and rushed over. "What are you doing here?! You're on sick leave!"

"Everything's fine!" I winced at Lena's shrill voice but managed a smile. "Got bored at home. And from what I hear, there's no chance of that happening here."

"No kidding!" She laughed, then lowered her voice. "You heard the news?"

"About Nossy?"

"Yeah! You should've seen her—total fury mode! Stormed in, threw stuff around, screamed that he'd regret this!"

"You mean Sokolov?"

"Uh-huh! Though he gave her a pretty nice severance. A couple of full paychecks—just to make her leave on the spot without working her two weeks."

Lena giggled.

"None of us could figure out what's gotten into him. We're thinking—what if the company's going bankrupt? You don't know anything? You two left together on Friday..."

She wiggled her eyebrows meaningfully, and I felt my face go bright red.

"Oooh, look who's blushing," she teased. "Spill it!"

"There's nothing to spill," I deflected, stepping back. "I should go say hi to Danny. He's, uh... technically my new boss now."

"Lucky you!" she called after me with mock envy.

Yeah. Real lucky.

The office was a mess. My desk—the last one by the door, next to the water cooler—had been pushed out of place. The drawers were slightly open, like someone had been rummaging through them. My jacket from Friday at the rec center was still crumpled over the chair.

"Hey, Eva!" Danny poked his head in. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, Danny. Or should I say... boss?"

"Oh, stop it," he waved me off. "Tell me, which projects did you do for Eleanor? Sokolov's asking."

I dropped into my chair—right onto the crumpled jacket. My head spun. I scrambled to think.

"He's asking? Why?"

"Says he wants to personally review the team's work."

"You know she didn't give me much. Just standard drafts—but lots of them."

"That's exactly what I told him."

I had planned to hand in my resignation, but not in front of Danny. No questions, no drama. So I started rearranging pens and folders on my desk, hoping he'd take the hint and leave.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway just as Danny finally sat down at his desk. Quiet but firm, getting closer. And closer. Then they stopped—right at our door. Suddenly, I wanted to crawl under my desk. Because somehow, on a deep instinctive level, I knew those footsteps.

Sokolov hardly ever came down here—usually just summoned Nossy when he needed something. But this... this steady, deliberate rhythm? That was definitely him.

The door opened, and I shrank in my chair. I'd been so determined to barge into his office and apologize—so sure of myself—that it hadn't even occurred to me... what if he didn't want my apology?

"Danny, this is it?" Sokolov walked in, flipping through a folder. "This is nonsense."

"Agreed, Roman," Danny said quickly. "But that's all we've got. Ask Eva yourself!"

Traitor. He pointed at me like I was a suspect in a lineup. And I'd just about managed to sink halfway down my chair unnoticed!

Sokolov slowly lowered the folder and turned his gaze on me. He stared at the way I was half-curved behind my desk—and with every passing second, his eyes narrowed more and more, until he looked like a pissed-off cat. All he was missing were the twitching whiskers.

I let out a nervous laugh, then slapped a hand over my mouth.

"What. The hell. Are. You. Doing. Here?" the cat—sorry, the CEO—hissed, punctuating each word.

"I told you not to set foot in this office this week!"

He leaned in, locking his eyes on mine. And just like that, I was back in that hospital room. Him holding my hands. Me begging him not to leave. My chest tightened. My vision blurred.

Breathe. Just breathe. This will pass.

"Hey!" Roman's voice sounded like it was coming from underwater. "Eva!"

"Should I get her a pill or something?" Danny asked, alarmed.

I shook my head and blinked hard.

"I'm... I'm fine. It's fine. I'm okay."

"Why did you come?" Sokolov asked, suddenly gentle. I'd never heard his voice like that before. Was this guy made of mood swings?

"I wanted to talk."

He gave me a long, unreadable look. Then motioned toward the door.

"Well, since you're already here... come on. I wanted to talk to you too."

Chapter 9

I'd never been in this office before. Only the reception area. I used to drop off blueprints and stop to chat with Vicky. Now, as Sokolov and I passed the front desk, she gave me a huge-eyed stare and mouthed something dramatic. Probably demanding all the juicy details—like why on earth the CEO of Sparrow was walking me into his office with his hand gently resting on my waist.

I did try to wriggle out of his grip, honestly. But he frowned and muttered that spending a second night in the hospital with me wasn't in his schedule. So I should just walk quietly and stop drawing attention. Yeah, sure. Too late for that. I was glowing so red it's a miracle the hallway lights didn't flicker out from shame. Vicky's wide eyes followed us, and all I could do was lower my head and pretend I didn't exist.

His office was spacious, bright, and incredibly stylish. Massive floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the riverfront. The furniture was black and white, sleek and minimal. A single laptop sat on the otherwise empty desk. Sharp. Pricey. Impeccably tasteful. Just like Sokolov.

"Take a seat," he said, gesturing to a white armchair across from his desk. Then he sat down, typed something quickly on his phone. "Vicky will bring tea in a second. I'm not offering coffee—you probably shouldn't have any right now."

I sat down, mentally scrambling for where to begin.

Sokolov didn't help. He just stared at me in silence. It felt like we were both putting off the inevitable. Thankfully, Vicky floated into the room just then, carrying a tray. She placed cups, sugar, and a candy dish on the table with theatrical care. Then gave me a look so loaded I almost ducked for cover before she swept out, dramatically silent. Great. I was definitely getting interrogated later. If only I knew what this conversation was going to be about.

"So what are you doing here?" Sokolov finally asked. "Why did you come?"

"I wanted to apologize," I mumbled, staring at my hands. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that..."

"We've already settled that part, remember?" he said. Then his voice turned sharp, and I looked up. "And don't ever apologize for your beliefs. You told me what you thought, and I thanked you for it. That's the end of it."

"But didn't you... fire a bunch of people today?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Who told you that? I only fired Eleanor. And she had it coming. I've had my doubts about her for a while. What you said confirmed them. She's been stealing credit for other people's work. After that, there was no question. You disagree?"

I blinked at him, unsure what to say. I mean... does it matter if I agree or not? He owns the company—his call.

"Drink your tea," he nodded toward the cup, and I gratefully picked it up, using it as a shield.

So he's not mad at me? I'm... not getting fired? Dear God, I'm completely lost.

Meanwhile, he got up and walked across the room. Stood by the window. Rocked on his heels, hands in his pockets. And, well, with the setting sun casting a golden glow over his athletic frame, I may have taken a moment to admire the view. Until he suddenly turned around—and caught me looking. Didn't even pretend to look away. Smooth.

"Did you have anything else to say?" he asked, walking back to his seat.

I gave a vague shrug.

"Alright then," he said firmly. "I'll talk."

He drummed his fingers on the desk. His face was unreadable, but I *swear* he was nervous. Just like that night in my apartment. And once again, I had no idea why Mr. Titanium Nerves would be anxious around me.

"Okay, fine," he said sharply, like scolding himself. "I'm not one to beat around the bush. So I'll be direct: I have a proposition for you."

"For *me*?" I felt incredibly dumb. A job offer? Then why the nerves? My frustration flared—God, I hate not understanding things.

"Yes, for you," he repeated. "I want you to be my girlfriend."

Pretty sure my jaw hit the floor. He must've noticed, because he rushed to add:

"Not really. Just pretend. For business. Temporarily. Until we close the contract."

Oh thank God.

Now it was my turn to pace the office. To say I didn't see that coming would be the understatement of the century. It felt like a whole skyscraper had just come crashing down on my head—complete with dramatic music and slow-motion debris. The words were stuck somewhere inside me, itching and clawing at my throat, but unable to come out in any coherent form.

I stopped in the middle of the room, took a few deep breaths. Then I practically lunged back to the desk and downed the cold tea in one go. The words softened instantly—and came tumbling out in a rush.

"Okay, hold on. Let's double-check I understood this correctly. Because—fun fact—I recently took a decent hit to the head, and now I question both my physical and mental health. So..."

I took another breath.

"You just asked me to be your girlfriend? What was it... temporarily? For business?!"

He nodded slowly.

I dropped back into the chair and declared, with full authority:

"I want details. All of them. What gave you this brilliant idea and how exactly is it supposed to help your business?"

He leaned back in his chair and smirked. And just like that—my heart tripped over itself. I ignored it. Lifted one eyebrow in challenge. Your move, CEO. He sighed.

“Alright, fair enough. I didn’t expect you to just say yes. Though... I was kind of hoping.”

Then he smiled—*really* smiled—and everything about him shifted. Instantly. God, that gorgeous, ridiculously ambitious heartthrob just asked me to pretend to be his girlfriend, and I’m sitting here... still thinking?

I shut my eyes and counted to ten. As long as I didn’t look at him, the emotional tsunami dulled a little. And with the feelings dialed down, logic finally made a quiet comeback. Honey, it whispered. You’re being manipulated. So obviously. So shamelessly. With one smile. Just one smile!

God, he makes it look effortless.

When I opened my eyes again, the smile was gone. But the icy CEO mask hadn’t returned yet either. He was just watching me, curious. Maybe a little surprised I was holding my ground.

Encouraged by that tiny moral victory, I sighed and sang sweetly:

“Well, well... You must be truly desperate to come to me for help.”

Chapter 10

He stared at me in disbelief for a second—then burst out laughing.

“Well, at least I won’t be bored with you around,” he said once he caught his breath. “Maybe it’s a good thing it’s you after all.”

“Maybe?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Alright, listen.” He leaned forward, all business now. “Sparrow is on the rise, and I’m not about to lose momentum. Business is brutal—slip here, back off there, and suddenly you’re eating dust. I can’t afford that.”

“Sure. Admirable mindset.” I nodded slowly. “Still not seeing what I have to do with any of this.”

“Oh, come on—you know exactly why.” He winced a little. “But if you want to hear it from me, fine. I do background checks on all potential partners. Sabrina’s... a traditional type. She prefers working with people who have family values—married, settled, that sort of thing. All other things equal, she’ll always pick the one who fits that image. And while this was already on my radar, I wasn’t exactly thrilled. I mean, I want the project—but not enough to get married for it.”

“But then...” He winked suddenly. “A certain someone very conveniently spilled coffee all over me, and while she was cleaning it up, Sabrina got the impression she was my girlfriend. And she’s been very persistent in believing that ever since.”

He steepled his fingers and gave me a catlike smile.

New manipulation alert! my brain chimed in helpfully. I looked away.

“Anyway,” the CEO went on, completely unfazed that his little smirk had landed flat, “she’s asked about you several times. Wanted to know how you were doing. I told her you were fine, of course, but she seems genuinely concerned. I think she likes you. And I think that might help with the project.”

I bit my lip and stared down at the desk, letting the information sink in. What a cynic. So in business, all’s fair? So this is what had him all wound up earlier. And here I was, imagining... ugh. Idiot.

A slow, hot irritation began building inside me. Strangely enough, I welcomed it. Better than sitting here like some starry-eyed fool under the spell of this dangerously attractive man.

“Alright,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “I get what this little act might do for Sparrow. Now tell me—what’s in it for *me*?”

“That,” Sokolov said with a grin, “is the kind of question I like to hear.” Then his face grew serious. “You said you’ve been working hard, and I wanted to see your level for myself. So far, I haven’t seen anything that proves it.”

“That’s because Nossy—uh, I mean, Eleanor—never gave me anything decent. I was stuck cranking out generic layouts like some kind of blueprint photocopier. Zero creativity, just mechanical repetition. But I do have a real portfolio at home. I’ll bring it next time.”

“Deal. Then here’s my offer: if your work turns out to be at least slightly above average, I’ll put you on the team for the Krasnodar project. And if it’s really good—you’ll lead the project yourself. Assuming we land it, of course. And assuming you want to. If not, we’ll find you something else—something better.”

I let out a low whistle. Now *that* was a proposal. Very generous. Very tempting.

I could feel a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth—because I knew exactly what to say.

“My level is very high. Don’t worry, I can handle the project.” I gave a little snort. “But people will talk. They’ll say the CEO gave his lover a high-level position.”

He shrugged.

“Do you really care what people say?”

I nodded slowly. Fair point.

But then I tilted my head.

“What about the company’s no-dating policy? It’s literally written into my contract.”

Sokolov shrugged again, entirely unfazed.

“I introduced it. I can remove it.”

“Well... what about my boyfriend?” I tried one more time.

His brows instantly drew together.

“Boyfriend? You have a boyfriend?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I said innocently.

He leaned forward, fixing me with a stare that felt way too intense—like a python hypnotizing a bunny. Somewhere deep under my ribs, something caught fire. And for a moment, I wanted to disappear under the desk.

He stared at me for a few seconds longer, then leaned back and gave a slow shake of his head.

“You don’t have a boyfriend. I would’ve noticed. I’ve been to your place. There’s no sign of a man anywhere.”

“Maybe we just don’t live together,” I said, still holding my ground.

Thing is—I did have a boyfriend. We even lived together. Well... *he* lived in *my* apartment. Ate *my* food. Worked on *my* laptop. And, as I discovered three months ago—when I came home early with a fever—he was also fucking my best friend.

My first and only boyfriend since college. And my so-called best friend—also from college. They’d both been lying to me for who knows how long.

That day, I heard quite a lot about myself. About how I was an ambitious workaholic who’d rather be sketching floor plans than cooking dinner. About how I’d “let myself go,” wore plain clothes,

kept my hair simple. How I could wear dresses and heels— since I knew how much he liked that! How I was probably frigid—barely making it to bed at night before passing out. Not like her. She was a passionate, beautiful woman who knew what a real man needed.

That "real man" went flying out of my ninth-floor apartment faster than the elevator. I watched from above, teeth clenched. I didn't cry. I'd forgotten how to cry sometime back in childhood. But the burn in my chest? That was real. Not just from betrayal—but from the fact that it came from two of the people I trusted most. And once you realize you can't trust *anyone*, something inside you shifts forever.

So yes. There were no signs of a man in my apartment anymore. But Sokolov didn't need to know that.

"Listen," the CEO said, folding his arms across his chest. "Maybe you misunderstood me. I'm not looking for a relationship. I don't do long-term. I don't have the time, or frankly, the interest. There's nothing going to happen between us, Eva. We're just pretending. A few appearances, that's it. I'm not asking you to sleep with me, or fall for me. In fact, falling for me is strictly discouraged. I can see you're rational. Logical. Not the emotional type. And that's exactly what I need. So think it over—but not too long. This is a perfect offer for you."

I nodded. Every rational cell in my brain agreed. But my heart? It was already pounding at the thought of spending more time around him.

"Well, what about *you*?" I asked, propping my chin on my folded fingers and meeting his eyes. Trying my best to ignore the thundering in my chest.

He didn't blink.

"What about me?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"What if *you* fall for me?"

He gave a slow, indulgent smile. Like I was a child asking if the moon could be caught with a butterfly net.

"That's not something you need to worry about. I never fall in love."

Chapter 11

"I never fall in love."

I snorted. Wow. That much arrogance in one sentence? Sure, I always knew he was more robot than man, but hearing it out loud wasn't exactly... pleasant. Because that night at the hospital—when all the bossy coldness peeled off from sheer exhaustion—I saw the opposite. He was human. Very human. Honestly, probably more emotional than me. So why bury it all so deep?

I chewed at my nail, lost in thought. Night had already fallen outside. Danny had gone home. I was still sitting at my desk with a cup of cold tea, unable to make a decision. No—that's a lie. I made it long ago. The moment he offered. Sokolov's proposal was tempting. Very tempting. But totally unacceptable. I knew right away—I could never agree to this game. It went against everything I stood for. Because the moment you let yourself be bought, even just once, you'll be for sale forever.

I'd rather take the slow road to success—at least I'd respect myself along the way. So no, it wasn't the promise of a promotion that kept me stuck now. It was the fact that I *wanted* to say yes. No reason. No conditions. Just because... I liked being near him. Looking into his eyes. Making him smile. Even laugh—that rare, precious laugh. I wanted to erase that constant tension from his face. He was so young, and yet it always looked like he was carrying the whole world on his back. Why does he push himself so hard? Is there even room in his life for rest?

"Eva, did you seriously just fall for the guy?" I whispered, staring into my own eyes in the dark reflection of my monitor.

The reflection shook her head slowly: *of course not!* We barely even know each other.

Then what is this? Savior complex? You want to rescue him? *Him?! A billionaire?! And what makes you think he even needs saving?*

Ugh... Yeah. I was spiraling. He needed me only because he needed the project. And let's be honest—he could win it without me. So I'll just go in and tell him exactly that.

I made my way through the darkened office toward the now-familiar door. My footsteps barely whispered across the floor. Up the stairs. Past the empty reception. I raised my hand to knock—and froze.

Voices. Sokolov wasn't alone. I hesitated for a second. Should I wait? Come back later?

And that was the moment that changed everything.

"...weird," a male voice said with a laugh.

"Agreed," Sokolov replied, clearly annoyed. "But I think it might actually help."

"What, things that bad?" the other guy said. "Last I heard, you had this project in the bag."

"That was before Falcon announced their interest. Now everything's on the line."

The man let out a low whistle.

"And you really think this thing with some random girl will tip the scales?"

Wait—what?

They were talking about *me*.

Oh. This was getting interesting.

"A fake relationship, Kamil, don't twist it. And yes—I do think it might help. It's all about psychology, my friend. I'll come off as the perfect reliable guy. Women like Sabrina believe a man's worth lies in his ability to commit. Old-fashioned, but what can you do."

Sokolov's companion snorted.

"Oh, that's rich! You? Serious relationships? Half the women in the country will be in mourning!"

"Don't exaggerate. A third at most."

They both laughed—and I felt a stab of... jealousy? What, just because that infuriating man was laughing with someone *else* for once?

"Is the girl at least cute?"

I swear, I forgot how to breathe for a second. But Sokolov didn't answer right away. Finally, as if reluctantly, he said,

"She's cute. But definitely not my type."

Excuse me, what now?!

If he'd been standing in front of me, he would've dropped dead on the spot, incinerated by my glare. But he was behind that blessed door, blissfully unaware, and kept right on talking:

"You know what kind of women I like—flashy, but... I don't know. Easy to deal with."

"So basically every woman you come across?" Kamil chuckled.

I could practically see Sokolov grimace. When did I get so good at reading his expressions?

"Well, everyone except her. She's a different breed. Looks kind of plain, like a tomboy. But she's way too sassy. Always has a comeback ready."

"A rare find!" Kamil teased.

"Maybe. But definitely not for me. And honestly, I'm glad. Less distraction from work."

Something inside me snapped. My heart thudded in my chest, and my hands clenched into fists on their own. I wanted to kick that damn door open and give *Mr. Not-My-Type* a piece of my allegedly-too-sassy mind. Not his type? *Oh, sweetheart, too bad for you!* Because now? Now we're going to work on your taste.

I took a deep breath. And exhaled. Then slowly backed away from the door, bolted downstairs, grabbed my jacket off my chair, and ran straight outside. I was boiling. Fuming. My head swirled with visions of sweet, sweet revenge on a certain oblivious CEO.

You *never* fall in love? Oh, we'll see about that!

Outside, I stopped and turned my face to the cold night wind, letting it calm the wildfire inside me. Bit by bit, the storm quieted. Rational thinking returned.

Five minutes later, once I'd cooled off, I pulled out my phone and found his number—he'd given it to me back at the clinic. I hesitated, staring at the blank screen, then typed:

"I've thought about it. I'm in. I'll get my stitches out in two days and stop by the office to discuss the details."

I read it over again. Good. Not my fault this war started—but I sure as hell wasn't going to lose it.

I hit send.

Delivered. Read. Wow. Must've been sitting on pins and needles waiting for my answer.

My lips curled into a slow, wicked smile.

Game on, darling boss. Game on.

Chapter 12

Roman

The meeting was dragging on way too long. I kept glancing at the clock. Then out the window. Then at my laptop. And back to the clock again. For the first time ever, I was bored out of my mind at my own meeting. Because there was only one thing on my mind: *Where the hell is she?!* Why hasn't she shown up yet??

By my calculations, Eva should've had her stitches removed last Wednesday. It's Monday now! A whole week has gone by since our conversation—and she still hasn't bothered to show up. With every hour, my irritation grew. I finally gave in and texted her on Sunday. Still unread. She didn't pick up when I called either. Cue the panic spiral: What if something happened? What if she got sick again—fell, hit her head, passed out? I almost jumped in my car that very evening. Good thing my GPS still had her address saved. But I managed to stop myself just in time. Maybe she *is* with her boyfriend, spending a lovely little weekend together... And I'd just barge in with a cheerful *hi there!*

Which, for some reason, only pissed me off more. Like I have any kind of right just because of this fake relationship... Goddamn it. Why the hell can't I stop thinking about her?! She's lodged in my head like a tick, sucking the life out of me.

I checked the time again. Forty minutes in.

"Okay, that's enough. We're done for today," I cut off the head of Sales mid-sentence.

"But I still—" he tried to protest.

"I've heard enough!" I snapped. "Everyone's dismissed."

They all exchanged surprised glances and filed out. No wonder—they were used to these meetings dragging on for at least two hours. But I'd had enough of wasting time in this room.

"Victoria, come in," I called for my assistant and started pacing the office like a caged tiger.

She walked in and froze in the doorway.

"Is Safronova in the office?" I barked.

"Yes, I saw her earlier."

"Call her in. Actually..."

Am I *really* in a cage?

"Never mind. I'll go myself."

I shot out the door before she could say anything, completely ignoring her stunned expression.

Down the stairs. Down the hallway. Right turn. Another right. Hmph. She's sitting way too far from my office. I should move her closer. It's not like I plan on running across the whole damn floor every time...

I stopped in my tracks, tripping over the thought. *Every time what, Roman?* Every time you feel like seeing her? Where the hell did *that* come from?

And just like that, her face popped into my mind. Pale, those giant blue eyes looking up at me. They're unusual—bright like two sapphire spotlights framed by those thick, dark lashes. Like they see right through you. Right into you. Girls like her don't need makeup. Eyes like that are the main attraction. Her lips, though... maybe a little gloss wouldn't hurt. They looked dry the last time I saw her. Pale. If I kissed them—gently bit them, ran my tongue across... They'd flush. For sure. And her natural sex appeal would skyrocket.

The mental image alone was enough to make my pants feel uncomfortably tight. What the hell, Sokolov? Been too long since you had a woman? Overworked? Yeah, probably. I'm not made of stone. And this girl—makeup or no makeup—is ridiculously pretty.

But I haven't seen her for a whole week. So why the hell won't she leave my head?

I yanked the door open without even thinking of knocking.

She was sitting there, eyes glued to the screen, clicking away with the mouse. The desk next to hers was empty, and by the window sat Daniel, currently acting as senior architect. He gave me a nod—we'd already seen each other at the meeting—but Eva didn't even bother to look up. Seriously?

I stood by her desk, feeling downright ridiculous. In my company, no one ignored me. No one. What does she think she is?

A mix of anger, indignation—and a sharp jolt of something else—ripped through me. Does she think having the "girlfriend" title gives her some kind of special privilege?

Well...

Maybe it does.

I stepped closer and swept a few folders off the edge of her desk, then sat on it. Staring straight at her. She finally glanced up, pretending to be surprised.

"Oh, Mr. Sokolov. I didn't see you there."

"Really?" I smiled, barely holding back the fury boiling under my skin. She wants to play? Fine. Let's play. "I missed you."

I took her hand and kissed her fingers. She jolted like I'd shocked her with a live wire. Looked at me in horror. Tried to pull away—but I held on tight. Leaned in, close. So close our lips nearly touched. She stared at me wide-eyed, barely breathing. Why did they darken like that? That sea-glass shade—was it fear? Confusion? Or desire?

My eyes dropped to her lips. Pressed tight together, almost white. I imagined them parting under mine. Imagined the taste of her tongue... Didn't even notice how fast my heart was racing. My palms burned. The office, the context, everything faded into the background as I leaned toward her—

—and the click of the door brought me crashing back. I glanced around. Danny was gone.

Yeah, great. Now the entire office will be buzzing about the boss hooking up with the architect's assistant. Well, good. It's supposed to look real. And that scene? Couldn't have been more real if we tried. What the hell is wrong with you, Sokolov?!

I slowly pulled away.

"What the hell was that?" Eva hissed through clenched teeth.

"A punishment," I murmured with a tight smile. "Why haven't you come to see me yet?"

She frowned. "Was I supposed to? I thought people only go to the boss when they're called in. You didn't call me in, so I didn't come."

Fair point.

"That rule doesn't apply to my girlfriend."

She narrowed her eyes.

"I'll keep that in mind. And that little performance..." She touched her fingers to her lips, mimicking a kiss. "Was that your idea of breaking the news to the whole office?"

I shrugged.

"Why not? Fast and effective."

"Makes sense." She smirked.

I glanced around. Tiny office. Cramped. Three desks, printer stands, a water cooler, a file cabinet. How do they not suffocate in here? There's barely enough space for two, let alone three.

"You need to be moved," I said aloud. "I'll have Victoria set up a room for you on my floor." I paused, then added, "And I believe we were supposed to go over the terms of our... arrangement. Did you bring your portfolio?"

"I did."

"Good. And another thing..." I gave her a slow once-over. A fine-knit white sweater, tight blue jeans that matched her eyes perfectly. Beautiful eyes. But jeans? Not exactly girlfriend-of-the-boss attire.

"I'll give you my card. Get yourself something appropriate. You know, dresses, heels... maybe some jewelry. Buy whatever you want—don't hold back."

Her eyebrow twitched. Eyes lit up. A flash of red bloomed across her cheekbones. Lips curled. Nostrils flared ever so slightly. Fury, barely contained. And God, she was stunning like that.

Wait, what did I say wrong? Isn't shopping every girl's favorite thing?

She stood up slowly. I was still perched on the edge of her desk, so now we were almost the same height. She stepped closer. Then again. So close we were practically touching. She leaned in—and now I had a perfect view of the outline of her breasts through the thin knit of her sweater. She smelled of something light and fresh. A hint of citrus. My body reacted immediately. Painfully.

— I froze. If I moved now, it would only be to flip her onto the desk, rip off those damn jeans, and

She slipped her hand around my waist, leaned in, and whispered in my ear, cool mint on her breath:

“I won’t hold back, I promise. Later... maybe. Because right now, I’m on my lunch break.”

And she was gone. Left me behind with a pounding heart and a whole damn problem in my pants.

Chapter 13

Eva

I was practically flying down the stairs, heart pounding like I'd just sprinted a marathon. Oh god. Who knew my carefully planned seduction scene would hit me this hard? But the main thing—the *main* thing!—I almost burst out laughing right there on the landing. It worked on him, too. And how!

I was so giddy with my own little triumph that I didn't even notice I was being followed. Not until the last second, when I glanced back and saw Sokolov right behind me. I gasped—but it was too late to run. He caught my wrist and pinned me to the stairwell wall.

"What the hell was that, baby?" he growled my own line back at me, his breath scorching my lips.

I jerked my chin up and hissed in his face, "Payback. For *your* punishment."

"Oh, really?"

His hand hovered near my face. Then slowly—almost lazily—traced along my cheek, over my lips, down my neck... then cupped one breast and gave it a slow, deliberate squeeze. At the same time, he pressed his body into mine so I could feel just how hard he was. Sweet hell. My lower belly tightened in sweet waves of heat. I shut my eyes to block out the wild, hungry look on his face.

"Fine," he whispered, pulling away. The second he did, the cold hit me like a slap. "One-one. But don't do that again."

"Or what?" I smirked.

"Or this fake relationship of ours stops being fake," he said, totally deadpan. Like he was stating a weather report.

A dozen snarky comebacks crowded my brain, all boiling down to one word: *Promise?* But all I said was,

"Deal. I won't pull that again—and you stop telling me what to wear."

We locked eyes. The air between us all but crackled. Then he snorted and raised his hands in mock surrender.

"Thought you'd like my offer. Guess not. Your call."

I gave a quick nod and turned toward the stairs—

Only for him to grab my wrist again.

"You're having lunch with me today."

I shrugged. Fine. I didn't care where we ate—and we still needed to talk details about our little agreement.

I regretted that shrug about twenty minutes later, when Sokolov pulled up to the most pretentious French restaurant I'd ever seen. There was a doorman at the entrance, standing like he guarded the Louvre. Inside, a pudgy maître d' in a suit and a slicked-back smile greeted us like royalty. The second he spotted Sokolov, he lit up like Christmas morning, showered us in compliments, and led us into the blindingly elegant dining room. White and gold wall panels. Chandeliers dripping with crystal. Tablecloths so white they glowed. Matching chairs.

Several tables were already taken. Men in custom suits. Women in designer dresses who didn't blink, just stared straight at me—because I clearly didn't belong. The host led us to an open table right in the middle of it all, and Roman gallantly pulled out my chair. I sat down, pretending I wasn't melting into the floor. But I felt like a beggar crashing a royal banquet.

The waiter zipped over in about ten seconds. Handed us the menus and launched into rapid-fire French. I smiled, giving Sokolov a mental tip of the hat. Trying to mess with me, huh? Cute. But sorry, babe—you picked the wrong girl.

Ignoring his watchful stare, I turned an even sweeter smile on the waiter and asked, in perfect French, what the dish of the day was. We ended up chatting for a few minutes—turned out he wasn't even a waiter, but the manager, a real Frenchman from the suburbs of Bordeaux. He complimented my accent, I returned the favor by praising his charm, and by the end of it, he was so touched he sent over a bottle of wine—on the house.

All the while, Roman Sokolov kept his eyes glued to me. And with every passing second, his gaze grew heavier. More unreadable. When the manager finally left us alone, I tilted my head and looked right back at Roman.

"Any more tests coming up?" I asked, cool as ever. "Or did you bring me here just to laugh at me?"

He shook his head slowly.

"You never stop surprising me."

"Glad to know you're still capable of being surprised," I shot back. "So, what? Thought I'd feel out of place in this pretentious palace? Don't forget—I'm your girlfriend. If I feel awkward, so do you."

"How do you speak French?" he asked, ignoring the jab entirely.

"I paid attention in school," I muttered, turning toward the doorway.

As if I'd start opening up now. He acts like a jerk and wants honesty in return? Not happening, sweetheart.

Truth was, my grandma was French. While my parents fought their endless battles, I spent a lot of time at her place. She sang me lullabies and taught me the language through little games. I'd spoken French since I was a kid. But no way was I about to share any of that with Sokolov. Childhood stories? Not today.

The giant doors opened again, letting in another guest. And suddenly—there she was. Sabrina.

For a second, I felt a twinge of guilt. Maybe Sokolov didn't bring me here to humiliate me after all. Maybe he brought me because he knew a potential partner would be here. Well. That changes everything.

I raised my hand and waved. Sabrina beamed and waved back as she chatted with the manager.

"Join us!" I called out in French.

Her smile grew even wider, and she made her way to our table.

"Eva, bonjour! What a lovely accent you have!"

"Please, sit down!" I grinned, all teeth and charm.

"Oh no, I couldn't. You two are clearly on a date!"

"No, no, we'd be delighted," I insisted. After a moment of polite protest, she gave in and joined us.

We chatted for a bit, and she absolutely drowned me in compliments—so many that it started to feel like she was pitching me to Roman like some overenthusiastic matchmaker. Eventually, I had to hide my burning face in my hands, which only earned me another compliment about my modesty.

Sokolov, meanwhile, said almost nothing. Just sat there, eyes locked on me, expression unreadable—but intense. Way too intense. Shouldn't he be making polite conversation with Sabrina? Instead, he was silently devouring me with that look. Which left me stuck carrying the whole conversation.

Luckily, salvation came in the form of a waiter, delivering our meals. For a while, we focused on chewing and avoiding eye contact.

"Oh! Eva! You promised to show me your portfolio!" Sabrina suddenly exclaimed.

"I did! And I will," I said quickly.

"I have an idea!" She set her fork down, clearly excited. "My husband and I are hosting a little *fête* tomorrow in Petersburg. He's a passionate collector and finally got his hands on a painting he's been chasing forever. He's going to... how do you say... unveil it!" She turned to both of us. "And I would love for you to come!"

"If it's appropriate, we'd be happy to," I said, playing it perfectly formal.

"It's more than appropriate—we'd be thrilled to have you! Oh! I've got to run." She glanced at the time. "So lovely to see you both, Eva, Roman! I'll send you the address. And Eva—bring your portfolio!"

"Absolutely!" I promised, and she clicked away in her designer heels, leaving me to melt under the simmering weight of Roman Sokolov's stare.

Chapter 14

Roman

The sky in St. Petersburg hangs low and heavy. It rolls over the rooftops like thick smoke, swallowing the cathedral spires. It hangs there, just above your head. Feels like if you reach up and tug it—it'll fall over you like a feather duvet. Some part of me wants to wrap myself in it and stay here forever.

I stand by the window in the event hall. Soft jazz drifts through the air. Guests flit around in clusters like fish in a tank—men in tuxedos, women in flowing gowns. They nod from a distance but don't come closer. Probably sense I'm not exactly radiating charm tonight. Fair enough. Among all these glittery goldfish, I'm a shark, still and waiting.

Even Sabrina only paused to introduce her husband before fluttering away. The only thing she asked: Where's Eva?

Good question. One I'd been obsessing over for two damn days.

We'd split up after lunch yesterday, agreeing to travel to St. Petersburg separately. I had meetings lined up, so I flew. Eva was supposed to arrive earlier on the train. We were booked at the same hotel—Victoria had arranged the rooms. I even knew her room number: 203, right next to mine. Both suites. I hoped she liked it...

But while I was getting changed, her room was dead silent. No footsteps, no drawers opening. Nothing. So where she was, what she was doing—I had no clue. And that not-knowing was driving me out of my mind.

After stewing about it last night, I told myself to back off. No unnecessary contact. I was reacting to her way too strongly. During lunch, instead of making polite small talk with Sabrina, I'd just... watched Eva. Sat there like a moron, utterly spellbound by her voice—soft, flowing French that wrapped around me like honey. By the end of the meal, I was on fire. No joke. I was practically glowing, while trying not to smile like a lovesick idiot.

And now? What the hell am I doing? I was supposed to be prepping for a serious conversation with Sabrina about our potential partnership. Instead, I am standing here, pacing, obsessing, glancing at the door every five seconds because Eva still hasn't shown up.

I swirled the last of my whiskey, knocked it back, and dumped the glass onto a passing tray. Then turned toward the hall entrance like I was magnetized.

And froze.

There, framed by the doorway and holding a black portfolio, stood the most stunning woman I'd ever seen.

A black dress—modest by cut, lethal in effect. The structured bodice hugged her curves, clinging to her waist and hips, then flared out into lacy waves that shimmered ever so slightly as she walked. The same semi-sheer lace wrapped her arms to the elbow, soft and intricate. Her thick, light hair

was braided down to her waist. Her lips—painted a bold, impossible red—looked like sin waiting to happen.

And her eyes...

...weren't even looking at me.

For a moment—no, longer than that—I just stood there, shamelessly staring like she was some priceless piece of art. Like a masterpiece in a museum I wasn't allowed to touch. I finally understood what people meant by Stendhal syndrome—when art literally knocks the wind out of you. Because holy hell, I was dizzy. My heart was beating somewhere in my ears.

And it wasn't just me losing it. Every man in the room seemed to freeze mid-sip or mid-bite, their heads turning in perfect sync toward Eva. Their expressions? Stunned. Bewildered. Possibly hypnotized.

Wait—do I look like *that* too?!

I jerked my head away, breaking the spell. My brain kicked back online, flailing for something logical, anything at all. *What the hell is happening? Pull it together, Sokolov. You've seen beautiful women before, haven't you?!*

And when I look toward the door again—there she is. Chatting away with Igor Mikhailov, laughing like they're old friends. And that bastard—he offers her his hand, and she takes it! Rests her other hand lightly on his shoulder, fingers almost grazing his neck. Tilts her head, looking up at him with those soft eyes... And then—of course—they start to dance. Right there, in the middle of the room, like they don't care one bit that no one else is dancing. As if that was all anyone needed, other couples slowly join in around them.

Igor takes Eva's other hand—the one still holding the folder—and laces his fingers through hers. Seriously? Has he lost his damn mind?

A red haze dropped over my vision. I swear the floor shook with every step I took. At that moment, I didn't give a damn about anything that might come next. I wasn't worried about looking like a fool. Or risking the project. No, the only thing I feared—truly feared—was that she might choose *him* over me. He was rich. Good-looking. Single. And apparently had way more in common with her than I ever did. For all I knew, they'd even come here together. While I stood there like an idiot, playing wallflower.

"Oh, hey!" Those sea-blue eyes framed by lashes a mile long finally found me. Her lips curled into a smile, and just like that, every ounce of air in my lungs vanished. I came to my senses somewhere between the tables, staring at the frozen pair.

How does she do that? Flip my whole world upside down, then click her fingers and set it right again? No. Not this time. I'm done being her puppet on a string.

"Sorry, Igor." My voice came out hoarse but firm. And he got the message right away. Dropped her hand. Took a step back.

I took his place without hesitation. Drew her in. Started to move. She was light as air, like she lived in heels instead of sneakers and loafers. Effortless. Irresistible. So damn beautiful it made my knees go weak.

I didn't know how to put any of it into words, so I just stayed silent—devouring her with my eyes.

"Cat got your tongue, Mr. Sokolov?" she teased, one brow playfully arched.

"I..." I swallowed hard. "Yeah, looks like it did. This transformation of yours just about short-circuited my brain."

"Oh, really?" The music stopped, and we froze in the middle of the room, unable to tear ourselves away from each other. Eva stood with one hand resting on my chest, looking up into my eyes—still half a head shorter than me, even in heels. One of my arms held her tightly by the waist, while the other was wrapped around her slender fingers. She stared at me, steady and unblinking, and I thought I saw a flicker of bitterness deep in her eyes.

"It's still me, you know, Roman. Under the makeup and the fancy dress—it's still the same girl. The tomboy who's not your type. So don't go getting any illusions. Once the clock strikes midnight, the princess turns right back into a pumpkin."

She pulled her hand free and spun on her heel, striding off toward the restroom.

And me? I was rooted to the floor. Again.

Because she'd called me *Roma* for the first time. And because all I could think about was how much I wanted to hear her say it again—and again—for the rest of our lives. And mostly... because I finally realized what an idiot I'd been. Of course she'd heard me lying to Kamil.

Saying I wasn't into her. What a joke.

Chapter 15

Roman

My first instinct was to run after Eva and explain everything. That when I see her, my heart acts like it's gone mad—either racing so fast that my pulse turns into a single rushing stream, or stopping altogether. That I can't think about anything else; day and night, it's only her in my head. That the makeup only added a little charm—she's more beautiful without it than anyone I've ever seen. That I lied to Kamil for no good reason, just because I'm a complete idiot. I'm terrified to admit even to myself how I feel, let alone to a friend.

All of that flashed through my mind in an instant. Then someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned—it was Mikhailov. He gave me a strange look and shoved a folder into my hands. The black one. And said:

"Hope you realize what kind of treasure you've got on your hands. Don't take your eyes off her—or someone will snatch her up. I mean your competitors. You paying her well? Raise it even more, so she's not tempted to look around. Friendly advice, Roman—don't let this girl slip away. With her kind of talent, she'll boost your company's turnover fivefold in a year. Yours—or someone else's. That's up to you."

He winked and walked off.

I stepped over to the window and opened the folder. A portfolio, with Eva smirking slyly in the photo. Phone number, email, a ton of completed projects.

I flipped through slowly, studying every detail. Perfectly executed design concepts. Flawless. One house I even recognized—they'd just built it in a luxury community near Moscow. That weird angular mansion on the hillside. I remember thinking, *"Damn, that's some next-level architecture,"* as I drove past. Wait—Eva designed that? But didn't she just finish university? When did she even have time? And with that level of skill, she was drawing standard wall layouts for my company?! Fetching coffee for Eleanor?

Why hasn't she quit yet?

I didn't even finish flipping through—I slammed the folder shut. Eva hadn't been bragging back in my office, just stating a fact—her level really *is* that high. And right now, I was ready to kill fucking Eleanor. How many other talented people had quit because they didn't want to deal with that old hag?

Why the hell did I even hire her after Falcon kicked her out?! Well, I knew damn well why. Because "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Too late to change that now. Let's just hope that if Eva hasn't run off yet, she won't—for a while, at least.

I found Sabrina out on the terrace. I handed her the folder, and she promised to review it by tomorrow. Not that I had any doubts—she'd definitely be impressed. She was already impressed with Eva herself. As was I.

Now where did she go?

I walked around the hall, even checked the restroom. Did she really pull a Cinderella? But it's not even midnight yet!

Finally, I spotted her through the window. She was outside, head tilted back, hugging her arms. Under the streetlamp, her hair looked almost white, and her figure—so delicate, like a porcelain ballerina from my grandmother's old china cabinet—seemed unreal.

I grabbed a coat from the cloakroom and stepped out into the damp St. Petersburg night. Silently walked up to Eva, draped the coat over her shoulders, wrapped her in it, and pulled her close. She pressed her cold nose into my neck and froze.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

She hesitated, then slowly shook her head. I hugged her tighter and breathed in the scent of her hair. Familiar now—freshness and citrus. Suddenly, Eva shifted in my arms. She opened the coat, wrapped it around both of us, and pulled me in.

"You'll catch a cold," she muttered, like she was scolding me, but her lips were already curling into a smile.

But I wasn't cold. I couldn't feel anything at all except for her body pressed against mine.

"Want to get out of here?" I whispered into her hair.

"I do," she smiled. "Just need to say goodbye to Sabrina first—don't want her getting offended."

As we slowly walked along the damp cobblestones of the embankment, holding hands, I felt like a schoolboy. Eva walked with a kind of sway, like a model, and I think she was a little tipsy. At least she laughed at every dumb joke I made, bright and loud—and I couldn't stop smiling either. A crazy, magical night.

I'd never felt like this with any woman. Like everything I'd kept buried deep inside for years suddenly broke the surface—leaving me exposed, raw, real. Maybe that's why I opened up to her. Told her about my childhood dream of moving to St. Petersburg. And then I finally did what I'd been dying to do these past few days—I kissed her.

It happened naturally. Her lips tasted like strawberries—sweet, addictive. I wanted to pin her against the granite railing and kiss her endlessly. I lost all control—no thoughts, just feeling. I'd never experienced anything like it. Not even back in school when every guy was exploding with hormones.

I'd always been in control. Ever since I was a kid, when I swore I'd never be like my father—a weak, spineless wreck of a man. His only real flaw was loving my mother too much. And she didn't love him back. Everyone knew it. Even I did. Because her lack of love for him spilled over onto me—her only son.

So I swore I'd never give a woman that kind of power over me. And until now, I'd kept that promise with ease. But with Eva... from day one, everything went to hell. I had to admit it—around her, I forgot all my vows. And now all the feelings I'd been stockpiling for years burst out at once. After just a

handful of meetings, I was hopelessly, insanely in love—and I wanted to scream it to the whole damn world.

But she pulled away. Then she just... left. Told me to come find her tomorrow. Like some kid. Like some beggar on the street.

The crash hit me like someone had thrown me into the icy Neva. I stood there, fists clenching and unclenching, furious at myself. Because this was the exact same script I watched my mother play on my father over and over again.

Slip a leash around his neck, tighten it, then loosen it—just to watch him dance on his hind legs.

And me? I fell for one kind word like a damn puppy, rolled over, belly up, completely forgetting who I was and what I'd lived by all these years.

My jaw clenched. Hell no. Good thing I saw it clearly now. I won't make this mistake again.

Chapter 16

Eva

I was planning to take a taxi home from the airport, but Sokolov graced me with a ride. After last night, I honestly had no idea how we were supposed to talk to each other going forward. The game was over, and I had zero interest in continuing it.

I sat there staring out the window at the flickering streetlights. Didn't want to turn his way. I'd seen more than enough this morning. I waited in the hotel lobby for that passionate man from the night before—and down came the Winter Soldier in full parade gear. Cold. Detached. Like an iceberg. And I—like the Titanic—slammed right into him at full speed.

God, how could I let myself go like that? Forget all my principles, all my rules? Believe, even for a second, that he was different? He wasn't. He was just like the rest of them.

There was nothing surprising about the way he acted. They're all the same—see a pretty face, and that's it. Who cares what's inside? Just grab the hot girl and get her upstairs. She says no? Her loss.

Thank God I managed to stop myself at the last second. Didn't go running after him the moment he called. Would've hurt even more now. Though honestly—how could it? I already felt like I was being torn apart from the inside. There was a lump in my throat the size of a fist—I could barely breathe.

How did I even get used to him so quickly?

I closed my eyes, trying to fall asleep. No chance. My brain was looping the events of last night like a broken film reel. And the more I thought about it, the more certain I felt—I had nothing to blame myself for.

But even in the dark behind my eyelids, the scene kept returning: The embankment. The still black water. The glowing bridge ahead. And the man walking beside me.

For late September, it was unusually warm. I wasn't cold at all, even walking in stilettos along the Neva. The mood was pure magic. I'd prepared carefully for that evening—and it paid off. Roman had looked at me with such genuine admiration that the vain little part of me melted under his gaze. And for the first time in forever, I was actually happy I'd been born beautiful. He was completely taken. Already halfway surrendered. All that was left was to decide what I wanted.

Not that it needed much deciding. Just being in the same room with him made it hard to breathe. And when he hugged me outside—I could've stayed like that forever.

The champagne-bubbled blood rushed in my ears, and Roman—walking beside me, the most handsome man alive according to every woman I know, from age seven to seventy—made it rush faster. I wanted something wild. Romance. Adventure. To get lost in St. Petersburg's courtyards and wander all night without a map. To end up on the far side of the drawn bridges...

As if reading my mind, Roman stopped and looked down at the steps leading toward the water.

"Wanna go down there?"

He'd definitely had too much to drink tonight too. But still—I was surprised.

I didn't argue though.

"Let's go."

Somewhere in the distance, music played. A cheerful group of tourists laughed and shouted nearby. Water lapped gently at our feet. Roman crouched down and dipped his hand into it.

"Hey there," he whispered to the Neva. Then, quietly: "When I was a kid, I dreamed of growing up and moving to St. Petersburg."

"Really?" I sat down beside him, leaning in to see his face. "Why didn't you?"

He shrugged vaguely and said nothing.

Then he stood up and held out his hand to me.

I took it—and whether he pulled a bit too hard or the champagne finally hit me, I swayed and nearly fell. But he caught me, pulling me firmly against him.

In the glow of the streetlamps, his eyes looked bottomless—like the cosmos. We froze, staring at each other as if seeing one another for the first time.

In the dim light, Roman looked unreal. Sharp cheekbones, dark chestnut hair curling slightly from the damp air, a straight nose, and that hint of stubble... He was devastating. Devilishly sexy. And my heart immediately broke into a gallop. I hated it. I knew what kind of effect he had on women. I remembered what he told his friend—that I wasn't even his type. But none of that mattered anymore. Because tonight, he was different. The hunger in his eyes wasn't fake. It was real. He wanted me. And somehow, I knew it. Felt it in every nerve.

And in that moment—I wanted him more than anything in the world.

So when he slowly, almost reluctantly, lowered his head and kissed me, I answered with all the fire inside me. Somewhere deep in the back of my mind, a voice screamed that it meant nothing. That this was just alcohol messing with our heads, and tomorrow we'd both be awkward and embarrassed. *I don't care*, my heart replied. *I don't care—I don't want to hear it!*

When he finally pulled away, trailing his tongue along my lip one last time, I instinctively leaned in—but froze at the sound of my own sanity shrieking.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, brushing my lips against his ear. He shuddered and pulled me tighter, and I smiled—feeling, for the first time, the full weight of my power over this icy iceberg of a man. "What are you doing?" I repeated. "You don't even like me."

"I do," he murmured, burying his face in my hair. "I like you way too much, Eva. You're driving me crazy."

Those words exploded in my chest like fireworks. My mad heart burst into a victory anthem, ready to drown out my rational mind once and for all.

God. Roman Sokolov—the man of my dreams—just told me he liked me. This couldn't be real. It had to be a dream.

I brushed my hand over his cheek. Kissed the corner of his parted lips. He leaned in for more—but I forced myself to take a step back.

What are you doing?! my heart screamed. Get back in his arms and never let go!

I took a deep breath and placed my hands on Roman's chest.

"Then tell me tomorrow," I whispered, looking straight into his eyes. "When you've got a clear head."

He squeezed my hands, but I gently slipped out of his grasp and stepped back toward the stairs. Paused for a second—and said it again, putting everything I felt for him into that one word:

"Tell me."

And before I could change my mind, I turned and ran. Up the stairs, then along the embankment, all the way back to the hotel. I burst into my room and slid down onto the floor, my back pressed against the door. Sitting there for a long time. Praying he'd come after me and knock. I kept reminding myself of the promise I'd made: Not to become his obedient little puppet. Not to be a one-night girl—used and tossed aside. But God... Right now, I needed him more than anything. More than air.

About an hour later, I heard footsteps in the hallway. They stopped outside my door.

Roman stood there for several minutes. And I fought with everything I had not to open it before he knocked.

But he never did.

And by morning—he was gone. Replaced by the Soldier.

Chapter 17

Eva

When the car rolled to a stop outside my building, I finally turned to him—and met that hungry, searching gaze. Though Sokolov quickly got a grip. A blink, and his eyes dulled again, frosting over with that familiar layer of ice.

“Thanks for the ride.”

The only words I’d said since the airport. What else was there to say? Pretty sure we both understood everything perfectly well.

“Wait.” Oh great, that mechanical voice again.

I raised an eyebrow in question.

“I went through your portfolio last night. And I had a question.”

“What kind of question?”

He hesitated for a few seconds, drilling into me with those bottomless, dark eyes.

“Why are you working for me with a level like that? Why didn’t you quit when Sparrow failed to see your worth?”

I shrugged.

“It’s complicated.”

“Give it a try.”

What a stupid conversation. I wanted to yell: how about you try being human for once? Try thinking about what drives regular people—not robots!

I took a sharp breath and stared straight ahead. Spoke slowly:

“When I was in my first year, a young and talented man came to speak to our class. He was everything an aspiring architect dreamed of becoming. Bright, ambitious. He said all the right things—about being devoted to your work, loving what you do, taking chances. About how you should never betray your dream. Remember who that was?”

The ice cracks in his eyes.

“Me.”

“You. When you talked about your company, you were completely different. Not the man I later met at Sparrow. You were... electric. So much energy, it practically jumped across the room. You lit up thirty young minds in that lecture hall like it was nothing. We all wanted to work with you. Especially after you said your doors were always open to fresh talent. That charge you gave me—it lasted through

graduation. And through half a year with Nossy. Even though I've lost count of the times I've asked myself: why the hell am I still doing this?"

"Things will change now."

His hands were still resting on the wheel, veins visible beneath the skin. Those long, elegant fingers would look perfect on my waist.

I gave a small shake of the head and turned away.

"Really?"

"Of course. I fired Eleanor. And our deal is still in place. Isn't it?"

Oh. So *that's* what this whole conversation was about. He'd been building up to it. Testing the waters. Couldn't just ask like a normal human being, could he? No—he'd rather pull your guts out, examine them under a microscope, and maybe—*maybe*—put them back. If you behave.

I shrugged, let out a dry little laugh, and threw his own line back at him with a bitter twist.

"Take care, Roman."

I jumped out of the car and walked quickly toward the door, thinking angrily: Don't you dare even try to catch me!

(And deep inside, stupidly hopeful: *Please try.*)

I let out a sharp huff, kicking a loose pebble out of my way. Come on, catch me—I'll tell you everything I really think.

(*Catch me!*)

I rushed to the door and started digging through my backpack, looking for the keys. Of course, Sokolov hadn't come after me. Probably drove off right away. I was too wrapped up in my own anger, my own thoughts, to even notice if the engine started. Turn around and check? What if he's still there? No way. Let him dream on.

Finally, I found the key. I lifted my hand, about to unlock the door—when a shadow suddenly appeared beside me. I froze, hand still in the air. A flicker of joy lit up inside me, and a smile tugged at my lips before I could stop it. I quickly smoothed it over and put on my best stern face. I turned—and froze again.

Standing in front of me was my ex.

"Nick?! What are you doing here?"

He looked awful. Those curls I used to run my fingers through were greasy and matted. His face was covered in stubble. His green eyes had that sad, lost look, and everything about him seemed... pathetic. Rumpled and small.

"She kicked you out, didn't she?"

"No," he mumbled, "why do you assume that? I left. A while ago."

And then, out of nowhere, he lunged forward and grabbed my arm. I flinched instinctively.

“Eva, please, just talk to me! I’ve known for a long time what a fool I was. But you blocked me everywhere—I never got the chance to apologize!”

Oh wow. Classic Nick. Pretending to apologize, while still making it somehow my fault.

“What’s there to talk about, Nick? You were crystal clear when we broke up. I got the message the first time. Life goes on. What else do you want from me?”

He lowered his head, looked up at me with that pitiful half-smile.

“Look, I lost my temper, okay? I was completely out of line. You’re a hundred times better than Tanya. You’re better than anyone, Eva.”

I laughed out loud.

“Oh, that’s rich. You cheat on me, then get mad at me for it. Self-contained, full-circle logic—how very *you*, Nick. Keep living your best life. As for me, I want nothing more to do with you. We’re done talking.”

I turned back toward the door—but he grabbed me and shoved me against the wall. His nose brushed along my cheek, his voice hot in my ear.

“Come on, stop it. You still love me, I know you do. I’m not letting you go until you forgive me. I missed you so much...”

I stood there, pinned to the wall, feeling nothing but disgust and frustration. There was a time when this man made me feel warm, when his touch gave me shivers. But now? Now all I wanted was to slam the door in his face.

“What exactly did you miss, Nick?” I asked coldly, staring him down. “My apartment? My laptop? The food I used to cook for you?”

His face twisted, and he smacked the wall with an open palm, hard.

“Why the hell are you always so sarcastic? You don’t have to be such a bitch, Eva! Who else is gonna put up with that attitude of yours if not me, huh?”

And then—he flew backward. Yanked away from me like a ragdoll, his back slamming into the concrete ledge with a choked breath. Right beside him, hands casually shoved into his pockets, stood Sokolov.

So. He hadn’t left. He’d been watching the whole time.

Cue the fanfare.

“You don’t exactly seem welcome here,” Sokolov said calmly, looking straight at Nick.

Nick’s eyes went wide. He glanced from me to Roman, then back again. Finally, his lips twisted into a nasty smirk.

"Oh, so you've already found yourself a new fuck buddy? And how's he working out for you, huh? That your little... boss man? Has he seen your balcony installation yet?"

His face contorted, and he practically spat the words.

"That was fast! And after all that righteous outrage too! Hey, asshole—know what she used to say about you? That you're a bastard, a tyrant, and a bully to regular workers! But hey, money talks, right, Eva? Suddenly he's not so bad?"

Reality started to blur. I leaned against the wall and lowered my head. *Just breathe. It'll pass. Don't panic.*

And then—I didn't even register what happened. One moment, Sokolov was standing there with his hands in his pockets. The next—Nick was flat on the ground, blood pouring from his nose. It all happened so fast, I didn't even connect the howling with Roman at first. Not until the words came, sharp and cold as ice shards.

"If I ever see you here again, it won't end this easily. If you ever come near my girlfriend again, I'll tear you apart. They'll be picking up pieces of you all over Moscow. Got it?"

He said it so casually, so coldly, it was terrifyingly clear—he meant every word. A chill ran down my spine. Was I scared? Not even close. Nick was groaning in pain, and in my head, one thought was beating louder than all the rest: *He called me his girlfriend.* And there was no one around he had to say it for.

Jesus, Eva. What is wrong with you?

Nick scrambled off the steps and, backing away, yelled,

"You think just 'cause you've got money you can hit people? I'm going to the ER! I'm pressing charges, you psycho! You're gonna pay for this!"

Sokolov stomped the ground like he was shooing away a yappy little mutt, and Nick flinched. A nervous laugh slipped out of me. Now that I saw the two of them side by side, the difference hit like a freight train. It wasn't the money. Or the looks. Or the clothes. No—there was something else. Something in the way Roman carried himself. That inner force he gave off without even trying. Next to him, Nick really did look like a scrawny street dog barking at a lion.

"Don't bother, Nick!" I shouted. "The security cameras have been down for months. You won't be able to prove anything!"

Muttering under his breath, he spun on his heel and disappeared into the dark.

"They really don't work?" Sokolov asked, sounding mildly curious.

"Nope," I said breezily, still watching my ex vanish. "I lied."

I turned to him. He was watching me with narrowed eyes, the corners of his mouth just barely lifting into a smirk. His voice was low.

"You're a dangerous woman, Eva."

I tilted my head and deliberately gave him the full once-over, slowly trailing my eyes upward so he could feel every imaginary touch. I paused at his lips. Then looked him in the eye and smirked back.

“Took you long enough.”

Chapter 18

Roman

I sat at a red light, silently counting down the seconds—just to stay on the surface. Not to sink into that whirlpool of memory. The bold words. That electric look. And those slender fingers gripping her backpack so tightly her knuckles had turned white.

Someone behind me laid on the horn. I jolted and snapped out of it, slammed the gas, and took off like a bullet. She's got me so wound up I'm practically feverish. Like the flu—hot, cold, obsessive thoughts. Acting without control. Is that what being in love feels like? What a relief I've avoided this mess all my life. And I'll survive this too—I'm not about to melt. Maybe it's just about sex. Yeah. That's it. It's probably been a month, maybe more. I've been buried in work—this project sucked up all my time. Then Eva showed up. Hot little thing. No wonder I went soft in the head.

Finally using your brain, Sokolov—congrats. Admitting the problem is the first step to recovery. Time for step two...

Without overthinking it, I called Sasha—my longtime fuck buddy. We'd been meeting up on and off for years. Whenever I wasn't seeing someone or just didn't feel like dating, she was there. The arrangement worked for both of us. No strings, no drama. Sasha was a predator in heels—she could reel in any sugar daddy without blinking, but just like me, she valued her freedom. A wallet with legs wouldn't cut it. She'd tried to wrap me around her finger early on, but I laid it out straight: I wasn't relationship material. She got it. We had an agreement—if she ever met the one, our deal would be off. Until then, her door was always open. Sure, I paid her, and she never made a fuss about it. That part suited me just fine. It kept things clear, simple. Sasha was fun, easygoing, and had decent street smarts. Sometimes we even had something to talk about.

We set up a time, and thirty minutes later I was rolling through the gate of her fancy gated complex. Lit walkways, landscaped greenery, playgrounds. Yeah, this wasn't the cheap development where I dropped Eva off. Life's funny like that—an escort can afford business-class living, and one of the most talented architects I know is stuck in a shoebox.

Stop thinking about her!

I punched in the code and stepped into her apartment five minutes later. The scent of scented candles hit me instantly. Sasha stood in the shadowed hallway, striking a pose—she loved an entrance. She sauntered over, hips swaying, unbuttoned a few buttons on my shirt. Her dark eyes sparkled seductively, and her plump lips brushed mine. Oh yeah, just what I needed. I grabbed a handful of her full ass, bit her lip gently. She moaned and pressed herself against me. She smelled like something woody and berry-sweet. I remembered liking it before. But now... I wanted something fresher. Citrusy, maybe.

Get out of my head!!

She led me to the bedroom and pushed me onto the bed. Moving slowly, she slid off her robe and stood there in lingerie. Climbed on top, started grinding. Her bra could barely contain her breasts. I

lay there, relaxed, while my brain took notes. New necklace—hadn't seen that before. Lips looked fuller—did she get fillers? The room was chilly, a breeze coming in from the window. And overall? Kind of boring.

Meanwhile, Sasha slipped her hand into my pants and raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. She rubbed, stroked, gave it time. Then bent down and started kissing my stomach, fumbling with the button on my trousers.

The discomfort inside was building. No—more than that. Irritation.

Screw this.

I sat up abruptly, pushing her head away and dodging the surprised look in her eyes.

"Well, *that's* interesting," she sang. "So what did you come here for, then?"

I rubbed my forehead and shook my head. Why? To exorcise that blonde devil from my brain. Not working.

Sasha narrowed her eyes, watching my face carefully.

"Alright," she said in her no-nonsense tone. "Let's go to the kitchen. Have some tea. Or something stronger. Just as friends. How about it?"

I shrugged.

"Sure."

In the kitchen, Sasha lit a cigarette. Poured herself some tea, splashed something stronger into my glass. I wasn't in the mood to drink. Wasn't in the mood for anything, really—except one thing: getting back in the car and racing across town. To that cramped high-rise where my little nymph was hiding.

"So, spill it. Who is she?"

I flinched, shooting her a startled glance. Was she reading my mind now? She smirked knowingly.

"Come on, Roman. I wasn't born yesterday. You're clearly not here with me—so where *are* you? Or rather... with *whom*?"

"You never miss a thing, do you, Sasha?"

"Of course not. Because if you can't get it up for me, the problem must be me. And it's way easier on my ego to assume it's you."

I let out a dry laugh.

"There's nothing wrong with you. I'm just... off today."

"Well, go on then. Let's pretend I'm your therapist. Better for my self-esteem that way."

"Seriously?"

"Why not? Can't promise I'll help, but I'm a great listener. So come on, spill. You in love or something?"

I nodded slowly.

"Looks like it."

"And her?"

"No idea."

"What do you mean—*no idea*?" she blinked. "You haven't even made a move? *You*?! Who the hell is this girl who's got *you* all twisted up? I kind of want to meet her now!"

I winced, imagining Sasha and Eva in the same room. What would they talk about? *Top Ten Ways to Break Roman Sokolov*?

I grimaced.

"It's complicated..."

"Lucky for us, we've got all night." She gave a lazy shrug. "And trust me—between men and women, things are always simpler than they seem."

Talking to Sasha was easy. In fact—there was never a reason to stay silent. One word led to another, and before I knew it, I'd spilled everything that had been eating me alive. She just kept sipping her tea and listening. Didn't interrupt. Which was the right call. Saying things out loud helped me line them up in neat little stacks inside my head—sort through them, make some kind of sense of it all. Try to see if I was being rational.

When I finally ran out of steam, I sat in silence for a bit longer, then downed the drink in one go and looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"So, Doctor Sasha—what's the diagnosis?"

She got up, carried her cup to the sink, then leaned against the counter, one leg crossed over the other like a flamingo, arms folded.

"Interesting story," she said. "But my question's still the same—what are you doing here? You were supposed to be going the other way. Oh, Roman... You're a smart man, built everything from scratch—and still don't get a damn thing about women."

I frowned.

"Were you even listening?"

She nodded.

"Oh, I was definitely listening. And you don't need to be a therapist to see it—you've got some childhood triggers messing with your head. That's what you need to deal with. The girl's got nothing to do with it. If you love her, just say it. Stop messing around—with yourself *and* with her. I'm telling you, she's already head over heels for you. Why else all the dress-up games? One day she's a tomboy, the

next she's a full-on femme fatale. She was trying to impress *you*, you idiot! Have you even looked at the whole situation from the outside? You strut around like some big-shot boss—tell your buddy she's not your type, tell her you never fall in love..."

"But I really haven't before... And it's not like I was planning to now, either!"

She laughed. "Oh please. You know what they say—if you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans."

I leaned forward, rubbing my forehead. Could she be right? Could Eva actually be in love with me?

Just the thought of it sent chills down my spine—and stirred something a lot lower. Fantastic. There's a beautiful, half-naked woman in front of me and I feel nothing. But one thought about Eva and I'm already hard. What the hell is wrong with me?

Sasha laughed, catching my face.

"Look, you came all the way here—you might as well stay. Don't worry, I'm not gonna jump you. Just sleep here tonight. You're tired, and you've been drinking. Not much, but still. In the morning, go find your Eva and talk to her. For real this time. Like a human being. Not the way you usually do."

I raised a brow. "And how do I usually talk?"

She made a deadpan face, widened her eyes dramatically, and spoke in slow syllables:

"Hel-lo! My name is Ro-man! I'm here to tell you how to live your life!"

I burst out laughing.

"Come on. I'm not that bad."

"You totally are. Trust me."

"Well, if I ever knew how to live the 'right' way... I sure don't anymore."

"Off to bed, brave hero," Sasha said, ruffling my hair. "Sleep on it. Things will look better in the morning."

Chapter 19

Eva

The night felt like a fever dream. That weird state—like I was sick, but without the fever, runny nose, or sore throat. Just a heart pounding like crazy and vivid flashes behind my eyelids every time I blinked. I must've woken up twenty times before morning, and at some point, I stopped being able to tell the difference between dreams and daydreams. Only one thing stayed the same—Sokolov was in all of them. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we kissed. But more often...

Oh.

One thing's for sure—I've never had dreams that hot in my life.

Somehow made it to morning, dragged myself out of bed, and brewed coffee. The tiny apartment felt oddly empty. Way too big for just me. And I knew exactly who I wanted beside me.

Wrapped in a blanket, I perched on the windowsill with my cup. My thoughts raced. I took a sip of the bitter brew, trying to get my head in order. If I ignored the emotions and just focused on logic—what did it all mean?

That I was clearly losing it. Just *thinking* about Sokolov made me feel crazy. And when he was near? Forget it—I wasn't even in control of myself. No clue why that was happening. Maybe his skin secretes some kind of pheromone? Like an insane aphrodisiac that short-circuits my brain? Is that what this is?

My reflection in the glass smirked back at me. Yeah, right. Keep spinning up wild theories instead of admitting the obvious—you're head over heels, girl.

I sighed and nodded to myself. Fine. I give in. I admit it. Now what?

He made it very clear that falling for him was a bad idea. He doesn't do love. And apparently, I'm "not his type." And there's nothing sadder than unrequited love—especially when the guy *knows* how you feel. So what now? Pretend I don't feel anything? How? When just being near him makes me feel like I'm going to explode?

Knowing myself, one day I'm going to jump him from around a corner—and he *won't* get away.

That thought made me laugh out loud. Grandma was right about me—"Fools are never bored." I was still a little kid when she said that, and she already had me figured out.

After the giggles passed, I got lost in thought again. Okay, but... what if he *does* like me—just a little? What if he just won't admit it?

I mean, that kiss on the pier—he kissed me like I was the last woman on Earth. You can't fake that. And yesterday—why didn't he leave right away? He called me his girlfriend. He punched Nick. That doesn't fit his whole ice-cold robot persona at all. Sure, he left eventually. But before that—just for a second—I *saw* it. That stupid Winter Soldier mask of his slipped. When I stared him down, I *saw* him flinch. I saw him lean in. And the hunger in his eyes—God. You can't fake that.

I downed the cold coffee with a sigh. Eva, girl, men are simpler creatures. Where women have feelings, they have... biology. Maybe he does want you. He's a man, not a machine—despite the act. But wanting someone doesn't mean love.

So here's the same old question: what am I supposed to do with this love of mine? Playing seductress doesn't appeal to me anymore. That game clearly went off-script. Sure, I could keep pretending to be some femme fatale to get a rise out of him, but how long can I keep that up? Sooner or later, I'll just go back to being myself—because that's who I am. And honestly, I like being myself. I don't want to play someone else just to match some guy's fantasy. Ugh. I'm officially lost.

I just need to talk to him. Like, actually talk. No teasing, no attitude—just be friendly. See how he reacts. And go from there.

Feeling a little lighter after making that decision, I rushed to get ready.

But instead of throwing on my usual jeans and sweater, I somehow ended up picking a navy blazer set with a pencil skirt. Oh, Eva, really?

I made it to the office surprisingly fast. On a whim, I ducked into a coffee shop and grabbed a no-sugar Americano for Roman and an orange-vanilla latte for myself. Coffee couldn't possibly make things worse, right? Anyone would appreciate a little gesture. And besides, he said I could come by anytime—as his girlfriend! This is just a friendly gesture. That's all. Nothing more.

Trying to calm the voice in my head, I stepped into the reception area. Oh. My. God. It was packed! Department heads, the legal guy, the chief accountant—everyone was there!

I almost growled out loud. Right. Thursday. *Staff meeting*. So much for our peaceful coffee break.

I froze in the doorway, scanning the room. Well, I was still going to give him that coffee.

I headed over to Vicky. She gave me a sulky look. Yeah... I still hadn't told her what was going on between me and Sokolov. Though, honestly, I'm sure the whole office was buzzing by now. Still, Vicky was annoyed. And I got it—that wasn't cool of me.

I gave her a sheepish smile.

"Vicky, is the boss in?"

"Of course," she muttered, narrowing her eyes. "He just got here."

"I'll just pop in for a sec!" I winked. "Please don't be mad, okay? I swear I'll tell you everything. I've just been... kind of overwhelmed."

"Fine," she softened a bit. "Go. But if he gets pissed—I never saw you."

"He won't!" I beamed, holding up the coffee cup. "I've got an anti-winter-soldier serum!"

"Go on already!" Vicky laughed, waving me in. "The meeting's about to start."

Ignoring the curious glances from everyone around, I walked to his office, knocked a couple of times—just to be polite—and stepped inside.

Roman was leaning back in his chair, staring thoughtfully at his computer screen. When he saw me, he straightened up. For a split second, I thought I saw surprise in his eyes—maybe even... a flash of joy?? I stepped closer, trying to figure out if that was real or just something I wanted to believe.

“Eva!” He gave me a slightly flustered smile. “I was actually going to talk to you. Just not right now—they’re waiting.” He gestured vaguely toward the door.

“I saw,” I smiled back. “I just popped in for a sec—to say thanks for yesterday and wish you a good day.”

I stepped closer and froze as the smile slid off my face. My eyes, trained to catch every detail, took in everything at once: The bloodshot eyes. The same suit as yesterday. A wrinkled shirt. A tiny smudge of lipstick on the collar. And most of all...

A wave of fury rose up so fast I nearly choked on it. My nostrils flared before I could stop myself.

Most of all—he reeked of perfume. Sweet. Feminine. Undeniably not mine.

My hands started shaking. My heart—no, a jackhammer—was pounding against my ribs. I must’ve changed expression, because Roman suddenly looked concerned.

“You okay?”

Oh, and now he’s concerned. The bastard.

I slammed the coffee cup on his desk, my fingers trembling, and took a step back. My lower lip quivered—I bit down hard. A scream was bubbling up inside me, and it took everything I had to keep it down.

“Eva?” He stood up. “What’s going on?”

What’s going on? WHAT’S GOING ON?!

“You’re not looking your best today, Mr. Sokolov,” I managed through clenched teeth. “Rough night? Well, I won’t keep you—you’ve got a meeting to freshen up for.”

And I turned on my heel and bolted for the door, vision blurring. I burst into the reception area, ignoring the hungry stares. I made a beeline for the exit—but footsteps pounded behind me. A strong hand caught my elbow and spun me around.

“Wait!” Roman shouted. “It’s not what you think!”

“Like you even care what I think!” I shot back, my voice cracking as tears threatened to spill. And that just made me even angrier. “I’m no one to you, got it?! Do whatever you want!”

His face went pale, lips pressed into a hard line. His eyes darkened.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Let me explain,” he said quietly, but firmly, still gripping my arm.

“Mr. Sokolov, I brought what you asked for...” Dima burst into the room, flipping through some printouts, blissfully unaware of the scene he’d just walked into. “Oh—sorry, am I interrupting?”

“No, Danny,” I said coldly, ripping my arm free. “Mr. Sokolov is completely free.”

And I stormed out of the office.

Chapter 20

Eva

I was furious. Crushed. Devastated. I burst into the hallway, froze for a second, then darted toward the back stairs. I didn't want him catching up with me again. I couldn't even look at him! Taking the steps two at a time, I raced downward, furiously wiping away tears. I hadn't cried since I was a teenager—since the day my mother kicked me out and yelled after me, *"Fine, do whatever you want. But live on your own if you're so grown-up!"* I was convinced I'd cried out every tear back then and swore I'd never cry again. And I didn't. Nothing had touched me that deeply since. I kept everything bottled up and pushed through whatever came my way.

My mother taught me how to charge headfirst toward my goals. To always get what I wanted. From the very first step, I was focused on winning—because even if I never really had a childhood, I damn well knew what success cost. So no, I didn't cry when I pulled all-nighters for school projects. I didn't cry when I had to fend off sleazy professors in college. I didn't cry while running coffee to Nossy. Not even when I caught Nick and Tanya in bed together.

So why does it hurt *this* much now? Why are the tears pouring like this?

I dashed outside and looked around. The back exit led to the far side of the massive office complex—I barely knew this part of the area. I pulled out some tissues and wiped my eyes.

My phone rang.

"Roman" flashed on the screen. I declined the call. Then put the phone on silent and shoved it into my coat pocket.

I needed to walk. To calm down. I couldn't think straight right now.

I marched down the street, fast and aimless.

The weather had turned cold. Wind whipped at my face. A fine drizzle had started. It actually helped. The gusts of wind were blowing the mess out of my head. After about forty minutes, I was so frozen I literally couldn't think about Sokolov anymore. Perfect. At least physical discomfort could overpower this idiotic infatuation.

But the moment I stepped into the first cafe I saw and slid into a booth, the pain came crashing back with a vengeance. I doubled over at the table, arms clutched to my chest. I wanted to howl with helplessness. What is he doing to me? Why does this hurt so much?

I took a long breath and a sip of hot tea. Checked my phone—twenty-two missed calls. A few messages too, but I didn't open them.

I drank half the teapot before my thoughts finally started making sense again. The pain still twisted inside me, but I managed to rise above it. To look at things more objectively. And immediately, I felt ashamed. Ashamed of the emotional mess I'd made at the office. Roman never made me any promises. He's not my man—he doesn't owe me loyalty! I had no right to be jealous. But I completely lost control, and the emotions just exploded. That's unacceptable. Clearly, I've lost my mind.

But one thing is clear now—he doesn't have feelings for me. He couldn't. Because after we said goodbye on my doorstep last night, he went straight to some—

I drew in a deep breath.

Didn't matter who he went to see. What mattered was that he didn't even try to stay with me. After that scene with Nick, he just politely said goodbye and vanished. And this morning, I made a complete fool of myself! I showed my true feelings, no doubt about it. The entire office must be having a field day right now.

I buried my face in my hands. What do I even do now?

No wonder he has that rule about no office relationships. Because now I have *no idea* how we're supposed to keep working together.

Okay. Fine. Sooner or later we'll have to talk. But not today. I'm in no shape to have a rational conversation right now. Maybe it is better to keep playing the game for Sabrina's sake—if he's still up for it. And then, once we land the project, I'll head back to Krasnodar. One city just isn't big enough for the two of us.

I picked up my phone.

Roman 10:12

"Eva, please answer!"

Roman 10:13

"I'm begging you."

Roman 10:20

"Where are you?!"

Roman 10:40

"If you don't answer, I swear I'm reporting you missing!!!"

Vicky 10:50

"Eva, where are you? Winter Soldier just canceled the meeting and stormed out. Told me to reschedule everything because he's 'not in the mood to work'! Never thought I'd live to see the day. What happened between you two? Please text me back, I'm really worried."

I stared at the last message for a solid twenty minutes. Then I pulled myself together: "Stop, Eva! Don't even think about getting your hopes up again. Just stop."

I typed something neutral:

"I'm fine. Just feeling under the weather—will work remotely for now."

After a moment's thought, I sent the same message to Sokolov.

Cue the immediate flood of phone calls. So I followed up with another text:

"I'm okay, Roman. I don't feel like talking. Sorry for snapping—I overreacted for no reason. I just need some time to get myself together."

The calls stopped. Good. Now I needed to figure out how to act around him. I wasn't going to quit—that would be like running away from my own problems. And I've never been the type to back down. The most important thing now was to stop being in love with him. No more overthinking. No more pain.

But how? Simple. Find someone else to focus on. Logical, right? Right.

Without giving myself time to hesitate, I scrolled through my contacts and found Igor's number.

"Save me!" I texted.

"What happened?!" came his immediate reply.

"I'm dying. Of boredom..."

A laughing emoji followed by a superhero cat in a cape.

"Rescue mission in progress! Be ready by seven. Fancy outfit required!"

I shot back an "OK!" sticker and sat there thinking. Perfect. Who needs Sokolov, anyway?

I did wonder for a moment what exactly *fancy* meant. Heels and a dress? Or something fancier—like a cocktail dress? Where were we going, exactly? Ah, who cares. Igor didn't seem like a snob. I doubted he'd be judging me by the length of my dress or the height of my heels.

As the taxi pulled up to my building, I glanced around nervously. Was I afraid of seeing Roman's car? Or... secretly hoping to? Either way, it wasn't there. Looked like he respected my request and was giving me space. No car. No Sokolov. Just as well.

Chapter 21

Eva

Back home, I fired up the work app and dove straight into the project. Roman had emailed me the assignment yesterday, and I got completely absorbed—every irrelevant thought thrown out the window. I loved this process. That sense of purpose, of creating something important, something bold, something different. It was addictive. By evening, the first draft was ready. I sent it off to him and finally looked at the clock. Oh wow, six already? I'd completely lost track of time. I'd been sitting here for hours—no lunch, no breaks.

I wasn't even hungry, but I threw together a quick sandwich anyway. Just in case my head started spinning again at the worst possible moment. My thoughts, of course, tried to drift where they always did—straight to Sokolov and his midnight adventure. But I shut that door fast and cranked up Rammstein. No one in their right mind can think clearly with that blasting. Definitely not me.

So I chewed, bounced a little to the beat, and started getting ready.

Throwing myself into prep was almost enjoyable—at least it kept my mind occupied. I picked out an outfit, put on some light makeup, and even debated over accessories.

It felt like a blast from the past. After I quit modeling, Mom never forgave me. We stopped talking. And something in me just... shut down. I completely lost the joy of dressing up. Like makeup wasn't makeup anymore—it was a mask. One I didn't want to wear.

But now, as I evened out my complexion and stared into the mirror, something hit me hard. God, how I *wished* it was Sokolov taking me out tonight—not Igor. Just to see that look in his eyes again. That raw hunger, the way he stared at me back in St. Petersburg—like I was the only thing he needed. I craved that. Physically.

I gave my head a shake. Ugh. Love is such a nasty little flaw. All my thoughts—like some junkie—were about one thing. Like a broken record: Roman, Roman, Roman! It was infuriating. I've never been like this. With Nick, it had been easy. Calm. No stress, no drama, no emotional ping-pong. We were friends first—then slowly became something more. It worked. For a while, anyway.

But Sokolov? He tore through my life like a tornado. And I bet he doesn't even remember that night in St. Petersburg. Hell, maybe he never did. Nothing happened anyway—it was just a kiss. One kiss! He probably has those for breakfast with a new woman every day.

At exactly seven, the doorbell rang. I was fully dressed and ready. A knee-length navy-blue sheath dress—classic cut, with a bold slit up one thigh. A delicate platinum bracelet on my wrist. Hair curled in soft waves, arranged carefully to hide the fading scratch on the back of my head. Makeup—subtle, but not invisible. Just right.

I slipped on a light beige trench coat as the finishing touch and stepped outside.

Igor was waiting by the entrance, holding a bouquet. The moment he saw me, he let out a little gasp of admiration and handed me the flowers. Stunning white roses.

"You look incredible," he said, leaning in to lightly brush his lips against my cheek—as if we were old friends.

Being around him was easy. Nothing like being around Roman. And yet... I still blushed.

"How's your head after that volleyball stunt?" Igor asked casually, opening the car door for me.

"It's fine now, thanks!" I smiled. "Still a little dizzy sometimes, but I think that's just from boredom."

Igor laughed and started the engine.

"Where are we headed?" I asked, fastening my seatbelt.

"Do you like jazz?" he countered with a grin.

"Very much!"

"Perfect! I had a feeling you would."

"Are we going to a concert?"

"A concert, dinner, drinks—and a healthy dose of admiration," he chuckled. "There's this great little venue I know. A popular jazz band's playing tonight. We'll get there just in time."

"Wow, I've never been to anything like that!"

"You're gonna love it."

I pressed the bouquet to my face and inhaled the sweet scent of the roses. God bless the moment I texted Igor. Such a gentleman—charming, attentive... not like *some people*. I bet Roman Sokolov wouldn't be caught dead at a jazz concert. I mean, does the man even do fun? Or is his idea of a good time that tragic team-building fiasco?

They say don't ask questions you're not ready to hear the answers to. And wow, did the universe deliver on that one. Because the very first person I laid eyes on when we stepped into the bright, elegant hall—round tables, warm lighting, soft music already playing—was none other than Roman Sokolov.

I froze on the spot. You have got to be kidding me. Was this man stalking me?! What were the odds?

"What's wrong?" Igor leaned in close, concerned. "You just went pale. Are you feeling okay?"

"I want to leave."

Igor followed my gaze and spotted him. Roman hadn't noticed us yet. He was deep in conversation with a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair. Roman sat casually, one arm draped over the back of his chair, sleeves rolled up to the elbow, blazer tossed across his lap. At the same table, two women were whispering to each other and blatantly staring at him.

Of course they were. Because of course Roman had to look like a damn movie poster.

“Damn,” Igor muttered, clearly thrown off. “We run into each other here sometimes, but I had no idea he’d be here tonight. Did something happen between you two?”

“No,” I said quickly. Too quickly. “It’s just... Igor, please, can we leave? Or I can grab a cab, really, it’s no big deal.”

“Absolutely not. Of course we’ll go. I’m sorry, I had no idea—”

“It’s fine. Really... oh no—”

Roman looked up.

And our eyes locked.

His expression flickered like a lightning storm—first confusion, then surprise, then something cold and sharp that made the air between us drop ten degrees.

I couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. I was a statue rooted to the floor, watching in horror as he stood up with all the grace of a predator on the hunt and walked straight toward us. My heart pounded so hard I reached for Igor’s arm just to stay upright. He squeezed my hand gently, reassuring. Roman’s jaw clenched, his cheek twitched. If looks could kill, we’d both be in body bags.

But when he got close, he just growled, eyes locked on mine:

“Well. You seem to be feeling much better. Come on—we need to talk.”

And just like that, he pulled me out of Igor’s hands and dragged me toward the lobby.

Chapter 22

Eva

Roman charged through the crowd like a tank, dragging me behind him. People practically jumped out of the way.

I twisted around and shouted, “It’s fine! Grab a table—I’ll be back in a minute!”

I was terrified Igor would chase after us and cause a full-blown scene. But thank God he had the sense not to. Or maybe he just figured picking a fight with Sokolov wasn’t worth the trouble. Either way, he just nodded and watched us go.

I tried to pull away, but Roman only gripped my arm tighter.

“Ow! Where are we even—hey! That hurts! You’re clamped on like a bulldog!”

He shot me a look over his shoulder, eyes blazing.

“You’ll survive.”

Oh wow. Charming.

“Where are you dragging me?!”

We turned a corner, went down a few steps, and ended up in a dim, narrow hallway. Roman didn’t even slow down.

“What is this, some murder plot? You gonna seal me up in the walls?”

“Quiet.”

He yanked at a few doorknobs until one opened, then shoved me inside, followed me in, and locked it with a click.

I looked around. A storage room? Maybe a wardrobe closet. Clothes were hanging everywhere—some in garment bags, some not. A long table covered in random junk. It smelled like dust and something oddly nostalgic. Like old Christmas decorations tucked away in Grandma’s attic.

I stepped back and crossed my arms, full defense mode.

“Okay. Wanna tell me why you dragged me in here?”

He leaned against the door and just stared at me.

“Oh, we’re doing the silent treatment now?” I huffed. “Cool. Great.”

I propped myself against the table, aiming for casual—even though my pulse was going a mile a minute.

“Why didn’t you answer me?” he asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Didn’t feel like it.”

"What did you feel like? Going on a little dinner date with Mikhailov?"

I practically choked. *Excuse me?*

"That's none of your business who I go out with."

"Oh, really?" he said, stepping closer. I pressed harder into the edge of the table. "As long as you're my girlfriend, you don't get to see other men. That's it. End of story. You're... compromising me."

"I'm compromising *you*? That's rich." My temper flared. "Right, because I'm the one showing up to work looking like I just crawled out of someone's bed. I'm the one reeking of someone else's perfume. Or maybe I'm the one sitting around with two thirsty chicks who—oh yeah, totally—it's *me* they're eyeing like dessert."

The corners of his mouth twitched. Oh no. No, no, no.

"You think this is funny?!" I shouted, completely forgetting all the calm, reasonable things I'd promised myself earlier. "You jerk! You absolute bastard, Sokolov! Laughing at *me*?!"

I grabbed the first thing I could reach off the table—some rag—and chucked it at him. He dodged effortlessly and took a step closer.

"Don't come near me!" I threw another one. "What are you even grinning at, you idiot?!"

"Because I like it when you get jealous," he said softly, stalking closer like a cat.

"Excuse me? *Jealous*? Don't flatter yourself." My voice was climbing into full chaos mode. "You're not even my real boyfriend! You're not the center of the goddamn universe, got it?!"

I raised my arm, ready to throw something else—anything. But he was already there. Right in front of me. Close. Too close. He pressed me against the table, and with that same cloth I'd been about to throw, he gently wrapped my wrists behind my back.

I jerked instinctively, a soft whimper escaping my throat.

"Not your real boyfriend, huh?" Roman murmured, eyes fixed on my lips.

"No!" I squeaked defiantly, heart pounding so hard it felt like it would crack my ribs.

"We'll see about that," he whispered—and leaned in.

But he didn't kiss me. Not yet. He froze—our lips a millimeter apart. No more. I could feel his breath, hear the wild rhythm of his heart, so fast, just like mine. His chest pressed against mine, solid, hot—and something low in my belly clenched, growing heavier by the second.

It was pure, exquisite torture—being so close to him and yet not close enough.

Another shaky whimper slipped out. I leaned forward, finally brushing my lips against his.

And that was it. The dam burst.

He crashed into the kiss like a man starved—hungry, desperate. Like he'd been dying of thirst and I was the only water in the world. I twisted my wrists free, wrapped my arms around his neck,

fingers threading through his short hair, pulling him closer. He devoured my mouth, then moved lower, kissing down my neck. His hands cupped my breasts, fingers teasing through the fabric of my dress.

Electricity. That's what ran through my veins—white-hot pulses every time his lips touched my skin.

I moaned, arching back, completely gone. Stopping wasn't even an option. It didn't exist. I *needed* this. Needed his kiss, his hands, his body pressed against mine.

"Roman... baby..." I breathed, head thrown back.

"Say it again," he whispered against my neck.

It felt like heaven—saying his name. I kept repeating it, over and over, like a prayer.

His hands roamed over my body, greedy, reverent—stroking, grabbing, igniting little fires everywhere they went.

"What are you doing to me..." he breathed into my mouth between kisses. "You're driving me insane. I can't think about anything else. It's you, always you. Where the hell did you come from, you beautiful, sweet... my little nymph..."

His words melted me. I felt like I was liquefying from the heat of his voice, his touch, his kiss. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the table, my dress somewhere in the pile of fabric behind us, and Roman was kneeling, kissing the inside of my thighs. His tongue traced a hot, wet line over my skin—and under it, fire. My back arched involuntarily, the pressure in my core almost unbearable. Just a little more, just a few more of those kisses...

"Roman..." I gasped, pushing up on my elbows.

He looked up—and his eyes were nearly black. Wild. Fierce. Feral. Just the way I'd dreamed of.

"Come here."

I grabbed his shirt collar and pulled him up to me, kissing him hard. My fingers trembled as I yanked at his shirt, palms already running over the heat of his skin. He was breathing heavy too, fingers sliding under my bra clasp and unhooking it with ease. His hand slipped down, and I lifted my hips to help him pull off my panties, my own hands already working at his belt.

It was madness. Complete, delicious madness—and I didn't want anything else.

Somewhere, deep in my mind, Rational Eva was screaming—*Stop! What are you doing?! This is a public place, for God's sake!* But her voice didn't stand a chance. Not now.

I clung to Roman, moving with him, crying out with every thrust, every crash of his body into mine. My heart, my mind, my body—they were all on fire. Higher and higher, until I finally shattered, gasping his name as he kissed me again, swallowing every cry. And then he groaned too—head thrown back, body pressing me down into the table, giving me the most delicious, overwhelming weight in the world.

We stilled, bodies still tangled, breath coming fast. Reality trickled back in, slow and hazy. A few minutes passed before Roman finally exhaled, his voice deep and satisfied:

“Now I’m your *real* boyfriend.”

Chapter 23

Eva

I think someone knocked on the door a few times. Or maybe that was just poor, panicked Little Eva still screaming from the far corners of my brain. Either way, by the time I came back to my senses, the only thing I could hear in the room was our breathing.

I was still perched on the table, bare-skinned, pressed into Roman's muscular shoulder, my legs loosely wrapped around his waist. Slowly, I slid my legs down and straightened up, trying to come back to myself. Breaking the embrace was harder—but we eventually managed to peel ourselves apart.

We stared at each other, stunned... then burst out laughing.

Roman collapsed against me again, shaking with laughter. I couldn't stop either. What was happening?! Who acts like this after sex?

"What are you laughing at?" I gasped, still catching my breath.

"Hang on... just give me a second..." He exhaled deeply, ruffling my hair at the temple. "God. I can't even find the words. Wait—" He paused, then sighed, frustrated. "It all sounds so cliché. Like, *'My love, that was the best sex of my life!'*"

"Mmmm, classy," I purred, nibbling his earlobe. "Never heard anything more romantic in my life."

He rubbed his nose against my cheek and kissed me again. His tongue teased me, stirring up the heat all over again.

"So seriously," I mumbled against the corner of his lips, "what was so funny?"

He squinted like a smug cat and whispered:

"I just never imagined the best sex of my life would happen... in a freaking supply closet."

That made me snort again. He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me in like I was his favorite toy.

"No, seriously," he said. "The last two weeks I've been completely obsessed with you. I imagined it happening in a dozen different places. Oh, if you only knew... But the *first* time? I wanted to do it right. Candles. Rose petals. The whole fairy-tale setup girls like. I wanted you to love it. To forget anyone else even existed. And then... boom. I lost it. The second I saw you with Mikhailov... I just— I couldn't take it. Because you're mine."

Then he cut himself off and crashed into my mouth, kissing me like he wanted to brand me with it. There was nothing gentle about it—he was claiming me. And yeah... I felt that heat building low again.

I cupped his face in both hands and kissed him back, pouring into it all the longing and frustration I'd been carrying for days.

"Rose petals are cute and all," I murmured between kisses. "But they don't even come close to a good pile of dusty rags in a broom closet. You get that, right?"

And I giggled again.

"We should probably get out of here before they lock up the restaurant for the night, don't you think?" Roman traced a hot trail of kisses down my neck.

"Maybe we've had just enough of a good thing," I said thoughtfully. "Let's free up this luxury suite for the next lucky couple. Who knows—there might be a line forming outside."

"You're right," he sighed, pulling back. "We can't be selfish."

I hopped off the table and started looking for my clothes in the heap of random fabric.

"What is this place, anyway?" I asked while pulling on my tights. "How did you even know about it?"

"Used to come here when I was in high school. Drama club," Roman said casually, buttoning up his pants.

"Wait—*what?*" I froze, still holding my dress in my hands. "You?! In a drama club?!"

"You don't know me at all, my love," Roman said with a smug grin.

Then suddenly, he straightened up and reached out his hand to me. There was something achingly tender in his brown eyes. He tilted his head and, in a quiet, steady voice, began:

*"Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her maid art far more fair than she..."*

I'm pretty sure the sound of my jaw hitting the floor drowned out the jazz band playing in the background.

I stood there, gaping at him like he'd just stepped off a spaceship. Roman gently took my hand and kissed my fingers.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to mentally file this *entirely new* information about the man standing in front of me. After a moment, I nodded.

"You really are convincing, Romeo. At least I see now how you change so fast— From charming sweetheart into cold machine. Ugh, wait... am I speaking in iambs now? This thing is contagious!"

Still muttering, I started pulling on my dress. Roman chuckled, turned me around, and kissed the back of my neck as he zipped it up. Then he wrapped his arms around me, burying his face in my hair. I leaned into his shoulder and closed my eyes.

A wave of peace washed over me. Pure and total peace. *This* was the best place in the world—his arms. It didn't matter where we were. It didn't matter what else was going on. As long as he was holding me like this, I could be happy.

We slipped out of the storage room, exchanging little glances like two kids who'd just been caught sneaking around. We avoided eye contact as we collected our things at the coat check. The staff here was impeccably trained—nobody said a word or gave so much as a knowing look—but I *swore* they all knew exactly what we'd just been doing. It felt like we were radiating love pheromones.

We kept exchanging looks and laughing under our breath. Roman kept brushing my hair back, wiping away smudged mascara. Then, just as we reached the exit, he pulled me in and kissed me—deep and greedy.

My heart nearly exploded.

"You actor," I whispered against his lips. "Putting on a show for the public, huh?"

"Of course," he purred. "Let everyone see that Sokolov's taken now."

That word again. Taken. He'd called me *his* and *his girl* and now *his woman*. Every time he said it, I felt like I might melt into a puddle of syrup. But deep down, Rational Eva wasn't asleep—oh no, she was still there, grumbling: *So what if he calls you "his woman"? Maybe he says that to all of them. Didn't he literally tell you he doesn't fall in love? I wonder how many of his exes knew that little fun fact...*

In the car, I sent a quick message to Igor:

"Had to leave. I'm sorry things turned out that way."

Half a minute later, he replied:

"I was worried. Hope you're okay. Guess you owe me a proper date now. ;)"

God bless Igor for being a normal, rational human being. Not an emotionally unstable maniac, like *some people*.

"Who are you texting?" *Some people* stretched his neck, trying to peek at my screen.

"Hey!" I protested. "Don't invade my personal space."

"Oh yeah? Or what?" Roman narrowed his eyes like a predator.

"You'll get lost in it and never make it out," I shot back with a wink.

He ran his fingertips along my cheek.

"Careful. Keep that up and we won't even make it home... Speaking of—yours or mine?"

I froze. I hadn't even thought that far ahead. I figured he'd just drop me off and that would be it. But he wanted to *stay* with me?

"Well then... mine."

He nodded and pulled out smoothly. While we drove, I couldn't stop staring at him. His strong hands on the wheel. That sharp, sculpted profile that looked like it had been carved by a Renaissance artist. A tiny beauty mark near his ear I'd never noticed before. The way his thigh muscles flexed under his pants every time he pressed the pedals. This man was perfection. He looked like some young god.

"Careful," Roman murmured with a crooked smile. "You're gonna melt me with that stare."

"Should I look away?"

"Don't you *dare*."

I smiled and leaned back into the seat. Watching my man like this was pure pleasure.

Chapter 24

We rode up in the elevator with a little old lady from next door. Roman was the picture of self-restraint all the way to the ninth floor. Hands buried deep in his pockets, jaw clenched. I, on the other hand, had no idea what to do with mine. All I wanted was to touch him. To make up for the forced stillness, we locked eyes and didn't look away. His face was unreadable, but fire danced in his pupils—and that look sent shivers all over me.

We politely said goodbye to the neighbor, and I unlocked my apartment. I flipped on the light, stepped aside to let him in—and the door slammed shut behind us just as strong arms pinned me against the wall.

"That elevator ride was endless," Roman murmured, brushing his lips along my cheek. "The way you kept looking at me... I was burning up. I wanted to pull over and take you right there in the car... Barely stopped myself."

"You're on fire tonight, Mr. Sokolov," I whispered, tilting my chin toward his. He didn't need another hint—he crashed into me, kissing me like he was starving. His tongue claimed mine, his hands were already tugging at my clothes. He slipped off my coat, unzipped my dress. It fell to my waist, and his fingers immediately found my breasts, caressing, gently squeezing them through the lace of my bra. I writhed under his touch, arching like a cat. His passion was scorching, the heat was consuming me, and moans poured out of me, one after the other. I barely recognized myself. With Nick, I'd never been this free, this wild. But with Roman... everything felt natural. Everything he did to me just felt *right*.

I helped him undress. He tossed my dress aside and pulled down my tights and panties in one motion, peppering kisses along every inch of skin he revealed. A deep tremor ran through me. I arched toward his mouth... his tongue, his fingers. My moans turned into cries. Every muscle in me tightened, stretched to its limit. I was on the verge of detonating—and then Roman stood, lifted one of my legs to his hip, and, after a breathless pause, thrust into me with one deep stroke.

A strangled cry tore from my throat as I surged to meet him. He stilled for a second, breathing hard, then pressed his whole body against mine and started to move. Slow at first, savoring it. His fingers were still working their magic, teasing, pressing, stroking me into madness. I moved with him, completely in sync. His ragged breath scorched my cheek. His rhythm quickened, his movements turning rough, erratic. I felt like I was burning in some kind of cosmic fire. Just a little more, just a little—

The climax hit so hard, the world went black for a second. My body arched in his arms, trembling violently. He drove into me a few more times, then groaned and clutched me tight—so tight I could barely breathe. It was overwhelming. Incredible. I'd had no idea sex could be like this.

Afterward, we showered and curled up on the couch, lazily talking.

"I've never lost my head like that," Roman said softly, still sounding dazed. "I don't know what it is about you. My brain just short-circuits. I mean, I didn't even think about protection. Like some dumb teenager! Eva!" He leaned in, mock-accusing. "Did you cast a spell on me?"

"Obviously," I muttered, mostly for the sake of argument. "Men are so predictable. It's never *his* fault—it's always the wicked woman's doing."

Truth was, I totally got where he was coming from. Because I felt the exact same way.

"No, really—I swear, it's only with you that I lose control like this," Roman said quickly. "Didn't I tell you I never fall in love? And now—turns out sex with love is just... mind-blowing."

"Relax, my poor headless horseman," I snorted. "I'm on the pill. Been on it for years and didn't stop even after I broke up with Nick. So don't worry—no babies in the near future."

Roman gave me a strange, unreadable look.

"What?" I asked, suddenly tense.

He frowned, shook his head slowly, and let out a long breath.

"This is gonna sound weird," he said. "But that didn't reassure me at all. It... disappointed me."

Warmth bloomed in my chest. My lips curled up in a slow, involuntary smile. Did he just say he *wanted* kids? With *me*? Oh my God.

"But don't ever mention that poodle again," Roman added, squinting at me.

"What poodle?" I blinked.

"Your ex!" he snapped. "I turn into a monster just thinking someone else had you. Why are you smiling? I'm serious!"

"Because I like it when you get jealous," I teased, throwing his own line back at him.

Roman didn't flinch. He sat up cross-legged, fixing me with a stern look.

"I *am* jealous. Hell yes, I'm jealous—and I'm not even pretending otherwise!" he growled. "I'm ready to kill when I see the way men look at you. When you walked in with Mikhailov today, I—God, I don't even know what I wanted to do to the both of you. It was like this red haze dropped over my eyes. And that damn poodle yesterday—when he pinned you to the wall—I still don't get how I didn't snap his neck right there. Shit, I never thought I could feel rage like that! I've always kept my cool. But apparently, that's only true when you're not around."

He was leaning over me... so intense. So passionate. So ridiculously sexy. And completely, gloriously naked.

I reached up and traced a finger along his chest, then lower, outlining the muscles of his abs. He faltered mid-sentence, eyes fluttering shut like he was listening to his own body.

"You forgot something, my dearest boss," I whispered. "If we're talking about jealousy... I've got a *lot* more reasons than you. Where were you last night? And why the hell did you reek of perfume?"

His face shifted—guilt creeping in. And just like that, the pain inside me flared up again. I sat up, hugging my knees against my chest.

"Why did you leave?" I asked, sharp and clipped. "Why didn't you stay?"

He stared at me, unblinking. Then said it, plain and simple:

"Because I'm an idiot." He rubbed his forehead and winced, that familiar little gesture. "I thought you were just playing with me. I wanted to forget you. Cut you out of my head." His eyes dropped. "So I went to see an old friend."

Something burned inside me. I knew we hadn't made any promises yet, but my heart still cracked open from the hurt. The disappointment. The stupid, helpless fury. I wanted to scream, but nothing came out.

"I don't want to lie to you," Roman said, his jaw clenched. "So I'm telling you everything. I went to her place thinking it would help me get over you. It didn't. I couldn't. Nothing happened between us, because all I could think about... was *you*."

The breath I'd been holding came rushing out of me, dragging most of the fire with it. Maybe I was a fool—but I believed him. Instantly.

"Really?" I asked, my voice tiny, throwing him a glance.

"Really. Swear to God. Nothing but the truth." He leaned in, kissing my knees. Then the fingers wrapped around them. "But now I want to hear something from *you*..." He climbed higher, trailing fire along my skin with every kiss. "Did I hear right, or did you actually call me your love? Say it again."

My arms flew up, wrapping around his neck. The words spilled out, raw and real, straight from my heart.

"I love you, my Winter Soldier."

Chapter 25

We didn't go to work that Friday. We'd fallen asleep just before sunrise, unable to pull away from each other, drunk on closeness and warmth. I only opened my eyes when sunlight began streaming through the curtains, warm and insistent. I reached lazily for my phone. Ten a.m. Oh no.

Roman was still asleep behind me, wrapped around me like a blanket, his whole body pressed to mine. I turned carefully in his arms until we were face-to-face. In sleep, he looked so much younger. The furrow between his brows had vanished, his lips were slightly parted, and a dark strand of hair had fallen onto his forehead. I gently brushed it away with my finger and kissed him softly on the lips. His lashes twitched, and then those dark, nearly black eyes blinked open. And just like that, the now-familiar tension curled low in my belly.

"We overslept," I whispered. "Hope the boss won't dock our pay."

Roman's voice came out rough with sleep. "Rules are the same for everyone. Just... the penalties vary."

He suddenly flipped me onto my back, and I squealed in surprise as he pinned me beneath him.

An hour later, we finally dragged ourselves out of bed. While he was in the shower, I made coffee and wished this could be our everyday life. Okay, sure, a billionaire probably wouldn't want to live in my shoebox of a studio forever—but honestly, who cared? I just wanted to be with him. Wherever that was.

"You're definitely a witch," Roman said as he walked out of the bathroom, towel-drying his hair. "No other explanation. This tiny apartment suddenly feels... cozy. I don't even want to leave."

I bit my lip, but couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face.

"Then don't," I said simply, pouring the coffee and plating the omelet.

He sat down and reached for his fork.

"I won't," he said after a pause. "We've already missed the office. Let's just work on the project here today. I saw the drafts you sent me last night. And maybe tonight we go out?"

"Sounds perfect."

"But—" He looked up from his plate, eyes locked on mine. "If you want, we could go to my place instead. Totally up to you. Just know this: I don't plan on leaving you today."

Something warm and sweet bloomed inside me.

"How about we save that for another day?" I said with a wink. "I still have a few plans for you here..."

“Oh yeah?” He squinted playfully, licking his lips. “Like what?”

I batted my lashes over the rim of my mug.

“Oh, you know... there’s a shelf that really needs hanging.”

We barely left the bed all weekend. Scratch that—we turned the entire apartment into one giant bed. My innocent little daydream from two weeks ago had come to life. We made love wherever passion found us—and it found us everywhere.

It was wild. I was losing my mind just from being near him. And I didn’t want to come back to my senses. My Winter Soldier turned out to be pure fire—restless, unstoppable.

In our breaks, we worked on the presentation for the Krasnodar project. Roman told me that Sabrina was blown away by my sketches, and he himself was “seriously impressed.” That meant the world to me. I even confessed I would’ve been willing to fetch coffee for Nossy for another six months just to hear that.

“An employee this valuable?” Roman said, kissing me. “I’ll bring you coffee myself. Every day.”

“I’m holding you to that,” I purred, tracing a new outline on the screen.

Despite the constant interruptions (and oh, there were many), by Sunday night we were nearly done. Just a few final touches left to polish before the Saturday deadline. It was a major project—a whole residential district with a shopping mall, gym, school, and several playgrounds. Huge scope. Huge money. Now we just had to convince the investors that ours was the winning pitch.

I hadn’t even noticed when I stopped thinking of it as Roman’s project and started calling it ours. Sure, there’d be competition—I knew we’d be up against some of the biggest construction companies in the country, and the top development conglomerate: Falcon. Still, I felt oddly optimistic. For some reason, it just seemed like we were going to win this.

On Monday, we almost overslept again, so we decided to grab breakfast somewhere along the way. Roman still needed to stop by his place—to shave and change. I was going to head straight to the office, but he made it clear that wasn’t even an option—we were going together, period.

So he stood by the door, waiting—surprisingly patiently—while I got ready. Not that I needed much time. I slipped into a sharp pantsuit, tied my hair into a high ponytail, stepped into my loafers, and threw on a trench coat. Ready.

“Well, well. Miss Executive,” Roman said, giving me a slow once-over. “What happened to the jeans? I kinda miss them.”

“Oh really? Thank God. I’ll go change!” I made a move toward the bedroom, but he caught me in one smooth motion, arms locking around me. His fingers slid into my ponytail, wrapping the strands around his fist.

“Impossible,” he whispered against my lips, teasing. “Prettiest girl in the whole damn world.”

My heart did that familiar thing—skipping straight into a gallop.

“Roman, we’re never going to leave at this rate,” I grinned. “Don’t you have a meeting today? You canceled it on Thursday.”

He sighed and let me go.

“You’re right. Unfortunately…”

We got to the office about an hour late. Roman said he’d pushed the meeting to noon, which meant the first order of business was coffee—in his office. Then, and only then, we’d start working.

But just as we walked into the reception area—still holding hands like a couple of lovestruck teenagers—Vicky intercepted us at the door, wide-eyed and flustered.

“Mr. Sokolov! I told her she couldn’t just go in, but she didn’t listen! I didn’t know what to do, I’m so sorry, I—”

“Calm down, Victoria,” Roman said, his voice perfectly even. “Who exactly are we talking about?”

There was a faint floral scent in the air—jasmine. Vicky waved vaguely toward his office, and I saw the door was already open. A moment later, the sound of heels echoed across the floor, and a woman in her fifties emerged, gliding into the room like she owned it. Beige dress. Impeccable posture. And a face that practically dripped disdain.

“Late to work, Mr. Sokolov,” she said coolly. “I got tired of waiting.”

I didn’t so much see it as feel it—Roman tensing beside me, like steel locking into place. I glanced up at him. Yep. Winter Soldier mode: activated. Jaw set. Eyes cold. Shoulders squared.

“Sorry, Eva,” he muttered without looking at me. “Coffee’ll have to wait.”

He let go of my hand and strode into the office, closing the door behind him. And just like that, I was left standing at the entrance like an unwanted guest.

“Who was that, Vicky?” I asked, totally thrown off.

Vicky stared at me like I’d dropped from the ceiling. Then she scoffed.

“Seriously? That’s Falcon’s founder. Rule number one—know your enemies.”

Chapter 26

Roman

I walked into the office and sat down slowly, every muscle tight with tension. The ease of the past three days vanished the second I saw *that...* woman in the reception area.

Click. Click. Click. Her heels struck the floor like a metronome of irritation as she made her way in and dropped into the seat across from me, one leg crossing over the other. She squinted at me, eyes sharp and calculating. I stared back, willing myself to feel nothing. My face froze into a mask.

"No coffee?" she asked, lifting a brow.

"I don't have much time," I replied flatly, powering up my laptop.

"Oh, is that why you showed up late for work?"

A muscle pulsed in my temple, but I ignored it. I'd stopped letting this emotional vampire feed off me a long time ago. She, of course, hadn't stopped trying.

I typed in my password, launched the software, and finally looked up.

"If that's all you came to say—"

"It's not," she cut in. That icy tone—I knew it too well.

I almost smirked. Oh, she's mad. Excellent.

I leaned back in my chair, relaxed. Arms on the armrests. Not crossed. Let her see I wasn't on the defensive.

Her tone shifted. Softer now. Quieter. The gaze too—suddenly all gentle and wounded. I might have believed it, if I didn't know this viper so well. Every move, every little act—I knew them all.

"I didn't come here to fight," she said sweetly. "This is serious. I heard you're planning to go after that land in Krasnodar?"

I shrugged.

"It's no secret."

She bit her lip. Well, well... putting on a little show of nerves now?

She shook her head.

"Don't go near it."

She said it calmly, without raising her voice. The kind of sincerity she only pulled out when it served her. I didn't move. She leaned in.

"You're not strong enough yet. It's the South! They play by different rules down there."

"I'm not interested in power," I said.

She scoffed. “Still the same child. Still that little Don Quixote of yours. This is big money, Roman. And big money doesn’t come without power. It’s not just about pretty presentations. You have to scheme. Manipulate. Play dirty. You don’t know how. You’re just like your father.”

She paused. Her voice dropped low.

“If you win this project, you’ll be bankrupt in six months. The South will chew you up and spit you out.”

I sat forward, eyes locked on hers.

“And why do you care?” I asked, my voice like ice. “Worried about me, *Mommy?*”

She suddenly relaxed. Smirked. Nodded, almost tiredly.

“Of course I’m worried... *son.*”

Her hand tightened around her purse. I stared at her fingers—pale, tense, nails still perfectly painted. Her lips pressed thin.

And I thought: *Don’t bother. I stopped believing you a long time ago.*

“There’s one more option,” she said, voice a touch too high. She hesitated, cleared her throat, and continued like it pained her to say it.

“That’s actually why I came. Look—if you’re dead set on going after the South, fine. Then let’s go in together. One holding. I’ve got the connections. They reach all the way down there.”

I blinked. Then burst out laughing.

“Well, that’s new,” I said. “You planning to add Sparrow to your collection of little toys? Not happening. Not in this lifetime.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped. “I’ll give you half the shares!”

She stood up and started pacing, heels clicking sharply across the floor. And right then it hit me—how much I hated that sound. Like nails hammering a coffin shut.

Thank God Eva wears flats. And even when she does wear heels, she floats. Like a butterfly.

I shook my head. Not the time to get soft. Thinking about Eva throws me off.

My mother stopped a few steps from me. The light hit her face just right—and for the first time, I noticed how much she’d changed. The lines around her mouth were deeper. Her skin darker, drier. No matter how much the iron lady held herself together... time was winning.

“Listen to me,” she said in a voice that didn’t sound like hers at all. It was soft. Gentle. A tone you’d expect from an actual mother. One who cares.

I narrowed my eyes. New tactic. I just hadn’t figured out the goal yet. What the hell did she want with Sparrow?

“You’re my son,” she said, staring me down. “Everything I’ve built—”

"You?" I raised an eyebrow. "So we're erasing my father now? The man who actually founded Falcon?"

Yeah, I was provoking her. No point pretending otherwise. It was easier to play the old games than start a new one. I waited for the usual poison. But she just nodded.

"Fine. Everything *your father and I* built over the years—it's all going to be yours, eventually."

I shook my head.

"I don't want it."

She clicked her tongue, annoyed.

"Oh, stop it with your teenage rebellion. I came here in peace, and the least you can do is meet me halfway! Falcon will be yours—whether you like it or not. So why not start managing it now? I'll step down if that's what you want. I'll sign it all over to you. Today. We'll go to a notary right now. What do you say? I don't have as much strength as I used to. The company needs a steady hand. Who else is going to lead it? You're my only son!"

And just like that—there it was again. That old, heavy, choking feeling I hadn't let near me in years. The *smog*. That was what I used to call it. The dark, suffocating mix of anger, hatred, and hurt that used to pull me under like a riptide when I was a kid. Strangely enough, it was the drama club that helped me fight it—at least for a couple of hours, by becoming someone else.

Just seeing her now was enough to make me mentally armor up, slam down the visor. Her jabs didn't touch me anymore. Her sarcasm barely registered. But when she started pretending to be a *real mother*, my defenses cracked—and the smog came pouring in.

"Brilliant," I said, slow clapping. "Really. Mother of the year. You're just off by—what, twenty years? Back then, maybe I'd have believed you were being sincere. Then again... probably not even then."

"Just listen to me!" she snapped, throwing up her hands.

"No!" I roared, choking on the smog. "You had your turn—now *you* listen to *me*! I don't give a damn about you or your company! I let it go seven years ago, the day I built my own. Remember why? Because you, *Mommy*, said I'd be lucky if I ever got to change a damn lightbulb in your company! Well guess what—if you ever do hand it over to me, know this: I'll tear it apart and sell it piece by piece in under a week. I don't need your handouts. Save them for your lapdogs. You want to fix something? Go back thirty years and learn how to be a normal mother. Until then, forget I exist. I'm not your son. I'm your competition. And next time—make an appointment."

I clenched my teeth, breathing hard. The smog was burning my eyes, locking up my jaw. I hate you! Go on—pour the poison on me! Stop pretending! Let it out already!

But she just gave a crooked smile. Nodded.

"You're *my* son," she said with smug satisfaction. "My blood. Whether you admit it or not, you're just like me."

I clenched my fists, imagining my hands around her neck. That bitch spent my whole childhood tearing me down for being too much like my father. And now that I've made something of myself, she wants to call it her blood?

I exhaled. Uncurled my fingers. The smog was retreating—slowly.

I nodded toward the door.

“Get. Out. Of my office.”

Chapter 27

Eva

I sat there, staring at my reflection in Vicky's dark monitor. She'd run off to the legal department to fetch some contracts, asking me to watch the reception desk for a minute.

But I could still hear her voice in my head.

"That's the founder of Falcon!"

And a second later—

"And Roman's mother!"

His mother?

The shock hit me so hard I didn't even know how to respond. So naturally, I blurted out something stupid.

"You're kidding! So our Winter Soldier's a trust fund baby? A spoiled heir to the throne? I thought he was self-made!"

"He *is* self-made!" Vicky snapped, like I'd insulted *her*. "He built his company from scratch! His father died a long time ago. And his relationship with his mother is... awful!"

That made me look at Vicky differently. Something in her voice, the heat in her cheeks—it set off a quiet alarm. That alarm turned into a very loud suspicion within seconds.

"How do you know that?" I asked slowly.

She turned bright red.

"Secretaries are supposed to know everything about their bosses."

I shook my head and took her by the hand, dragging her away from the door and toward the reception desk.

"Talk," I said firmly. "Did something happen between you two?"

My heart was pounding. *No. Not again. Not another friend falling for the same guy as me.*

She went even redder and started nervously twisting her fingers.

"No! Nothing happened. I just... I mean, when I first started at Sparrow... you know, I was always around him, and—well, look at him. How do you not fall for a guy like that? But he doesn't know. I swear, he never knew! Please don't say anything to him! He's never been with anyone from the office. You're the only one. The *only one*. And I'm totally over it now. I promise."

I took a deep breath and tried to smile. Tried. Yeah. How *does* one not fall for him? And how was I supposed to believe that *he*, the walking fantasy of every woman in the building, would actually stay with *me*? What made me so special?

Vicky suddenly jumped up and bolted, muttering something about urgent legal stuff. I wasn't buying it. She just wanted to escape that painfully awkward moment.

And there I was, stuck replaying the whole thing in my head like a broken record.

Then I heard it—Roman's voice, low and furious, coming from his office. No, not just furious. He was *growling*. Clipped, cold, ruthless. I couldn't make out the words, but the tone said enough.

A minute later, the door slammed open and his mother stormed out like a woman possessed. She swept through the reception area like a hurricane and vanished down the hall.

Yeah. I guess Vicky wasn't exaggerating. That relationship looked toxic from across the room.

I sat there, frozen. Should I go in? Try to calm him down? Or would that just piss him off even more?

The silence from behind that door was absolute. No footsteps, no papers rustling, not even breathing. After five minutes of that, I started imagining the worst. What if he wasn't even breathing in there? Fine. Yell at me if you want, but I need to know you're alive.

I got up and crept toward the door. Gently pushed it open without knocking.

Roman was sitting there, staring straight ahead. Not blinking. Not moving. Like a statue. His face was pure stone.

Then he blinked, and his gaze snapped to mine. I let out a shaky breath, halfway ready to duck back out, but he crooked a finger. I walked over, carefully, and perched on the edge of his desk. Looked into his face. The longer I stared, the softer it became. Like a stone thawing in the sun.

To seal the deal, I wrapped my arms around him and rested my head against his. Let my fingers play with the hair at the nape of his neck.

He exhaled—loudly—and hugged me tight.

"You heal me," he whispered, lifting his head.

I touched his face, his shoulders, ran my fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes, practically purring like a cat.

And when I felt him finally relax, I asked quietly,

"Will you tell me what happened?"

And just like that, his body tensed under my hands. He shook his head slowly.

"Not today. I don't want to talk about her."

I nodded.

"Okay. Some other time. Then maybe... we get back to the project?"

"Yeah. Let's do that."

The rest of the week, we barely left the office. Roman worked like a man possessed, obsessing over every last detail in the plans. He didn't want me working in my usual space—said he needed me close—so he had Vicky bring in another chair and practically glued me to his side.

We lived on coffee and takeout, breaking only for quick snacks and even quicker kisses. He kept asking for my opinion on all sorts of unexpected architectural quirks, and every time he actually *listened*, my heart did a little flip. Sometimes he'd take my suggestions. Sometimes we'd argue—loudly, passionately, until our voices got hoarse. And during those debates, he'd come alive: gesturing, pacing, explaining, eyes gleaming with purpose.

And me? I could barely take my eyes off him. Sometimes I'd argue just to keep the fire going, tossing in random objections just to watch him light up. He caught on more than once, of course. Then he'd laugh, kiss me hard, and disappear back into his head again, chasing perfection like the world depended on it.

It felt like he was building his final masterpiece. Like it had to be *flawless*.

At night, we went home—to his place this time. A wide, sun-drenched loft with tall ceilings and the kind of minimalism that only rich people can pull off without looking cold.

We made love like we were burning—urgent, fierce, almost desperate. Like we needed to quiet the noise from the week, from the past, from the world outside those walls.

By Thursday, the project was done. Sharpened to perfection. We were flying out early Saturday morning, so I told him I'd go home Friday afternoon—to pack, to regroup, to just... breathe.

Now I sat in my tiny apartment, staring at the old portrait of Roman still pinned to the wall. I'd pulled out the darts, finally. The paper was wrinkled, slightly torn, but somehow I loved it even more this way. It felt like *him*—the real Roman, not the polished version the world saw.

I sipped my tea—literally the only thing left in my kitchen—and thought about how, just a week ago, I was drowning in one-sided love.

And now? Turns out it wasn't one-sided at all. Not even close.

The past week had made that crystal clear. With *me*, he was different.

People at the office had started acting weird around me. Word had gotten out—somehow—that he'd fired Nossy *because of me*. Now they were all watching me like I was some sort of sorceress who could bend Roman Sokolov to her will.

They were tiptoeing. Reverent.

It drove me crazy. Roman thought it was hilarious. Every time he left his office, he'd wrap his arms around me from behind and whisper so only I could hear: "So... who do we fire today, Your Majesty?"

My cheeks would catch fire, but I couldn't help laughing.

He wanted me around constantly. And honestly... I wanted the same.

We worked together. Slept together. Ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner *together*. We were in each other's pockets 24/7. And sometimes that scared me. How fast—*instantly*—I'd fallen for him. How deep his hold on me already was.

That's part of why I insisted on going home. I needed air. Space. A moment to remember who I was outside of *us*.

Because somewhere, at the very edge of my thoughts, this quiet warning kept buzzing. *This can't be real.*

I'd started catching myself waiting for the catch. For something to go wrong. For Roman to get bored and walk away. To go back to his perfect life and leave me in the dust, broken and hollow. Because I wouldn't be able to recover. Not from *him*.

I was too far gone.

And that terrified me.

I was afraid to love him this much.

Now, sitting in my shoebox of an apartment, I felt a sudden ache of loneliness so sharp it took my breath away. The fear of losing control—of losing *myself*—crept in and settled heavy on my chest.

Stupid idea, staying home tonight.

When Roman's around—when he looks at me, touches me, kisses me—every fear I have just... disappears.

I needed him.

I grabbed my phone, unlocked the screen—

—and the doorbell rang.

My heart did a somersault. I ran to the intercom.

"Who is it?" I whispered, already knowing the answer.

"Pizza delivery!" came Roman's voice, cheerful and smug.

Chapter 28

The spacious hall of the massive business center was just a little too warm. Back in Moscow, we were already bundled up in coats and scarves, with rain hammering down nonstop the entire week before we left. But here, in the south, people were still walking around in light blazers or just shirts—and some brave souls even strutted around in short sleeves like it was still summer.

Roman checked his watch with an impatient flick. The presentation was dragging into its third hour.

For three days straight, regional construction companies would take turns showing off their projects. Moscow's turn was set for day four. Just one day—for the two biggest players from the capital.

Everything we'd seen so far had been... decent. Nothing bad, really. But compared to *our* project? Not even close. That was the good news. The bad news was, we still didn't know what *Falcon* was bringing to the table.

We sat in the second row. Igor, a few seats down, was yawning like he had no shame. Sabrina, part of the review committee, sat directly in front of us. Roman's mother hadn't bothered to show up.

Of course. Probably not the type to waste her time on anyone else's work. Or maybe she was just *that* confident her company would win.

The last of the southern companies finally wrapped up his pitch. The applause was... polite at best.

I was exhausted—again. Another night without proper sleep. I'd managed a quick nap on the plane, but it hadn't helped. We'd checked into the hotel and headed straight here, barely managing to grab breakfast.

I felt like a soggy paper towel.

Roman, on the other hand, was his usual self: fresh, focused, and *unfairly* sexy.

I glanced at him sideways, a little envious.

No, seriously. He had to be a vampire. Remember how he couldn't even enter my apartment the first time without an invite? I should throw holy water on him. Maybe that wouldn't break the curse, but at least it might make him *less* offensively attractive.

But of course, my brain just *had* to conjure up that memory of him from the day we met—standing in a soaked shirt clinging to his chest like a second skin.

Yeah, no. If anything, that curse was making him *hotter*.

Fine. I'll just eat a whole clove of garlic. Then he definitely won't come near me, and I'll finally get a full night's sleep.

Smirking at my own ridiculous thoughts, I shot him a sideways glance. He caught it, smiled, and gave my hand a firm squeeze.

Instant goosebumps. My heart did a little skip.

Okay, who am I kidding? Sleep is *not* in my near future. Not when it's a choice between sleep and Roman. I'll take Roman every damn time.

After the presentation, we were finally let go, with a very insistent invitation to attend the evening cocktail party. Wasting no time, we headed back to the hotel to try and catch even a sliver of rest.

"What did you think of South Monolith's design?" Roman asked as he kicked off his shoes and loosened his tie.

I walked over and helped him undo the knot, unfastened the top button of his shirt—and couldn't resist pressing a kiss to that little hollow between his collarbones.

"It was... a project," I purred. "Didn't even come close to yours."

"Ours," he corrected.

Then he scooped me up and pulled me against him, burying his nose in my hair.

He smelled *ridiculously* good, and his lips were already trailing a slow, burning path across my temple and cheeks.

And just like that, I decided again—Sleep is *so* overrated.

"Eva, *ma chère*, you look absolutely divine!"

Sabrina broke away from the crowd and rushed up to me, circling like I was some rare museum exhibit, clicking her tongue in delight.

I smiled, slightly embarrassed, and quietly asked her to keep it down a notch—though honestly, it felt *really* nice.

I wasn't sure what this elegant older woman saw in me, but something about her attention warmed me from the inside out.

And okay, I did look pretty good. I'd gone all out tonight. You don't just show up to a party with *Roman* on your arm wearing jeans and a sweater—though now that I think about it, that *would* be hilarious. I might try it one day, just for science.

But tonight, I was in full goddess mode: a flowing pale blue dress in Greek style, open shoulders, brushing the floor as I moved. I'd teased my hair at the roots and pinned it into a deliberately messy bun. Even went for bold makeup—totally out of character, but the look worked.

I'd liked what I saw in the hotel mirror. But now, standing alone against a wall, all that confidence was dissolving into simmering irritation.

What was the point of all this effort? Who exactly was I dressing up for?

Roman had complimented my look, sure—but hadn't looked up from his phone since. He was texting. Calling. Giving orders like the world would collapse without him. And once we finally got to the event, he said he'd step away "for a minute"...

That was over an hour ago.

I'd been drifting through the hall like a lost balloon, unsure where to go, how to stand, or who to talk to. Fuming. At Roman. At myself. At this stupid dress. At the entire stupid idea of coming here at all.

I was *this close* to grabbing my clutch and heading back to the hotel—Until Sabrina showed up.

I smiled at her, genuinely this time. But she caught my mood anyway.

"What's wrong, darling? Why the sad face?" she asked, slipping into French. "And where's your fiancé?"

"Roman's not my fiancé," I corrected with a smile. "Just my boyfriend."

"Ah, a boyfriend today—fiancé tomorrow! Don't worry, he'll propose. I saw it from the very first day—how he looks at you! That look? You can't fake that, sweetheart."

She glanced around.

"So, where *is* he?"

I shrugged and said as lightly as I could,

"Probably off charming some local power players."

"He *left* you alone?! *Ooh la la!* Someone needs to have a word with him!"

"No-no, please! No words, no lectures!" I laughed—really laughed this time.

"There we go!" she nodded, satisfied. "Much better! Well then..." — she looked around and snatched two glasses of champagne off a passing tray — "Let's go out to the terrace! Breathe in the warm night air, toast to this meeting—and to your victory, no matter what."

She winked.

I squinted at her, curious. What did she mean *no matter what*?

We stepped out onto the terrace.

And it *was* beautiful. The city stretched out below us in glowing colors, the night air soft against our skin. The champagne buzz kept me warm.

We chatted, laughed—sometimes so hard we had to hold onto each other. People walked by, a few glancing in my direction. Sabrina introduced me to some of them; others just nodded politely from a distance.

By the time the chill finally crept in and we decided to head back inside, my mood had done a full 180.

Until I saw the crowd of men near the wide-open window.

And in the middle of them—Roman.

With a stunning brunette clinging to his arm like she'd paid for the privilege.

Chapter 29

Eva

It felt like time had stopped. Like the whole world hit pause. All I could see was Roman's laughing face, leaning in *way* too close to some woman—her flawless, polished features practically glowing. And I could feel the chemistry between them with every fiber of my being.

My heart didn't just break—it shattered into a hundred sharp little pieces that started flowing through my veins, slicing me from the inside out.

And then, *finally*, Roman lifted his head and decided to acknowledge my presence. He gently eased the brunette aside, and for a split second, I swear he looked... guilty. And that *killed* me. So he knew. He *knew* I was here, *knew* I might see them—and *still* couldn't resist cozying up to some random woman.

"Oh, there's Roman!" Sabrina chirped innocently, catching up with me. She'd been walking behind and hadn't seen anything—which was great, really. Roman's wholesome-guy reputation was safe for now.

We walked over to the group, and Sabrina immediately started introducing me to everyone, like I was the guest of honor.

I smiled so brightly it felt like my face might crack. Some people kissed my hand, I giggled and fluttered my lashes like I hadn't just watched my whatever-he-is flirt with another woman in 4K.

Meanwhile, my brain was foggy, my head was spinning, and I didn't catch a single name. Sabrina laughed—apparently, my little flirt show wasn't hurting my reputation either. Not that I cared. Right now, I just wanted to hurt Sokolov. As much as possible.

"Where were you?" he whispered in my ear. "I was looking for you."

"If you were looking, you would've found me," I said coolly, eyes straight ahead. But I did keep glancing at her. I couldn't help myself.

I kept sneaking looks at that brunette—her sharp, glossy features, her predator-smile. She had the face of someone who knows she's winning. And I think she did notice me watching, because she stretched those plump lips into a slow, deliberate smile and held out her hand.

"Sofia. So nice to meet you."

"Eva." My smile probably looked more like bared teeth.

"Roman's an old friend of mine," Sophia cooed, resting her hand—*again* (the audacity!)—on his shoulder. "We haven't seen each other in forever. When I found out he'd be here tonight, I just had to come."

Oh really? And how, exactly, did she find out? Did Roman tell her? Was this some planned little reunion behind my back?

Jealousy burned through me—hot, stupid, and totally irrational. Thanks again, Sokolov. Another delightful new emotion unlocked.

I'd never felt such a pure urge to claw someone's perfect hair out of their smug little head.

Just then, a tall, broad-shouldered guy caught my attention. He looked familiar—vaguely. I think he'd been with Roman at that jazz place where Igor took me... and where Roman and I had...

Nope. Not going there. *Focus.*

The big guy, unlike the rest of the men, wasn't wearing a tux. Instead, he had on black jeans and a brown sport coat, buttoned once in the middle. And I definitely didn't miss the way Sofia was eyeing him—like something she'd scrape off her heel. That alone made me instantly like him.

"Hey, I'm Kamil," he said, giving me a firm, no-nonsense handshake. "Heard a lot about you, Eva."

And then he smiled—wide, boyishly genuine. Like he was two seconds from winking, but not in a sleazy way—more like a warm, friendly one.

So *this* was Kamil.

Voices echoed in my head.

"Is the girl at least cute?"

"Cute... but not my type."

I didn't even pretend not to stare. Roman had told me about his childhood best friend Kamil—practically raised together. Said he worked for the Bureau now. Roman called him "Cap." Said the nickname stuck back in school, when they were all into comic books. Because apparently, Kamil was always that guy. The straight arrow. Honest. Untouchable. Lawful good incarnate. While the rest of them were still playing with toy cars, he already knew he wanted to catch bad guys.

What was he doing here? Flew in just for the party? Didn't seem likely.

"I've heard a lot about you, too," I replied, my voice suddenly much warmer than I expected. Funny, considering there was a time I wanted to rip this mystery man to shreds. Oh Roman, what are you doing to me?

But the warm feeling fizzled just as quickly. Mood: wrecked again. This was getting out of hand. Who was this woman, riding a rollercoaster of her own emotions? Because I didn't recognize her—and I hated her.

"I'm sorry," I said formally, avoiding Roman's gaze. "I need to excuse myself. I'm exhausted. Think I'll head back to the hotel."

"What?" Roman frowned. "Why? What happened?"

"Nothing," I replied, sharp as glass. "I *said* I'm tired." (And yep, even I could hear the blade in my voice.)

He looked confused. "Give me ten minutes. I'll go with you."

"Oh, no, don't worry," I cut him off with fake cheer and eyes that could burn holes through steel. "You stay and have fun. I'll manage just fine on my own." I turned to the group, flashed a dazzling, detached smile. "Goodnight, everyone!"

And off I went—fast and focused, walking straight toward the exit, Roman's gaze searing my back... and her hateful glare too. Sofia's. The brunette's. His *friend*.

Why would she even hate me? I thought bitterly. She clearly felt confident—untouchably superior, even. And then Roman caught up to me. Perfect timing, of course—just as the Mercedes pulled up, one of the cars meant to take guests home. He opened the door for me. I stopped short, not getting in. Frowning, I looked him straight in the eye.

"You didn't have to follow me. Go back. Your... friends must be waiting."

He met my words with a steady, unreadable stare.

"You really think I'd let you leave alone?"

I arched a brow, let out a sharp breath through my nose.

"Oh, but you *already* did. I stood there for an hour like an idiot while Sabrina found me and took pity—like I was some stray mutt. So don't give me the gentleman act now, Roman. Go back to your party. I don't belong here."

I got in and shut the door before I could change my mind. But before the car could move, the opposite door opened—and Roman slid in beside me. Silent. Stone-faced.

He didn't say a word the entire ride. And I didn't cry. Not really. But my eyes stung, and I blinked hard, willing the tears away. Trying not to sniff, hoping he wouldn't notice.

If he didn't want to talk, why the hell did he come with me?

At the hotel, he grabbed my hand—firmly—and led me inside. Still silent. We rode up in the elevator like strangers, the air thick with unspoken things. I turned my face away, but the mirrors caught me from every angle: pale, miserable, with unshed tears making my eyes shine like glass.

He tapped the keycard and opened the door to our room. I slipped off my heels and padded toward the bathroom barefoot.

But I didn't get far.

In two strides, Roman was behind me. He pulled me into him, pressed me gently but firmly against the wall. Still silent. I fought him—silently, too. He grabbed my wrists and held them above my head with one strong hand. With the other, he traced my body—slow, deliberate—sliding under the wide neckline of my dress. I was furious. Struggling. And yet... the heat in my belly said otherwise. My breath caught, my breasts responded, and I hated—*hated*—how I was leaning into him.

My body had officially betrayed me. And I couldn't stop it.

"I hate you," I whispered against his lips.

"And I love you," he growled—then crushed his mouth to mine like he was claiming every broken piece of me.

Chapter 30

Roman. That same evening

By the time we left the room, the party was in full swing. Eva looked stunning in a floor-length, powder blue dress, the kind that moved just enough to show off every curve of her perfect body. I wanted to cover her up, shield her from every hungry stare—and at the same time, I was proud. Proud that this Snow Queen was mine.

While we rode the elevator down, I couldn't stop looking at her, fighting the insane urge to take her straight back upstairs and rip that damn dress off. I always wanted her, every second, and it never stopped surprising me. She made me feel things I didn't even know I was capable of—raw, unfiltered things. I wanted to show her off to the world and hide her away from it all at once. I wanted to shout that I loved her and yet somehow couldn't find the right words. Everything I could say felt meaningless, not enough to hold what I actually felt. How do you explain the need to throw the whole world at her feet? To shield her from every side glance, every careless gesture? I wanted to run away with her to the edge of the earth, just the two of us... maybe more than two someday.

The elevator chimed and pulled me out of my thoughts. The doors slid open and we stepped into the lobby. I needed to get into work mode, but my brain was still tangled up in Eva.

Should I propose? I'd do it today, no question. But would she even say yes? When we're in bed, I feel it in every inch of her body—how she burns under my hands. And it drives me out of my mind. Her raw response sets me on fire every time. But then there are these other moments, the quieter ones, where she seems to pull away. Not overtly—it's more like a flicker at the edge of my awareness, like a sound too faint to hear clearly but impossible to ignore. She wraps herself in some kind of shell, keeps that distance like she's protecting something. I don't know what to make of it. We need to talk. Really talk. But not now. First, I need to wrap up this project.

And she's helped so much with it. Gave me ideas I hadn't even considered—she's like a damn fountain of creativity. An architect through and through. Isn't that what they say? A natural talent, polished by a solid education. But what am I supposed to do next? I know what I promised—if we win, she gets to head the architecture department here in Krasnodar. But with everything going on, I don't want that anymore. For one, leaving her here alone—in a place where rules are bent and power talks louder than law—is insane. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to her because of this job. And more importantly—*how* am I supposed to be away from her? I've gotten so used to having her near. She's like air—I can't breathe without her. I can't go back to waking up alone, walking into an office that doesn't have her in it. No way. I just have to hope she won't want to leave either.

In the car, I held her hand tight, watching the side of her face as she stared out the window. When she caught me looking, she gave me a tiny smile, just a flicker at the corner of her lips. Those ocean-colored eyes lit up like stars. My beautiful mystery.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I let go of Eva's hand—reluctantly—and checked the screen. Kamil. Said he was already there, waiting.

Just like that, my good mood slipped away, melting like snow in the sun. Which was probably for the best. Time to focus. We pulled up like movie stars to a red carpet, and sure enough, cameras started clicking the second I helped Eva out of the car. What the hell was this? Paparazzi? Who called them?

Eva didn't even flinch. She instantly shifted her stance, turned slightly to the side, chin tilted just right toward the flashes. She smiled wide and bright. And unlike other women in her position, who usually try to cling to me or grab my hand, Eva simply clasped her purse and waited—letting *me* decide how public I wanted to be.

As if that needed a second thought.

I wrapped my arm tightly around her waist, making it crystal clear to the world—*she's mine*. The flashes popped like fireworks, and photographers shouted instructions at us like we were models. Eva followed them like a pro, posing with the kind of grace that made her look like she belonged on the cover of a magazine. She never stops surprising me. Who would've thought that the girl running around the office in jeans and a sweater had so much raw elegance? Enough to stop a crowd in its tracks.

Eventually, the cameras let us go, and we stepped into the venue. A waiter came over with a tray. I took two glasses of champagne, handed one to Eva, and sipped mine slowly, letting the bubbles tickle my tongue.

"You good here on your own for a bit?" I asked. "I need to take care of something."

She nodded. "Of course."

But I thought I caught a flicker of disappointment in her eyes. I'll handle things with Kamil quickly—I don't want to leave my girl alone any longer than I have to. I didn't care about the people around us; I pulled her into a tight hug and kissed her on the cheek before heading off to find my friend.

Kamil was waiting on the second floor, where small tables were scattered across the balconies for more private conversations. We hugged tight, clapping each other on the back—been a while since we last met. Cap was always busy, neck-deep in work. I didn't even know what his official title at the Bureau was these days, just that it wasn't a small one. That's why, when I got an unexpected but important piece of intel from my mother, I called him right away. He promised to dig into it—whatever was in his power. And now, here he was, flying in all the way from Moscow to handle it in person.

"Dressed like a proper London dandy—finally stepped into the light," I teased, giving him a once-over.

"Screw you," he grunted, dropping into his seat. "They didn't even want to let me in without a tux. I had to flash your name around just to avoid pulling rank. I'm supposed to be undercover, remember?"

"Yeah, that would've been a disaster. So? What've you got?"

He plucked an olive from his cocktail, chewed it, and made a face.

"Ugh. I'll never be old enough to enjoy this crap. Anyway—what I've got so far isn't even buried. Didn't have to dig. The Gadayev brothers' crew is so damn brazen they barely hide. They run

their businesses in plain sight, backed by the local government. The money's dirty, sure, but they do just enough laundering to keep the papers clean. They're eyeing this land too. Standard play—they'll drag construction out for ten years, then freeze the whole thing. Classic scam. Everyone scratches everyone's back around here, and the brothers are protected by people who know how to make problems disappear. They're gonna grab this project, Roman. I'd say there's a ninety percent chance they pull it off."

"But there's still ten?" I asked.

"There is. If we step in. If we stir up the hornet's nest. But I'm warning you—it's gonna get ugly. Heads will roll. You'll feel it too. Their protection runs deep. While we work on dismantling it, they'll come at you hard. Constant inspections, maybe worse. You've got to think long and hard—do you really want this? If you do, I'm in. I'll bring in my people, pull every string I can. But you've got to be sure, Roman. Honestly? It would be way easier—and smarter—for your business if you just took your mother's deal. Her backing isn't like the locals'. No one would dare push back. They'd walk away and find another target."

I took a sip of my drink, letting his words play out in my head—especially that last part. Call my mother. Set up a meeting. Accept the offer, lay down my own terms. Easy. The company wins. I get a smooth ride. It's family business, after all. I could finally stop dealing with these petty local wars and focus on what matters. On Eva. Maybe get married. Take her somewhere for a honeymoon. Rest. Breathe. I've earned that, haven't I?

But how the hell would I live with myself after? Knowing I caved—not with force, but with a quiet little nod. Knowing that one call would wipe out everything I've built on my own. One move, and all those victories would mean nothing. Just because the viper got her way.

I let out a long breath, drained my glass in one go, and set it down with a solid thud. Looked at Kamil and gave him a firm nod.

"Go ahead. That's your green light."

Chapter 31

Roman

There were more people in the hall than in the past three days combined. Even those who had nothing to do with the upcoming construction had come to check out the projects from the Moscow companies. To learn a thing or two, to gather new ideas. Or for whatever other reason.

We were standing slightly off to the side from the display stands. Waiting for things to kick off. But for some reason, they still hadn't made the official announcement. Eva was clearly nervous, and I wasn't exactly calm myself. Kamil had said he'd do everything he could to knock the Gadayev brothers off their pedestal—even just a little. But we'd started too late. We simply wouldn't make it before the project decisions were finalized. We'd need at least a week. Two days? No chance.

Still, when you go all in, you don't look back. Whatever happens, happens.

And Eva... things weren't right there either. Ever since that evening—when Sofia suddenly showed up—she kept avoiding my eyes. In bed, she was still hot, passionate. But during the day, it was like she'd built a shell around herself. Not once did she make a scene. No accusations, no ultimatums. And I know she never will—she's above that. But she's so distant, it's like there's a weight growing in my chest.

I told her straight—there's been nothing between Sofia and me for years. Yeah, we slept together a couple of times in college, a hundred years ago. Since then, we've just been... friends. Not even that, really—acquaintances. We hardly ever see each other.

That was when she finally looked me in the eyes. And for a second, she looked like *my* Eva again—the one who cracked jokes and scolded me for being a tyrant to my employees. She raised one eyebrow, let out a sarcastic snort.

"Roman, you're either incredibly naive or you're lying. And I doubt you're naive—you're way too good a businessman for that. So..." She spread her hands.

And once again, I felt like a helpless idiot around her. A feeling I'm not used to. The only person who ever made me feel like that was my mother. A long time ago, when I was just a kid. And now, whenever it creeps up again, I default to my old defense: anger.

So I shrugged. *Don't believe me? Think what you want.*

We haven't brought it up since. But now, there's this invisible wall between us—her distrust. And I have no clue how to break through it.

The noise in the hall suddenly surged—a wave of voices rolling from the entrance to the stage. I turned, trying to figure out what was going on.

A group of uniformed officers were escorting the CEO of "Studio"—the company Kamil told me was backed by the Gadayevs. The one that was supposedly promised our project.

Damn, Kamil. You actually pulled it off, you magnificent bastard.

I spotted him too—walking straight toward me from the door, brows furrowed, hands in his pockets.

“What’s happening?” Eva asked, her voice tense.

“I don’t know,” I muttered. It was hard to lie to her—she sees right through me. But the truth wouldn’t help either. It would only worry her. Better to leave things unsaid. Why burden her with my problems? She’d get scared, start stressing. Women see this kind of thing differently.

“Roman, can I have a word?” Kamil cut in sharply, not even bothering to greet me.

Uh-oh. That sounded serious.

I stepped aside, feeling Eva’s eyes burning into my back.

“Your doing?” I asked, nodding toward the door the police had just gone through.

“That’s the thing—it *wasn’t* me!” Kamil hissed. “Something’s off, Roman! Sergei Gadayev was arrested this morning for drug possession. Now they’re rounding up his whole crew. Something’s moving, but it’s not my move! And I do *not* like it one bit. Shit, what the hell is *she* doing here?”

I turned.

Sofia was strutting down the aisle like it was a fashion runway. I felt a stab of irritation—*Seriously, what’s she doing here? Why did she come?*

And then she was already there, leaning in to kiss my cheek. Didn’t even greet Kamil.

“Roman,” she said sweetly, locking eyes with me. “Someone asked me to give you something.”

But I wasn’t listening—I was looking for Eva. Wondering if she’d walk out again. But no—she was standing by the wall, scrolling through her phone. Not even glancing our way. Fine.

“What were you saying?” I turned back to Sofia.

“Who asked you?”

“Your mother. Don’t be mad!” she said, pulling a face as she caught my expression. “She knew you wouldn’t take her call, so she asked me...”

“Just give it here,” I cut her off, not in the mood for this idiotic exchange. I held out my hand.

Sofia slipped an envelope into it.

There was always something weirdly warm between my mother and Sofia. Why? No idea. Like a weasel and a viper deciding to be best friends.

I opened the envelope, skimmed the first few lines—and felt that old, thick smog of hate rising up and flooding me. Because—again!—she twisted everything her way. Flipped the board. Made her move, just in time to steer the whole game in her direction. So even if she lost the company battle—she could still win the war. With *me*.

My fingers folded the letter back into the envelope on their own. Then tore it into shreds.

“What is it?” Kamil asked, his voice tight with concern.

My cheek twitched. I closed my eyes. Counted to twenty. When I opened them, Sabrina was already up on stage, mic in hand.

“Unfortunately, just thirty minutes ago, Falcon Holdings officially withdrew their project,” she said, looking a little thrown off. “I’d like to invite a representative of Sparrow to the stage. Mr. Sokolov, please. Let’s give him a round of applause...”

She gestured toward the display stands with a polite smile, while the hall filled with clapping. And my hands were shaking with rage.

More than anything, I wanted to turn and walk out. She withdrew the project. That bitch! Pulled some strings to sweep the local mobsters out of her darling son’s way. Another neat little move to rub my nose in it—*You’re not a rival. You’re a helpless little boy. You’ll never make it without me.*

I clenched my jaw. And then I looked up. Eva was staring right at me. Calm. Steady. Serious.

I froze, locking onto her gaze like a lifeline. Dragged myself out of the black fog of rage, inch by inch. Because I couldn’t walk away. I didn’t have the right.

This wasn’t just my project. It was ours. And maybe I wouldn’t beat Falcon the way I wanted—in a fair fight. Only because she never gave me the chance.

That’s not on me. That’s on her.

Eva gave me a tiny nod. I nodded back, the corner of my mouth lifting in a half-smile. Then shoved the shredded letter into my jacket pocket—and stepped onto the stage.

Chapter 32

Eva

“Sparrow! Sparrow!” The name of our company echoed from all sides.

I felt like I was about to burst with joy—*we won!* We actually won! I wanted to scream with happiness like it was all my doing. Even though, of course, it wasn’t. It was Roman’s. I’d helped here and there, sure, but getting a project like this off the ground—that’s way more than AutoCAD drawings and 3D mockups on a stand. It’s a long, meticulous process. Meetings, negotiations, proposals, bids. God knows what else. Business, to me, is a black hole. But Roman—he moves through it like a shark through water. No—like some prehistoric megalodon with a grin full of teeth.

Even now, while I pretended to be engaged in the shallow chatter of local socialites, my predator was deep in conversation with someone in power. A deputy? The mayor? No idea. Next to Roman, they all look like washed-out shadows. And I feel like a shadow myself. More and more each day.

Roman glanced over his shoulder. Smiled when he caught my eye. Ever since that first evening I stormed off, he’s made a point of keeping me in his line of sight. That’s just how he is—once he slips up, he never lets it happen again. He keeps everything under control. Negotiations, design work... sex. He’s flawless at everything. And I keep catching myself thinking how terrified I am of losing him.

And those thoughts scare the hell out of me.

Because I’m like him too. I’ve always kept control—especially over my life, my emotions, my choices. Ever since I walked away from my mother, I haven’t let anyone steer me. And now? Now I’m ready to melt into a puddle just from one soft look. And you know what? Fine. So be it. I’ve never been this happy in my entire life. But the fear... it won’t let go.

And so I kept picking at it. This old wound. Turning it over, again and again—what if?

What if he gets bored and leaves?

What if he realizes I’m not good enough for him?

What if he lies, betrays me, crushes me?

What if one day I hear those words again: “*Then go live on your own, if you’re so smart*”?

And how would I live, if I’ve already fused with him so fast, so completely? So much that ripping myself free would mean tearing flesh. Mine, obviously—not his.

I shook my head sharply.

Oh, Eva, what the hell is wrong with you again? You love digging yourself into this hole. And you know it, so shut it down before it spirals. Focus on the project, for God’s sake.

But even thoughts about the project felt off. After yesterday’s presentation, Roman was so tense it looked like sparks might shoot from his eyes. Even an idiot could see our project was head and shoulders above the rest. And now that Falcon was out, there was nothing left to even compare it to. But

Roman didn't look like a man celebrating. He looked like someone who'd just chugged lemon juice instead of champagne.

That evening, when I was getting his clothes ready for the cleaner's, I checked the pockets—and found torn-up pieces of a letter. I couldn't resist. Sat down and pieced them together on my lap. There weren't many words, but enough.

"I can't turn back time, sadly. So I'll do what I still can. Good luck, son. I hope one day you understand—everything I do is for you."

I froze, frowning. What exactly did his mother do? Pull Falcon out of the race? That's it? So she really thought Sparrow couldn't win in a fair fight?

Ugh.

No wonder Roman was furious. She thought she was helping—but what a slap in the face. That was a blow straight to his pride. How little must you know your own son to pull something like that? What a... clueless woman.

I wanted to call her something much worse, but stopped myself. She's still his mother. Even if not a very bright one.

Honestly, I don't know how he didn't walk away from the project altogether. Knowing Roman, I'd have bet money he would. He needs a clean win, not scraps off someone's gilded table.

I remembered that wild look in his eyes after reading the letter. How he clenched and unclenched his fists, crushing the stupid paper. And how, a second later, he met my gaze. How the fury slowly faded, replaced by something thoughtful. And then by resolve. I'm sure—that was the moment something shifted inside him. Some inner war no one else could see. But what kind of war? Why did he calm down so fast? Why didn't he blow everything up like I expected? I don't know. But I hope one day I will.

A shrill, theatrical laugh snapped me out of it. My heart jumped in my chest. Sofia. Again. Circling Roman like a cat in heat. Laying her head on his shoulder, grabbing his arm like she owned it. And Roman... he wasn't encouraging her, but he wasn't stopping her either. Just stood there, hands in his pockets, smiling.

The irritation surged up, ready to explode into a scene straight out of a bad soap opera. And then...

Ugh, Eva, get a grip. I'm disgusted with myself. Is this how it's going to be now? Every time I see him near some random woman, I'm going to burn alive with jealousy?

It's like I got swapped for someone else at that stupid team building. I should've just quit right then and there—never found out how infuriatingly perfect the Winter Soldier could be in real life. Because now I barely recognize myself. All I do is try to please him. All I think about is how he'll take my next move. And where the hell did the old me go? The one who made dumb jokes, who didn't give a damn, who laughed everything off?

Trying to calm down, I grabbed a glass from the table and downed it in one go. Ice clinked against the sides. I choked immediately, coughing hard. Stared at the empty glass in horror. The posh little princesses nearby were whispering and giggling behind their manicured hands. *Was that them? Did they swap my Coke for whiskey?* Or was it... just a stupid mistake?

God, I need to get to the hotel. Now. Before I embarrass Roman.

I stood up. Wobbled. Grabbed the edge of the table to stay upright.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Roman finally peel Sofia off him and head my way.

"Wow," he grinned, eyes sparkling. "You're not messing around tonight."

Not mad. Not yet. Because he didn't understand...

The room tilted.

Roman didn't give a damn about the people watching. He pulled me into his arms, leaned in close, and whispered, "What's going on?"

"There was Coke. I swear, I thought—never mind. Doesn't matter now. Listen..." I exhaled into his ear. The jealousy, the resentment—it all dropped away. A new problem was taking shape on the horizon. "I think I'm about to pass out. It's fine. Just... don't leave me, okay? Dump me in the hotel room, then go do whatever you... wa—want."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

His voice wrapped around me like a warm ocean wave. His eyes—those deep amber lights—were glowing like beacons. The hall began to drift, the curtains swaying like sails on some distant ship.

"Eva!" He tapped my cheek gently. "Eva, hey! What's wrong?"

"Don't..." I barely managed to part my dry lips. "Worry. I just... can't han... hic... handle strong al—alcoh—hol."

He was still saying something. But I couldn't hear a thing anymore.

Chapter 33

Eva

Inhale—exhale.

Inhale—exhale.

Push off the trail gently with the ball of my foot, kicking up a few dry leaves. Land soft. Repeat. Again and again.

I ran through the park, trying to get my thoughts in order. After last night's little performance, Roman was probably furious. I mean, yeah, I really pulled it off, didn't I? Ruined his night, made him leave his own celebration early—and all because of me. But I swear, I had no idea there was whiskey in that glass! Maybe the waiter mixed it up. Or maybe someone thought they were being funny. Even if it was a joke, they couldn't have expected *that* kind of reaction. I've only tried hard liquor twice in my life—and both times ended the exact same way. My body decides it's being poisoned and just shuts everything down. But that was ages ago... and now? Ugh.

I picked up the pace, cheeks burning. What the hell! I was just thinking I hadn't done anything stupid in a while—and boom, there it is! Way to go, Eva. Made a complete fool of yourself. And not just yourself, but Roman too—and that's worse. Now his business partners probably think his girlfriend's an alcoholic.

I'd woken up early. Roman, as usual, was asleep with his arm draped around me. I had no memory of how I got into bed, but little by little, the pieces came together. Looked like he really did carry me back to the room. Undressed me. Stayed with me. So... maybe he's not *that* mad?

I slipped out of bed as carefully as I could, got dressed, and went out for a run. Our flight to Moscow wasn't until the evening, and I needed to clear my head. So now I was jogging through the park, breathing in the warm, slightly damp air that smelled sharp and golden—like autumn leaves. What a perfect fall. I didn't even want to leave. But of course, I'd have to.

Roman still hadn't said anything about my new assignment. But honestly, it didn't matter anymore. I already knew—the only thing that mattered was being with him. I couldn't live here alone. Not because I couldn't handle the job—I could. But because it's impossible to function when half of you is missing. And by now, I had no doubt—Roman was my other half.

He'd been wound so tight these last three days, like a spring under pressure. Like he was waiting for something. But he wouldn't say what. I could see it in the way that crease never left his brow, the way his jaw clenched whenever he typed something on his phone. I wanted to ask him what was going on... but I didn't. He could see I was worried, which meant he was choosing not to tell me.

I'd worn a hoodie on my run and immediately regretted it—it was too warm. I was sweating like crazy, completely soaked. Time to wrap it up.

I ducked into a coffee shop and got our usual: one americano, one latte. Picked up a couple croissants too, then headed back to the hotel with my hands full. A cowardly little hope crept into my head—maybe the coffee would calm him down, and he wouldn't be *too* mad at me.

Holding the paper bag under my chin, I swiped the key card. The door clicked open. I stepped inside. Kicked off my sneakers out of habit—and then my heart jumped into my throat. Full-blown sirens in my head: *RUNRUNRUNRUN!!!*

The bag fell from my hands. I turned—and found myself staring straight into the barrel of a gun.

I gasped, but forgot to exhale. The gun was held by a short, bearded man in a wrinkled t-shirt.

"Well, well," he sneered. "Look what we have here."

He shouted toward the room,

"Hey, Grey!"

From our room—OUR room with Roman!—another man appeared. This one really *was* gray-haired, though he didn't look older than thirty-five.

"Who are you?!" I choked out. "Where's Roman?!"

"Bring her in," Grey said with a bored glance, sizing me up from head to toe.

The bearded guy gestured with the gun, and I moved, still holding the coffees.

Inside the room was a third man. And he was terrifying. I couldn't explain why—I just *felt* it. He looked perfectly respectable: clean-shaven, tailored suit, polished shoes. His black hair curled slightly at the neck, styled like he'd just walked out of a barbershop. His beard was so neatly trimmed it had *definitely* seen a pro. A typical corporate hipster on the outside. But the wave of dark, violent energy coming off him made me want to crawl under the bed and not come out. Maybe not even this year.

And on the bed, in nothing but sweatpants, sat Roman. Looked like these bastards hadn't even let him get dressed. Somehow they'd gotten into the room without a sound.

"Roman!" I started toward him—but froze when his eyes met mine. Cold. I slammed into that look like hitting a wall of ice.

What...? Why was he looking at me like that? Was this because of... last night?

Behind me, the bearded guy grabbed my elbow.

"Whoa there, kitty. What's the hurry?" He yanked my arm and pulled me into him. I squealed, feeling his sweaty palm sliding around my waist. "Mmm, nice! Spicy little thing! Hey, Moscow! She's hot, huh?"

And then the bastard laughed—loud and disgusting—filling the whole damn room. And Roman... Roman just sat there, still watching, blank-faced, while that gorilla had his hands all over me.

What the hell was happening?! I knew him. There was no way he was this mad about my stupid mistake.

My heart thudded in my ears, pounding like it was about to burst. My brain was racing, scrambling through every possible outcome.

"If anything here's hot, it's the coffee," I hissed, turning half toward the thug. "I tend to spill when I'm nervous. Mr. Sokolov can confirm."

"She really might," Roman nodded with a lazy smirk. "She runs hot. You got that right."

The bearded guy let go of my arm, muttering something in a language I didn't understand.

"Your girl?" the slick guy asked with an accent, eyeing me sharply.

"Well, since you've done your homework," Roman said slowly, "you already know I don't do relationships. A friend asked me to get her a job. So I did. She's cute, why not?" And he smirked at the three thugs who let out a rough laugh.

I stared at them, confused out of my mind—until I caught the pulse twitching at Roman's temple. And just like that, it clicked. He was bluffing. He was playing some game I didn't understand. But it was dangerous. And then he added, like reading my thoughts,

"But I wouldn't recommend messing with her. She's dumb as a rock, sure, but her daddy's connected." He rolled his eyes upward. "You touch her, you're asking for serious trouble."

"Who do you take us for, Mr. Sokolov?" the slick guy said with a creepy little smile. "Why would we need your girl? We came in peace—for now. Just want to talk things through. You understand, right?"

"I understand," Roman stood, grabbed a shirt from the chair, and started putting it on—slow and deliberate. "But I think you're overestimating me, gentlemen. I've got nothing to do with your... let's say, issues. I won a bid, sure. But we're living in the 21st century. It's called fair competition and—"

In a blur, Slick was suddenly in front of him. One more movement, lightning-fast—and Roman was on the floor, gasping for air!

I cried out and dropped my damn coffee. I lunged toward Roman, but someone grabbed me again—I couldn't even tell if it was the gray-haired guy or the bearded one. All I saw was Roman curled up on the carpet.

"You're tiring me out," the slick guy grumbled, clearly disappointed. "I'll say it one last time—call off your dogs. Or both you and your..." —he turned his eyes to me— "competition might suddenly start feeling unwell."

He laughed, clearly pleased with his own wit.

"Consider this a warning," he said with a fake-friendly tone. Then, dryly added, "You've got two days."

He turned to leave. They let go of me, and I ran to Roman. He was sitting on the edge of the bed now, holding his side. The door slammed shut.

I touched his chest, babbling something about calling a doctor. His lips curled into a bitter smile.

“So it’s war,” he said quietly, staring past me. Then suddenly, like snapping out of it, he barked, “Eva, pack your things. You’re flying out. Now.”

Chapter 34

Eva

“What do you mean I’m flying out?! And you?”

I stayed on the floor, stunned, while Roman said nothing—just got up and started pacing the room, listening to the dial tone in his phone.

“Roman, can you hear me?” I raised my voice. “What do you mean I’m flying out?”

He waved me off sharply, cutting through my protests, and barked into the phone.

“Yeah. Yeah. Hey. They were just here. Made threats, yeah. Exactly like we expected.” He paused, listening to whoever was on the other end. Then suddenly exploded: “What the hell, Kamil?! No, I said no! No!” Another pause. “Just tell me one thing: are you with me? Good. I’ll put Eva on a plane now and call you after.”

He hung up. Stood still for a moment, frowning, pressing the phone thoughtfully against his chin.

The fear inside me finally snapped and turned into full-on rage. It bubbled up, choked me from the inside, demanded to be let out.

I jumped up and yanked the phone from his hand.

“Are you going to notice me already or am I just furniture now?!” I hissed, flinging the poor thing onto the bed.

Roman turned to me. His bitter-chocolate eyes softened—just slightly.

“Eva, this really isn’t the time for a fight,” he said gently.

“Oh, seriously?! And when *is* the time for a fight, Roman? It’s not like I argue with you every day!”

He sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“Who was that? What did they want?”

He walked over to the bed, picked up his shirt, and started getting dressed again. Calmly, without even looking at me, he said:

“Eva, get ready. I’ll explain everything later. Right now we don’t have time.”

“What the hell!!!” I screamed. “Do you think I’m an idiot? Roman! Look at me!”

He turned, reluctantly. His eyes narrowed, nostrils flared. Angry. Good—I’m furious too.

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on! Why aren’t you flying home?!”

“I need to stay here a bit longer.”

That cool, casual tone nearly made me explode. I didn't know what I might do to him next.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, counted to four. Exhaled. He was still staring at me in silence.

"You calm now?"

My hands were shaking, and he thought I could calm down?!

"It's because of the project, isn't it?" I asked, voice trembling. "That's what this is about, right? Is it really that important to you? Roman, they didn't look like they were joking! You're just a businessman—and these people are dangerous! They could... they could actually kill you!"

His gaze softened. He stepped closer and took my hands. Brought my palms to his lips.

"Snowy, that's exactly why you're flying out. You'll be safe in Moscow. I was hoping they'd believe you mean nothing to me. No idea if it worked... You'll stay at your place, Kamil will assign security. And I'll stay here and—"

"Are you out of your damn mind?!" I jerked my fingers out of his grip. My voice was trembling, tears threatening to spill. "You don't get it—I'm not scared for myself, Roman! I'm begging you: let them have the damn project! I know it matters to you, but it's not worth your life! Just walk away, let it go!" I grabbed his hands now, pulled him into a hug, clung to him. "Please, come home with me. If something happens to you—" My voice cracked.

But Roman turned to stone in my arms. I pulled back, looked into his eyes. Cold. Angry. This time for real.

"If you want to be with me, there's one thing you need to understand," he said in a tone so flat it didn't sound human. "I don't back down, Eva. Whether you like it or not, you're flying out today. I'm staying. When I'm done here, I'll come back to Moscow."

I knew that voice all too well. That cold, mechanical voice of the Winter Soldier.

I stepped away, staring at him through angry tears. He'd made up his mind. My opinion didn't matter. My opinion never really mattered to him.

Well, that changes everything.

"I don't know what's driving you," I whispered, looking straight at him. "Maybe you're addicted to adrenaline, or maybe you're a gambler who can't live without the risk. Maybe you're in love with power—or still trying to prove something to your mother." He flinched, like I'd slapped him. Good. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted him to know what it felt like to hurt this much because of someone you love. "The reasons don't matter, Roman. What matters is the choice you make. And you've made yours. Fine. I'm leaving. You're staying."

I packed in complete silence. Roman got dressed quickly and sat in the chair, typing away on his phone. Meanwhile I wandered around the room like a ghost, grabbing makeup, clothes, underwear... The way he was acting physically hurt. And I was terrified. Terrified for this stubborn idiot.

“When’s the flight?” I asked dryly, stopping in front of him. “There wasn’t anything to Moscow before the evening.”

He looked up. His eyes were so dark they seemed to swallow every last bit of light in the room.

“I arranged a private flight,” he said calmly. “Are you ready?”

I nodded. The lump in my throat wouldn’t let me speak.

He picked up my bag and headed for the door.

Two hours later, somewhere in the sky between Krasnodar and Moscow, I curled up in my seat and finally let the tears out. I kept replaying the way he hugged me before I left—held me so tightly, buried his hands in my hair, kissed me, crushing my lips with his own. That kiss was still shaking me. Still tearing my heart apart with the gut-deep feeling that he was saying goodbye.

I shook my head and wiped the tears off my cheeks in frustration. I’d fallen into the trap again! Once more, someone else was making all the decisions for me. When to stay, when to leave. When to work, when to have sex. No more. If that was goodbye, then fine—arrivederci, sweetheart.

For several days I didn’t leave my apartment, drowning in my own resentment. Roman didn’t call, and I didn’t either. Until the anxiety over him burned through my nerves like molten wire. Damn it, maybe he didn’t care about me—but I couldn’t just sit and do nothing.

I dialed his number. Temporarily unavailable. The panic spiked. What now? I didn’t have Kamil’s number. Or Roman’s mother’s—not that I’d ever call *her*... Maybe I could try Sabrina? I wondered if she even knew what was going on.

As I debated my next move, I absentmindedly scrolled through my news feed. And then I saw it—Roman’s photo and the headline:

“Shots fired at Moscow real estate tycoon on the outskirts of Krasnodar”

Chapter 35

Roman. One year later

Nice enough venue. And a decent evening, too. Respectable guests, elegant women. Music, paintings, waiters with champagne. I almost like it here.

Yeah, right. Who am I kidding?

I hate every second of it. This grey St. Petersburg air is suffocating, seeping not just into my lungs but into every pore. Triggering vivid pictures in my head. So sharp, it's like it hasn't even been a year.

I lifted my gaze from the glass and looked around. Yeah, the room was almost identical. Same heavy drapes over the windows, same balustrade on the staircase. Same towering doors—so damn hard to look away from them. Feels like if I wait just a little longer, she'll walk through them. My enchanting vision, my beloved nymph in that sheer black dress.

I jerked my head, catching myself standing there like an idiot, staring hungrily at the open doors. Looked away, forced a smile, pretended to be listening to the conversation. No one noticed that while everyone else is enjoying the evening, I'm screaming from the pit I threw myself into. No one sees what's happening to me.

She would've seen it.

In this crowd, with a pack of pretty girls (one of them literally hanging off my arm!), I'm completely alone. Every day I fall asleep alone and wake up alone. Reaping what I sowed like the fool I am.

Why the hell did I even come here?

Every detail in this hall triggers that soul-draining déjà vu. Every blonde becomes *her*. My Snow Queen, my lost happiness.

Back then, a year ago, I was stuck in Krasnodar for almost two months. The war with the locals got nasty. Kamil pulled in a whole army. My mother sent backup too, despite all my objections. But the locals weren't backing down either. I hired private security and didn't go anywhere without two or three meatheads with hawk eyes. Survived three attempts on my life—like death was trying but fate wouldn't let it take me. The third time, when my Benz blew up right in front of me, it was like something snapped into place in my brain.

Suddenly, I understood just how much I wanted to live. Swore to myself that if I made it through, I'd never get into that kind of mess again. You can't clean up that kind of mess, no matter how hard you try. Chop off one head, and the hydra grows three more. But I'm no hydra. I've only got one head.

The realization hit me so hard I could barely breathe. And as the bodyguards dragged me away from the burning wreck and back to the safehouse, all I could think was—I'll call her. Screw everything,

I'll call and come clean. She'll forgive me. Because she loves me. For what, I don't know—must be fate, loving a fool like me.

Then I kept dialing and hearing the same thing over and over—number unavailable. She turned off her phone. She was pissed, obviously. Our last conversation wasn't exactly pleasant. It was right after the second hit, when I was getting stitched up in the ER. She'd called, crying into the phone, begging me to come home. I don't even remember what I said—probably something awful. I was doped up on painkillers. But she said goodbye calmly. Hung up. And that was it. Not a word since.

I missed her like hell. Sleeping alone was the worst. I'd always slept like a rock, but now—I just couldn't. No matter what I tried. During the day, I kept busy with the project, the war, the chaos. But at night, all I could think about was her fragile body. My hands still remembered every curve. My ears still rang with those sweet little moans. A few times I almost called her, just to hear her voice. Then stopped myself—it's the middle of the night, idiot, she's probably asleep. Idiot's the right word. The only one that fits. The biggest damn idiot on the planet.

When the last heads were chopped and the rest locked up in cages, I finally flew back. Left Dima in charge of the project. From the airport, I went straight to Eva's. Only stopped at a flower shop to grab the biggest bouquet of red roses I could carry. I kept picturing her opening the door. Her blue eyes lighting up with joy. Me pulling her into my arms and never letting go again.

Didn't even need to buzz the intercom—some guy was coming out and held the door for me. Gave me a wink and nodded at the bouquet.

"You must've screwed up bad, man."

I gave him a crooked grin and nodded. Bad doesn't even begin to cover it, buddy.

I pressed the buzzer with trembling fingers, trying to calm my racing heart. It was pounding like crazy. And then the door opened. But instead of Eva, a tall guy in glasses stood there.

That's when the ground cracked open under my feet, and I dropped straight into the abyss. One so deep, I still haven't climbed out a year later. Through the deafening roar in my ears, I barely caught what he was saying—that he was just some guy. Not *her* guy, just someone who rented the place. Had no clue where she'd gone.

She mentioned something about traveling. No, didn't have her number. Paid for the whole year up front. She needed to rent it fast, offered a great deal below market. Wait—are you Roman? She left you this note.

My legs felt like rubber as I walked down the stairs, bouquet ditched somewhere behind me, eyes glued to her handwriting.

"I know you could find me if you wanted. Please don't. I need space. I need to heal from whatever this insane thing is between us. Respect that—don't follow me."

That was the first time I ever fought with Kamil. Because his people lost her, and because he flat-out refused to track her down.

"Let the girl go, Roman. What is she—some kind of toy to you? I only spoke to her twice, but it was enough to get it. She's not the kind you can play with. Sorry, brother, it's her choice. If she wants to come back, she will."

She won't! I wanted to scream. She won't come back! I knew her—really knew her. She's just like me. Stubborn, headstrong, proud. I wouldn't have come back after that. And neither will she.

But I listened—to both of them. I didn't force a search. I spent the whole year living like a wind-up robot. Moving through the motions from morning till night. Solving things, fixing things. But once the day wound down, I'd lie there staring at the ceiling, hollowed out. Because without her, life stopped making sense. And somewhere in that year, a lot of things clicked into place.

"Roman, what do you think—" purred a flirty brunette, the one who'd latched onto my arm. Who was she? Where'd she even come from? I couldn't remember to save my life. "Is Expressionism part of Modernism, or its own thing?"

I nearly rolled my eyes, barely kept it in. God, how desperate they all were to seem *different*. All of them fluttering around, trying to outshine each other. Bright clothes, bold makeup, or worse—fake intellect. As if intelligence was something you could fake with hollow eyes.

I think I started answering. Might've even smiled politely, while my gaze drifted around the room like it always did. And then I froze mid-sentence. My heart kicked up like a fool. Blinked once. Twice. Trying to shake the illusion. Because it had to be one.

But the mirage didn't vanish. It stood there, magnetic as ever.

I stared, frozen to the floor, afraid that if I moved an inch, she'd dissolve into nothing like all the others. So I just stood there, burning the entire image into my brain.

A light beige dress that floated like air. A sharp, unexpected haircut. High heels. She looked straight at me. Then raised her glass and saluted me with it.

Chapter 36

Roman

I know I come off as cold, stern, maybe even ruthless. Detached. Like I'd walk right over people to get what I want. Good. That's exactly how I'm supposed to look. That's exactly how I've always been. Until a girl with eyes like a summer sky ripped open my soul, shook it out, and handed it back—keeping most of it for herself. And now I feel those missing pieces wherever I go. I want them back. I want my composure, my control, my life. But souls don't grow back like lizard tails. Once something's torn out, that's it. Which means the only time I feel whole anymore is when I'm near her. The one who stole my soul.

I think I stopped mid-sentence. I'm not even sure. Everything blurred. I froze for a second, making sure she was real. Then I started walking toward her like I was caught in a tractor beam. Someone might've said something behind me—I didn't hear. None of it mattered. Not the noise, not the room, nothing but that delicate silhouette across the floor. Those slender wrists, the wide eyes, the sharp collarbones, proud tilt of her chin. Every detail branded itself into me instantly, each layer of memory soaked in her image.

It was her. No doubt about it. Eva. Even if she looked different now. Thinner—cheekbones sharper on what used to be a soft, round face. That short haircut—boyish, strange, perfect. And her eyes. Different too. Deeper. Sadder. Where was the spark that used to drive me insane? The teasing, the chaos, the fire? It was like she'd aged fifty years in twelve months. And my chest ached knowing I was probably the reason.

But then the corners of her lips lifted. Her eyes lit up. And my stalled heart roared back to life. I took the empty glass from her hand and set it on a tray a frozen waiter was still holding nearby. Twined my fingers with hers and pulled her into a dance—just like back then, a year ago. I had so much to say, but thoughts flitted and crashed like moths. I didn't say a word. Neither did she. We just danced, right there in the middle of the room. Didn't care who watched or whispered. Nothing mattered. Nothing but her arms around my neck and that intense, hungry gaze.

When the music stopped, we stood still a few moments, eyes locked. Then I asked,

"Want to get out of here?"

"I do," she said with a smile.

Déjà vu all over again. But this time, it didn't haunt me. I wanted to freeze the moment, soak in the scent of her hair, the brightness of that smile, the velvet feel of her skin.

We didn't take the same route as last time. Didn't matter. I still led her down to the water, still backed her gently against the stone rail. And kissed her like I was losing my mind. But this time, she didn't pull away. She kissed me back. Still, afraid she might disappear, I whispered everything I'd kept inside for a year. How I missed her. How life without her wasn't life. How much I loved her. And how selfish I'd been, not understanding what she was feeling. Because now that I'd spent a year alone, I knew. I knew exactly.

There were so many words inside me, I could've whispered them all night if I wasn't constantly interrupted by kisses—deeper, hungrier, more desperate. I hadn't asked her anything yet, too afraid she'd vanish again before I said the one thing that mattered. She stroked my face and shoulders, tangled her fingers in my hair. Her hands trembled. I was completely overwhelmed.

I think I was close to losing my mind entirely, when she finally pulled back just a little and whispered with a hoarse little laugh,

"Maybe tell me all this tomorrow... when we're both sober?"

I slowly shook my head.

"There is no tomorrow. No next time. For us, there's only *now*."

Then there was darkness. The darkness of my hotel room and her body against mine. Her kisses—no longer warm, but burning. Her skin—soft as sin. Her breath—ragged, broken. The sounds she made, the way she moved, the way she clung to me... My heart slammed with every beat, pumping pure fire through my veins. I loved her wildly. Madly. I lost myself in her and found myself again. Every kiss, every touch was a mark of how much I'd missed her. God, how I missed her.

When the first wave crashed and left us breathless, we lay tangled in the sheets, still holding each other tight. Then she began to speak.

She told me she'd spent the year traveling. Taking freelance jobs, trying to stay busy—anything to forget. But she couldn't. She followed my every move through news alerts. Said she couldn't take it anymore and came to the exhibit just to see me. To find out if I'd moved on.

Silly girl. Doesn't know there's barely enough left of my soul for *me*, let alone anyone else.

I looked into her eyes, shining in the moonlight.

"I waited for you," I said. "Yesterday. The day before. A month ago. All year. But I won't lie—my patience was running out. If you hadn't come back tonight, I would've broken my promise and found you myself. So yeah... you made the right call."

She smiled in the dim light, but when she spoke, her voice was quiet and absolutely serious.

"I just realized life's too short to spend it away from the person you love."

Chapter 37

Eva

It felt like I was waking up from a long, nightmarish sleep. As if I'd spent the past year stuck in a sticky, hollow haze—and only now had finally opened my eyes and returned to the real world. I didn't know what was waiting for me here—happiness or yet another heartbreak. But one thing was certain: I couldn't keep going the way I had been.

No, I didn't regret leaving back then. I remembered perfectly well how I'd fled my own apartment in a near-panic, teetering on the edge of a breakdown. Helpless. Desperate. Unable to change anything or even just be there. At the time, I truly believed Roman had done exactly what I feared most—tossed me aside and forgotten I ever existed. It took a long time to realize that wasn't the case.

He pulled away because he knew every move he made was being watched. Every phone call traced. He kept me at a distance to send a message to his enemies: I meant nothing to him. Not worth touching. And he kept his distance so convincingly that even I had believed him. That's why I left. It was too painful to stay in that apartment, surrounded by all the things that reminded me of us.

Rip the bandage off all at once—that was my thinking back then. I was determined to forget him and start fresh. I quit my job on the spot, sublet the apartment, and moved to St. Petersburg. Roman, knee-deep in his stupid turf war, didn't even notice I was gone. Or maybe no one told him. I remember repeating to myself: *You'll forget him. You'll be happy again.* I changed my number, stopped reading the news just to avoid the latest headlines about Sokolov's battles with the Southern cartel. I told myself I didn't want to know. Didn't want to know anything about *that man* either.

Only it wasn't that I didn't want to—it was that I was terrified. Terrified that one day I'd see a headline saying the latest attempt on his life had succeeded.

A month later, Kamil found me. We were sitting in a cozy café while soft snowflakes drifted past the window. I was picking apart a cinnamon roll while Kamil sipped a cappuccino. It looked kind of funny—this huge, rugged guy gently blowing on a tiny cup of coffee. But I didn't feel like laughing. I hadn't felt like laughing in a long time.

"Listen," Kamil said, "I've known Roman since we were kids, and I've never seen him treat a woman the way he treats you. You might not believe me, but I know—his thoughts revolve around you. You're his anchor. The one thing keeping him grounded when the current tries to pull him under. Got it?"

"I don't," I admitted truthfully.

He paused, chewing his lip for a moment. Then he said:

"Roman's stubborn as hell. Like, full herd-of-rams stubborn. But that's just how he is now. He either had to become this way or he would've broken. I grew up with him. I saw what went on in that house. His dad loved him, but his mom... she tore him down for everything. And I mean everything. Not physically—mentally. Day after day, wearing him down."

"You know why he called the company 'Sparrow'? She used to call him that—up until he was, like, twelve. Said he was scrawny, weak. 'What kind of falcon are you? You're just a sparrow!' she told him. And he kept trying, poor guy. Tried to be better. Tried to please her. But no matter what he did—it was never enough. The way he stood was wrong. The way he sat was wrong. Straight-A student? Still wrong. Top of every math competition? Wrong again! 'Why don't you do something useful, like sports?' So he did—swimming, judo, whatever. Then in ninth grade he shot up like a rocket. And not just on the outside—inside too. It all changed. He stopped trying to win her approval. Shut her out. Dropped everything she demanded of him."

"He joined drama club. Oh, she was livid. 'Look at him—thinks he's Alain Delon now!' But Roman didn't care anymore. He did things his way. And he was good, too—could've made a career of it. But instead he followed in his dad's footsteps. And when he graduated as an architect, he named the company 'Sparrow.' Just to spite her."

I gave a faint smile. Yep, that sounded like Roman. But how tightly, how eerily intertwined our lives were! Controlling mothers and their unhappy children.

"Why did she hate him so much?" I asked Kamil.

He shrugged.

"Roman looked like his father. And she didn't marry him for love."

He sighed.

"But I'll tell you this: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? Roman's strong. Not just a backbone—more like a granite column. He's been tearing every weakness out of himself since he was a kid. One by one. So believe me, Eva—he hasn't had a single one in a long, long time."

He paused for a couple of seconds, narrowing his eyes at me. Then ended with quiet steel in his voice:

"But now he does. That's why I'm telling you—you're his anchor. His strength and his weakness. Holding on to you might pull him up to the surface... or drag him all the way down. So I don't know whether to be happy for him or worried. Maybe you can tell me?"

I didn't answer him then. I just said I needed time to think. He promised not to tell Roman he'd seen me. My whole soul ached for him—but it was hard. So hard to believe him again.

The grapevine did its thing, and I had no shortage of work. I slipped into a kind of stupor. Wrapped myself in a thick cocoon of numbness and stayed glued to my laptop all day, trying to block out any room for thought. I designed. Sketched. Came up with new layouts. Traveled from city to city, never staying more than a month. I believed that cliché about time being the best healer.

But time wasn't on my side. And with time... it only got worse.

Dark lashes fluttered. Roman opened his eyes. For a few seconds I just watched as the last traces of sleep faded from his gaze—then I leaned in and kissed the corner of his mouth, then his neck,

lingering for a moment to look at the round scar just below his left collarbone. The one from the second attack. When I called him in tears, begging him to drop everything and come back to Moscow.

I traced it with my finger. Roman watched me closely, then caught my hand and kissed it. His voice, still husky from sleep, murmured:

“Marry me.”

I froze, feeling light as air, filled to the brim with a happiness so weightless I thought if I let go of Roman’s hand, I’d float to the ceiling like a balloon.

“Wow,” I said, unable to hold back a smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard a more romantic proposal.”

With one swift move, he pulled me on top of him—so I could feel *exactly* how romantic the moment was.

I shifted a little, grinning. His eyes instantly lit up, but he held me gently by the waist and said:

“I was going to propose a year ago. I kept trying to do it right, make it special. Romantic. And look how that turned out. Nothing good. So no more waiting. If you say no today, I’ll ask again tomorrow. And the day after that. And—”

I pressed a finger to his lips, leaned in, and whispered in his ear:

“There is no tomorrow or the day after. For us, there’s only *now*.”

Epilogue

Several Years Later

A light breeze played with the hem of my sundress. It tugged at the edges of the blanket I was sitting on, eyes closed, face turned toward the sun. Then a shadow passed over me, and I opened my eyes with a hint of disappointment. I hoped the picnic wouldn't be ruined by sudden rain! But no—it was still sunny. A drone was hovering right above me, blinking at me with its little camera.

"Mo-o-o-m, smile!" came a voice from the lake.

I smiled brightly and waved at the drone. It soared triumphantly into the sky and circled above in a little victory lap.

Right then, Timon—our three-year-old beagle—came bounding over and pounced on me. I scratched the little rascal behind the ear. Yep, no such thing as relaxing around here!

The drone buzzed off above the trees.

As I petted the dog, I couldn't take my eyes off my eight-year-old son. Max—our little miracle. So much like me. He wasn't even supposed to be born—they'd told me it was too dangerous. But Roman wanted a child so badly, I hid my condition and carried him anyway. And in the end, he saved all of us—me, Roman, and our relationship. Thanks to our tiny superhero, we're still together. A real family. Somehow, miraculously, he even managed to bring together both of his grandmothers—Roman's mother and mine. And while "warm and fuzzy" isn't how I'd describe our relationship with them, things are way easier when Max is around. It's a kind of magic, honestly. No wonder he says he's going to be a wizard when he grows up!

"Guess what we have! Look, Mom!"

My husband stepped out from behind the trees, our two-year-old daughter in his arms. She clutched a crumpled bouquet of forget-me-nots in both hands.

"Look, Mommy, we picked them just for you!" Roman grinned from ear to ear. "Go on, Anya, give Mommy the flowers!"

"No!" our little one declared, puffing out her cheeks and furrowing her dark brows. Definitely her father's daughter—and unlike Max, the spitting image of Roman. Same big brown eyes. Same dimple on her chin.

"Don't be stingy," Roman coaxed her softly.

"No!" she pouted. "Mine!"

"Well, if they're hers, they're hers," Roman sighed in mock defeat, settling down next to me. "I'll get you another bouquet. An even prettier one!"

Anya paused, thinking it over, then handed me the squashed bouquet and turned to her dad.

"And one for me too!" she demanded firmly.

"You little trickster!" Roman laughed and started tickling her belly.

And I just kept smiling.

Three years ago, when my life felt like one endless disaster, I had a dream: Roman, holding a little girl in his arms. When I woke up, I cried, thinking she was his daughter with someone else.

Even now, there are moments when it all feels too good to be true—Roman, Max, and little Anya. Like I'm still dreaming. But I quickly push those thoughts away. Yes, we've been through hell, more than anyone should have to. But we made it through. Together. And I truly believe—nothing can break us now.

Whenever fear of the future creeps in, I repeat my mantra:

"There is no tomorrow. There is only now."

And in every single "now" ... I'm completely, wildly happy.

Dear readers!

If you're curious about what happened to Roman and Eva between the final chapter and this epilogue, check out the novel *I'm Not Your Wife*. It's a dramatic and unusual story—but as you now know, it all ends in a guaranteed happily-ever-after.

And with that, the Sokolov family story comes to a close. Thank you for walking this rocky road with them. I'll be eagerly waiting to hear your thoughts—what you loved, what you didn't. I'd really love to know!

