



Chapter 1

Anna and I only meant to duck out of the gallery for five minutes, but it's been half an hour already. We grab some coffee—and then realize there's no way to cross back. Prague is frozen in place. Traffic jams do happen here, sure, but they're nothing like the ones back in Moscow. Still, I've never seen it this bad. Not even the crosswalks are moving.

"What is going on?" I mutter, wrapping my coat tighter around me.

The October sky hangs low and gray, threatening rain. We're standing right at the edge of the curb, trying to peer through the rows of cars to figure out what's holding things up.

"Oh, right—it's that huge conference today," Anna remembers. "They're probably bringing in international VIPs."

As if to confirm her words, flashing escort lights appear up ahead. A voice blares from a loudspeaker, probably telling the drivers to move aside and let the motorcade through.

"Finally," I sigh. "Once they pass, the road will clear up."

I take a sip of coffee and drum my fingers nervously against the cup. What unfortunate timing for this exhibition—everyone's attention is on the conference. Then again, maybe the general buzz will actually work in my favor. Maybe I'll get some of the spotlight too.

The flashing lights gleam just a few cars away now. At least seven black SUVs trail behind the lead escort vehicle. One after another, they slowly glide past, maneuvering around the jam. The tinted windows and sleek bodies make them look like a presidential convoy. There's no seeing who's inside—and that's fine. Whoever it is, I just want them to pass already.

I'm following the last SUV with my eyes when, suddenly, it screeches to a halt. The tires are still spinning when the door swings open and a man steps out into the street. Tall, dark-haired, maybe around thirty. Dressed in a sleek navy-blue suit, he looks like he walked straight out of a magazine. His face is tense and strong-jawed, lips pressed in a grim line. The wind has tousled his perfectly combed hair. A conference guest?

Something stirs uneasily in my chest.

The man scans the crowd with sharp, focused eyes, searching for someone.

The crowd stares back with interest.

"Sokolov," someone mutters behind me. "That's him. In the flesh. I saw him on TV yesterday..."

What he saw, I never find out. The rest of the world suddenly fades into silence—because Sokolov's gaze finds me and locks on. It cuts through me like a blade, draining the strength from my limbs.

Everything disappears—the road, the gray sky, the honking cars. There's nothing left but his eyes. Hungry. Desperate. And somehow... childishly lost. I can't even see them from here, but I know they're deep brown, framed by thick black lashes.

A sharp pain blooms in my chest. I realize I'm not breathing. I gasp. My heart pounds like mad, and in the chaos of thoughts racing through my mind, only one makes any sense:

What is happening?! Why am I so shaken by a complete stranger?

We stare at each other, unblinking. Devouring each other with our eyes—just like in all those trashy romance novels. And now I get it. It really does feel like I'm about to dissolve under that gaze, like I'll just vanish and be gone.

The wind flares open the hem of his blazer, but he doesn't seem to notice. His lips move—he's saying something, but I can't hear it over the street noise.

Then, leaving the car door wide open, he starts walking toward us. Another man jumps out behind him, slamming the door shut.

"Wait... do you know him?" Anna whispers in disbelief. "That's Sokolov. He's looking at you like he knows you."

"No," I manage to say. "He must have mistaken me for someone else."

Just a few heartbeats later, he's standing in front of me. His eyes really are brown. His lips twitch with nerves.

Ignoring the curious onlookers, Sokolov pulls me into a tight embrace, so strong it knocks the breath from my lungs.

"Eva..." he whispers into my ear. "Eva, oh my God. It's really you. It's you..."

Anna gasps behind me.

I suck in the suddenly too-thick air. The warm whisper of a stranger affects me in the strangest way—my insides are trembling. My eyes burn, and I feel like I'm about to cry. Sokolov holds me tight, with no intention of letting go.

His companion finally makes it through the tangle of cars, grabs Sokolov's arm, and whispers something urgently. Roman flinches, shrugs the hand off, and clutches me even tighter.

"Roman!" the man says again, gripping his shoulder. "Stop it. You can't do this. Get a grip—Eva is gone!"

Roman jerks his head like he's shaking off a pesky fly. Slowly, he straightens up and lets go of me—only to gently touch my face and search my eyes.

"I knew it," he breathes. "I never believed you were really..."

I stand frozen. I can't move.

He lets out a shaky laugh. Twirls a strand of my hair around his finger. Says something completely off:

"Redhead... Wow."

I inhale sharply, trying to pull myself together.

Okay. Stay calm.

The guy is obviously unwell. Grieving. His wife died. But why am I the one who's freaking out? Slowly, I raise my hand and push his away from my face.

"You're mistaken," I say softly, looking into those deep brown eyes flecked with gold. "My name is Polina."

"What?" he frowns. "No! You're Eva. Sokolova. My wife. I could never mistake you for anyone else."

But his hands drop, and he peers intently into my face.

I shake my head.

"No. I told you—you're mistaken. I'm Polina Krause."

For a second, he freezes. Then jerks his head sharply, and something in his face shifts—just a flicker—and the helplessness is replaced with steel.

"Why are you saying that?" His voice hasn't caught up with the change; it's still rough and unsteady with strain.

"Roman," the dark-haired guy hisses again. "Come on. You've already guaranteed yourself a full spread in every tabloid out there. So you made a mistake—it happens. Let's go."

"Wait," Roman growls. "You think I'm an idiot? You think I've been chasing random women for five years? I'd recognize my wife in a crowd of a million, Kamil!"

Kamil gives me a sympathetic look and shrugs.

The crowd is buzzing now, murmuring, snapping photos. Someone's recording. Looks like Sokolov really is a public figure—but he doesn't care. His gaze is still locked on me.

"You hate wearing heels," he says quietly. "And you talk in your sleep almost every night. You're addicted to terrible fast food—I could never get you to stop..." He lets out a short, nervous laugh. "And the tattoo. That's right!"

He grabs my arm and pushes up the sleeve of my coat, staring in disbelief at the smooth skin. Then back at me.

"No," he mutters. "That can't be. Did you get it removed?"

Why am I letting this happen? Why am I not stopping him, not walking away? And why—why does my chest hurt like this?

He yanks up his own sleeve. The thin fabric tears, a cufflink clatters to the pavement. A black-ink bird is tattooed on the inside of his forearm.

He looks at me, eyes burning.

"We got them together. In St. Petersburg. Don't you remember?"

It's like the world runs out of oxygen. My throat tightens. My vision dims. I glance around at the curious faces, the phones raised, the stares.

Anna sees the state I'm in and steps in, shielding me with her body.

"Sir, she told you already—you're mistaken," she snaps. "This is not your wife. Look what you've done to her. Polina, come on."

She tugs me across the street and I follow, weaving through the honking cars, my vision blurred by tears.

There's a loud, low buzzing in my ears.

My hands are shaking.

Because I know three things for certain. My name is Polina, and my husband is Mark Krause—not Roman Sokolov. I have no idea who Eva is, and I didn't understand a word that gorgeous lunatic just said. And yes—last year, I had a tattoo removed. A bird I got back in college, for no good reason at all.

Chapter 2

"Polina, baby, how are you?" Mark yells into the phone.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. Everything's okay."

"What do you mean, okay?! I saw the news. It's a nightmare! I'm flying out on the first flight!"

I exhale with a groan, covering the mic with my hand. Mark loves me and always worries. But sometimes, he really overdoes it with overprotection.

"Listen." I try to make my voice sound more optimistic. "I understand you're worried. But honestly, it's not that bad. Ever since that lunatic mistook me for his wife, the gallery's been packed. Anna sold almost all the paintings—can you believe it?"

"What about him? Did he come back?" Mark asks impatiently.

"No, I haven't seen him again. He must've realized his mistake by now. Probably regrets it. And hey, all this attention is actually working in my favor!"

"Listen," Mark cuts me off, "I know you. You can tell anyone you're fine, but not me. I can feel your anxiety even from here. Are you still taking your meds?"

"Of course."

"Good. Smart girl. And—yeah, no more talking. I'm flying out tomorrow. That's it. Kisses. Please—be careful. Don't stay alone."

"Okay," I agree. "Deal, I'll wait for you. But what about your patients?"

"It's fine, I can get someone to cover for a couple of days. Your peace of mind means more to me than anything."

"Oh. I love you, you know that?"

"I know." His voice softens. "And I love you, baby. More than you can imagine. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Talk to you tomorrow!"

I put the phone down and sit on the bed. Mark's right—he really does know me like no one else. It's been three days since that strange encounter, and I haven't left the hotel once. Anna told me about the crowds at the gallery and my sudden popularity over the phone. But I just couldn't bring myself to face all those curious visitors. Especially after Anna told me Sokolov had come by several times asking for me. She didn't tell him where I was staying, but I'm sure it wouldn't be hard for him to find out.

I couldn't possibly end up alone with him. I was still shaking at the thought of him. That desperate look in his eyes, full of love and pain. The tattooed bird on his arm. Just thinking about him made my heart pound like crazy, and I could hardly breathe.

I didn't understand what was happening. I loved Mark. I didn't even know this man. So why was my body reacting to him this way?

When I got back to the hotel that day, the first thing I did was Google "Roman Sokolov." I found out he was a high-profile businessman from Moscow. A construction tycoon, philanthropist, and investor. An eligible bachelor and the dream of half the country's women. A widower—rich, handsome, and consistently alone since his wife's death. Although, maybe not so alone anymore...

"Someone close to Sokolov—whose identity we cannot disclose—suggests that the billionaire may be planning to propose to his longtime friend Sofia Yavlonska. Whether that's true or not, time will tell. However, it's worth noting that whenever Roman Sokolov appears in public, it's always with Sofia."

Attached to the article was a photo. Sokolov stares at the camera from some glitzy event, looking bored, while a stunning blonde beams next to him, holding his arm.

I gave a dry chuckle and opened a new tab: photos of Sokolov's late wife. Amazingly, she really did look a lot like me. Uncannily so. It made Sokolov's reaction a little easier to understand—he wasn't as crazy as he seemed. If I didn't know for a fact I had no sisters, I might've mistaken Eva Sokolova for my own twin. Sure, she had platinum hair and I was a fiery redhead with a wild mane of waves. She had a round face, mine was sharper, with more defined cheekbones. But the blue eyes, the slightly upturned nose, the smile... How was this even possible?

But the coincidences don't end there. A couple of quick searches online quickly tell me that Eva died of cancer. The same cancer Mark—back then just my future husband—had cured me of. And it

happened five years ago, right around the same time. Coincidences like that don't happen. They just don't. Period.

It's been driving me crazy for three days now. I pace around the hotel room like a wounded animal, thinking, thinking, thinking, until my head starts pounding with pain.

That night, the nightmares came back. They had stopped over the past few years, but now they've returned. I never remembered them—just woke up from my own screams, sobbing and gasping for air. I'd squeeze my eyes shut, trying to hold on to the dream before it slipped away. It was terrifying... but part of me ached to remember what it was. But I couldn't. Those dreams haunted me during the first year after I recovered, and Mark had shown incredible patience and strength—every time, lulling me back to sleep, calming me down until I drifted off again.

Mark... My sweet Mark. He doesn't deserve a wife who melts at the memory of a stranger holding her in the middle of the street. It's just not fair after everything he's done for me. He had nursed me, healed me, poured all his strength into saving me—dying, unwanted, alone. And eventually, he fell in love. When I moved from his center into his apartment, I wanted for nothing. He had set up a studio just for me, where I would write like a madwoman all day long. And when I forgot to take my meds in the middle of a creative high, he would bring them to me himself. Not once did he complain—only care, only love. Endless love.

No. Mark doesn't deserve betrayal. It's a good thing he's arriving tomorrow. I hadn't realized how lonely I'd been until I heard his voice.

The phone chimes on the nightstand. Probably Mark, texting to say goodnight. Already drifting off under the meds, I glance at the screen—and see a message from an unknown number. The last two digits are sevens.

"Eva, I don't know why you're doing this, but we need to meet and talk. At least for the sake of our son."

Chapter 3

Another night was filled with nightmares. This time, I remembered them. Endless staircases leading into corridors. Hollow emptiness. Footsteps echoing through the silence. My own. No one else's. There was no one there—only me, endlessly searching for an exit. I ran down empty corridors, pounded on doors, tried to look out windows, but behind the curtains there were only brick walls.

I woke up every hour, gasping for air, soaked in tears. I'd turn to the other side, only to fall right back into the same nightmare. Running again, searching again. Never finding a way out.

By six in the morning, I was fully awake and knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep again. Not that I wanted to. The night had drained me, left me without strength or will. I don't know what to do.

I'm not Eva—that much I'm sure of. Whatever Sokolov might think, I am not his wife. Because I remember my entire life. I don't have amnesia. Before I got sick, I lived here in Prague for several years. I

started treatment here too, but after several relapses, the doctors had given up. One of them told me about an experimental method developed by Dr. Krause in Russia. He said the doctor was looking for a specific kind of patient—and that I might be a match. Without hesitation, I went to faraway Novosibirsk, a city in Siberia. I was twenty-four and desperately wanted to live.

Then came the treatment. IV drips, pills. Scans, injections. I was a shadow of myself—pale, thin, my hair cut short. I don't understand how Mark could've fallen in love with that wreck. Why? For what reason? Maybe because of my will to live.

"You're a rare flower strong enough to break through concrete just to survive. I admire you."

And he really did admire me. But I didn't understand it myself—what gave me the strength to keep fighting? What pushed me to get back up, again and again, and keep hitting that impossible wall, just to glimpse a ray of sun? It had been so hard. And so painful. I remember more than one moment when I didn't want to go on living. When I screamed from pain, unable to recognize anyone through the haze clouding my vision. I was a hopeless case. And I wasn't the only one—Mark took in other hopeless patients like me. They gave up. Only I kept fighting. And in the end, only I survived. After I recovered, Mark shut down the experimental program and stopped his research. He said it didn't pass the trials. Yes, I had survived, but likely because of my own determination and strength of will, he told me. It happens sometimes—even with the most severely ill. We moved again. Mark went on treating oncology cases using classic, proven methods. He's good at it. At least, the steady stream of patients hasn't stopped.

So I can't possibly be Eva. Even though we're clearly connected. By diagnosis. By time. Even by appearance. And I need to figure out how that's possible.

I pick up my phone and check when the next flight from Russia is. 2:30 p.m. Alright. I can make it in time to meet with Sokolov, hear whatever he wants to tell me, and get back to the hotel room. Maybe then, things will become at least a little clearer. Maybe Eva and I share some relatives. I grew up in an orphanage, so in theory, it's not impossible. And there's no need for Mark to know about our conversation. He already worries far too much about me as it is.

While getting myself ready, I try to think of what to write to Sokolov so he doesn't take it the wrong way. Thoughts circle in my head like sharks, devouring my calm and self-control. Thoughts of Sokolov and his son won't leave me alone. After his message last night, I found his social media page and scrolled through a million photos. In every single one, he was with a little boy. Not with friends, not with a fiancée—just with a blond, blue-eyed boy. And the pictures show how the child is growing. Here he is, just a tiny thing, looking at his father seriously. His brows furrowed, reaching toward his dad with a little hand. Here they are at the beach, making sandcastles. The boy is tanned and completely happy. Here they are go-karting, crashing into each other. Both are laughing, and Roman's knees stick out past the steering wheel.

It's amazing to see such tender love between father and son. Especially when compared to the news photos where Sokolov is a stern, grim businessman who shows no mercy to his competitors. The contrast is striking. I look at the boy, and something tightens inside me. I don't want him thinking badly of his mother. Even though I don't know her at all.

Maybe it's because I can't have children after the illness. That's the price I paid for my life, and I've come to terms with it—although sometimes, when I see mothers with strollers, the pain is unbearable. But now I feel a strange guilt in front of this child, whose mother I've never even met. As long as Roman believes that Eva abandoned them—him and the boy—I won't find peace. If Sokolov remains convinced I'm Eva, the illusion won't break, and I'll have to live with the weight of guilt for my accidental twin.

I need to convince him! He has to understand that I'm not her!

Determined, I pick up my phone to set up a meeting—and that's when there's a knock at the door. My throat goes instantly dry, and my heart breaks into a sprint.

I set the phone down. Take a deep breath. Maybe it's housekeeping. Or Anna.

Another knock. More insistent this time, irritated.

Who am I kidding?! I know perfectly well who's out there. My trembling hands and the heat in my chest, threatening to ignite the whole room, tell me as much. This insane, uncontrollable reaction of my body—there's no mistaking it.

My first impulse is to hide. Stay still. Don't open the door!

Then comes a wave of saving irritation. What the hell is wrong with me?! Am I afraid of him? Or of myself? I've been through so much, I've long since developed immunity to fear. I'm usually calm, composed. Nightmares don't count—emotions often override reason in dreams. But right now, I feel like I'm dreaming.

I stride to the door and open it. Sokolov is standing right in front of me. The dark gray suit fits him perfectly. The black sneakers look like it's mid-summer outside, not early November.

That's where my willpower gives out—I can't lift my eyes. My gaze lands on his broad chest, steadily rising and falling, and I say nothing.

"Can we talk?" I hear his even voice and, growing bolder, look up.

The nervous guy who hugged me in the street is gone. Standing before me now is the man I'd read about in the news: the famous construction tycoon Roman Sokolov. Cold-blooded. Ruthless with competitors. Showing mercy neither to enemies nor friends. An iceberg with empty eyes.

Winter Soldier, comes to mind, out of nowhere.

I let out a small snort at how accurate that sounds and step aside slightly, nodding. He squeezes past me and stops in the middle of the room. The air thickens—just like it did on the road. Breathing becomes difficult. Roman Sokolov, like a burning torch, consumes the oxygen around him.

He stands frozen, clearly unsure of what to do with himself. He looks completely out of place in my tiny hotel room.

And suddenly I'm hit with déjà vu so intense I have to close my eyes and grab the wall. The room spins. My heart is pounding like mad.

I don't remember Sokolov. I have no idea what he's going to say.
But I am absolutely certain—we've been in this situation before.

Chapter 4

Opening my eyes, I see him staring straight at me. His gaze is still impossible to read. Whatever he's feeling—if he's even feeling anything at all—I can't tell. But under his eyes, I feel exposed, uncomfortable. Every cell in my body is aware of how awful I must look after a sleepless night. Exhausted. Weak. Which is exactly how I feel.

A wave of anger rushes in as immediate salvation. He might think I didn't sleep because of him! And even if that's a thousand times true—he can go to hell!

"Say what you came to say and leave!" I fold my arms across my chest, lean against the wall, and meet Roman's eyes directly. A picture of composure—honestly, I'm proud of myself! As if it's not my blood melting in my veins just because he's standing so close. I add, "My husband is arriving soon."

He raises an eyebrow, and that small gesture alone punches a massive hole in my self-control. With a sigh, I clasp my hands behind my back so he won't see how badly they're shaking.

"Husband, huh." Sokolov glances around the room, his tone flat. "So that's why you left me?"

I jerk my head in frustration. What a stubborn ass!

Without waiting for an answer, he smirks.

"Five years, Eva. Five! Did you really live peacefully all this time? Fine, forget about me—clearly, I meant nothing to you. But how could you do this knowing you had a son growing up?! That's what I can't understand. Explain it to me."

I flinch. A wave of emotion hits me. My fists clench on their own. Yes, I feel for him—but I don't have to sit here and listen to accusations meant for someone else!

"Listen... Roman." My voice comes out hoarse, like I've forgotten how to speak these past few days. "First, you need to understand one thing: I'm not Eva. I'm not your wife. Please, believe me. I'm sorry about your son—I really am. And I don't want you thinking Eva's lied to you. I don't want him thinking that either. I don't know why we look alike! I have no idea what kind of strange connection ties us together. But I'm not her. You have to understand that!"

With every word, his face grows harder, until by the end, it turns into a frozen mask. Tightly pressed lips. A sharp, piercing stare. He doesn't believe me.

"Okay," I try again, making another attempt to appeal to reason. "Let's try to figure this out. You mean to say you weren't at your wife's funeral? Didn't see her in the coffin?.. Sorry, but we need to be clear."

He shakes his head and lets out a dry laugh.

"All right. Let's play this game. No, I didn't see you... I mean, Eva, in the coffin. She never even told me she was sick. Just ran off, left a note. Running was always easier for her. She'd done it before. But that time, it was my fault..."

He exhales sharply, staring at the wall. Then he turns to me—and I recoil, stunned by how quickly the mask has fallen away. His eyes are a bottomless pit of pain. He burns in it, melts in it, like a live wire pulsing with current over and over again. Goosebumps ripple across my skin. What kind of woman could do this to him?...

Roman closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them, his lips stretch into a smile. His gaze is empty again. The mask is back in place.

"She wrote that she didn't want to be a burden. That she didn't want me to remember her dying. 'Remember me alive,' that's what she said. So that's what I do."

"That's cruel," I say quietly.

"Oh, yeah," Roman nods, smirking. That smirk seems permanently etched into him now. It's unsettling. "I did look for you... her, I mean. But it was like she vanished into thin air. Eventually, I found the clinic where she'd been treated. I told you she'd run away from me before, right? Well, that time, it was to that clinic. They had a good doctor there, Timur Aliev—he told me everything. Although, since you're alive, maybe he lied. I'll find out when I'm back in Moscow... Anyway, he said Eva was seeing him during her pregnancy. She didn't tell me a word about it. He said he warned her not to go through with it... that it was dangerous... But she wanted the baby..."

His words start to unravel. He turns away, clearly not wanting me to see the mask fall again.

"Fine. If that's what you want to hear—maybe it's my fault. I was the one going on and on about wanting a kid. And maybe you never wanted one at all... But then why have him and disappear?! I don't get any of this, Eva! I swear, I'll leave you alone, I'll walk away—but I need answers!"

He whirls around. His face is twisted, eyes blazing.

It's unbearable to look at him. Now, with emotions raging inside him, he doesn't resemble the Winter Soldier at all. He's a man—and I can understand him on a human level. Losing someone you love... it's terrifying. It hurts. It's a real nightmare. And he's been stuck in it for five long years. Maybe he had only just begun to find peace—and then I appeared. And it all started again.

I peel myself off the wall and take a step toward him.

"No, Roman... You're not to blame. The illness could've been triggered by anything. And in any case, Eva made the choice to have the baby. She wanted to give life to your little boy. I understand her."

He frowns. His eyes gleam feverishly.

"You understand?"

"I would've done the same," I nod. A bitter smile stretches across my lips. "You see... after my illness, I can't have children. So I know what I'm saying. I would've given my life for my child to live."

He stares at me without blinking.

"All right. Let's say you're not Eva... But that means you were sick too?"

I nod.

"And you got better?"

"Yes."

"Who cured you?"

"My husband. Mark. Mark Krause."

"Mark," Roman repeats thoughtfully. Then slowly draws out the name: "Riiight... Krause! I kept wondering where I'd heard that name! He's the one who treated Eva. She died in his clinic! Timur told me he was the one who suggested she go to Krause's medical center in Novosibirsk. By the time I got there, it was too late. Eva had been cremated, and the ashes were buried in an unmarked grave. Supposedly, she told them she had no family. And your Krause—he only took on patients who were alone, so that no one would file claims if something went wrong. That's why I wasn't at my wife's funeral. Because there wasn't one, was there, Eva?"

Chapter 5

"You're clearly messing with my head!" Roman narrows his eyes, looking me up and down. "You're lying to me! What the hell, Eva? You were never like this! You always told it straight to my face—no bullshit, no pretending, no sneaking around! I can't believe you've changed this much!"

Aaaaaargh!!! This is unbearable!!!

I take a slow breath in and out, trying to calm myself.

Mark really did take only loners into his program—I remember that. It made things easier for him: work only with the sick, promise nothing to their families. And as it turned out, that was for the best—since none of the patients survived. Except me.

"Yes," I say, choosing my words carefully. "I know this all looks really strange. I don't have any answers for you right now. But I'll tell you honestly—I want to find them too. I'll try to figure something out, okay? About how Eva ended up at the clinic and when she died. I don't know how many of us there were, and I don't remember her at all. But back then I was in such a state, I didn't notice anything around me. Mark designed a personalized course for each patient. It was an experimental program, and he only took in those who'd been turned away from other clinics. But please... Don't blame him. He really did everything he could."

I don't even notice when his expression changes again.

We look into each other's eyes, and the air seems to hum.

"All right," he says, stepping closer, eyes locked on mine. Like a hypnotized rabbit, I step toward him, too. "I've waited a long time. I can wait a few more days. But first, there's something I need to check."

We're standing close. So close, I can feel the heat radiating from his body. I lift my hand to push him away. I open my mouth, ready to say something, but my mind is blank. My hand falls limp in midair. Roman takes the final step between us and places his hand on the back of my head. My palm lands on his chest. I can hear his heart pounding. Strong. Wild. I'm drowning in emotion. His gaze is magnetic—I can't look away. He's impossibly beautiful, hair tousled, eyes so dark they seem to swallow the light.

Time around Sokolov isn't measured in minutes or hours. It's measured in heartbeats.

Thump.

He keeps his eyes on me.

Thump.

He leans in and kisses me.

Thump.

Time stops completely.

Time stops completely. We freeze between two heartbeats. It's no longer beating, but that's how it should be. That's right. Roman kisses me and keeps his eyes open, still watching me, and I fall. I fall into the endless cosmos of his pupils. His abyss becomes ours, the hunger—shared. He kisses me with growing urgency. His tongue traces my lips, pushes deeper. I can't do anything—I'm light pulled into a black hole. There's no escape, but I don't want to escape.

Sokolov breathes in ragged bursts. His tongue grows bolder.

At some point, I realize we're no longer in the middle of the room. He presses me against the wall. One hand holds both of mine above my head, the other hungrily explores my body. He pulls away from my lips, and a breathy sound escapes my chest—no, it's not right, come back!

He kisses my neck, moves lower, bites my nipple through the fabric of my shirt. I hear a moan—and somewhere far away, outside consciousness, I realize it's me.

It's madness. Complete insanity. But I don't want to be cured. I dissolve completely. I'm gone. There's only fire, consumed by darkness.

"Eva... my Eva..." whispers the darkness. And I recognize the voice from my dreams. I sob softly, pressing closer. Losing the last scraps of will.

Roman yanks my shirt up, kisses my chest greedily. Heat flares between my legs—I gasp and lean forward...

Into the silence, broken only by our breath, a phone starts ringing—shrill and sharp.

But even that doesn't break the spell. It only irritates me: who cares?! I'll answer later! After three long beats of a heart that finally starts again, Roman freezes. He pulls back to look at me—not into my eyes, but lower. And then I realize—the phone isn't mine. It's his.

I swallow. Lick my burning lips. He lets go of my hands and suddenly steps away.

He answers the call with a perfectly calm voice:

"Babe, I'll call you back in five minutes."

Babe?!

Jealousy flares in my chest like wildfire. So he has a fiancée! And she's his babe! And while he was kissing me—he didn't even lose his breath!

He slowly slips the phone into the pocket of his jacket. Tucks his shirt back in. (Was I the one who pulled it out?!)

Then says:

"You're either a whore who kisses every stranger, or you remember me just fine. I don't even know which is worse."

He wipes his mouth with his hand and walks out of the room.

Leaving me burning with shame and guilt. Because he's right—I am a whore! A heat-struck cat in season! I melted in his hands, turned into syrup! Forgot about my husband, forgot about the whole world—just for the sake of his kiss! God, I'm so ashamed!

Sobs burst out of me. I'm furious with myself! What the hell came over me?! I've never wanted anyone the way I want that... damn Winter Soldier! I never even looked at another man besides Mark, and Mark... Mark is different. He's attentive, gentle. Nothing like that. With him, it's love. Real love. Not whatever that was with Sokolov—a wild, animal craving. Like he'd drugged me or cast some spell with those black, bottomless eyes!

I shake my head. No, girl—look the truth in the face, don't turn away! No one drugged you. You wanted it. You were ready to jump on him like a total...

God, give me strength, I'm so angry at myself!

I finally manage to get up, find a sedative, swallow a pill. I need to pull myself together before Mark gets here. Lord, how am I supposed to look him in the eye?

A message pops up on my phone. Unknown number. Last digits—double sevens. Sokolov! I open it, heart heavy.

"You've got a crescent-shaped scar on the back of your head. Remember where it's from? We were playing volleyball. You fell, hit your head. Got hurt bad—had to get stitches. So, what I wanted—I got. No more doubts. Thanks for the pleasant bonus ;) And yeah. Don't even think about disappearing again. Next time, I'll track you down—no matter where you hide."

Chapter 6

I'm running again. Down a never-ending hallway, choking on tears. This time, I know I'm not alone. And I'm looking for... someone I can't find. Worse yet—I don't even know who I'm looking for. Eventually, I collapse onto the floor, curled up into a ball. The walls echo with my sobs and the sound of someone's footsteps.

"Eva!"

"Eva!"

"Come back to me!"

"I'm not Eva," I try to say, but my mouth is dry. "I don't know who Eva is. I'm not her. Not her!!!"

"Sweetheart! Shhh, shhh! It's okay, baby! Wake up!"

Somehow I claw my way out of the sticky nightmare. Mark is sitting on the bed, peering anxiously at my face. Outside, dusk has fallen. A lamp glows beside us.

My head aches. Did I sleep the whole day?

I glance around, confused, trying to piece things together.

And then it all comes flooding back. Roman Sokolov. The kiss. My madness.

Color rushes to my face, and I sink back into the pillows.

Mark.

I look at my husband, cautiously. He looks exhausted. Dark circles under his eyes, two-day stubble. He must've come straight here after a shift—didn't even sleep...

"How did you get in?"

He smiles.

"I'm your husband. Showed my passport and they gave me a key."

I nod. The room spins.

I try to sit up, but fall back onto the pillows again.

"Mark... we need to talk."

"Of course, baby. We'll talk about everything. But first, let's figure out how many pills you took."

I frown. How many...

"One."

"Are you sure?"

He leans over me, gently lifts my eyelids, peers into my eyes. Then snaps his fingers. The motion sends another jolt of pain through my skull, and I squeeze my eyes shut with a groan.

"Tell me the truth, sweetheart. How many?"

"I told you—just one!" I pause, thinking. "One last night. And another this morning. I slept terribly."

"Nightmares again?"

I say nothing.

Gathering my strength, I get out of bed and, swaying, somehow make it to the bathroom. What's happening to me? No way this is from just one pill...

Cold water helps me clear my head a little. I return to the room feeling a bit more refreshed. Mark is standing by the window, holding the pill bottle, staring at me with a frown.

"Baby..." he starts softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize how hard this was for you here. I'm sorry I left you alone."

I rub my forehead.

"I don't understand..."

He shakes the bottle. No sound. It's empty.

"No-o-o," I say slowly. "I clearly remember taking only two. Mark... really. It must be an old bottle. Mine is here somewhere..."

I rush over to the nightstand. Ignoring the way the walls and floor sway like I'm on a ship, I start rummaging through the drawer.

"Just a second... where are they..."

Mark waits patiently.

Finally, finding nothing, I collapse back onto the bed, drained.

I whisper:

"I really don't know how that could've happened... Okay. Listen... let's just..."

He slowly comes over and sits beside me. Gently strokes my hair.

"This is my fault. I should've come with you."

"Oh, stop it," I protest. "I'm not a child, Mark. Nothing happened."

He hums.

"I can see that." At my furious glare, he raises his hands in peace. "All right, all right. Let's not talk about it. For now. What was it you wanted to discuss?"

I sit up and try to gather my thoughts. My head is foggy. The conversation with Sokolov this morning—already buried under everything that followed—feels distant, unclear.

A flush creeps over me again. I push through it.

“Did you know Eva Sokolova? You treated her, right? No, wait. Why didn’t you ever tell me we looked alike? I checked online—we look like twins, Mark! Why didn’t you say anything? Okay, whatever... just tell me now. I want to know everything. When she was admitted, what her diagnosis was, how long she was treated before she died. This whole thing is so strange—I want to understand it.”

With every word I speak, his expression grows more serious. Until I’m completely certain—he does know something. Something important.

“Talk to me, Mark, don’t stay silent!” I grab his hand.

He gently strokes my fingers.

“Sweetheart... But Eva Sokolova was never treated at my clinic. Where did you get that idea?”

“Don’t lie to me!” I snap. “Why are you lying? Roman told me everything!”

“Roman?”

“Roman Sokolov—he was here this morning!”

Color instantly floods my face. I blurted it out. Well, too late to take it back now. Let’s see what he says.

But Mark only tilts his head. His voice dry.

“What else did Roman Sokolov tell you?”

“He,” I say, my fire fading just a little, “thinks I *am* Eva. I know that’s not true, but please, Mark, just tell me the truth!”

He exhales heavily and sinks to his knees beside the bed. Taking my hand, he presses a kiss to my palm.

“Sweetheart... baby... I...”

“Stop mumbling!” I snap. “Say it like it is!”

“Fine!” He looks me straight in the eyes. “Since you asked. Polina, Roman Sokolov flew back to Russia two days ago. It was on the news. There’s no way you could’ve seen him this morning.”

“What?!” The walls begin to sway again. I’m gasping for air. “No! That’s some kind of mistake! Look!” I grab my phone. “He messaged me. I was going to ask him to meet. But he came on his own! Where is it...”

I scroll through my messages. Ads, ads, spam. A message from Mark. One from Anna... Where is it?

There’s nothing from Roman. No conversation at all. The call log is empty too. Nothing.

"Last two digits were sevens," I mumble, flipping through the log again and again.

"Polina, we need to fly home. Now. You have to get checked. If the hallucinations are back—"

"No!" I whisper. "What hallucinations, Mark, what are you even saying?!"

He's trying to drive me crazy on purpose. That can't be true! I *remember* meeting Roman. God, how could anyone forget something like that?!

I bite my tongue before I say too much. The last thing I need is to tell Mark how I melted in some stranger's arms!

"Baby, I asked downstairs—today you didn't leave the room. And you didn't have any visitors either. You slept through the whole morning. The maid stopped by, but she didn't wake you. If you want, we can call her. You can ask yourself."

I slowly shake my head. No. No no no no! What?! It was... a dream?! I *dreamed* it?!

"Polina, please—let's go home. You need to be examined. You *remember* this has happened before!"

I freeze, like I've just slammed into a wall of horrible truth. Because Mark is right. The headaches, the nightmares, the insomnia. The hallucinations. I've been through all of this before.

A sob breaks out of me. I cover my face with my hands.

There's only one thing this can mean.

The illness is back...

Chapter 7

The next day passes like a dream. Passport control, the flight, the ride to the medical center. We don't even stop at home—Mark insists I need to be examined as soon as possible. The whole time, I'm in a daze.

In my head, one thought pounds like a drumbeat: *againagainagainagain...*

More than anything, I was afraid of a relapse. In the first few years, it was especially likely, and every time I went in for a checkup, it felt like walking to the gallows. Always expecting the worst. And each time, a massive weight lifted off my shoulders when it didn't come back. And now, just when I finally let myself relax, let myself enjoy life—the cursed illness returns.

I've practically stopped doubting it. I keep repeating the thought to myself the whole way, trying to prepare, to accept it, to brace for battle again. But I can't. There's no peace in me, only despair, tearing me apart from the inside.

I don't want to go through it all again!

Mark does everything he can to calm me down.

"Baby, don't get ahead of yourself. The diagnosis might not be confirmed. It could just be stress. You've had a tough few days—foreign country, the exhibition, and then that... damn Sokolov!"

On the plane, Mark showed me a news post stating that Sokolov had returned to Moscow two days ago from an international conference in Prague.

I looked at it and thought: *This is reality*. Not the kisses in the hotel room that still make my skin burn whenever I think about them. A dream. A damn dream!

Through half-closed eyes, I watch Mark and think: *How could I? Why the hell am I dreaming softcore porn about another man?*

Mark is twelve years older than me. I love him—there's no question about that. He fills me with admiration. With awe. He's a true genius, and I'm unbelievably proud of him. Proud that he chose me. Though I honestly don't know why. He had options. He's a handsome man—not like Sokolov, completely different. A Scandinavian kind of handsome. Tall, broad, with thick blond hair and piercing blue eyes.

Mark keeps talking, but I see it, feel it—he doesn't believe his own words. And I only let myself fall apart once. When we're in a taxi on the way to Mark's medical center, I lay my head on his shoulder. I'm so tired I can't even cry anymore—there are no tears left.

"I'm not getting out this time," I whisper. "I won't make it."

"Don't say that, hey!" Mark snaps, suddenly firm. "Don't even *think* that way! You know attitude is everything when it comes to recovery. Baby, even if you're sick—you'll beat this! Listen..." — he lifts my chin, making me meet his eyes — "I promise you. No—I *swear*! I cured you once, and I'll cure you again. You're not going to die, you hear me? You'll live a long and happy life!"

I nod indifferently. What else is he supposed to say? He's my husband. He loves me, no matter what. He's supposed to support me—and he does. But I still can't understand what I did to deserve a husband this perfect.

Meanwhile, the only thing I can think about—besides the illness—is Sokolov. Like a broken record, I replay the scene in the hotel room over and over. So vivid in my head. And apparently, not even real. Just a hallucination, conjured by a fevered mind and a failing brain.

The car stops at a wrought iron gate.

"We're here!" the driver chirps, as if we've arrived at a spa resort and not an oncology center.

My stomach twists. Clenching my teeth, I climb out of the car in silence.

Mark thanks the driver, adds a generous tip. Yeah. Perfect, damn it, in everything.

Suddenly, anger crashes down on me. At the cheerful driver. At myself, and my stupid fantasies. At Mark and his damn perfection. But most of all—at the cruel, filthy fate that keeps dragging me down the same road over and over again. A road full of pits and potholes, any one of which could turn out to be bottomless.

"Come on, baby," Mark wraps an arm around me, brushes his dry lips against my temple. I shudder, but don't let it show.

I nod and move forward silently.

And here we go again. Doctors, tests, MRIs. Thanks to Mark, the whole process is fast-tracked. He leads me by the hand from one room to another, and I follow obediently, thoughtless, hollowed out. Because deep down—I already know the answer.

By evening, he walks me to a private room where my things have been brought. He leaves, promising to return soon. But it's not him who comes back—it's a nurse with a syringe.

"This is just a sedative, nothing to worry about," she assures me. "Doctor Krause asked us to give it to you."

Reality sinks in, wrapped in that familiar haze of apathy. My brain, detached and mechanical, begins building a logical chain. Mark asked them to give me a sedative—which means he's worried I'll lose it. Maybe even have a meltdown. Which means the news won't be good. And he already knows it. Which means he's stalling—waiting for the drug to kick in.

A stain creeps across the white wall. It pulls me in like a vortex, and once again, I'm running, running, running down a long hallway.

The voice calling Eva returns—but this time I'm not running from it. I'm running *toward* it.

I jolt awake, sit up. The dream ended in nothing—again. But for some reason, this time there's no emptiness. No hollow aftermath of a nightmare. Instead, I feel a surge of strength.

I remember who I really am. A fighter by nature. The kind who breaks through concrete and reaches for the sun. The kind who survives where others don't. Who rises from the ashes—literally.

I really hope Roman Sokolov and his little boy will be okay. Let him live a happy life. Let him marry his childhood friend. Let her help him get through the pain. Let it be. I have my own life. Pathetic, broken, painful. But still mine. Mine—Polina's, not Eva's. And I'll keep fighting for it as long as I'm alive.

I walk into the bathroom and wash my face. Look at myself in the mirror. My eyes shine with a sickly gleam. A twitchy smile frozen on my lips. Stunning, really. What a sight. Maybe Eva was right not to let her husband see her like that. Not everyone can handle it. Who knows—maybe his great love would've vanished the moment he saw a walking corpse.

I give a bitter smile. Yeah, Eva wasn't so dumb after all.

The door clicks behind me. I turn. Mark stands in the doorway, leaning against the frame, eyes downcast.

I walk up to him, place my hands on his shoulders. Look him in the eyes.

"Well, love," I say calmly, "go on. Tell me the truth. Is it what I think it is?"

His face twists, just for a moment. Then he pulls himself together. But he still can't meet my eyes.

He just nods, staring at the wall.

Chapter 8

Life slips back onto a path I'd long forgotten. IV drips, injections, tests. I sleep a lot, and the days slide into each other smoothly, like shifting shapes in a kaleidoscope. The same old image, over and over. I stare at it steadily, without turning away.

Mark has stepped back from most of his patients and spends all his free time with me. We're practically living at the center now. I asked why we couldn't just go home—he's the one doing all my IVs anyway. But Mark said he felt calmer knowing I was under constant observation. Fine. I agree with everything he says. I've learned to trust him.

A new day.

A new day.

A new day.

How long have I been here? I've lost count. Occasionally I glance at my phone to track it—has it been a week? Two? A month? I rarely go outside—it's gotten very cold, and Mark's afraid I'll catch something. But I don't want to go out anyway. I feel like I'm wrapped in a cocoon inside this room. I've frozen into it, become a chrysalis. If I step outside and feel the world again, it'll crush me. With pain, with anger. With despair. But while I stay here, it's like none of it is happening to *me*. It's happening to someone else, someone who just borrowed my body.

I feel... okay, all things considered. I often sit on the windowsill, wrapped in a blanket, staring mindlessly outside.

Then Mark comes in and sets up the IV. We curl up together in bed and watch a movie. Afterward, we talk. About our trips, shared projects, my paintings. He's trying to bring me back to life, and he talks, and talks, and talks... reminding me of moments I'd long since forgotten. He remembers everything and tells the stories again and again.

Like the time in Spain, when a dog stole my hamburger and Mark ran after it—as if I was really going to eat it after that. And when he realized how ridiculous he'd looked, he laughed so hard he almost fell over. Or in Turkey, when we watched a street artist sketching portraits, and I whispered tips on how to shade properly. The artist finally yelled at me to stop interfering, and Mark and I ran away, laughing like lunatics. Or how we'd spend hours shopping, trying on everything just because we were both hopeless shopaholics. How...

We laughed over those memories, and all the while I kept thinking how heartless I must be to have forgotten such little things. The little things that make up a life. And only when Mark started retelling them did the images come rushing back, clear and vivid again.

And every time, I thought how lucky I was to have such a wonderful husband. And how unworthy of him I was.

Because almost every night, I dreamed of another man.

The dream was always the same.

As if in the middle of the night, I hear a knock. I get out of bed, walk to the window. And there, outside, I see him. Tall, dark-haired, impossibly handsome. In a plain white shirt with the collar open and the sleeves rolled up. He looks at me with a soft smile, then gestures for me to come. I shake my head—I don't know him. Then he places his hand on the glass. And I want so badly to lift my own, to feel the warmth of his fingers through that thin barrier. But I can't. So I just stand there and watch the tattooed bird flutter on his forearm. It wants to break free. It wants to fly away.

That's when I always wake up. I sit up in bed and wipe the tears from my face. Mark soothes me, tells me it's okay. That this emotional storm is just a side effect of the treatment. I don't tell him about the dream. I just try to hold on to the image of the man with the bird on his arm. But it slips away, leaking out of me along with my tears. Even though I feel like I've seen him recently—so recently—and yet I can't remember where.

After one of those awakenings, I lie still for a long time, staring at the ceiling. I can't fall back asleep. Mark snores softly beside me, his hand still holding mine. I try not to move, not to wake him. When my arm goes numb, I gently slip out of his grip and walk to the window. Wrapping myself in a blanket, I sit down in my usual spot. The darkness outside is broken by the streetlamps around the center. Snow is falling gently, and for the first time in a long while, I find myself wondering how long I've been here. I check my phone— December 1st. God. Christmas is coming. And then...

Wait.

Mark had a conference scheduled for December 3rd, in Vienna. He used to talk about it all the time. He was preparing for it. Back then. Before I got sick. And now he doesn't even mention it anymore. He's given all his time to me. No. That's not right.

"Mark!" I sit down next to him on the bed and touch his hand. "Mark, sweetheart, wake up!"

"Huh?" His eyes fly open. He sits up abruptly, scanning my face. "What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

"No, no, calm down. I'm fine! But you're not..."

"What do you mean?" He's already relaxing. He yawns.

"You've got that conference coming up. In two days. Did you buy your ticket?"

"What ticket? What are you talking about?"

"The flight to Vienna. You've been preparing for weeks. You have to go! And don't even try to argue with me!"

He opens his mouth, but I press my hand over it.

"No! Don't argue. You've put so much into it—you talked about it nonstop! It was selfish of me to forget. I'm sorry."

He gives me an annoyed look, about to protest. I lower my hand, and he takes the opportunity to blurt out:

"Baby, don't be ridiculous. I'm not going anywhere! How could I leave you alone—just think!"

"Oh my God, Mark, I'm in a medical center full of doctors! I couldn't be alone here even if I tried! It's settled—you're going, and that's final!"

His expression softens.

"Well... if you insist..."

"I *do* insist!"

"Okay!" He takes my hand and kisses my fingers. "Honestly, I would like to go. I really have been preparing for it..."

"Then great!" I smile. "And I'll be just fine here... with some TV series or another. Just promise me you won't worry."

While we argue, the sky outside begins to lighten. Mark heads to the shower, washes up, and leaves for the morning meeting. I chew on a granola bar absentmindedly, watching snowflakes drift past the window. And then I freeze—there's a figure standing directly across from my window.

A man is standing behind the wrought-iron fence, staring intently at the center.

Chapter 9

"Polina, hi!"

I flinch and turn around. Yulia—one of the nurses who took care of me five years ago—is standing in the doorway, smiling.

"Come here, quick!" I wave her over and point to the window. "Do you see him?"

"See who?" She frowns, squinting into the thickening snowfall.

There's no one by the fence.

"I swear," I mutter. "He was right there, by the gate. I saw him. I know I did."

"Who?"

"A man!"

"What man?"

"I don't know!"

Groaning, I rub my forehead. No, this time he wasn't a hallucination. There really was... someone.

Wait—why did I think *this time*? When have I ever had hallucinations?

My mind feels like mush.

“Never mind.” I turn away and glance back at Yulia. “Maybe I imagined it. Just don’t tell Mark, okay? He’s flying to Vienna today, and he’s already freaking out about leaving me alone.”

“I won’t say a word!” Yulia grins and suddenly hugs me. “Liiiiina! It’s been so long!”

“It really has,” I smile back. “I didn’t even know you work here. I thought you stayed in Novosibirsk.”

After I got better, we moved to Krasnodar. Mark said he was tired of the cold, and that the southern air would be better for me. He opened a clinic here, and now patients come to him from all over the country.

“I’m a doctor now!” Yulia boasts. “I finished med school, and Mark took me on as an intern at his center. Of course I said yes! I mean, who would ever turn down a chance to work with Mark Krause? He’s a total rock star in the medical world!”

“He really is,” I laugh.

When you see your husband doting on you like a mother hen every day, indulging your every whim and comfort, it’s easy to forget he’s actually a respected doctor and researcher—his work studied by med students across the country.

“How come I haven’t seen you before? I’ve been here for... what, a month?”

Yulia shrugs.

“Well, I didn’t know you were here. Mark’s treating you himself. We don’t even talk about you at staff meetings. He won’t let anyone else near you. I’ve never seen a more protective husband, I swear!”

“Yeah, I’m lucky to have him...” I mumble, sneaking another glance out the window. The snowfall has thickened—it’s just a wall of white now. Even if someone *was* out there, I wouldn’t be able to see them.

I shake my head, brushing off the thought.

“So now he finally told you about me?”

“Yeah, I was really surprised and...” Yulia stops short. “Sorry. I was about to say ‘happy’—but only because I got to see you again, Polina. Of course, with everything going on... that would’ve been really tactless. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” I chuckle. “I’ve sort of... made my peace with it.”

“Come on, you look amazing!” Yulia makes me spin around. “Honestly, you look like you’re blooming. I’m sure Mark will chase that illness away in no time—he’s better at it than anyone. It’s a good thing they caught it early!”

"You're right, you're right."

The door opens, and Mark walks into the room—speak of the devil. He's holding a coffee cup and a paper bag.

"I brought you breakfast, sweetheart! Oh, Yulia, you already stopped by to say hi? Lina, I asked Yulia to keep an eye on you while I'm away. I thought it would help you relax, since you already know each other."

"You really thought of everything." I pull a croissant from the bag and take a bite. "Mmm... delicious."

He leans down and kisses my forehead. Hugs me.

"I really don't want to leave, but I've got to start getting ready... My flight's in four hours."

"Of course," I say, swallowing my bite and kissing him back. "Go, love. Don't worry. I'll be fine."

"All right. It's only three days. You won't even have time to miss me."

"Exactly!"

He lets go and reluctantly steps back. He looks at Yulia.

"Please keep me updated on her condition. If anything changes—even a little—call me right away. Got it?"

"Yes, sir!" Yulia gives him a mock salute and smiles. "It's all going to be fine, don't worry."

"Oh. Well... okay. Bye."

He shoves his hands in his pockets. Then takes them out again. Stands there, hesitating like he can't make himself leave.

"Oh come on!" I laugh and turn him toward the door. "Go! I don't want to see you back here a minute sooner than three days!"

He twists around and pulls me into one last tight hug. Then finally releases me and walks quickly down the hall.

"See what I mean?" Yulia follows him into the corridor. "That man loves you like crazy."

"Sometimes his overprotectiveness kind of freaks me out," I admit, watching Mark disappear down the hallway.

Yulia gives me a skeptical look.

"You know how many women we've had here whose husbands forgot they existed? They toss them in some expensive medical center and move on with their lives, thinking they've done their part while their wives battle illness alone. So don't complain about overprotectiveness, Lina. You don't know the other side of that coin. Oh—sorry," she adds, suddenly nervous. "I didn't mean to offend you."

I reassure her it's fine, and she hurries off to work.

The day passes quietly. I read, watch a movie, even sketch a little in my notebook. They bring lunch, then dinner. Yulia checks in a few times to ask how I'm doing, then rushes off again. I get the sense she doesn't have time to gossip—especially since she's now responsible for Mark's patients too.

In the evening, I suddenly realize Mark should have landed by now—but he hasn't called. I check my phone. There it is: mobile data is turned off. I hardly ever make calls, so I didn't notice it before. Weird. I don't remember turning it off.

Staring out the window, I scroll to the contact labeled "Mark."

Mark picks up after three long rings. He says he just landed and checked into the hotel. His voice sounds tired, and I keep the call short—tell him I'm fine and hang up.

The snow has stopped. The courtyard looks like a Christmas postcard—pine trees topped with white, paths glistening under the lamplight. It's a shame it won't last—snow never sticks around for long in Krasnodar. I wish it would. I wish this year's Christmas could feel like a winter fairy tale, instead of the usual gray slush...

My phone buzzes unexpectedly and makes me jump. The screen lights up: *Anna*.

I frown, trying to remember who she is—and then it hits me: Anna's my gallerist in Prague. How could I forget about her?! We saw each other not that long ago. And hey... what about the paintings?

I swipe the green button.

"Lina?" Anna's voice is anxious. "Oh thank God! I've called you so many times. Where have you been?"

"Um... I've been a little under the weather. Sorry I didn't answer. How are things? How's the gallery?"

"Oh!" Her tone brightens. "You wouldn't believe it! Total success! Your paintings caused a sensation! Every single one sold, and *Soul*—can you imagine?—we auctioned it off. No one wanted to give it up!"

A strange tightness grips my chest. *Soul*—my favorite work. I put... well, my soul into it. My own technique. My creation. A painting I felt like I'd carved out of myself piece by piece. When I finished it, even I was a little scared—where had all that come from? But the result was mesmerizing, and I took it to the exhibit as my most precious treasure.

"Lina?" Anna sounds worried. "Are you still there?"

"I didn't want *Soul* to be sold, Anna."

She pauses. Then says gently,

"I tried calling, but you never picked up. There was a line of buyers for that painting, and in the end, I figured it would be okay to sell it—since you hadn't said anything beforehand. But if you want, we can try reaching out to the buyer and see if they'll give it back."

"That would be nice."

"Oh—and do you know who bought it? I mean, it was a ridiculous sum, I don't even want to say the number over the phone."

"Really?" I say flatly. "Who?"

"Your old friend—the crazy billionaire. Roman Sokolov."

The words hit like a punch to the gut. My vision blurs. My heart skips a beat.

What...

Who is she talking about...?

"Lina?"

"Anna..." My voice is raspy, foreign in my own ears. "Who is Roman Sokolov?"

Chapter 10

I sit on the floor in the dark, clutching my knees, chin pressed tightly against them. Fragments of phrases flash through my mind, images, memories from the recent past. My heart's pounding like mad. Burning from all these memories.

"Eva, my God, it's you..."

"Redhead... wow."

"Next time, I'll track you down—no matter where you hide."

No... That last one didn't happen, did it? That was just part of the imagined scene in the hotel room.

What the hell is happening to me?! How could I forget all of it? It wasn't that long ago! And besides, if I made up such a crazy scene involving Sokolov, then he clearly got under my skin. So how could I forget him so quickly?

I squeeze my eyes shut. In the darkness behind my eyelids, the image of the man with his hand on the glass comes to life. So he's the one who's been in my dreams every night.

I groan through my teeth. God. God, God, God!

With memory gaps this sharp, I must be in real trouble. Soon I'll turn into some drooling old hag. And stay that way until I die.

Tears spring from my eyes.

Why?! Why is this happening to me??

The door opens, a beam of light cutting through the darkness from the hallway. The switch clicks.

"Lina?" Yulia kneels beside me, trying to see my face. "What's going on? Why are you sitting here in the dark?"

"Yulia!" I grab her hands. "Please, I'm begging you, tell me the truth! Things are really bad, aren't they? Mark won't say anything—he just keeps trying to calm me down. But I can't take it anymore! Please, tell me what's really going on!"

"What's gotten into you? Hey—shhh! Calm down!"

She wraps her arms around me, stroking my hair while I sob uncontrollably, struggling to explain through tears what I need from her.

"I... I keep forgetting... whole pieces of my life... Yulia! That's not normal! And Mark... he just keeps telling me everything's fine! That things are improving! But they're not! I'm begging you..."

I gasp for breath and finally get the words out:

"Just tell me... is the tumor big? Is it hopeless?"

"Hold on." Yulia lets go of me, shifting back. "Have you told Mark you're having memory lapses?"

"I... no. That's the thing—I didn't even know I was having these gaps. It's like... like someone cut my memory up and stitched it back together from scraps. Some parts are just gone, like they never existed! At least, that's what I thought... but now I remember everything, and it's terrifying, Yulia. I'm so scared."

"We need to call Mark—"

"No!" I grab her hand. "Please don't call him! He won't tell me anything, Yulia, he'll just try to calm me down again. But I want the truth! I know you're honest. You won't lie to me! Please..."

"He's going to kill me," Yulia says weakly. "Or fire me. On the spot."

"He won't! And if he tries, I swear—he'll have to deal with me! Yulia..."

I look her in the eye, and she caves.

"Okay. But get off the floor first, before someone sees you like this. I'll go grab your chart."

"Thank you."

I get to my feet, unsteady, and shuffle to the bed like my legs barely work. I fall onto the mattress, too overwhelmed to think—but my mind won't stop, wave after wave of thoughts crashing over me.

Finally, after what feels like fifteen minutes, Yulia returns. She's holding a thin blue folder.

"I don't get it," she says, sitting down beside me. "Maybe Mark locked your chart in the safe... I don't know. But this? This isn't it. There's nothing here. No labs, no conclusions, no MRI scans. I don't even know what to tell you. Honestly, we're going to have to call him."

"No, wait." I snatch the blue folder and flip through it. It really does only have the basics: name, age, marital status—listed as unmarried. It looks more like a questionnaire than a medical file. I glance at Yulia. "But it has to be somewhere. Mark must've written orders for me?"

"He did—but separately. Not in the chart. Okay, listen. I think I know what's going on. Remember, he treated you last time using his own methods... Maybe he's doing the same now. It worked before, right? But it's not legal, so he's hiding your file."

"You think so?"

"What else could it be?"

I shrug. Then whisper,

"Then there's only one thing left to do. We need to examine me again. Wait—hold on!" I raise a hand to stop her protest. "Just an MRI. Yulia, you can do that, right? Please... I need to know the truth. I have to understand what's happening to me. How bad it is."

We stare at each other for a long moment. Then Yulia sighs and nods.

"Fine. You're right—you have the right to know everything. Okay. But we'll do it after rounds, all right? I don't want anyone reporting me to Mark."

"All right," I nod. "Let's meet in an hour."

Yulia sighs and shakes her head like *you're gonna get me in so much trouble*, then walks off.

I pace the room like a wind-up toy for the next hour. Just back and forth, over and over. I have time to panic, to get scared out of my mind, and then... to calm down. I start accepting the not-yet-confirmed truth as a fact. I'm just so tired. Tired of being sick, of the treatment, of myself like this. I can't take it anymore. I don't want comforting lies. I'm ready to hear the truth, no matter what it is.

Finally, in full spy-novel style, I sneak down to the MRI room. Yulia's already there. We barely speak as we get everything ready.

Time stretches like rubber. My heartbeat ticks the seconds: thump... thump... too slow.

Everything is foggy, muted. I feel like I'm floating in a mist. In that same fog, I lie inside the scanner, still and silent for what feels like forever. In the fog, I get up and sit on the exam table, waiting for the verdict. I stare down at my own hands. I've already made peace with the worst-case scenario.

And still in that fog, I hear Yulia's confused voice.

"Lina... I don't understand... There's no tumor."

Chapter 11

We're sitting in my room in complete silence. I'm in shock. Yulia's frowning.

I was ready for anything. Absolutely anything.

Except this.

Half an hour ago, Yulia showed me the scans. I didn't understand a thing, but she insisted they were completely clear. No tumors. No metastases. No signs of Alzheimer's or any other illness that could cause memory loss.

"Yulia," I whisper, "then what is Mark treating me for?"

She drums her fingers on her knee and says slowly,

"I have no idea. And... Please don't take this the wrong way, Lina. I really respect Mark. He's a brilliant scientist and a great doctor, but... This whole situation smells off."

We fall silent again. There's one more possibility I don't even want to consider.

"What if..." I clear my throat. "What if I have schizophrenia?"

Yulia's eyes go wide.

"Oh come on! Don't be ridiculous. What symptoms do you even have, besides memory lapses?"

I shrug and cover my face with my hands. My voice comes out barely audible.

"I don't know. I don't know anything anymore, Yulia. I'm sorry... I just need to be alone for a bit. To think."

"Yeah." She stands up. "I don't know what's going on either. And I need to think about what to do next. One thing's for sure—I'm not giving you any more of Mark's serum. I won't take that responsibility."

"Wait... You seriously think Mark is trying to hurt me?" I'm horrified.

Yulia just spreads her hands in silence and walks out the door.

And I stay behind.

I press my palms to my temples, trying to piece together everything that's happened over the past couple of months. Bit by bit. Shard by shard. Coldly, without emotion.

The picture that forms is far from pretty.

Everything I thought were symptoms of illness—hallucinations, memory gaps, the constant fatigue—it all started after Mark came to Prague for me. My husband. The man I loved. The one I trusted more than anyone. I doubted myself, but never him. And yet he lied to me, knowing full well how terrified I was of a relapse. Knowing how I panicked even at the thought of the disease coming back. He lied, deliberately. But why?

There's only one answer: to keep me close. So I wouldn't think of anyone else. So I wouldn't end up kissing another man in some hotel room.

I suck in air through clenched teeth.

No-o-o. No, that's insane. Mark's never been a jealous freak. I've never seen that side of him. If anything, he'd laugh when guys stared at me. He was proud. Proud that his wife turned heads—and belonged only to him.

So this jealousy... it's aimed specifically at Sokolov?

Or...

Oh God.

Mark started talking about how I supposedly took a bunch of pills—right after I asked him about Eva. So he lied about that too. Eva really was treated in his center, and for some reason, he chose to hide it from me. At the cost of my tears and anxiety.

A wave of resentment and anger rises in my chest. How could he do this to me?! How?! And now what am I supposed to do?

There's something else I can't stop thinking about.

Did that hotel room meeting really happen?

The memories come back like a photograph developing in a darkroom—slowly, but with incredible clarity. Our conversation, and everything that happened after... The moment I think of his lips, his hands on my body, heat rushes through me again.

I get up and start pacing the room in circles. Okay. I know who can clear this up. Sokolov. After I talk to him, I'll know for sure—either I'm still sane, or I really have lost my mind.

So how do I contact him?

I hesitate for a second, then call Anna. It's late, sure, but Prague is two hours behind. She probably hasn't gone to bed yet.

"Hello? Polina? Hold on, I'm stepping outside." Her cheerful voice is muffled by loud music. Then the music fades, a door slams. "Okay, I'm out. What's up, Lina?"

"Listen, I need Sokolov's contact info. It's urgent," I say quickly. "Do you have it?"

"Uh, yeah. Of course. Why? If this is about the painting, *Soul*, then I—"

"No, no. It's something else. But I really need his number. ASAP."

"All right, hang on, I'll find it and text it to you, okay?"

"Okay." I let out a relieved breath. "Thanks, Anna."

A minute later, two numbers show up on Telegram: a mobile and a landline with a Moscow area code.

Without giving myself time to overthink what I'll even say when he answers, I dial the mobile number.

No connection.

Damn it.

Guess I'll have to try the landline.

One ring. Two. Three... Five.

Finally, there's a click on the line, and a woman's voice breaks the silence.

"Hello!"

My breath catches. I didn't even consider the possibility that it wouldn't be Sokolov answering. Though of course... come on, Polina, how stupid can you be? As if a billionaire personally picks up every call at home! It's probably the maid.

"Well? Hello? Speak!" the strange maid snaps impatiently.

"Um. I need to speak with Roman Sokolov. Please put him on the line," I say, matching her tone.

After a slight pause, she asks:

"Who's calling?"

"Polina Krause."

The silence stretches so long I think we've been disconnected. I'm about to hang up, but just in case, I say again:

"Hello?"

"Ahem. Yes. You see, I was given specific instructions regarding you, Ms... uh... Krause. The thing is, Roman is currently very busy—he's preparing for a wedding and working a lot. He waited for your call for a while, but now he says there's no longer any need to speak with you. He asked not to be connected, even if you do happen to call. Am I making myself clear?"

Each word hammers another nail into my coffin. My heart pounds like a bell in my ears. I can't breathe.

"Hello? Are you still there?"

"Yes," I croak. "Thank you. I understand."

"Goodbye!"

In the background, a dog barks, and before the call disconnects, the woman shrieks:

"Max! I told you to keep that mutt away from me! You know I'm allergic!"

And a small child's voice answers gently:

"Sorry, Mommy."

I quickly hang up. So she wasn't the maid. She was Sokolov's fiancée. Probably that Sofia. The one his son already calls "Mommy."

I curl up on the bed. Something inside me coils tight like a spring. Twists my insides, clamps them in a vise. I try to exhale, but instead of air, a moan escapes my chest. I press my fist to my mouth, but the sobs break free on their own.

I don't remember falling asleep.

I wake to a rustling sound. Someone is sitting on the bed next to me. My heart races — sensing danger. The dim yellow glow of a streetlamp barely lights the room. But it's enough to see Mark beside me. I suck in a sharp breath. Tangled in the blanket, I shrink back. Because I've never seen Mark like this before. His eyes are heavy, dark. His lips pressed into a thin line. His nostrils flare with barely contained fury. A syringe in his hand.

I gasp and raise my arm to shield myself. How did he get in here? Was it Yulia?..

"Can't leave you alone for a single day!" he hisses through gritted teeth.

Then grabs my arm and plunges the needle into my shoulder.

Chapter 12

Roman. Prague. November

The first thing I feel is happiness. Immense and cloudless—the kind I only ever felt as a child. When I still believed in miracles without a shred of doubt. In Santa Claus. In the bunny who sent me treats through my father. In fairies, from the stories my grandmother read.

It was that very feeling. It surged over me, engulfed me. Drenched me like a tidal wave. A tidal wave of boundless joy.

There she is, standing by the curb. Shifting from foot to foot. Holding a paper coffee cup in her hand. Looking me straight in the eye. I can't see from here, but I know—they're blue, like a spring sky. Those eyes I will never forget. And never confuse with anyone else's.

The second feeling is confusion. Why did she call herself by someone else's name? Why does she say she doesn't know me? Did she really not recognize me, or is she hiding something?

There's no doubt in my mind that this girl is my wife. So what if she's a redhead now, a little thinner? So what if her gaze is wary and unsure? She froze in my arms, her heart pounding like a frightened rabbit's. And in her eyes—blue like a spring sky—there's so much emotion it's practically spilling out, threatening to flood all of Prague. It's strange that no one else seems to see it. Not Kamil, not the girl with Eva, not the crowd thickening around us. All they see is a madman refusing to accept the obvious—that his wife has been dead for five years.

Then, like a crashing storm, came the rage. She left again?! Made a fool of me—*again*?! To hell with the onlookers, with the photos that'll be everywhere by tomorrow! To hell with Kamil not believing me! But what the hell is wrong with you?! Why do you keep doing this to me?! What am I to you—a toy? But this time, you're not getting away without an explanation! I'll drag the truth out, no matter how deep it's buried.

Later, in the car, the pain hit. Well, that part's familiar. I'm used to it.

Because after happiness, pain always comes. Eventually.

"She said, 'I'll try to find something out,' back at the hotel."

Just thinking about that hotel room makes my heart race again, and I feel like a complete fool. I went there with firm resolve—to put an end to it, to look her in the eye and listen to whatever pathetic excuse she'd come up with. The truth, or whatever she'd managed to invent over those few days.

And I folded within the first few minutes. The moment I saw her. That look of pity in her eyes. The sincerity with which she was spouting nonsense about being Polina. As if she truly believed it. And I fell for it. Again. Some kind of damn magic. Once more, I felt that pull—like a magnet, like an invisible thread you can't break. It stretches, twists, tangles with other threads, but never snaps. That's why she still breaks me. Still twists me up inside when I'm alone. Even after five years, she still makes me lose my mind. I lost myself so completely I was ready to screw her right then and there. And what's crazy—she would've let me. I saw it in her eyes, in how she responded. She was feeding me that crap with a straight face, but the moment I pulled her closer—she went silent. And even if she really forgot me... her body remembered.

Thank God Max called in time. Pulled me out of that whirlpool.

For two days after that conversation in the hotel room, I waited—almost calmly. Well, sort of. I went to meetings, signed papers, negotiated deals. But it was all on autopilot. Going through the motions. Inside, I was being torn apart by the urge to drop everything, rush to that miserable hotel, and drag her home by force. Or at least stay there with her for a couple of days. Let the storm that had been raging in me for the past four days finally break free. I hadn't felt such an emotional explosion in years. So I kept it together. Just barely. Why did I even try so hard? Maybe it would've been easier if I hadn't.

To hell with it. I was just so happy to see her alive that even if it turned out she ran off with another man—I would've forgiven her. That weight I'd carried for years—it was crushing. Every day felt like pushing a boulder uphill, only to watch it roll right back down. Kept thinking, once I learn the truth, I'll finally be free of it. I'll live in peace. And here I am again. Running like a boy after his white rabbit.

Well—no... Not white anymore. Now she's red.

The only real miracles are left in childhood. And once you grow up—you have to fight for them. Rip them out of life with blood and fury. There's no other way.

So now, as I look into the concierge's frightened eyes, I'm not even angry.

"Could you repeat that, please? I didn't quite catch it," I say politely.

He hesitates, but answers:

"Mrs. Krause left yesterday morning."

I nod, forcing myself not to grind my teeth.

"And do you happen to know where she went?"

"Our driver took her and her husband to the airport."

So. *Her husband*, huh.

A long-forgotten feeling coils in my gut. Jealousy.

"Did she leave anything for me?" I ask, tapping the folded bill against the counter.

"Uhhh... no, sorry," the concierge mutters, eyes fixed on my hand.

The stone on my chest grows heavier. Should I chase her again? Track her down? Or just let her go? How much longer am I supposed to play Sisyphus doing his damn job?..

The concierge hesitates, then says,

"But you know..."

Ah, you bastard.

Once again, I slam my metaphorical shoulder into that damn boulder.

And start pushing it uphill.

The concierge leans in and whispers:

"She seemed... I don't know, off. Like she was out of it. Didn't say a word, didn't even say goodbye. And before that, she'd been really sweet. Always left a tip." His eyes flick to the bill.

"Out of it," huh.

So that's how it is.

I toss the money onto the counter, thank him, and leave.

After a moment's thought, I head to the gallery. I need to get Eva's friend's phone number. An address. Anything. For the first time, it occurs to me—maybe she's not acting on her own. Maybe someone has something on her. Maybe she's being blackmailed. Forced into something illegal. Dirty. Maybe that's why she left.

Blood starts to boil. My fists itch. Right now, I want to find Eva's fake husband just as badly as I want to find her.

Still wrapped up in the thought of smashing that bastard's nose in, I stop in front of the gallery. Last time I was here, I didn't even look at the paintings. Adrenaline was rushing through my veins—I only had one need—to see my wife again. Everything else was a blur.

I walk slowly now, down the aisle between the hanging paintings. There are still plenty of people, but not as many as last time. So no one's getting in my way. And to my untrained eye, the paintings are stunning. Could Eva really have painted all of them? I had no idea she possessed such immense talent. She worked at my company for years as an architect—a valuable employee. A true professional. She created brilliant blueprints. But I never once saw her paint.

I turn into another corridor, walk to the end—and stop in front of a large painting, at least a meter and a half across. An incredibly beautiful woman stands against the backdrop of a sunset. Her face is soft, joyful. Arms outstretched, as if she wants to embrace the whole world. It's mesmerizing. I tilt my head and take a step closer to get a better look. And freeze. The woman begins to change. Subtly, but unmistakably. Her face is now twisted in pain. Her arms raised in agony. Black blood runs down her palms. She's no longer embracing the world—the world has crucified her.

My throat goes dry. I stand like a statue, unable to move. It feels like my feet are glued to the floor. Like I'll be stuck here forever, bearing witness to this unspeakable sorrow. I've never considered myself a sensitive admirer of art—but this...

How could anyone paint something like this? I can't even find the right word. Horror? Masterpiece?

Someone touches my shoulder. I turn. It's that girl—Eva's friend. Anna, I think. I must look pretty shaken, because she studies me for a moment, then says:

"Don't worry. *Soul* doesn't leave anyone indifferent."

For a second, I'm confused—what is she talking about? Anna points to the small plaque beside the painting.

And right then, I understand: That stone I've been dragging—it's not going to crumble. It's not going anywhere. Because Eva isn't lying. Maybe she's not telling the whole truth—but only because she can't. Something really happened to her. Something serious. Something terrifying. And she desperately needs my help.

Her *Soul* is crying out for it.

Chapter 13

My head feels heavy, my eyes as if filled with hot sand. I'm lying on something hard. It feels like I'm on a ship—everything's rocking, and I feel a bit sick. I'm so thirsty. I can't hold back a groan and open my eyes. No, not on a ship. I'm in the back seat of a car. Mark is driving. Where are we going?

"Awake?" He glances back at me, squinting, assessing. Then, seemingly satisfied, he nods to himself and pulls over. "Bit early, baby. We're not there yet."

"Where are we?" I can only whisper. I feel wrung out like an old rag. My arms and legs are numb—fallen asleep from the awkward position. I can't remember where Mark and I are going. Maybe I'm still not fully awake.

"Give me some water, please."

He gets out of the car. Opens the door. Holds my head and helps me drink from a bottle. I feel a bit better.

"Thanks." I try to sit up, but Mark holds me down. Shakes his head. "What is it?"

He pulls a syringe from his pocket, and in that instant, everything comes flooding back.

The second time I wake up, it's a little easier. Mark must've gone lighter on the sedative this time. My head's still foggy, but I remember everything. And I don't make the same mistake. I lie still, breathe evenly. Try to discreetly stretch my numb legs. Try to figure out where we are.

It's bright outside. He wouldn't keep me sedated for more than a day, would he? So we must've left just a few hours ago. I turn my head carefully, but I can't make out the road. Better not to risk it. Don't draw attention to myself. Not until he decides to bless me with another dose. So I look out the passenger-side window. Mountains. The peaks are out of view, and the base is covered with metal mesh. I vaguely recall—that's how they protect roads from landslides.

We keep driving, no stops. I feel carsick, and I'm hungry. No matter—I'll deal with it.

To distract myself, I start methodically recalling everything that connects me to Mark. How we met, when our relationship started. When we got married. I realize—there was absolutely nothing, no sign at all, that he was capable of doing something like this to me. But the facts speak for themselves: he has some kind of agenda I don't understand.

I force myself to remember everything that happened a month ago. The memories return slowly, reluctantly, but I keep going over the events in my mind until the details come into focus. So, Mark flew out to me as soon as he heard about Sokolov. He didn't accuse me of anything, didn't show any jealousy—only concern. Under the guise of that concern, he dropped everything: his center, his patients, his conference prep. Rushed in like a devoted husband to save his damsel in distress. Only, there was no distress. Nothing had happened to me at all.

Now that I've pieced it all together, it's easy to see what happened next. Mark is incredibly charming—getting into my room must've been no trouble at all. He probably injected me with something while I was asleep, which would explain why I felt so awful when I woke up. He knew I trusted him completely, so it was child's play to convince me that I'd taken the whole bottle of pills over the course of a few days. That everything that had happened was nothing more than a product of my sick imagination. And to seal the deal—he knows how terrified I am of a relapse—he hit me with the idea that all of this was just a sign the illness was coming back.

So that I wouldn't think about anything else. So I'd forget the man who held me on the side of the road.

A new thought hits me—and it chills me to the bone.

What if this isn't about the man at all?

What if the whole thing was meant to stop me from asking too many questions?

About Eva. About my past. About why I don't remember her, even though we were in treatment at the same time. I should remember her—especially if we look so much alike.

And then, inevitably, another thought creeps in.

What if Sokolov was right?

What if I really *am* Eva?

But how could that be possible? I don't just fail to remember being Eva—no. I remember my entire life. My childhood, my teenage years, my university days in Prague. My dog, my school, my job. The onset of the illness, the exhaustion, the panic. The hope I felt when I found out about Mark's clinic. I remember it all clearly. There's no way I could be Eva Sokolova, the wife of some construction tycoon. The woman who gave him a child—who now calls another woman "Mommy."

Tears sting my eyes again.

I sniffle, but thankfully the music is playing in the car, and Mark doesn't hear me. After a while, he pulls off to the side of the road and gets out. I sit up a bit and peer through the window. A two-lane road. Mountains on one side, dense trees on the other.

Mark drags aside a huge branch, revealing a hidden path.

Where the hell has he brought me?!

I look around quickly, desperately searching for some clue—any detail at all. And then I see it. About twenty meters away: a small sign. White numbers on a blue background: "42."

My heart pounds like mad. I'm genuinely scared now. If someone had told me just a week ago that Mark—sweet Mark, the one I loved curling up with, the one who told endless stories about our shared past—would turn into a deranged maniac and drag me off to some secret hideout by force... I never would've believed it.

God, what is he planning to do to me there?

Mark gets back in the car, and I collapse onto the seat. When he turns to look at me, watching closely, I'm "fast asleep."

Apparently, I'm doing a convincing job, because he starts the engine and drives forward. A plan forms in my mind at lightning speed. He needs to hide his hideout from prying eyes. Move the branch back into place. That means he's going to stop again.

And he does. He brakes—but this time doesn't turn the engine off. Leaves the door open and walks back toward the road.

This is my chance.

I open the door. Carefully slide out. The cold air hits me. I'm shivering. Doubts rush in—maybe this plan is insane. It's not as cold here as it would be in Krasnodar, but I'm in a thin hospital pajama set and barefoot. How far can I really run like this, in December?

No time to think. Every second counts.

There *have* to be people nearby. I'll find them. And even if not—I'd rather freeze to death in the woods than keep living as my husband's powerless puppet.

I carefully circle around the car and bolt into the forest. I run so fast I don't feel the cold, don't notice the ice cutting into the soles of my feet.

One thing I know—As long as there's even a shred of strength left in me, I have to keep running.

Chapter 14

Roman. Prague. November

Kamil knocks on the door just as everything is packed and the suitcase is waiting by the door.

He walks into the room and drops into an armchair without any ceremony.

"You have any idea what it cost me to cover for you on the forum all these days?" he says, pinning me with a look. "They all wanted Roman Sokolov, not Kamil Rzaev! I was in the hot seat, and I didn't like it!"

"Well, what can I say, buddy," I mutter, pulling on my jacket. "I can't be the only one grilling in that seat forever. That's what a deputy is for."

"Yeah, right," Kamil grumbles. "Deputy, bodyguard, errand boy, and circus clown. Honestly, Roman, I was better off back at the Bureau. I'm seriously thinking of going back — they're probably tired of begging me by now."

"Deal!" I agree peaceably. "I'll come with you!"

He snorts.

"Yeah, right."

"Oh come on!" I sit down across from him. "You know I can only trust you. I'd be lost without you."

"You *would* be lost," Kamil agrees without missing a beat. "So get moving. The conference closes today. You *have* to be there. I promised everyone."

"I *am* moving," I nod. "Just not to the conference."

He seems to notice the suitcase by the door for the first time. His brow furrows.

"Where to?"

"Krasnodar."

"What?!"

He leaps to his feet and towers over me like a mountain. Kamil is a big guy, and he looks seriously intimidating. If I didn't know him so well, I might think he was about to come at me. And honestly, he might. After twenty years of friendship, I suppose he's earned that right. I sit calmly, watching his angry face. I know him—he'll cool off. He's like a match: quick to ignite, just as quick to burn out and return to his usual composed state.

Sure enough, he snorts and sits back down.

"All right," he says. "Krasnodar it is. But I'm coming too. I'm done covering your ass. Just tell me what exactly we're doing there."

"Looking for Eva," I say quietly, bracing for another explosion.

But Kamil just smirks and nods.

"Figured as much."

"What, you're not even going to try to talk me out of it?"

"What's the point?" he grins. "It's not like I just met you yesterday. You're stubborn as a mule. If you've decided your wife came back from the dead, then it's probably best for *her* if she *did*. Otherwise, you'll drag her back from the afterlife yourself."

"Look," I say, completely serious. "You saw her just as clearly as I did."

"I don't know who I saw," Kamil shoots back. "Sure, there was a girl who looked like Eva. But I only saw Eva a few times. And more importantly—the girl herself says she's *not* your wife."

"There's something shady going on," I admit, and tell Kamil everything I've learned over the past few days. From Eva—Polina—herself, from her friend, and from the concierge.

Kamil and I have been friends since school, but he's only been working for me for the past couple of years. Ever since he finally gave in to my nagging and quit the Bureau he'd dedicated his whole life to. Before that, he was always busy—working around the clock. We'd see each other maybe twice a year, on special occasions. So yeah, he didn't really get a chance to know my wife.

"I need your help, Kamil," I finish. "As a friend—and as a cop."

He drums his fingers on the armrest, deep in thought, and says nothing.

"Alright," I say. "You think about it—I need to call my son."

Max and I have a long-standing rule: whenever I go somewhere without him, we always video call in the morning and evening. No matter what. No matter how busy I am. Even if I have important meetings. Because no meeting is more important than my son.

"Hi, Dad!" Max beams from the screen. His eyes are bright, his blond hair a mess. There's something black on his cheek.

"Hey, kiddo! What are you up to?"

"Nick and I are doing an experiment!" he blurts, so excited he's tripping over his words.

"An experiment, huh? What kind?"

"We lit some magic powder—and it turned into a real snake!"

"Wow!" I say, trying to peek behind him for signs of destruction. "Didn't we agree you wouldn't set anything on fire?"

"It wasn't me!" Max proudly shows his clean hands. "It was Nick!"

"Alright, let me talk to Nick, please."

"Daaaad!"

"Come on. Call him."

"Fiiine... just a second."

About six months ago, Max announced that when he grows up, he's going to be a scientist. A geneticist. So he can clone his mom... How he even learned about cloning at five years old is beyond me. But after a few of his "experiments," our nanny handed in her resignation. Said she'd still be happy to feed him and put him to bed, but everything else? Nope. So I hired Nick—the son of one of my employees. He'd just graduated from a teacher's college with a degree in chemistry. There was only one rule: from now on, Max would only do experiments under Nick's supervision.

"Hello, Mr. Roman!" Nick's face pops onto the screen. He's got the exact same black streak on his cheek as Max. Sometimes I honestly can't tell which one of them is the grown-up.

"What kind of snake, Nick?"

"Ash snake! But don't worry, everything's fine! It's just a toy—I bought it in a store."

"I'll show you right now!" Max disappears, then comes back with a metal tray holding some kind of black-and-gray ruins.

"Is that a snake?" I ask.

"Uh-huh!" Max confirms with excitement.

"Amazing!"

"All right, Dad, we're off! We've got two more experiments to do!"

"Son, don't burn the house down, or Grandma will kill us!"

"She won't!" Max laughs, then immediately tattles, "She went to the theater anyway!"

"Really? With whom?"

"With Sofia." He suddenly grows quiet and asks, a little sadly, "Daddy, when are you coming home?"

"Soon, buddy. I'll bring you a surprise, okay?"

"Okay..." He looks glum at the mention of Sofia. "But it'd be better if *you* just came."

"I will! I'll be like Flash!"

I know how to cheer him up. Flash is Max's favorite superhero, and sure enough, a smile spreads across his face.

"Do you have a red suit?"

"Of course! Gotta go now. I miss you!"

"I miss you too, Daddy!" His messy head gets closer to the phone and he kisses the camera. I smile. That little devil's got me wrapped around his finger.

"Bye!"

I hang up and stand there for a moment, grinning from ear to ear.

When I come back, Kamil is focused on his phone, typing something. As soon as he sees me, he stands up.

"Found out about your Krause guy," he says businesslike. "Big-name doctor in his field. Runs a private oncology center in Krasnodar. People come from all over the country. Let's go talk to him. About his wife."

Chapter 15

Once again, I come to in a dim, closed-off room. I'm lying on a bed, and there's a TV mounted on the wall opposite me. The curtains are drawn tight, so I can't tell whether it's day or night. My head feels hollow and ringing, my body weak. I remember how quickly Mark caught up to me in that forest. After that—nothing. Must've injected me with something again.

I have no strength left. I'm so tired. And I don't know what to do anymore.

Mark—the only person I ever truly trusted—turned out to be a goddamn monster. Yulia betrayed me. Sokolov is getting married. I have no one left. So what am I even fighting for?

I want to cry, but even my tears have abandoned me. So I just lie there, eyes open, staring at the wall.

I don't know how long I stay like that. But eventually, the door lock clicks, and Mark walks in. We make eye contact. He's squinting at me, hands in his pockets. Probably holding another syringe, just in case.

"Can we talk?" he asks.

"Can we..." I whisper, "half-fainting," "skip the injections? I can't take them anymore."

"Of course, sweetheart," he replies with a smug smile, confident he's won. "No more injections. You'll be taking pills instead. But first, you need to eat."

He nods and sits on the edge of the bed.

"It was Yulia who called you, wasn't it?" I ask, just to say something. Of course it was Yulia—who else?

After a pause, he nods.

"What did she say?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It *does* matter!" I snap, pushing myself up against the pillows. "Mark, I know I don't have cancer."

"No," he agrees.

"Then why did you lie? You knew how terrified I was... terrified of the illness coming back!"

"Because you *are* sick, Polina." He looks at me darkly. "Mentally ill."

"You're saying I'm schizophrenic?"

"I am."

I let out a bitter laugh and nod.

"And why should I believe you? You lied to me not that long ago."

"Because I hadn't lied to you before, Polina. This was the first time. I panicked. I didn't know what to do. I just knew I didn't want them locking you up in a psych ward. You understand?"

"So instead you locked me in your clinic."

"Yes. Maybe it was the wrong call—I don't know. But I truly believed that if you were with me, in a familiar environment, you'd get better faster."

Lies. More lies. I don't believe a single word.

But he doesn't need to know that.

I cover my face with my hands and let out a sob.

That's all right, sweetheart. We'll see who wins in the end.

He moves closer and wraps his arms around me. I push past the wave of revulsion and bury my nose in his shoulder.

"And now are you finally going to take me to the psych ward?" I whimper, my whole body shaking. Knowing full well he already brought me exactly where he intended to.

"No, sweetheart," he says, stroking my hair. "I could never do that to you."

"Then where are we?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"This is my old house," Mark replies evasively. "You're safe here. We'll stay a couple of months, let you rest, breathe in the fresh air. Then we'll go back."

Yeah, right. You'll drug me into oblivion, and I'll forget everything again. We've been down this road.

I nod obediently. Whisper,

"Thank you..."

What I really want is to shove him away, run out of the room, lock the door behind me. Call the police. Tell them everything. But what exactly *would* I tell them? That my husband has been drugging me for years? Who's going to believe me? Mark's a respected doctor, with a ton of connections. He'll say I'm schizophrenic—and they'll believe *him*. Not me.

So first, I need proof.

I snuggle closer to him, and I can feel him relax. He probably didn't expect me to give in this easily.

"Can we..." I murmur in a dazed voice, "do without the shots? I can't take them anymore."

"Of course, my love," he says with a smug smile, convinced he's won. "No more injections. You'll take pills instead. But first, you need to eat."

I nod meekly, and he leaves the room.

I stay behind, mind racing with plans. Maybe later I'll be able to lull him into letting his guard down. Trick him, stop taking the pills. But at first—I know—he'll be watching me like a hawk. So I'll have to take them. But what if my memory starts slipping again? How fast will it happen? How fast did I forget meeting Sokolov? A day? A week? When?

Hard to say. It happens so smoothly. So naturally. Like it's not even happening.

What do I do now?

I get up and start pacing the room, checking every corner. My phone's gone. It's gray outside. And getting darker. So more likely sunset than sunrise. There are bars on the windows. Like a real psych ward. You really thought this through, didn't you, darling? So you always had a backup plan—for keeping your little bird locked in her cage.

I can feel my anger giving me strength. Fine. Let's see who wins this round.

By the time Mark comes back with a tray full of plates, I already have a plan of my own.

I'm lying in bed, looking pitiful, while inside me a fire is raging. Mark turns on the TV, casually mentioning there's no network here. No cell service, no satellite. I nod dutifully, making another mental note.

We watch a movie from a flash drive. A romantic comedy. I smile at Mark as I eat. I smile as I swallow the capsule he gives me. I smile as I listen to yet another tale about our happy life. I smile even as I fall asleep, my head resting on his shoulder.

The next morning, I wake up smiling at the new day. At the sun peeking through the bars of my new cage. The bars don't bother me. Neither does the unfamiliar setting. I feel blissfully relaxed.

I feel good.

Until I find a note in the pocket of my robe—written in my own handwriting.

And just like that, I snap back to reality.

"Don't trust Mark! Do whatever it takes not to take the pills!"

Chapter 16

Roman. Krasnodar. November

While we were flying, I told Kamil everything I knew about Mark Krause. How I went to see him in Novosibirsk when I was looking for Eva. How his colleagues spoke of him—with reverence and awe. A brilliant mind, a young genius. Although when I met him, he wasn't all that young—maybe thirty-five. Which would make him around forty now. He left a strange impression on me. Blond, lean, with sharp eyes behind trendy black-rimmed glasses. He stared at me without blinking, like he was looking straight into my soul.

The kind of man women fall for. But I'm not a woman. And the good doctor filled me with a kind of revulsion. Like a snake stuffed into human skin. After talking to him, I felt like I needed to wash my hands. At the time, I told myself it was because of the news he gave me—in that cold, even tone of his. Though he didn't stay that calm for long. It's hard to stay composed when you're pinned against your own glass office wall, bleeding from the nose and sobbing like a kid.

To this day, I'm ashamed of how I lost it back then. I screamed like a madman. Threatened him with lawsuits, lawyers, swore I'd strangle him with my own hands. That was the moment I truly realized I was alone. Completely alone. Without Eva, my world had become utterly empty. And for that, I hated everything—hated the world, hated the doctor who gave me the news, and hated Eva for leaving me. How could she?! How *dare* she leave me?! Just die, vanish, without even leaving a handful of ashes behind?

That was probably the first—and only—time I had something like a panic attack. I lunged at everyone who tried to enter the office. And then suddenly I couldn't breathe. It felt like my heart was going to stop, and that snapped me out of it. I thought of Max. Understood that I didn't have the right to leave my son alone in this cruel world. No matter how much it hurt—because of him, I had to keep living.

I walked out. Later I hired lawyers to investigate Krause and his shady operation. But it turned out he was clean. Every contract signed, every deal and procedure fully legal. I had to accept it: Eva came to that clinic of her own free will. She chose to die alone. She'd told them she had no family—Krause didn't want to deal with grieving relatives. People like me. After that, I left him alone. I didn't think about him again—until now. All I thought about was Eva. Alive. Smiling. And over time, I came to understand

why she did what she did. I couldn't forgive her—but I *did* understand. She knew she was terminal. And she didn't want me to see her dying. Who knows what I'd have done, if I'd been in her place?

I see her again. That image always comes back. Long blond hair. Sad eyes. She leans in and kisses me goodbye. I want to hold on to her, grab her hand. I want to scream, but I can't even whisper. The scream tears me up inside.

Eva. Eva!

I jolt awake.

The plane is descending.

"Mr. Sokolov, please fasten your seatbelt," the flight attendant says politely. Pretty girl. Young. She keeps sneaking glances at Kamil.

Krasnodar greets us with rain. Gray drizzle wraps around us from all sides. We get into a cab and head toward the medical center. I can already feel the inner fight coming. A hard round against myself. My fists are itching in advance. I usually keep myself under control. It's easy for me. At the office, people still call me Winter Soldier behind my back—Eva came up with that. I always pretended I didn't know. That was ages ago, long before we got married. I'd give anything to go back to that time.

The medical center looks impressive. A new three-story building surrounded by a park, with walking paths and benches. Everything designed for patient comfort—elevators, ramps. After Eva's death, I started a foundation—poured quite a bit of money into cancer treatment. I had to tour a lot of hospitals. I saw more than enough. So the first thing I notice here is the calm, almost homelike atmosphere.

Krause meets us in his office. He hasn't changed a bit—maybe just deeper lines around his mouth, making him look even more reptilian.

"Of course I remember you, Roman," he says after the formal greeting. "You were, after all, the only... ahem... grieving relative I had. That program was strictly for patients without families."

"Yeah, I know," I cut him off impatiently and sit down across from his desk. Kamil takes a chair by the door—watching the whole room. "But that's not why I'm here. I didn't come to talk about my wife."

"Oh?" Krause raises an eyebrow.

"I came to talk about yours."

Now *that's* the real Winter Soldier—zero emotion. He just lifts an eyebrow a little higher.

That old familiar revulsion crawls up my arms, down my fingers like static. I feel the irritation growing. To keep my hands busy, I pick up a pen from his desk and start spinning it between my fingers.

I say,

"You must know we met her in Prague, right? Come on, don't pretend you don't. It was in every tabloid that still has a pulse."

Krause nods cautiously. I go on:

"And I couldn't help but notice something striking." I narrow my eyes. "Your wife bears an uncanny—no, an unbelievable—resemblance to my Eva."

"And what exactly are you implying?" Krause says coolly.

"Nothing yet. *Yet*. But I'd like to speak with her."

"For what purpose?"

"To clarify a few things. You must admit, the situation looks strange. I hope you're not going to stand in the way of that conversation?"

He shrugs.

"Why should I? Polina's a grown woman—she can decide for herself who she wants to be with. Though I think she already has, hasn't she? You were after her attention back in Prague, weren't you? That's why she left in such a hurry—you were just a little too persistent. No, of course, I get it," he adds with a sarcastic shrug. "When billionaire Roman Sokolov takes a liking to another man's wife, she's supposed to drop everything and spread her legs, right? Well, guess what—doesn't always work that way."

The pen snaps in my hand. I stare down at my white-knuckled fingers. I'd love to wipe that smug look off his arrogant face.

Not yet.

I unclench my fist and place the broken pen on the edge of his desk.

"We'll discuss her sudden departure too," I say in an even voice. "So how can we reach her?"

"I was just getting to that," he replies, and I swear I catch a glint of triumph behind those cold blue eyes behind his glasses. "Polina isn't here. Not just here in Krasnodar—I mean she's no longer in Russia at all. She left to study drawing at the New York Academy of Art. She'd been wanting to go for a long time, and after that successful exhibition—finally, she went. You know, in a way, you might have helped make that happen!"

He tilts his head and gives a slow, theatrical clap.

I feel my face go stone cold. I draw a breath through clenched teeth. One more word—just one—and this smug blond bastard is going to wish he'd never been born.

Kamil sees it instantly. He stands and, with a curt "Good day," practically drags me out of the office—and then straight out the front doors.

The cold air sobers me. I lift my face to the rain and freeze, letting the blind rage settle. Realizing Krause was clearly baiting me. And if it hadn't been for Kamil, I'd have taken the bait.

I don't know what game this snake is playing—but I don't believe a single word that came out of his mouth.

Chapter 17

Polina

With each passing day, it gets harder to concentrate on what matters. I wake up and lie still for a while, staring at the pale pink ceiling. A thought scratches at the edge of my mind: I need to check under the mattress.

I need to.

I don't know why—but I get up and check. The note is still there. The same one. The one that brings my memory back.

"Don't trust Mark! Do whatever it takes not to take the pills!"

That last part is getting more and more relevant with every day. If I don't come up with something soon, it won't matter anymore. I'll turn back into the perfect puppet. Soft. Wax-like. Molded into whatever shape Mark wants.

The capsules are bright red. I smile and tell Mark I feel like Neo, taking the red pill every day.

Except I never had a choice.

What do I do?

What do I do?

Every day, I sit on the couch in the living room and pretend to read. Meanwhile, I go over the last two months in my head. Over and over.

Telling myself: I must not forget. Not *one* thing.

Eventually, the memories feel more like a memorized lesson. I remember them like they happened to someone else. A character in a novel. A romance, maybe—but a totally messed-up one. I mean, really. Try pitching this: a billionaire comes to a conference and sees a random woman on the street—then recognizes her as his dead wife! Her husband's been drugging her, wiping her memory! It's absurd. Ridiculous. Like something out of a bad thriller.

But somehow, those thoughts still bring tears to my eyes. And it's not from laughter. I can feel it—this emptiness growing inside me. Huge, dark, all-consuming. I'm terrified that one day it'll grow so big, there'll be nothing left of me at all. That the emptiness will take my place. It'll live with Mark. Smile at him. Sleep with him. Think it's his wife. Without remembering—without even *knowing*—that just a week ago, it was me.

At night, I still dream about Sokolov. He finds me somehow. Breaks into the house. Beats the hell out of Mark and takes me away.

Those dreams give me hope. Not for rescue—no. Sokolov has probably already forgotten all about that strange meeting. Or worse, he resents me for it. He's getting married, after all, and I doubt his fiancée would be thrilled about him chasing after some woman—no matter how much she looks like his dead wife. No. Sokolov's not coming. I shouldn't even think about it.

But the fact that he shows up in my dreams... that means not all is lost. My memory is still fighting. Rebuilding itself in sleep. Feeding me memories Mark doesn't want me to have. That's good. That's amazing. And if I wake up crying after every one of those dreams—Well. That's just a side effect.

Thank God Mark and I sleep in separate rooms, and he doesn't see me cry. I told him I needed time to recover, and he agreed. Good call. Every time I even think about that traitor, I flinch with disgust. If he ever tried to kiss me—I'd scream.

He has some kind of secret lab in the basement. I'm not allowed down there. I tried once, but the door was locked from the inside. He's down there every day, from morning until around three. While he's gone, I cook, read, or listen to music. Then he comes up, and we have lunch together. Afterward, he gives me a pill, always making sure I actually swallow it. In the evening, we watch a movie or play board games. And we talk. Or rather, *he* talks. I listen. Feeling the poison of his words eating away at my mind.

And every day, it gets harder to hate him.

The pills mess with my sense of time. One night (how long ago? Two days? Two months?) I go downstairs to get a glass of water and hear him talking on the phone. I freeze. There's a signal here?! I peek around the corner. Try to catch fragments of his conversation.

He's standing by the window, staring into the dark. His voice sounds tired. Irritated.

"...not your concern," he snaps. "I'll deal with my wife myself. You had one simple job: keep track of Sokolov and keep me posted. And you couldn't even manage that! A ridiculous coincidence—how could you possibly miss it? Fine. What's he doing now? Okay. No, don't worry about Polina. She's not a problem. Talk later."

I stumble back, my legs suddenly numb. Who was he talking to? Who was supposed to be watching Sokolov? And why the hell would anyone need to watch him?

The plot of this imaginary romance novel just added another chapter—one I'll have to study carefully. And think through. Very carefully.

"Sweetheart, we need to go to the store," I say the next morning, flashing Mark an innocent smile. "We're running out of food."

I can see the internal struggle all over his face—he doesn't want to take me with him, still afraid I might run. But he doesn't want to leave me here alone either.

I let out a loud yawn.

"Or maybe not today," I say, rubbing my eyes theatrically. "Didn't sleep well. I think I'll go lie down."

"Sure, baby," Mark says, visibly relieved. "Don't worry, I'll go on my own."

"Okay then. I'll make a list."

An hour later, lying in bed, I hear the crunch of gravel under the Rover's tires. Without wasting a second, I jump up and head downstairs.

First thing—I check the door. Locked. I peek out the window: the car is gone.

Time to move.

By now, Mark's relaxed again. He's started to trust me. Which means he doesn't bother hiding the capsules anymore—they're on the top shelf in the kitchen. We've probably been living here for about a week, and by his calculation, I should be fully compliant by now.

Perfect. Works in my favor.

I grab a few bottles and dump the capsules onto the table. I open one: fine, white powder. Carefully—one by one—I empty the capsules into the sink. Instead of the powder, I refill them with powdered sugar.

Sure, I could've left them empty, but better not risk it. What if he notices they're too light? There are a lot of them, but I won't miss a single one. This is step one in my quiet little war.

By the time I hear the hum of the car pulling back into the driveway, I'm already in bed again, tucked under the covers. A grin stretches across my face, sharp and silent.

Get ready, darling. I'm done playing nice.

Chapter 18

Roman. Late November

"Daddy, when are you coming back already?" Max whines from the screen. His little face looks so sad, eyes all teary.

"Very soon, kiddo! You'll wake up—and I'll already be home!"

"Really really?!" he squeals and starts hopping in excitement. Tears gone in a flash.

"Daddy's word!"

"Yaaaay!" He lights up like a Christmas tree. "But you *have* to wake me up, okay? Promise??"

"Okay, okay!" I laugh. "Alright, I have to go now or I'll miss my plane!"

"Don't you lie to me!" he says, sticking out his tongue like a little rascal. "It's *your* plane! You fly when you *want* to!"

"Smart little guy, aren't you?" I squint and shake my head. "Kiss you, kiddo! See you in the morning!"

Max's nose fills the screen. A loud smooch follows, and the screen goes black.

We're heading back to the airport. Kamil, sitting in the seat next to me, shakes his head with mock disapproval.

"You've totally spoiled that kid, man."

"Look who's talking," I snort. Max is Kamil's godson, and he adores him like his own.

"I *am* talking," my friend replies coolly. "I'm his weekend dad—I *have* to spoil him. But *you* should try being a little stricter once in a while."

"Why would I?" I ask, genuinely surprised.

"Well, you know..." Kamil hesitates. "Fathers are supposed to be like... you know..." He makes a scary face and growls in a deep voice: "*Bring me your report card, son!* 'Be a man!' And what else... Oh! 'Put your damn hat on or you'll freeze your ears off!'"

We burst out laughing like a pair of dumb high schoolers.

I shake my head.

"No, Kamil. I've heard 'Be a man' way too many times growing up," I say, drawing a finger across my throat. "And not from my father, either. From my mother. Enough for ten men. You know that. She drilled me like I was in the army. My son's never going to hear that from me. I'm sure I can raise a decent human being without all that drilling. Let him have a happy childhood. Especially..."

I turn to the window, my mood darkening. The conversation ends, but we both know what I meant to say.

"Especially since he's growing up without a mother."

I watch the trees rush past outside the window, going over the plan in my head.

While we were waiting for a taxi outside the clinic, Kamil made a few calls. The information checked out—Polina Krause really did fly to New York yesterday. Slipped away again, like smoke through my fingers. What kind of woman *is* she, damn it? If I'd known back in Prague, I never would've let her go. Would've stuffed her onto a plane by force and taken her back to Moscow.

I lean my forehead against the cold glass.

But then what? I'm not going to keep her locked up. Still... why did she leave so suddenly? Could it really be... because of that kiss? Or was she forced to?

I close my eyes and recall the softness of her lips, the chill of her fingers under my shirt, the goosebumps left in their wake. My pants tighten instantly. I shift in my seat, pulling my coat over my lap.

"Here's what we'll do," Kamil says matter-of-factly, oblivious to my discomfort. "In Moscow, I'll try to check the airport security footage. If that doesn't work, I'll fly to New York. Look for her there. Once I find her, I'll let you know. Then you can decide what to do."

I know what Kamil's thinking—that I'm chasing a ghost. He doesn't believe this girl is really Eva. But he's playing along, so I can see for myself. That's fine by me.

"All right," I say. "Find her. If you do—I'll fly out immediately."

"You'd better focus on the project," Kamil says, giving me a sidelong glance. "The clients are losing patience. And it'll help take your mind off things."

I close my eyes and let myself sink into the seat.

"Yeah," I say. "You're right."

Moscow, unlike Krasnodar, already feels like the holidays. Dressed up. Glittering. Like a girl flaunting her jewelry. Snow lands on my shoulders and head, melting into droplets as I step inside the house. Kamil stayed behind at the airport to check the surveillance, and I went straight home. I promised Max I'd wake him up at sunrise.

I head upstairs in the dark.

I know this house like the back of my hand. It's not very big—two floors and five rooms. My mother and Sofia keep insisting, in perfect unison, that it's beneath my status. That it's long past time to move into something more fitting. And I did build that something—huge, high-tech, in a luxury gated community, with all the attributes a successful man is supposed to have. But every time I walk into that place, a wave of emptiness hits me. It feels lifeless. I promised Sofia we'd move in after the wedding. But deep down, I can't imagine leaving this house—the only place where I've ever truly been happy.

I step over the second-to-last stair—it creaks. I peek into Max's room. He's sprawled out on the bed like a starfish—just like his mother. Eva used to sleep the same way. At the foot of the bed, a three-month-old beagle squints at me—Timon.

"Shh!" I whisper and sit on the edge of the bed. "Quiet, Tim!"

Timon grumbles but doesn't bark. Smart dog.

I reach out and tickle Max's nose. He wrinkles it adorably but keeps sleeping. I stroke his head. His light hair has curled into damp little ringlets from sleep.

"Max," I whisper, leaning over him. "Hey, buddy."

He opens his eyes. For a moment they're clouded with fading dreams—and then, with a squeal, he throws himself into my arms.

This is it, I think, lifting him up. This is what I live for—those little arms wrapped around my neck.

At breakfast, Max talks nonstop. I listen—so many stories to catch up on! He and Nick did a new experiment, and they went to an amusement center with Grandma, and Timon almost learned how to shake paws...

"How are you?" my mother asks flatly, while Max chatters on in the background.

She moves into my house whenever I have to travel for work. I know it's for the best—Max stays with family, not a nanny. And besides, she treats him differently. Not the way she treated me. There's something magical about grandchildren—they cast a spell on grandmothers. Still, her constant presence gets under my skin.

"Everything's fine," I say, just as flatly, spearing a piece of omelet.

Max proudly shows off a wiggly tooth. I make a big surprised face—*Wow, no way, that's amazing!* But inside I worry—he's still so little, and his teeth are already starting to fall out. We need to see a dentist...

"What's so good about it?" my mother hisses venomously. "You've made a fool of yourself! Everyone's talking about how Sokolov ran around Prague chasing some girl."

I set my fork down and look at her calmly. Gone are the days when remarks like that could get to me. I haven't owed her an explanation in a long time.

"That 'some girl,' Mom, is Eva. She's alive."

The only sign of surprise is a raised eyebrow and a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Well, is that so?" she says. "And what now? You going to chase after her again?"

I shrug.

"At the very least, I'll find out what's going on. Then I'll decide."

"What is there to decide?!" She can't help it—her voice rises.

I look her straight in the eye, and say—to Max:

"Did you eat, kiddo? Go play with Tim. Work on his training a bit, and I'll come up later so you can show me what he's learned, okay?"

"Okay!" Max and the puppy dash upstairs.

And we're left alone. Still locked in that same burning stare.

"What is there to decide?" my mother repeats, more calmly now. "If this... if she really is alive, then it's obvious—she left you. She left you and Max! While you were mourning her, she was off fooling around with someone else! The only thing you need to decide is how soon you're filing for divorce. You've got a wonderful fiancée—hopefully you haven't forgotten about her! Because I know how you lose your mind the second that tramp shows up!"

"Stop it!" I growl, finally snapping. "Don't you *dare* call Eva a tramp!"

She sneers and shakes her head, like: *there it is, I knew it.*

"I'll handle this myself," I say firmly, furious that she still managed to get under my skin. "And I think it's time you left."

She scoffs and gets up. I don't walk her to the door.

While she puts on her coat and slams the door behind her, I sit and think. I know exactly why it's so easy for her to throw me off balance—because she's the one who dares to say out loud the things I only let myself think.

Chapter 19

Polina

By morning, the yard is buried in snow. Suddenly, it hits me—how fast time is flying. Soon I won't be able to keep pretending. Mark is already starting to suspect something. By his calculations, I should've forgiven and forgotten by now. I pretend that I have, but I still keep him at a distance. And that drives him mad. He's holding it together—for now. But I can feel it: it won't take much more before that anger spills out. And then what? Will he rape me? Or will he first switch me from pills to injections?

I need to get out. Fast. But first—I have to find proof of what he's done to me. I think it must be in the basement. Yesterday I saw where he hides the keys. Now I just need to make him leave the house. Not so easy—last time he brought home enough groceries to feed us both for a month. But it's all right. I think I know what to do.

At breakfast, I push my food around the plate.

"What's wrong?" Mark asks gently. "No appetite?"

I sigh.

"No, it's fine. I'm just..."

"Go on, tell me," he encourages.

I look up at him and give a small, shy smile.

"Christmas is almost here. And we don't have a tree. No lights, no garlands. I just... I want it to feel cozy. Even if it's just the two of us. You know... fairy lights, ornaments... mulled wine by the fireplace. Why don't we ever light the fireplace?"

He smiles, puts down his spoon, and takes my hand.

"You want a holiday?"

His touch makes my skin crawl, but I don't let it show. I squint playfully and run my finger along his palm.

"Of course I do! We haven't had a proper celebration in forever. It's just... I don't know what to get you as a gift."

He laughs.

"Oh, come on, *you* are the best gift I could ever ask for. Any day of the year."

I lick my dry lips. I catch him subconsciously mimicking the motion, staring at my tongue. Purring, I say:

"Then *you* should get me something. Something we'd *both* enjoy... Maybe something silky... red... or black?"

I wink, and he gives in—brings my hand to his lips, kissing my wrist, my fingers, my palm...

I feel the smile freeze on my face. Gently, I slip my hand free.

"Wait... Wait. I really don't feel attractive lately..."

"Baby, come on, you know you're always the most beautiful woman in the world to me. But okay. I get it. I'm sorry!" He immediately switches into *Sweet-Mark Mode*—tender, understanding, oh-so-devoted. Perfect to the point of nausea. "It's unforgivable, keeping you locked up like this! But don't worry—I'm finishing the dissertation, and after Christmas, we'll go home. In the meantime, I'll head into town. I'll bring you something... special. Or do you want more brushes and paints?"

"Yes!" I clap my hands in delight.

I want *everything in the world*—just get the hell out of here already.

A few days ago, he started telling me about his dissertation—testing the waters, seeing how much I remembered. I played along easily, so now it's our new reason for living out here, far from civilization. The new excuse—because the old one, Mark's betrayal, I've supposedly already "forgotten" under the influence of the red capsules. Thanks to me, those capsules now contain nothing but powdered sugar instead of whatever poison he used to lace them with.

He leaves, carefully locking the house behind him. I wait until the car pulls away, then race for the basement door. There's no time to lose.

I have no intention of sitting here waiting for Mark to come back. My bag and winter clothes are ready. I just need evidence—something to prove what he's done to me. Then I'll escape through the bathroom window.

The basement is dry and cool. The light is normal—no bright lamps. I spot some equipment on a long worktable against the wall, but I don't have time to examine it. I run to the cabinets and start rifling through them, scanning rows of labeled vials. Which one of these is he drugging me with? What should I take? It doesn't matter. I sweep everything into the bag.

Is it enough? Or not?

I look around.

There's a laptop on the table.

I open it. Of course it's password-protected. I try a few combinations at random. Mark never used to hide his passwords from me. I more or less know what he uses—always my name, in Russian or Latin characters, paired with a date: my birthday or our wedding anniversary.

None of them work.

An alarm bell goes off in my head: you're running out of time—drop it and go!

I freeze, scrambling through combinations in my mind. I know Mark. I know how vain he is. What would he choose as a password? Something that makes him feel powerful every time he types it in.

My fingers tremble as I try: "Eva Sokolova"—in both layouts.

Nope.

Damn it!

I slam the lid shut. Yank out the cords. I'll just take the laptop with me—someone who knows what they're doing can crack it. I'm out of options.

Except...

My hands open the lid again, almost on their own. I type in: "Eva Krause".

The screen dims, then lights up again.

It's in.

My heart is pounding like crazy. I feel like I've stepped into a spy movie.

I need to leave—but I can't stop myself from taking a quick look. Just to see what he's hiding.

Right away I stumble on archived videos. Tons of them—hundreds. I click at random. Young Mark in a white lab coat. Rat experiments. Positive results. He's excited, full of energy.

I skip ahead. Then again. Again.

The screen fills with words I don't understand. Technical terms, numerical results. Graphs, charts.

Keep going.

(You have to run!!!)

There has to be something else.

I keep clicking—open, listen, close—faster and faster.

Finally, one video shows a different location. Mark looks like he did when I first met him—messy blond hair, black-rimmed glasses, a bit of stubble on his cheeks. Not for style, just too busy to shave.

He looks into the camera and says,

"Trial of Serum 596/4, Series VN. Subject: Polina Smirnova, age twenty-four. Diagnosis: multiform glioblastoma. No favorable outcome expected from conventional treatment."

Smirnova—my maiden name. But I don't remember this footage...

I freeze. Eyes glued to the screen.

The camera shifts to a girl sitting in a chair in the middle of the room. Pale. Fragile-boned. Worn down. She's watching Mark without blinking, following his every move. Is that admiration? Or even... love?

I collapse into the chair, staring at the pitiful creature on the screen. Though I don't need to study her.

Because one thing is immediately clear: It's not me.

Chapter 20

I've completely lost track of time. I keep playing video after video. I can't stop watching. This is the truth—cruel, terrifying.

Mark, what did you do to all of us?

Mark, how could you?

Mark...

I snap out of it when a loud buzzing startles me. I jump. It takes a second to register—it's a phone. There's a phone somewhere down here.

I check the drawers again and find an old flip phone. I shove the laptop into my bag, grab the phone, and sprint upstairs.

My mind is racing. Thoughts chasing each other in a tangled mess. Images from the videos flash before my eyes.

A gaunt man with a hollow stare and a bare scalp.

Polina Smirnova, eyes wide in a sunken face.

A woman in her fifties, bloated, her head wrapped in bandages.

And Eva Sokolova. A slight blonde with tightly pressed lips.

Me.

"Doctor, I'm willing to do anything to get better."

"I trust you completely."

"I'll follow all your instructions."

Mark's face, eyes burning with feverish excitement.

"Subject Sokolova is showing positive progress. The metastases in her right lung have nearly disappeared, and the tumor has significantly shrunk. However, the drug is producing an unexpected side effect..."

Unexpected side effect.

That's how elegantly Mark described replacing my memories with those of Polina Smirnova.

Mark treated Eva and Polina in different ways. Eva was getting better. Polina wasn't. They shared a hospital room. Became very close. They talked a lot, for hours on end. Always whispering, sharing every detail of their lives. Polina understood the treatment wasn't working. She knew where things were heading. "Please remember me," she sobbed into Eva's shoulder. "I have no one else but you!" She was alone, raised in an orphanage, with no parents, no husband. Her condition kept getting worse. When she was moved to the ICU, Eva was left in the room by herself.

At first, Mark noticed she started mixing up the events of her life. Every day, she took simple tests. He'd ask the same questions—she'd give the same answers. Until she didn't. She began hesitating, thinking too long. Then she started recalling things that never happened to her—but had happened to Polina.

Mark could've stopped it all from the beginning by simply reminding Eva who she was. But he didn't. The unusual effect of memory substitution fascinated him so deeply that he not only let her keep talking—he encouraged it. He was curious how far the human mind could go. The brain, he said, was still uncharted territory, full of secrets. Mark spoke to the camera with wonder about how Eva "remembered" the dog that used to live in a kennel outside the orphanage where Polina grew up. How she "remembered" the names of all her childhood friends, even ones Polina had never mentioned. How, to Mark's greatest excitement, she began speaking Czech. Eva's mind, made unusually flexible by the experimental drug, filled in the details of another girl's life as if pulling them from her own memory. It was incredible. Unthinkable. Nobel-worthy.

Mark abandoned his other patients and focused entirely on Eva. Until one day, he became fully convinced that Eva Sokolova no longer existed. Only Polina Smirnova remained. A girl who had recovered from cancer at a miraculous rate. A girl in love with him.

And there was him. A doctor obsessed with his patient.

When the real Polina died, he had her cremated and buried under the name Eva Sokolova. He shut down the program. Let go of the Nobel dream.

No one could ever know the truth.

Eva...

No—Polina. She was his creation now. And she belonged to him alone.

I stumble out of the basement, half-conscious. Drag myself to the sink and splash cold water on my face. Scrub, scrub, scrub with a rough towel.

I have to snap out of this. Right now.

Come on, whoever you are—get it together!

I slap myself hard across the face. Tears roll down my cheeks.

Did he ever love me?

Of course not. He loved Polina. Probably. And then... then it became a creator's pride in his own invention. Like Pygmalion, he carved his ideal woman out of me—and fell in love with her.

God, what a nightmare. While my real husband was out there searching for me, grieving, suffering... while my child was growing up somewhere out there... I was like some wind-up doll, acting out the whims of this psychopath. God...

It felt like my head was about to explode. Too much for one day.

No.

I can't fall apart. Not now.

That will come later.

Later I'll cry. Mourn my fake life. Bury it. Start over. Go insane, too—but later. Right now, I have to run. Mark will be back soon. And once he's back, he won't let me go.

I remember the phone I left on the table while washing my face. Grab it and dial 112. Rings. Thank God.

"Emergency services. What's your emergency?"

I speak fast, short. No time to explain.

"I don't have much time. My name is Eva Sokolova. I've been kidnapped and held against my will by a man. Doctor Mark Krause from Krasnodar. He's lost his mind. He says I'm his wife. Listen carefully! He drives a blue Rover—I don't know who it's registered to—" I rattle off the plate number.

"Hold on—" the operator's tone shifts.

"I don't have time!" I scream into the phone. "He'll be back any second!"

"Where are you?"

"I don't know... Somewhere in the mountains, down south. A standalone house. There's a turnoff onto a dirt road—it's blocked with branches. And there's a sign... wait..." I squeeze my memory. Come on, come on!!! "Yes! A small blue sign. The number '42.'"

"Stay on the line. I'll try to trace your call."

The front door slams. Footsteps.

In my panic, I never even heard the car. It's over. I'm done.

Mark walks in, smiling, cheeks flushed. Carrying a fluffy Christmas tree.

It only takes him a couple seconds to assess the scene. The smile slowly fades from his face. His eyes go hard. Cold.

"Who were you talking to?" he nods toward the phone in my hand.

I step back slowly, mind racing—what now?

"Hello?" the operator calls out. "Eva, are you there? Eva, what's happening?"

"Eva, huh?" Mark sneers, eyes drilling into me. He yanks the phone from my frozen fingers, tosses it to the floor, and stomps down on it with his heavy boot.

I press my back against the fireplace mantle. There's nowhere left to go.

I'm trapped.

Chapter 21

Roman. Moscow. December

The new project is taking up all my time. A sports complex in Minsk—architecture, landscape, interior design—it'll all be ours if the clients like the plans. They say they already want to work exclusively with me. I don't doubt their sincerity—long gone are the days when I worked to build a name. Now the name works for me. But that's no reason to relax. The market is competitive, and delivering on time is a big part of success.

So, all week I leave early in the morning and get home around eight—just in time to spend a little while with Max. After putting him to bed, I sit at my desk and keep working. You'd think with that schedule there'd be no energy left for wandering thoughts. And yet, they keep slipping down the same worn path.

Eva.

Eva.

Eva.

I think about her when I wake up, and when I go to sleep. I tell myself it's normal. She's a part of my soul that was torn out—with blood. A big part. No matter what I do, that wound will never heal. It throbs, it festers, it seeps. All I can do is pretend I've made peace with it. Stay composed. Fake a smile through the constant, unrelenting pain.

About a year after she died, I realized I couldn't cope. Time kept moving forward, but I wasn't getting better. On the contrary—I felt like I was being pulled into a black hole. I finally listened to my friends and saw a therapist. And all I got from those sessions was one clear truth: I didn't need therapy. It was a waste of time. Everyone kept saying the same thing: *"You have to let go. Move on."* No one understood that thinking about Eva, remembering her—was the only thing holding me together. I was

using those memories like tiny stones to brace against a coming avalanche. It wasn't much, but it kept me from falling apart completely.

And then there's Max.

The responsibility of raising him, my love for him—that held me down like an anchor. If not for Max... hell, I probably wouldn't even be here.

I catch myself staring off into nothing. We're going to an event with Sofia tonight, so I came home a bit early. But since I had time, I decided to get a little more work done here. And now I'm just sitting here like an idiot, staring at the wall.

I get up from the desk, annoyed. The chair rolls back and hits the bookshelf. There, on the third shelf from the top, tucked inside a brown volume of Bulgakov, between pages one hundred four and one hundred five, is a letter. The one I found right here on this desk five years ago.

"I want you to remember me young and beautiful..."

"Forgive me, try to understand..."

"If there had been even the slightest chance..."

"When Max grows up, tell him I loved him very much..."

"Don't look for me—I'm gone."

I know the letter by heart. Those lines stab into my brain like red-hot needles.

I grit my teeth.

Damn it.

Time to get ready for the event, and instead I'm pulling myself back together again.

Sofia's probably already waiting.

Another problem. Sofia.

Now, for the life of me, I can't remember why proposing to her ever seemed like a good idea. It was always perfectly clear—I don't love her. And she knows I don't love her. Maybe that's exactly why I decided to marry her. Yeah, back then I thought it would be a great business partnership. Two career-focused people, longtime acquaintances who got along well—a solid team. Sofia was the only one who never pressured me about Eva, never tried to erase her from my mind. She just stayed close, distracted me with chatter, helped however she could. And most importantly—she never pushed her way into my head or into my bed.

When word got out that Sokolov was single again, I became the target of a full-on hunt. At first, crushed by grief, I didn't even realize it. Then I did. Then I got angry. Then I shut myself away. Didn't help. Persistent girls found every crack in my defenses and poured in like cockroaches.

That's when Sofia and I announced our engagement. At first it was fake—just to get people off my back. But then I thought it through and decided this marriage actually had quite a few advantages. Yes, without love—but maybe that was a good thing. Eva would always be my only true love. And Sofia... she'd be a reliable partner. So I proposed for real. But with one condition: I wouldn't have any more children. No competition for Max. No jealousy from him. Sofia was fine with that. She'd never wanted to be a mother anyway. Being married to Roman Sokolov would bring her more than enough benefits on its own.

Half an hour later I'm in a tuxedo and black coat, standing by the living room door. Sofia's waiting inside—she arrived early to discuss something with my mother. I hear her talking to someone—cold, sharp. I recognize the tone—her employees are terrified of her when she speaks like that. Now I'm curious—what got her so angry?

I reach for the doorknob and hear her say: "He's preparing for the wedding, and on top of that, he's working a lot. He waited for your call for a while, but now he says there's no longer any need to speak with you."

I freeze involuntarily and listen. Is she talking about me? Who is she talking to?

The rest is muttered, and then a sharp:

"Am I making myself clear?"

Tim barks loudly, and Sofia snaps:

"Max! I told you to keep that mutt away from me! You know I'm allergic!"

A wave of anger rises inside me. She's yelling at my son?

I walk into the room, my footsteps loud on purpose. Max is sitting on the floor, hugging Timon, and with a voice full of tears says: "I'm sorry, Mommy."

It's like I've hit a wall. I stand there in the middle of the room, mouth open. I probably look like a complete idiot.

Max turns to me, frightened. Is he scared? Of me?

I look at Sofia. She's clearly nervous—frowning, biting her lip.

"Who came up with that?" I ask quietly, trying not to lose it and scare Max even more. "Why did you call Sofia that, son?"

Max blinks, opens his mouth like he's about to blurt something out. Then he looks at Sofia and, staring straight at her, says:

"I just felt like it."

I feel my face go rigid.

Unbelievable. He felt like it? Why? There's never been any real warmth between them.

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

I check the screen—it's Kamil.

Unfortunately, he has no good news. After arriving in New York, Polina Krause seemed to vanish into thin air. Kamil visited every college and university where she might have taught art. Then he called several more in other states. Nothing. No one had ever heard of any Polina. The already fragile thread finally snapped.

Chapter 22

Polina

Mark comes closer. He moves like a wild animal. His eyes are hungry. Dead. How did I never notice his dead eyes before?

This is his true face!

I back away until I hit the fireplace mantel. I stare at him in horror. This man is nothing like the kind Dr. Krause his patients adore. Right now, he's a monster capable of anything.

He reaches out and wraps his fingers around my neck. His thumb lifts my chin. Forces me to look him in the eyes.

They're wild. Terrifying. A black void I'll drown in.

"Why did you go there, Polina?" the void hisses through his teeth. "Why?!"

I jerk away, twist, bite his open palm. I scream into his flushed face:

"My name is Eva! Eva, not Polina! And you damn well know it! How could you, Mark? How could you..."

He clamps the bitten hand over my mouth. Yanks me around, back toward him. Leans in and hisses in my ear:

"You ungrateful bitch! All these years I carried you in my arms! Gave you everything you wanted! Galleries, exhibitions, travel abroad—anything! I asked for so little in return—just stay by my side. Do what I say. Be a loving, obedient wife! And how did you repay me? You bitch!"

One hand pins my head to the mantel, the other slides under my sweater.

"No worries... no worries, my sweet. We can still fix this. You'll forget everything. You'll become my sweet little Polina again..."

I grunt and struggle.

"Stand still, you little whore!" he snarls, lifting my head and slamming it into the mantel. Not hard, but the pain echoes through my whole body.

"The police are coming!" I scream. "Let me go! They'll find me no matter what!"

"They won't find you that fast. We've got time."

I hear him fumbling with his jeans. It's awkward with one hand, but he refuses to let go of me.

With a sharp motion, he undoes my pants and yanks them down to my knees, underwear and all.

"You know," he growls, voice thick with arousal that makes my skin crawl, "it's kind of perfect it turned out this way. My wife is perfect—but I've always wanted to fuck you... Eva."

"No! No!" I cry, thrashing, only fueling his desire.

"Go on, fight back—I like that!"

He slaps me hard and presses his overheated body against mine. He grinds against my backside, aroused.

And I realize I'd rather die than let this happen. I grope along the wall, the fireplace mantel... and suddenly my fingers land on something. A bronze dragon figurine! No time to think. I lift it sharply and strike with all my strength.

Mark freezes for a second. Then his grip loosens, and he slowly slips to the floor.

Whimpering, I crawl back against the wall. One hand pulls my pants up, the other still clutches the figurine.

It's bloody.

I let out a sharp cry and throw it away. Mark is lying on the floor, his arm twisted awkwardly beneath him. A pool of blood has formed under his head.

I can't breathe. My heart is about to burst out of my chest. Tears pour down my face.

Oh God—did I kill him?! I killed him!

I grab my coat and bag and run outside. I jump into the car. I have to get out of here! Hide somewhere, think. Decide what to do next.

It doesn't matter what he did—I'm still the killer! I'll go to prison for excessive self-defense! Maybe they'll even call it premeditated! Mark has powerful friends who'll stand up for him no matter what. And who am I? Who would defend me? A bio-robot with fake memories! My artificial life has collapsed, and under the rubble there's nothing but emptiness!

The keys are in the car. There's cash in the glove compartment, held together with a rubber band. Must be money Mark withdrew to avoid being tracked by card. Though really—who would be tracking him?

It's getting dark. I pull out onto the road, stopping only once to drag a branch out of the way. Now there's only forward.

I drive for about an hour. There are almost no cars coming the other way. The tears have stopped, and my hands have nearly stopped shaking. The winding road keeps me alert, forces me to focus on it and nothing else.

I repeat Scarlett O'Hara's mantra like a prayer: "I'll think about all this tomorrow. I'll think tomorrow."

From the darkness, the bright letters "SOCHI" appear.

I knew we had to be nearby. I drive for another hour. Then I ditch the car, taking only the money and my bag. I gave the police the license plate myself—not hard to track it down now. Probably won't take long.

I walk out onto the avenue and just keep walking. Dizzy from the noise, the bright string lights, the happy people darting around me. And the air—crisp, salty, ringing like crystal.

I feel my shoulders start to relax. For the first time in a very long time, I am free.

Finding a place to stay isn't a problem. All I have to do is leave the avenue and turn into a residential area—almost every gate has a sign offering a room or a house for rent. I don't need a house, a room will do just fine. I walk a little farther from the center and knock on a door. A pleasant woman around fifty opens it. She introduces herself as Tatyana. Two minutes of conversation—and she's already leading me deeper into the yard. On both sides are small houses, and under the streetlamp sits a cat. We climb a slippery spiral staircase to the third floor.

"Here," Tatyana unlocks the door for me. The air inside smells damp and cold. "We'll turn the heat on—it warms up quickly. There's a shower and toilet. It's a good room. In winter we rent it cheap because of the stairs. But you're young, it won't be hard for you!"

I agree—the stairs aren't a problem. I pay for the room a week in advance and am finally alone. Completely at a loss for what to do next. Everything I have with me is Mark's laptop, my passport, and the ampoules I dumped into my bag.

I lie down on the bed and breathe in the musty scent of the sheets. My thoughts swarm like ants, piling on top of each other.

No, I can't do this! I can't be alone anymore! I need to be around people! Just to feel they're there. To see the happy faces of tourists. To soak up even a little of their energy. To believe that things aren't as hopeless as they seem, and that a way out will appear.

I leave the house and almost run back toward the avenue.

For a while I just wander. Enjoying the feeling that I can walk instead of sitting in a locked room. Even though it's winter, there are still lots of visitors—Christmas is coming, the city is beautiful and welcoming.

Right in front of me, a bar door swings open and a group of young people spills out onto the sidewalk. I pause, thoughtful. I glance inside. When was the last time I was in a bar? For as long as I can remember, I've been taking medication, so I never drink at all. Mark always said alcohol and pills don't

mix. But what is there to lose now? Could I feel any worse? Let's find out. I want to forget everything—on purpose! Even if it's just for one night.

"Welcome!" the bartender smiles. "What can I get you?"

Pfft—might as well go all in.

"What kind of sets do you have?" I say, drumming my fingers on the counter. "I'm getting drunk tonight!"

Chapter 23

Roman. Moscow. December

The hour before dawn is always the hardest. Scientific data shows that this is when suicidal thoughts peak. I, someone who often suffers from insomnia, understand exactly why.

The walls of the office feel like they're closing in. The oppressive silence presses down. The air, thick and heavy, instead of filling the lungs with oxygen, clogs them in chunks and chokes. I can't sleep, so I sink into a stupor. I'm a fly frozen in amber.

An hour before dawn, it becomes clear that struggling is pointless. That everything is decay, emptiness, and there is no way out—nor will there be. At that hour, I allow myself to fall into the darkest and most hopeless despair. Because I know—it will recede before the inevitable morning.

So now I just sit and wait for the darkness outside the window to give way to twilight, and then—to the bright light of day. Trying to distract myself, I think about the scene I witnessed this evening.

After the event, I drove Sofia home, and by the time I got back, it was well past midnight. Max was asleep. Not as usual—sprawled out like a starfish—but curled up, sucking on his thumb. I frown. What's this now? He gave up that habit long ago—why is it back? I pull the blanket over him where it's slipped off. Timon, lying at his feet, lifts his ears alertly.

"Sleep," I mouth, and he understands, resting his head back on his paws. Smart dog.

I'm not the least bit sleepy myself. For a while, I drift through the dark house like a ghost. Then I resign myself to another sleepless night, make some tea, and go to the study. Might as well work—no point wasting time. But after opening my laptop, I just stare at the photo of my son on the desktop.

Happy and smiling, he's sitting on a swing. My son's always been like that—a little Energizer Bunny.

And in contrast, I suddenly see it clearly—something's off with him now. He's become suspiciously quiet and sad. Even abandoned his experiments. In the evenings, when I tuck him in, he doesn't ask me to read to him anymore. He just hugs me, buries his nose into me, and stays there until I lay him down. Then he turns away and falls asleep. And maybe I shouldn't worry—he's being perfectly obedient—but inside me, an alarm is blaring like mad—something has happened to my son!

And tomorrow, I'm going to find out what.

"Forgive me, Mommy!"

When I recall that thin, trembling voice of his, my eye starts twitching, and rage swells in my chest. I want to burn the whole goddamn world down for a single tear from my son.

Sofia said she doesn't mind Max calling her that. After all, we're getting married soon, and the boy needs a mother. But for some reason, the thought alone turns my stomach.

Maybe because she's never really shown Max much warmth—but I always thought that was normal. He's not her child, after all. I don't love her, and she has every right not to love him. Our marriage is just a transaction, nothing more. Maybe that's why Max's use of the word—so forced, so unnatural—pissed me off so much.

Or maybe it's because his real mother is actually alive. Though I have no idea what to do with that information.

Suddenly, the heavy silence is shattered by the shrill ring of my phone. I glance at the clock in surprise—four thirty in the morning. An unfamiliar number flashes on the screen.

My heart skips a beat, then starts pounding like a jackhammer in my ears. I realize I'm terrified. No one calls at this hour with good news.

Damn it—maybe it's just spam. I've got every filter and blocker installed, but somehow those spammers always find a way through.

Before the ringing stops, I quickly hit the green button. Hold the phone to my ear. Silence.

"Hello?" My voice cracks. I clear my throat and try again. "Hello? Say something."

It feels like there's less air in the room. I gasp for breath, whispering the words on the exhale, lips barely moving:

"Eva? Is that you?.."

I hear a noise on the other end. Footsteps. Then what sounds like a door slamming. Finally, a woman's muffled voice comes through:

"Mr. Sokolov?"

"Yes!" I can tell it's not Eva, but I still whisper, for some reason. "Who is this? How did you get my number?"

"You left your business card... when you came to our center. Three weeks ago."

My fingertips go numb.

"Krasnodar?"

"Yes."

The woman on the line is breathing fast. She's nervous.

"Listen, something strange is going on. I didn't know who else to call. Who else to tell... You were looking for Polina Krause, right?"

"Yes!" My voice finally finds its strength, and I practically shout, "Do you know where she is? Can you tell me?!"

"That's just it... Mark—her husband, Dr Krause—he's been hiding her here. He said she had a relapse and started treating her with some unknown drug. Something he developed himself..."

I'm gripping the phone so tightly I'm afraid it might crack. The woman's words are tumbling out now:

"But yesterday he flew out for a conference, and Polina and I accidentally discovered that she's not sick at all. No relapse. She's completely healthy—but he's still giving her the drug! I was going to wait till morning before deciding what to do, but half an hour ago, he suddenly came back, and—"

Her voice cuts off.

"And I just saw him carry her out of the clinic. In his arms. She was unconscious! I have no idea where he took her, but I have a really bad feeling about this!"

Forgetting what time it is, I shout:

"Did you call the police?!"

"What would I even say?!" Her voice is full of tears. "That a husband took his wife from a hospital? Mark is a respected man. A renowned doctor and scientist! No one's going to look for her! That's why I called you—I remembered you said... if I had any information at all..."

"Okay, try not to worry," I say. My fingers are trembling, but my mind is razor sharp. Like always in a crisis, I act first and panic later. "You did the right thing. What's your name?"

"Yulia."

"Listen, Yulia. Take a breath. Try to calm down and get some rest. I can be there... in about five hours. Maybe sooner, but probably not. I'll come straight to the clinic from the airport. Please wait for me. I've saved your number. I'll call when I arrive. See you soon."

I hang up and immediately dial Kamil's number. The phone rings and rings until I hear his voice—groggy and irritated:

"You even look at the time before calling?"

"Pack your stuff. You can sleep on the plane. I'll pick you up in thirty minutes."

A soul-deep yawn on the other end. Then a short reply:

"Okay. I'm up."

That's the difference between friends and acquaintances—when it really matters, a true friend doesn't ask why.

Chapter 24

A strange, spiraling déjà vu — we're driving the same highway from the airport to the Krause center again. Kamil is constantly on the phone, cross-checking numbers, scribbling notes. I don't interrupt. I know the moment he learns anything, he'll tell me.

Anger gives me strength. I picture what I'll do to that blonde bastard when I find him. And I will find him — no doubt about it. If we have to comb the whole country, we'll track him down. My fists clench on their own, my fingers itching in advance to wrap around the snake neck of that doctor.

We pull up to the gate. I jump out and run inside without waiting.

A blonde girl in blue scrubs meets us at the entrance. Yulia. She looks exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes.

"Did you find out anything?" she asks after introducing herself.

I glance at Kamil. He shrugs.

"We can't file a report just yet. If they're still missing in a couple of days, we'll declare both of them wanted. For now, we're getting help — unofficially."

"Honestly, that's better," I cut in. "The official system's too damn slow. So what can we do now?"

"They're scanning traffic cameras for Krause's car. As soon as something comes up, I'll get a call."

"Where did he keep Eva?" I turn to Yulia.

"Eva?" she frowns, confused.

I nod, irritated, throwing up my hands.

"Eva! Polina! Long story."

She glances from me to Kamil but doesn't ask anything else. She leads us down the corridor, gesturing for us to follow. At the front desk, she simply tells the nurse we're relatives. Doesn't specify whose, but the nurse nods kindly.

We head up the stairs to the third floor. Yulia brings us to one of the doors and pushes it open. I step in. Aside from the IV stand in the corner, the room looks like a regular bedroom. Big bed, wall-mounted TV, wardrobe. A table with chairs. Another door leads to a bathroom.

The window overlooks a small courtyard, with tall fir trees lining the fence.

"She used to sit at that window all the time," Yulia says. "That's what the girls were saying this morning. Every time they came in, she'd be sitting there, watching for someone. I only saw her myself yesterday. We go way back... From Novosibirsk. I helped with her rehab after Mark treated her. But

yesterday—when I walked in—I was honestly scared. She looked... off. Grabbed my hand and asked, ‘Do you see him?’ Then pointed outside. But there was no one there... I thought she was losing it.”

“There was a guy here,” Kamil says calmly. “Keeping an eye on the place. I asked him to. Maybe that’s who she saw.”

“And where is he now?” I ask, fury boiling up again. “Your guy?”

“Yesterday, of all days, I told him to stand down.” Kamil looks at me, almost apologetic. “He’d been watching the place for ages and nothing happened. We figured it was a waste of time...”

I grunt, rubbing my face.

“Mark didn’t let anyone near her,” Yulia says. “He even slept here. The orderlies only came in to clean the room... but he warned them—if they said a word, they’d be fired on the spot. And the pay here’s good. No one wants to lose their job.”

I look around. So this is where he kept her the past three weeks. Not the worst conditions, but I’m boiling inside.

I open the wardrobe, not sure what I’m looking for. Then the nightstand. The shelves are nearly empty—some underwear, a couple of tank tops. A worn-out copy of *Wuthering Heights*. An unopened chocolate bar. Two mugs. A large sketchbook with a pencil tucked between the pages. I flip through it slowly, studying the drawings. The view from the window—familiar. The room. A girl with a sharp nose in a white coat—an orderly? A smiling Krause, whose face I want to tear to shreds. That smug look—he looks more alive in the sketch than in real life. And then... the window again. Eva by the window, hand pressed to the glass. And on the other side, mirroring her, hand to the same spot...

Me.

My vision blurs. Yulia calls my name, Kamil shakes my shoulder. I realize I haven’t been breathing. I suck in a breath. My head clears a little. I slam the sketchbook shut and rasp:

“I’m fine!” But I’m not fine. Not even close.

My ears are ringing. I want to run, to do something, anything. Standing still is unbearable—knowing that with every minute, my wife is getting farther away from me.

Kamil peers at my face, clearly worried. He says something, but I can’t process it. Thank God his phone rings. I’ve got a couple of minutes to pull myself together. Focus on breathing.

A deep inhale.

(DAMN IT, I SHOULD’VE SEARCHED THIS WHOLE FUCKING CLINIC LAST TIME!!!)

A slow exhale.

Another breath in.

(WHAT A FUCKING IDIOT I AM—THIS IS ALL MY FAULT!!!)

Another breath out.

By the time Kamil hangs up, I'm able to listen.

"They found Krause's car. Parked behind a gas station near the highway. Looks like he switched to another vehicle there—but hell if we know which one. It was covered for a long time, and there are no cameras in that area."

Over the next ten days, Kamil goes into overdrive. After consulting with my lawyers, I go ahead and file a formal complaint against Krause. Eva is declared missing under the name *Polina Krause*. The investigators are blunt types—couldn't care less about who I am or the fact that I've got Moscow behind me. They look at me like I've lost my mind. Whatever. I'm used to that. All that matters is that they're doing their job. They seized the clinic's records, conducted a search. Yulia was worried they'd shut the place down entirely, but it didn't come to that. The patients aren't to blame, after all.

With no way to control the situation, I focus on what I can do—work. I travel back and forth between Moscow and here almost every day. I can't sit still. My body physically rejects inactivity—liquid anxiety pumps through my veins instead of blood. I hold meetings, give presentations on the Belarus project. Sign contracts. Stay late at the office. I drive myself into the ground with work and the search, but staying in one place is impossible. I still don't know what to say to Sofia. I've only seen her once—and dodged the conversation entirely. Not the time. Managed to avoid my mother too. Worst of all is Max. He's still distant, flat, detached. The doctor said his labs are fine, but mentally, he's clearly withdrawn. I tried talking to him—nothing. That's what really scares me. My son used to tell me everything. I promise myself I'll book him a therapy appointment as soon as I get back. And then I'm flying to Krasnodar again.

Kamil hasn't left. He's helping the investigation, digging into Krause's background. It's hard—on the surface, the guy's a fucking saint. Takes on the hopeless cases. No one knows what exactly he's treating them with. On paper, it's all standard methods. But in other clinics, those methods don't work at that stage. Here, almost everyone improves. That's why there's a year-long waitlist. His patients' families adore him. Many of them are powerful. I fend them off as best I can, but I can feel it—just a little more, and they'll turn on me too. I give the office the green light to double-check all documentation—every last detail. No room for error. Everyone's buzzing with activity. The place feels like a kicked beehive.

A week later, facial recognition software picks up Krause in Sochi. We lose track of him again after that, but it's *something*. Kamil and I fly out there.

Three more days of fruitless searching. Kamil turns into a mother hen, trying to get me to eat anything at all. Says I'll disappear if I keep this up. He's right, and I know it—but I can't. Food won't go down. Everything's falling apart. I'm losing control.

Kamil's excited voice blasts through the speaker as I drive aimlessly around the city, scanning the faces of strangers.

"Code red!" he yells over speakerphone. "You're not gonna believe what just happened!"

"Well?!" I snap.

"Guess who just called emergency services? Eva Sokolova! At least, that's the name she gave them."

I slam on the brakes and double-park by the curb. A black Beemer blares its horn as it speeds past.

"Where are you?" I shout. "I'm on my way!"

Chapter 25

Twenty kilometers of dirt road winding through the trees, then a climb up a washed-out slope—and there it is. Krause's secret hideout. Rented years ago. A small plateau on the mountainside, facing away from the main road. We never would've found it if Eva hadn't mentioned the branch covering the turnoff and the "42" sign right before it.

The windows are glowing in the darkness.

I leap out of the car and sprint to the front door. My self-preservation instinct is gone—there's only one thought pounding in my head: she's in there. Get her out. Now.

Someone grabs me halfway to the porch, twists my arms behind my back, drags me off into the trees. I fight back, but Kamil talks sense into me: "Are you crazy? This is a police operation!"

I stand there for fifteen long minutes, counting the pulse hammering in my ears. Finally, a guy from the SWAT team gives us the signal—it's clear.

The house is empty. Should've figured—no car outside. But my brain's useless right now. Total static.

In the living room, signs of a struggle. Stuff scattered, broken cups on the floor.

My nerves are shot. One more push and I'll snap.

Then I see the blood by the fireplace.

A tremor runs through me—same as the day they told me my wife was dead.

I shout, "Eva! Eva!"

"He's not stable—get him out of here," one of the officers barks at Kamil, staring at a blood-soaked towel.

I tear free and run upstairs. No one. I check every closet, every corner. Then down to the basement. Nothing. The place is empty. Kamil chases me from room to room, trying to calm me down. I only leave once I've checked the whole house.

"Get a grip," he says for the hundredth time. "The forensics team will comb through everything. They'll take the place apart stone by stone."

"Is the car flagged?" I ask, scanning the mountains with wild eyes. I'm seriously considering heading out on foot or renting a Jeep.

"Of course it is. Listen to me!" He grabs my shoulders. "We're on his heels. He won't be able to keep her hidden much longer."

"She got one call out," I growl. "But he won't make that mistake again. If he switches cars now, we'll lose him."

"That's no reason to spiral!" Kamil shakes me. "Pull yourself together, man. Eva's counting on you!"

I look at him, the adrenaline finally starting to fade.

"If she really dies this time," I say, shaking my head, "I'll never forgive myself."

"She won't," Kamil says firmly. "If he wanted to kill her, he'd have done it already. He needs her."

"But the blood..."

"We don't know whose it is."

Yeah. We really don't.

Krause's car turns up an hour later on the outskirts of Sochi. Empty. At least there's some relief in knowing there's no blood inside.

"They're starting facial recognition scans," Kamil tells me. "We'll look for witnesses. They couldn't have gotten far—not in the city. We'll try to track payments too. Hey!" He grabs me again—probably for the fifth time today. "I've got everything under control! But you need to go to the hotel and rest. Sleep. Eat something normal. Otherwise, you're not gonna survive long enough to see Eva again! Buddy, you can't keep going like this!"

"Yeah," I mutter, barely listening, glancing around.

Whose blood was it in that house?

What if it wasn't Eva's?

What if *she* was the one driving the Rover and ditched it here? No... it doesn't add up. Why would she run? She's the one who called emergency services. But what if she was running from Krause? Where would she go? Where would I go? Somewhere crowded. Somewhere with people.

"You're right," I say to Kamil, though my thoughts are miles away. "I'll go to the hotel."

"Wait—hey!" he yells after me. "Where are you going?! You have the car!"

But I keep walking, studying faces, peering into shop windows. I walk a long way down the brightly lit, festive boulevard. Now and then I stop people, show them Eva's photo. No one's seen her. I

wander back and forth, looping around like a bloodhound on a scent. It's stupid—I know that. But I can't stop. I *feel* her. She's here. Somewhere close.

A couple stumbles out of a bar, laughing, talking in hushed voices. And I—I hit something invisible. Like a wall. I can't take another step.

"I'll go with you!" Tyler Joseph's voice floats out from the open door.

What bar plays this kind of song?

My legs move on their own, carrying me down the stairs.

One, two, three.

"I'll go with you"

I push the door open.

"I'll go with you"

My eyes sweep the room in an instant—small lobby, bar counter, people everywhere. Loud, laughing, moving. A second room further back. I see it all, take it all in— but none of it matters...

"I'll go with you..."

Because she's here.

I can feel it, like the tumblers of my life clicking into place—each one falling into its perfect slot. Now it's right. Now it all makes sense.

Eva is swaying to the music, twirling a red curl around her finger. The moment I reach the bar, she looks up. Her blue eyes light up with joy. I smile—I can't help it. She's completely wasted.

"My favorite song!" she announces—to me or to the bartender, hard to say.

"Wouldn't calm down until I played it," he confirms—a guy with a short buzz cut dyed electric blue, his arms covered in tattoos.

"Our favorite," I correct, sitting down beside her.

"Ooooooh!" she drawls, drunk and grinning as she points at me and beams at the bartender. "You know who this is? Roo—*hic!*—man Sokolov! Wait—what was it... Oh! 'Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist!' That's totally him! I mean, okay, he's not a weapons manufacturer like Stark, just a boring construction tycoon... But if you ask me, I'd say he's a model! Because he always looks like ten stylists just got him ready for a Vogue cover! I swear, if he wore a potato sack, sacks would instantly become the hottest trend of the season!" She bursts out laughing—total stand-up mode—then snaps her fingers, biting her lip. She's impossibly seductive. "But wait! That's not even the best part! You know who else he is? You'll never guess! He's my husband! Can you believe that? And now, for the cherry on top—"

She curls her finger at the bartender. He leans in, casting a sympathetic glance my way. Eva leans toward him and stage-whispers, loud enough for the whole bar to hear:

"I don't remember him at all! Like—not a single thing! And just look at him! Could you forget a guy like that if you were a woman? But I did! Completely!" She lets out a sharp breath, then turns back to me. Her eyes are welling up, about to spill over. "Roman," she says, voice cracking, "why did you come? You've got a wedding to plan!"

"Dude," the bartender mutters, sliding a glass of whiskey in front of me. "You are in trouble. This one's on the house. Looks like you need it."

"Shhh..." I ignore the drink and pull Eva toward me, feeling her tremble. "Shhh... It's okay. It's all okay now."

I close my eyes. Convince myself this is real. That I'm not dreaming. She's really here, right here, already passed out with her head on my shoulder, completely trusting.

The bartender laughs and shakes his head.

"I swear," he says, "I've never seen anyone get that drunk off two shots. Watch her, man. She's got wild energy."

He winks.

Another time, I might've been annoyed. But right now? Nothing could ruin this moment.

"Call us a cab," I say, tossing a bill onto the counter.

Chapter 26

Eva

I open my eyes and lie still for a moment, trying to figure out where I am. A spacious two-room suite. A massive bed. The curtains are drawn. Did I seriously get so drunk I hooked up with some wealthy tourist? Not bad, honestly—not bad at all, considering the state I was in after the escape. Wait—where is this tourist? I'm in bed alone. Well...

I yank the blanket up.

...Almost completely naked! Underwear and bra barely count! Wow, I must've gotten *really* wasted—not a single thing comes to mind! Or maybe the alcohol mixed with my meds? But I haven't taken anything for days...

And strange—I don't feel hungover at all.

Cautiously, I sit up, listening to my body. Nope, nothing. I feel great. Maybe my body metabolizes alcohol like a pro? I haven't drunk in years—no real point of reference.

I get up and tiptoe into the bathroom. Empty. I shower quickly, brush my teeth. Wrapped in a robe, I head back out.

I finally work up the nerve to peek into the next room. It's bright—sunlight streams through the floor-to-ceiling windows. An electric fireplace glows softly. A white rug on the floor. A sofa by the wall... and on it, sleeping—Roman Sokolov himself.

I gasp and slap a hand over my mouth. But he's out cold. Doesn't even stir.

How?! What happened? How did I end up here? *With him?* A million questions—and not a single answer in sight. Maybe I *do* belong in a psych ward after all. These blackouts are anything but funny.

Still—what is he doing here? I thought he was in Moscow, prepping for a wedding.

Although... hold on. Technically, he's still married. To *me*. Of course. That's it. He must've come to talk about a divorce. My little resurrection couldn't have come at a worse time for him. But how did he find me so fast? None of this makes sense.

I stand there, shifting from foot to foot, staring at... um... my husband. That's going to take some getting used to. The only husband I remember is Mark—the fake one. A husband-shaped lie wrapped around a full-blown maniac. Time to reevaluate everything I thought I knew.

My *real husband* has dark hair. Back in Prague, it was slicked back, giving him a polished look. Now, messy and falling onto his forehead in sleep, he looks so much younger. If not for the dark circles under his eyes, he could pass for a teenager. A college kid doing temp work over winter break. But there's a deep line between his brows, and faint creases by his eyes—clearly not a student. A man, probably mid-thirties. And unfairly handsome. Sharp cheekbones, dark stubble on sunken cheeks. His thick eyelashes twitch.

He's frowning even in his sleep. That couch is clearly too small—his legs are bent, and one arm dangles toward the floor. His phone rests nearby, and his fingers twitch like they're ready to grab it at any second. I wonder what he's dreaming about. Looks like something bad. If I were *really* his wife, I'd go over to him now. Run my fingers through his hair. Wake him with a kiss so he'd forget the nightmare right away. He'd open his eyes—deep brown, almost black in the morning—and smile. And then...

I shiver.

That image came to me so vividly—as if I'd seen it a thousand times before.

Roman opens his eyes. Dark brown—almost black. He stares at me, unblinking, like he can't believe what he's seeing. For a long moment—maybe a whole minute. Then he blinks, shakes his head, trying to shake off the remnants of sleep. And... he smiles.

And I just stand there in front of him, not knowing what to do with myself. A strange kind of bitterness swells inside. Because he woke up on his own—not from my kiss.

"What time is it?" Roman asks, his voice hoarse.

I shrug. He chuckles, slaps his palm against his forehead—*What an idiot*—then checks the watch on his wrist.

"Yup, definitely missed breakfast. How long have you been up? How do you feel?"

"I feel fine!" I say, surprised that my voice doesn't tremble at all. "Actually, it's weird. I must've drunk a whole tank last night—I don't remember *anything*. How did I end up here? And you...?"

He gives a small, amused shake of his head. Still doesn't take his eyes off me.

"You've got an intolerance. Your body's wired in a very specific way—once it detects alcohol stronger than twelve percent, it flags it as poison and shuts down. But the upside? You wake up fresh as a daisy."

He laughs. I notice one of his canines sticks out just slightly. That tiny imperfection, breaking through his otherwise flawless appearance, somehow makes him even more attractive. As if that were even possible.

I nod slowly.

"Got it... Damn, I honestly don't remember. I haven't touched alcohol in years. Not a drop. God, I could've done something really stupid... if you hadn't found me."

"Yeah, I showed up just in time," he says simply, without a hint of reproach.

And now, belatedly, panic starts to rise. What the hell came over me last night? Instead of hiding, I strolled right out into the street—and *went to a bar*! Had I completely lost my mind?!

But then again... If I hadn't gone, Roman wouldn't have found me. And how *did* he find me, anyway?

It's such a strange feeling. I *know* we're legally married. My head knows it. My heart... feels it too. It pulls toward him, flutters, strains.

But the reality is—I'm in a room with a man who's practically a stranger. And I have no idea how to act.

As I stand there, lost in thought, I realize I'm just staring at Roman. And he's staring back. Looking at me hungrily, like he wants to devour me. Or like he's trying to memorize every detail of my face, to hold onto it for as long as he can.

"That hair color suits you," he says seriously.

"Thanks," I reply, a bit flustered. I don't mention that dyeing my hair red had been Mark's idea. The perm too. He said he liked it that way. But now I understand—he was trying to change Eva's appearance as much as possible.

What else did he lie about?

I take a few steps back and sink into a nearby armchair, suddenly exhausted.

"You okay?" Roman asks, concerned. He doesn't move toward me. Which makes sense—why would he?

"Yeah," I whisper, swallowing the lump in my throat. I glance down at my forearm.

It's clear—no sign of the tattoo. I had it removed last year. On my own this time. No pressure from Mark. I just knew he didn't like the shaded bird, so I let it go. Willingly. In the name of love, or so I thought.

But really, that act had marked the final break from my past.

Chapter 27

The room is warm and cozy. The table in front of the fireplace is covered with food, but I'm not hungry. I tear off little pieces of a bun and slowly sip my latte. I try to look anywhere but at Roman. It doesn't work. My gaze keeps drifting to him like it's magnetized. He, unlike me, is happily devouring scrambled eggs with bacon, washing it down with orange juice. Clearly in a great mood—he's talking enough for both of us. And all I can think about is how he held my hands above my head. While kissing me.

"Are you even listening?" he frowns, cutting off his monologue.

"Yes, of course!" I focus and look him in the eyes. Mentally scolding myself—*What are you, thirteen? Why are you staring at him like some groupie drooling over a rock star?!*

He goes back to his story about how he found me. Praising me—for having the presence of mind to call emergency services and describe how to find the house.

I nod absently.

I was genuinely relieved to hear that Mark is alive. Relieved—and at the same time, unsettled. Where did he go? What will his next move be? What will he do to get the laptop and vials back? He's not called a genius for nothing—he'll be three steps ahead of us.

"Don't worry about anything." As if reading my thoughts, Roman sets down his fork and looks at me in a way that instantly dries out my lips. "I'll hire the best trackers. They'll dig him out of the ground if they have to."

I nod. Clear my throat and say:

"I think... he'll find us himself."

"Why?"

"I... took something when I ran away from the house."

Roman raises his eyebrows in surprise and smirks slightly. Shakes his head and draws:

"You naughty girl."

My cheeks flush with heat. I stand up sharply, irritated. What's with the flirty attitude?! Wasn't he here to talk about a divorce or what?

I walk over to the window. The sky outside is clear, the sun is shining brightly. You'd never guess it was December.

Roman comes up and stands beside me. Too close. I take a small step to the side.

"Sorry," he says. "I don't know what got into me."

I shrug, like, whatever—forget it.

"So what did you take from him?"

"The laptop. It has all the evidence. What he did to me—and to the others... How I even turned into Polina."

And still haven't stopped being her.

I wrap my arms around myself. I feel an overwhelming loneliness. Completely alone—caught between two realities. Lost. Faceless.

Mark wants Polina. If I fall into his trap again—I won't make it out. He'll mess with my head again, feed me pills, make me forget. Turn me into his little puppet. He'll build his toy world around me all over again. Not because he loves me so much. But because playing god is his favorite game.

Roman, on the other hand, wants Eva. He needs her—I can feel it. The way he worries. The heat of his body. A single hint from me—and he'd drop his fiancée, cancel the wedding, throw his whole life at my feet again. But I don't deserve that kind of gift. I wouldn't know what to do with it.

Because I'm neither one nor the other. Just a marionette. Where they point me—that's where I go. Does a real self still exist under all those layers of fake memories? Or has she been destroyed for good?

I suddenly turn toward Roman. Of course—he's standing there, watching me. That hungry, burning gaze. He didn't have time to hide it behind his Winter Soldier mask. And I feel naked in my white terry robe. I pull it tighter without thinking. That gesture doesn't go unnoticed. Roman lifts his left eyebrow in amusement.

"We need to set some boundaries," I say quietly, but firmly. "I watched those videos on the laptop. That's why I didn't run in time—I was in total shock. Lost track of everything. Doesn't matter... But here's what does, Roman: I know now that my name isn't Polina. But that doesn't mean I've become Eva either. Do you understand me?"

He stares at me for a full minute, like he's hypnotizing me—then silently nods. He gets it. Bitterness spreads through me.

"Polina's memories are still alive in me. It still feels like that's my real life. My real past. And I don't know anything about you—except what I read online. And the fact that you're incredibly handsome, of course!" I smile, pretending everything's fine. "And that part was online too, by the way."

I smile even wider. Look how cheerful I am!

My heart is bleeding.

"So let's just do what you came here for. Restore my name, and then we can get divorced with a clear conscience."

"You think that's why I came?"

His face is completely calm. Even relaxed. Only in his eyes, golden sparks keep flashing. Or is it just sunlight?

I shrug.

"Why else?"

We're interrupted by a phone call. Roman steps aside to take it, and I exhale. I can't keep pretending for long—it's not working. Feels like one little push, and I'll crack. Spill everything that's bottled up inside.

"Yes, I found her," Roman says behind me. I really hope he's not looking at me right now. Just in case, I slowly straighten up and fold my arms across my chest. Admire the view outside the window. "She's here with me. Where was I supposed to send her, Kamil? That bastard is still lurking somewhere nearby. You find him—then we'll talk. Yeah. Okay. Bye."

I feel him approaching. Literally—my heart senses it. Starts fluttering wildly in my chest, like a bird trapped in a cage. Fascinating effect.

I turn around. He's standing right in front of me. Mask's back on, but now I know how easily it slips. Still, no point in provoking him. Our paths are about to part again anyway. No need to get used to anything.

"Can you give me the address of the house where you left your things?" he asks, dryly. "I'll go get them. No need for you to go out just yet."

I think. Of course not! In the state I was in yesterday, I could barely make rational decisions—let alone remember addresses!

I shake my head.

"I don't know the address. I only remember the way. Looks like I'll have to go myself."

Chapter 28

Roman

While we're getting ready, Eva tries to keep a straight face. She went into the bathroom, came back out in jeans and a sweater. Looks like she's calmed down. Thinks that makes her look less attractive? Naive girl. It takes zero effort for me to picture her with no clothes at all. Like snapping my fingers—bam, there she is.

In five years of missing her, I somehow never really thought about how much I missed just her body. Well, not never—she visited me at night. Kissed me senseless. I fucked her in my sleep so hard the world stopped. There were other women, but none of them knew how to love like that—giving everything, completely. Only after those dreams came the crash. I'd wake up drained, wrung out, drenched in sweat. Like I really had spent the whole night screwing. And then the loneliness would hit even harder. So bad it made me want to howl, scream out loud, tear my damn hair out. Because she wasn't there. No one to hold, no one to cling to. Screw sex—I just wanted to bury my face in her hair and never let go.

That's why it only hit me yesterday—how much I missed her body. When I carried her to the room and she wrapped her arms around my neck. So gently. In her half-sleep she stroked the back of my head, ran her fingers through my hair. Just the back of my head. And I was hard like she was dancing naked in front of me. While I was undressing her, I almost lost it—wanted to wake her up with kisses. I knew she wouldn't resist. I saw how she looked at me in the bar, remembered her reaction at that cheap hotel in Prague.

My ears were ringing, my hands literally shaking, that's how badly I wanted her. To touch her, kiss her, make her moan under me like before. To make her come over and over. To make her forget that blond doctor ever existed.

I held back. Went to the couch. It would've been wrong. Wouldn't have been fair. Still not sure which of us—me or that blonde doctor—is the bigger idiot.

I squint at her. She said she doesn't remember me. That she still thinks of herself as Polina. Does she still love *him*?

"What?" she snaps, chin tilted up in defiance.

I don't know who she thinks she is right now, but in that gesture—from hair to fingertips—she's all mine. My Eva. Bold and prickly. My girl.

"Nothing," I shrug. "You're too noticeable. We need to hide your hair. Now."

I pull a long gray beanie from my suitcase—Max stuffed it in there. I make him wear a hat, he makes me. Can't argue—it's fair. So this gray ridiculous thing's been traveling around with me. And now, it came in handy.

"Here," I offer. "It'll suit you."

She gives me a suspicious look—trying to figure out if I'm messing with her. I shrug—yeah, interpret that however you want. I keep a straight face, though I'm dying to laugh. Been feeling that way since last night at the bar. Since I saw her again. My mood's been soaring, no matter what chaos is going on around us. Just because she's alive. Because she's near. We'll deal with the rest somehow.

She goes to the bathroom again, comes back wearing the hat. Damn, how is it possible that even dressed like some teenage boy, she's still impossibly attractive to me?! Baggy jeans, oversized sweater. And now the hat. An unbelievably sexy look—according to one particular billionaire.

I nod approvingly.

"Perfect. Looking like that, you're ready to bum smokes outside the building. I doubt anyone will recognize you."

She turns bright red, presses her lips together. There's fire in her eyes. She's offended.

Then it fades, and I feel claws scratching inside my chest. What did I mess up this time?

She walks over and looks me straight in the eye. Hands in her pockets, those huge blue eyes shining under the hat.

She says:

"Listen. Maybe you misunderstood me. I didn't mean to hurt you. Quite the opposite—I don't want to cause pain. Again. Not again. I can't. I have no right! You've already been through so much because of her. Because of me, I mean... I don't know why Eva— Why I did that to you. Didn't tell you about the illness. Left you alone with a child. There were probably reasons for it. But now, looking back, I see how cruel it was. I wouldn't forgive myself if I were you. And you shouldn't either. Move on. Eva's dead. You grieved. You mourned. Don't bring her back—especially since that's probably impossible. She wrote to you, told you not to look for her, that she was gone. And she really is gone, Roman. As for the one who took her place—I don't even know who that is. So let's get divorced. Marry a woman who loves you. Who'll make you happy. Who'll value you and protect you. You've suffered enough because of me. Okay?"

I stare at her in silence. With every word, the weight in my chest grows heavier. It keeps growing and growing until it fills me completely. Until I become that weight. Meanwhile, she goes on:

"I'd just like to... I know I have no right—whatever you decide is up to you... I'd just like to see my son. And maybe, later... see him again. Now and then. But if you say no—I'll understand."

She falters, looks away. My jaw feels like it's about to crack—I'm clenching it so hard. My hands are so tense they're on the verge of cramping. That damn stone inside me won't shrink.

I barely recognize my own voice. It's mechanical, robotic.

"Maybe you're right. I need time to think. Let's put this conversation on hold for now. First we deal with your fake husband."

I turn and walk away. I feel like a stone golem. I can barely move. Yeah, baby, you've got a real talent for wrecking a guy's mood.

Halfway to the door, I turn back. No—I can't stay quiet. Some of the things she said are eating at that stone inside me. They're the only reason I can still move.

"I never told you about the letter. So how do you know what it said, if Eva is dead inside you? Maybe you just don't *want* to give her a chance. Maybe Polina—and her feelings for the doctor—are still closer to you?"

She stares at me, stunned. Presses her fingers to her lips. She spoke without thinking—and now it's hit her. Good. That means there's still something to think about.

Chapter 29

Eva

As we leave the room and ride the elevator down, neither of us says a word. I still can't pull myself together. I keep going over what I said to Roman. And what he said back. Could he be right? Could memories really be coming back? Just like that, out of nowhere—like with the letter? I have no idea how I knew what it said. I don't even clearly remember writing it. And if Roman hadn't pointed those words out, I wouldn't have given them a second thought. Unreal.

I glance at him sideways—calm as a Tibetan monk. I wish I could be like that, God!

The hotel lobby is packed. A huge Christmas tree sparkles and twinkles. Under it, boxes wrapped in colorful paper. Translucent crystal-like figures hang from the ceiling. Some kind of Christmas music is playing. It's beautiful. I've always loved Christmas. As cliché as it sounds, for me it's a symbol of rebirth. A new turn of the wheel. And it's up to you—will you steer it, or end up crushed in the mud beneath it. Christmas brings energy, some kind of strength. It's always been like that since I was a kid. I hope that doesn't change now.

And then the thought hits me—what childhood are you even talking about? The one from the orphanage, the one you remember but never really had? Or the real one, with gifts and candy and loving parents? The one you have no memory of?

I guess this is my karma now—to question every feeling I have. To ask: is it real, or not?

Roman holds my hand firmly, confidently leading me toward the massive door beside which stands a very serious-looking doorman. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a man striding straight toward us. Around forty-five, wearing a coat and glasses, briefcase in hand. Looks respectable. I slow down, tug Roman's fingers—wait. Let's let him pass. Who knows, maybe he's in a rush. Roman turns, and at that moment, the guy barrels into us. He grabs my hand out of Roman's and, staring me straight in the eye, says quietly:

"Return what you took. Today. They'll contact you. Don't even think about going to the police, got it? Or it'll be worse."

It all happens so fast—I don't even have time to be scared. But Roman's reaction is flawless. In an instant, he assesses the situation, grabs the guy by the shoulder and punches him in the gut. The man doubles over, I gasp, and only now realize—he wasn't just passing by. He was waiting for us.

Chills run down my spine, I glance around—is *he* here too? Mark??

But of course he's not stupid enough to show up himself. He's using other people.

Security's already rushing over, and Roman is gripping the guy by the collar like a kitten by the scruff. Suddenly, the man jerks free, leaves the coat in Roman's hands, and bolts for the exit. The guards take off after him.

Roman's first instinct is to chase him. He takes a few steps, then stops and turns around. He looks at me, then around the lobby. Assesses the situation. It's too crowded—he won't risk leaving me.

He drops the coat on the floor, holds out his hand to me. I grab it like a lifeline. He grips it tight and pulls me toward the exit again. A couple of breathless security guards head our way.

"Did you catch him?" Roman calls out.

"He got away! What'd he do?"

They went after him without even knowing why. Must be Roman's a special client—they're not about to risk losing him.

"He threatened my wife," Roman nods toward me. Just like that! "If he shows up again, detain him and hand him over to the police."

They nod. Look at me with interest. I probably don't look the part of a construction tycoon's wife.

We get into a black business-class Mercedes as soon as we're outside. It suits Roman perfectly. Me, in my outfit, I feel like some stray who climbed into someone else's car. I scoot to the side and stare out the window like I've never seen anything more fascinating. Though every part of me is drawn to Roman: to lean on him, to hide my head against his chest. To let myself be protected.

To keep from grabbing his hand, I tuck my palms between my knees.

We drive through the city like we're floating, cutting through the slow-moving stream of cars.

It takes about twenty minutes to reach the spot where I left Mark's Rover. The car's already gone—taken for examination.

Roman tells the driver not to leave, but to trail us slowly. He gives me a mocking look.

"Alright, show us the way, hero."

Ignoring the jab, I look around. I try to imagine the city in the dark—that helps me get my bearings faster. Then I gesture for Roman to follow and walk quickly down the avenue.

He follows a couple steps behind. There's the bar I turned into last night. For the life of me, I can't remember how Roman pulled me out of there. I glance back. He's smiling, nodding toward the bar. He knows what I'm thinking. Bastard. I snort and keep walking. Wave my hand without looking back—come on, keep up! At the corner, there's an electronics store and a cell phone shop. We keep going—you can't miss it: they play the same "Jingle Bells" chorus on repeat here, and that's something I remember perfectly from last night. How do the employees not go insane? They must hate that song.

Oh, and just behind that souvenir shop—we turn there!

Out of the crowd, a skinny figure suddenly lunges toward me, and I recoil. A scruffy-looking guy holds out a phone. I take it automatically. He says:

"Return everything you took! Today!"

Roman's one second too slow to grab him. The guy bolts and dives straight into the dense traffic. Screeching brakes. Twisting metal.

I'm frozen to the pavement. Every sound is too sharp. The world turns from a rolling film into frozen slides from a projector.

Click.

The avenue's at a standstill. Drivers are swearing, a woman screams somewhere.

Click.

The guy's shoe lies on the curb. A bright red stain on someone's green bumper.

Click.

Sudden darkness. The scent of men's cologne. A moment later I realize—Roman's holding me. Shielding me from the horrific scene. It's pointless, Roman. That image is burned into my memory forever.

The phone in my hand vibrates. Unknown number. I hold it to my ear. Mark's oily voice comes through the speaker.

"Darling, return my things. You don't want people dying because of you, do you?"

Chapter 30

Roman

Eva suddenly starts collapsing to the ground. I don't realize right away that she's lost consciousness, but I catch her instinctively. Light as a kitten, her breathing barely there. Red strands have slipped out from under her hat, and against them, her face looks unnaturally pale. It scares the hell out of me, and then her phone slips from her hand. A plain old flip phone. Some woman picks it up and hands it to me, glancing at Eva with pity.

"Oh God, this is awful—just awful! What are they thinking, those idiots? Why, why would they do something like this?!"

Shaking her head, she walks away, still mumbling her outrage out loud.

I quickly scroll through the call log with one hand. Just one incoming call from an unknown number.

"You might want to step back from the road," says a bald old man in a scarf. "The lady's already unwell, and the fumes from these cars aren't helping."

I glance around, dazed. It all looks like a set from a bad movie. The crowd keeps growing, cars are honking. People shouting. That idiot jumper is lying under a green UAZ. An ambulance is trying to push its way through the jam.

Why did he jump? What did he say to Eva before that?

I don't know. I didn't hear. I was too far behind.

Anger at myself starts bubbling up, boiling somewhere deep. Grinding my insides to dust. I shouldn't have missed that—had no right! I'm losing control again.

I stretch my neck, scanning the road. There it is—our Benz, not too far off. We'll sit there, let Eva recover. She'll tell me what happened.

As I approach the car, the driver jumps out and opens the door.

"Hospital?"

Eva opens her eyes. Her gaze drifts blankly around the car. I rub her cheeks, breathe on my fingers. They're ice-cold. She's like a block of ice herself.

"Take us back to the hotel," I tell the driver.

A hospital's too risky. It's like she's under siege—until I figure out who we can trust, no strangers.

Her eyes clear. She sits up straighter and asks:

"Where are we going?"

I don't answer. I call Kamil.

"Send a doctor to the hotel," I say curtly. "Only someone vetted, Cap—run them through the wringer. No connections to Krause, not even through third parties!"

"I'll take care of it."

As always, no unnecessary questions.

"Cap?" Eva says, rubbing her hands.

"Kamil. He's a friend. Don't worry, you can trust him."

And then it hits her. I see her fingers trembling, lips quivering, breath coming in short gasps—she's about to pass out again! I grab her and pull her into my arms. I'm whispering some nonsense, trying to soothe her. She clings to me tightly, pressing in. She doesn't even cry—she moans, growls, shakes all over. A full-blown meltdown. It actually scares me. I've never seen Eva like this before. I'm angry again, but not at myself this time—at that bleach-blond freak who pushed my fierce girl this far.

"It's my fault, it's all my fault!" she yells. Tears are streaming down her face. "That man died because of me, Roman! How am I supposed to live with that?!"

"Shhh..." I rock her gently, stroke her hair. Doesn't matter what I say right now—it'll all sound wrong. But I still whisper into her ear, "You're not to blame, baby. You're his victim, hear me? There's only one person responsible, and we'll find him. I promise you, Snowy. We'll get that bastard."

We're stuck in traffic. Soft classical music plays in the car. Eva's sobbing slowly quiets down. She snuffles for a while longer, nose buried in my chest. Then she suddenly sits up straight.

"My phone! I had a phone—where is it?"

"I've got it," I reply calmly.

"Give it to me!"

"Look, it needs to be examined. Kamil will—"

"GIVE IT TO ME NOW!!!"

I watch her for a moment, weighing it. No way that bastard left any trace on it. Most likely, the phone wasn't even bought directly by him. Kamil will pull the call log anyway. I take it out of my pocket and hand it over. She grabs it like a lifeline and checks for missed calls.

"He didn't call," I say. "Did he promise he would?"

She shrugs and leans away again. Shut down. Is that all I'm good for now? A shoulder to cry on?

I feel the irritation rising. I speak sharply:

"Let's hope you realize we have to work together on this. If you don't help me, I'll still find him—but it might take longer. And who knows what else he'll do in the meantime?"

I instantly regret the last part. Idiot. She just calmed down, and here I am dumping guilt back on her.

But she just presses her lips together, nods.

"I get it."

I pull a tissue from my pocket and hand it to her. She takes it in silence, wipes her face, still staring out the window. We drive on in silence. It takes much longer to get back to the hotel—traffic's worse now. Kamil called, said the doctor's already waiting. Eva snapped that she doesn't need any doctor. I ignore it. How are we supposed to communicate if she keeps shutting down like this? I glance at her and think back to how it all started. She was just like this back then—prickly, quick to flare up. I never knew what I'd done wrong or how to approach her. Later, I figured it out—it was her shield. Deep down, she's one of the softest people I've ever known. And every time she lashed out, I'd just kiss her. Tell her I loved her. Her whole armor would melt away in a second.

I smile. Probably not the right approach now. But maybe later.

"What are you smiling at?" she asks, eyeing me suspiciously. I shake my head—not telling. She adds, "And why do you call me Snowy?"

That one, I'll answer.

"Well, technically, you're the Snow Queen," I say, smiling straight at her. "Who else could be a perfect match for the Winter Soldier? I'll explain someday. But 'Snowy'—that's just between us."

She gives me a strange look, like she's about to say something. But then holds back and turns back to the window, curling up again in her prickly little shell.

Chapter 31

Eva

Time. Time never waits.

While an older doctor checks me over and asks about my symptoms, I answer automatically. My mind's somewhere else. Thinking. About how little time I have. That Mark will call soon, and I'll have to answer. And it's like he knows I can't pick up now—there are too many people around. The doctor, Roman, and now Kamil showed up with a detective. The room's packed, and everyone wants something from me.

The doctor says I need rest, and Roman latches onto that like a lifeline. The detective barely gets a few questions in before Roman swoops down like a hawk—leave my wife alone! Didn't you hear what the doctor said? Tomorrow, all questions tomorrow!

We barely managed to fend them off. There's no time to waste—especially since I feel fine, all things considered. I say I want to help. Even if I don't know much. Besides what I saw on the laptop, and they already know the rest. They found the house I was held in. They searched the clinic top to bottom. Nothing on Mark, except my statement about being held against my will. That's why the laptop is so crucial. The detective gives me a strange look. Probably doesn't believe me. And honestly—who would? It's easier to assume I'm delusional. Or that I ran off from my husband with another guy and now I'm making up wild stories to cover it. That version fits nicely into the detective's worldview. But a serum that cures cancer and rewires the brain? Yeah, no thanks.

I get it. And I understand something else— I can't be saved anymore. Mark is a spider. He's woven his web around everything he could reach. And that's... a lot. Now it all clicks in my head—Roman, without realizing, nudged me toward the truth. Back in the car, while he was trying to comfort me. The well-dressed man who attacked me in the hotel lobby. The poor guy who jumped in front of a car. They were both his victims. They must have been Mark's patients once. Treated with his serum. He told me he'd stopped the experiments long ago, but I know now that was a lie. Everything fits. The waiting list at the medical center. The miracle recovery rates, supposedly from standard treatments. If you dig deep enough, I bet all the ones who recovered were big shots. Then again, maybe not. He must've had pawns too—people who'd throw themselves under a car on command..

My heart starts pounding in my ears again. I can't breathe. I see the guy with the phone in his hand. And then a minute later...

"That's enough!" Roman cuts off the detective. "Look at her—she's pale as a ghost!"

Mark, what have you done to all of us...

Is this about power? Or was it just a safety net you built in advance?

Everyone who's ever met Dr. Krause's patients gushes about how they adore him. That admiration was easy to explain—gratitude for saving their lives. But it wasn't just gratitude. It wasn't. That love was grown. Engineered. Planted like seeds—this blind devotion to a man who heals anyone

who asks. With that serum, Mark created an army of grateful slaves. Fanatics. Without doubt. Without fear. Ready to die for him.

I lift my head.

And who exactly am I supposed to tell all this to? Roman? Kamil? That serious-looking detective with the gray hair? Just so they can laugh in my face or, worse, have me locked up in a psych ward? No way. No one's going to take my word for it. I need proof. The videos, and the serum I grabbed from the house in the mountains. And those are the last things I can hand over to the detective. If I do, more people will die—Mark made that crystal clear. Dr. Krause had hundreds of patients over the years. The only way to save them is at the cost of my own life. Or my memory, which is basically the same. I'm sure he won't settle for the laptop alone—he'll want me too. The fact that I managed to escape his web is a spit in the face of his god complex. His sick vanity. He wants his favorite doll back at any cost. And I have no choice but to give her up. That's the trap I'm in.

"All right, one last question for today," the detective says gently. He's not a bad guy, really. He's not rough, doesn't blame me for anything, just looks at me a little strangely. Maybe he's just worried about Moscow getting involved. Roman probably has connections there. "Can you show us on a map where you left the evidence?"

"I can!" I nod confidently. "But probably not on a phone—it's too small. Do you have an old-school map? Paper?"

"We'll find one."

While they're looking for it, they talk in low voices, trying to keep me from hearing. Roman keeps glancing at me, and I really don't like how he's looking. Sharp. Piercing. Like he's seeing straight through me. Like an X-ray. It makes my cheeks burn with guilt. This time he definitely won't forgive me. And he shouldn't. How many times can I keep hurting him like this? But right now, God knows, I don't have a choice.

They bring the map, and I pretend to think it over before marking a spot with a little cross. Far from here. Definitely not the real place I left the stuff.

Before leaving, Roman crouches in front of me. Looks me straight in the eyes. His gaze is dark. Impenetrable. His face completely serious.

"Nothing else you want to tell me?" he asks calmly, and I feel shards of ice splinter in my chest. I want to breathe them out, let them melt—but I can't. So I just shake my head. He nods. "All right. Will you wait for me?"

"Of course," I force a smile. "Where else would I go? You did say you were going to lock me up. So no one can snatch me away."

"Of course." His smile seems bitter to me. God, has he figured it out? But how? "I won't give you to anyone—unless you want me to."

Chapter 32

Once they leave, I wait a good half hour just to be safe. I don't have a key, so I call the front desk and tell them—sounding properly flustered—that I accidentally broke a glass and need someone to clean it up immediately. They promise to send a maid right away. Without wasting time, I head to the bathroom and swipe a glass off the table on my way. I glance back.

Shattered. Just like my soul.

I get dressed and step out at the exact moment the door opens. I hold it for the maid as she wheels in her cart. She thanks me and smiles. Guilt twists in my chest. Roman will probably blow up at her later... I smile back and point to the broken glass. She gets to work. I slip out.

I walk quickly down the street. My senses are on high alert, like they were when that guy threw himself under the car. Sounds are too sharp, colors too bright. I scan every face—I can't help it. Who among them is one of Mark Krause's worshippers? The young guy in glasses with a fancy coat? The curly-haired girl in a blue bomber jacket? The old lady feeding pigeons? Who's been sent to watch me? Paranoia wraps around my throat and squeezes—I suspect everyone.

I jump on a bus, don't pay, ride a couple stops and hop off. This part of the city looks familiar. While looking at the map earlier, I managed to catch a quicker way to get to the street I need. And still, I get lost. I wander for half an hour before finally finding the courtyard. Yes, this is it. Same houses, same slippery stairs. Same cat squinting at me like it wants to say, *You're an idiot, Eva. Always were. Always will be.*

"Scram!" I hiss at him, but he doesn't even flinch. Just stares at me with contempt.

The room's much warmer now—the landlady wasn't lying, the heat's blasting. It even feels cozy. I shouldn't have left. I should've stayed hidden. Maybe Mark wouldn't have found me.

I snort in frustration. Bullshit. He would've found me anyway, with his whole network of worshippers.

I open the laptop and skim through the videos. Thinking. Thinking...

When I step outside, the sun's already setting. I glance around. Well? Where are you all hiding? No one. The last light of the day warms the top of my head—this time, not covered by Roman's beanie. But the ice shards in my chest don't melt. They cut deeper. I want to break down and cry, but I can't. I don't get to fall apart right now.

Deep breath in. Slow breath out. I start down the street. It's not my job to decide where I'm going anymore. No doubt the spider's all-seeing eye is already on me.

Sure enough, not even five minutes pass before an old black Mazda pulls up. The driver gives a slight nod—get in. I don't hesitate. What's there to think about? I've already thought it all through.

"Hand over your phone," the driver says, and I obey. It goes flying out the window. We keep driving.

It's a short ride, maybe ten minutes, through narrow streets. Then we stop. The driver's voice is flat:

"Out."

I obey again. I take a few steps, and the Mazda drives off. A beat-up old car rolls out of an alley. The new driver frisks me from head to toe—stops just short of making me strip. Finds nothing. Orders me into the car. They swap me like this a few more times. One car to the next. Circling the city, watching for a tail. When the last driver finally ties a blindfold over my eyes, I know this is it. The last stop. The end of the line. And that's when my body starts to shake. I'm terrified of Mark—sick with it. I know what he's capable of. I ran. I humiliated him. I robbed him and knocked him out cold. It's only hitting me now—he's not going to let that slide. So what will he do? How will he make me pay?

Tears leak under the blindfold. I breathe in sharp, jerky gasps, completely losing control. God, I'm so scared.

We drive for what feels like hours. At some point, I start to calm down. The road twists—first up, then down. Mountains again, I guess. Another of Mark's hideouts? How many does he have? I wrap my arms around myself. I shouldn't have survived five years ago, Roman. I'm nothing but trouble. Numbness settles in—same as always after the tears. Whatever happens, happens. I'm ready for it.

When we finally stop, I've already accepted my fate. They let me out, but don't take off the blindfold right away. I hug myself. It's colder here—much colder than in the city. Someone leads me forward. Dogs are barking. People talking in a language I don't understand. Something harsh, unfamiliar.

They lead me inside and only then pull off the blindfold. Bright fluorescent light stabs my eyes. I hear voices around me, but I can't tell where to look. So I look down. Wood floor painted brown. Woven rugs scattered here and there. My eyes start to adjust and I take in the room. Stone walls. Tiny windows up near the ceiling. A snarling wolf's head mounted between them. We're in some kind of fortress. The voices go quiet. I turn toward the sound. In the far corner—there's a table. Three men sit behind it. Two of them look like the kind of guys you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley—thick beards, sharp faces, eyes crawling over me like flies. The third is Mark. Eyebrows raised, staring straight at me. And I feel a hatred for him so deep and feral, those two creeps couldn't even dream of it.

Without a word, I walk over and hurl the bag with the laptop right at his smug face. Bastard catches it. I'm honestly disappointed—should've thrown harder.

"Well, damn," the younger guy mutters, grinning. "This one's got fire. Breaking her's gonna be fun."

Mark unzips the bag, peeks inside, nods with satisfaction. Then his eyes flick back to me. I shudder with disgust. How did I not notice before how repulsive his stare is? Like a dead fish.

"What are you waiting for?" he says. "Strip."

"What?!"

"Oh, you didn't think I'd keep you around after everything you did, did you?" His smile twists into something vile. "No, sweetheart. There's a price for betrayal. You're going to sink lower than you ever thought possible. Crawling through filth. Pleasing bums for scraps. But before you hit rock bottom, you're gonna start with these fine gentlemen. They like breaking girls with attitude. And when they

found out you're Sokolov's wife—oh, they were thrilled. Turns out they've got some unfinished business with him."

I look around in panic. Two massive guards stand behind me, already undressing me with their eyes. The two brutes lick their lips, still slick with grease. They make smacking noises, egging me on. And inside me—all-consuming fury. If I had the chance, I'd kill that bastard right here, right now, and not feel a thing.

"Which one of you was his patient?" I hiss, leaning over the table like a snake. "You? Or you? Or someone in your family? Do you even know who you're sitting next to? That's not a man, he's a monster. Yesterday, he ordered someone to jump in front of a car—just to scare me. To make sure I'd come here and bring his stuff. You think he won't do the same to you? He's out of control. He thinks he's God. The moment you're no longer useful, you'll be under that car too."

A slap sends me flying. I hit the floor hard, flat on my back.

"Shut your damn mouth!" the younger one barks, waving a hand.

They grab me from both sides and drag me out of the room. But just before the door closes, I see him—standing there, frowning. And this time, there's no lust in his eyes. Just something like doubt.

Chapter 33

It's freezing. *Freezing!*

They dumped me in some kind of stone box with no heating. The only piece of furniture is a stinking couch by the wall—stained and torn to hell. It's impossible to sit on. The cold hits instantly, and I start shivering like crazy. So I pace. Back and forth. Jump around. Recite poems out loud. A couple of hours in, and I weirdly feel... relieved. I won't last much longer like this. I'll freeze to death. And honestly? Good. Better than whatever fate Mark has planned for me.

I strain my ears, trying to catch any sound from the rest of the house. Nothing. I think they're downstairs—maybe the first floor—while I'm on the second. Or the third? Who knows. The staircase was a spiral. Hard to tell. Maybe that whole performance I gave earlier planted some doubt in the bearded guys. Maybe I hit a nerve. Either way, I'm hoping I at least bought myself some time. While they sort things out down there, I'm up here turning into an icicle.

"One-two-three, one-two-three!" I march in place, clap my hands.

Then more pacing. Back and forth, back and forth. Should I just sit down and freeze already? But no—survival instinct won't let me.

"One potato, two potato, three potato, four!"

High kick.

"Five potato, six potato—seven potato more!"

Jump. Clap above my head.

Damn it, I *am* going to freeze!

I lunge at the door and start pounding with everything I've got.

"Let me out of this fridge, you bastards!"

Silence.

Then—footsteps. A man's voice. He calls out.

"Eva!"

I scramble to the far wall and press myself against the cold stone. I'm shaking uncontrollably now—can't stop. Who the hell is out there?

A key turns in the lock. The heavy wooden door creaks open... and I nearly collapse when I see who steps in. Kamil. Ducking slightly to get through the doorway.

In a flash, an image bursts into my mind—Mark at the window, phone in hand. His voice clear as if it were yesterday: *"You had one simple task—track Sokolov's movements and report to me!"*

I gasp. The cold doesn't even register anymore. I should be scared. But I'm not. Not even close. I'm furious. I launch at the traitor, punching wherever I can reach. Caught him off guard—I get a couple of good hits to the face before he recovers. Then he grabs my wrists, twists them behind my back, spins me around. But screw that—I start kicking. I'm screaming, cursing, flailing.

"Calm down, psycho!" Kamil yells and shoves me onto the disgusting couch. I jump right back up, hissing like a wildcat.

"You bastard! Traitor! Roman trusts you! And you—you're working for Mark!" I spit the words like venom, aiming to hit where it hurts.

"You're completely nuts! What makes you think I betrayed him?!"

He looks so stunned that I start to doubt myself. Maybe I was wrong? I hold off on attacking him, but I'm not unclenching my fists just yet.

"What are you even doing here?" I throw at him accusingly.

"We were tracking you! All over the city and beyond. We lost you for a bit—had to stay careful, switch cars, switch drivers. Got a little turned around in the mountains. But thank God, we made it." He peers at me, cautious. *"We did* make it, right? No one hurt you? Or..."

He steps closer and gently turns my face toward the light. Probably saw the slap mark.

I jerk away, pulling my head from his fingers.

"I'm fine. It's nothing," I mutter.

He nods toward the door.

"Well come on, crazy girl."

"You go first!"

He rolls his eyes but obeys. I follow him, one step behind.

We walk down in single file. Armed people in tactical gear move through the corridors—some nod at Kamil, others just pass silently. I'm beginning to realize I was wrong about him. This is a real rescue mission. But still, I glance around nervously, half-expecting something to go wrong and ready to bolt at the first sign of danger.

On the ground floor, I catch up to him and grab his sleeve.

"Did you get him? Did you catch Mark?"

"He's already gone. Calm down. Got caught nice and easy. And we've got that evidence you brought him, too."

I glance around, scanning the room.

"Where's Roman?"

"He's not here. Come on."

He leads me out the door and helps me into the passenger seat of a car. Then he gets behind the wheel, starts the engine, and cranks the heat. I hold my hands up to the warm air. Ohhh... this is heaven.

"Stay here for a bit," Kamil says, looking me dead in the eye. "But seriously—don't pull any of your disappearing-act crap. I'm not in the mood to go chasing you through the mountains like some goat. If you run—I'm leaving without you. Got it?"

"Why would I run?" I blink at him, honestly baffled.

He snorts and shrugs.

"Hell if I know what's going on in that head of yours."

"Don't worry," I grin, curling up in the seat. "You're not getting me out of this warm car for anything."

Judging by his look, he doesn't believe a word. Whatever. I stretch out my legs and let the heat wash over me.

He walks away, leaving the car unlocked. The warmth lulls me. My body finally relaxes. I lower the seat back and curl up tight. Hard to believe I woke up this morning in a hotel room with Sokolov. This day's been endless—like I've lived several lives in the span of a few hours.

It's over now. Really over. Mark's caught. I'm free. We're all free. Roman said he'd find him—and he did.

I think, *If Roman forgives me, I'll never leave him again.*

I remember how he looked at me. How he held me. How he calmed me. He'll forgive me. He still loves me. That thought warms me more than the heater. I soak in it, wrap myself in it like a

blanket. I think of Roman—his eyes, his strong arms. Even if my mind forgot, my body remembers. Every heartbeat, every breath around him. I never felt that with Mark. Not even when I thought he was perfect. Yes, I respected him. Admired him. I was proud to be chosen by someone so brilliant. But I never felt this... explosion of emotion. Not with him. Not with anyone else. Because what I feel for Roman—it's in my blood. In every cell. It runs through me, keeps me alive. Because of him, I was that flower pushing up through the concrete. Because of him. And because of our son.

My thoughts start to blur. Somewhere in the haze I hear Kamil get into the car. The engine hums. We're moving. But I can't open my eyes. I'm too tired. I have nothing left. I fall asleep. And in my dream, I see a little blonde boy with dirt on his cheeks. His eyes shine as he throws his arms around my neck. He whispers, "Mommy, I brought you back to life! But don't tell anyone!" I laugh—and suddenly I see Roman. He's holding a tiny girl in his arms. She looks just like him: dark hair, deep brown eyes. Beautiful. Unbelievably beautiful. My heart swells with tenderness. I reach out to her—but the little girl tightens her arms around Roman's neck... and turns away from me, frowning. And I freeze, understanding with perfect clarity: she's Roman's daughter.

But not mine.

Chapter 34

I wake up as the car slows to a stop in front of the hotel. I get out, bracing myself for a serious conversation. I have to explain everything to Roman. He'll understand. He *has* to.

My head is spinning. We walk through the decorated lobby—lights and garlands everywhere—and I'm swaying so much Kamil catches me by the arm.

"Whoa, easy there." he says. "When's the last time you ate?"

"No idea. Morning, I think."

"What day's morning?" he snorts. "You're all skin and bones."

I'm too drained to snap back, so I stay silent. We ride up in the elevator without a word. Kamil unlocks the door and switches on the lights. I blink at him, confused.

"Where's Roman?"

"He flew back to Moscow. From now on, I'm the one handling your case."

"What?" I shake my head, stunned. *He left? He just... left me?*

Kamil shrugs. "That's what he decided. Look, he knew you were lying from the very start. Saw right through you. This whole operation was his idea. At first, yeah, we weren't sure, but then we saw you leaving the hotel—and it all clicked. So the only reason you're even sitting here right now is because of him. We got Mark because of him. Because he knows you that well."

I drop onto the couch and cover my face with my hands. "It's too much," I say.

"What is?"

"Too much in just two days. My head's gonna explode."

"Well, get some rest," he says. "Dinner's coming up. I'll take care of it. Room's paid for—stay as long as you want. I'll be in touch. While the investigation's ongoing, don't leave the city. After that, it's your call."

He walks out. And I just sit there, replaying the same sentence over and over in my head: *You screwed it all up.*

He told me we had to be on the same side. That we had to do this together. And I went and did it all alone. Again. And this is what I get.

But what else could I have done?

My stomach tightens into a painful knot. I curl up on the couch, pulling my knees to my chest, sneakers and all. I want to stay like this forever. Become a fetus. An embryo. Dissolve into the vast waters of the universe. I'm so tired. God, I'm so tired.

The maid brings dinner. Not the one who cleaned up the glass earlier—a different one. She sets the table without a word and leaves. I don't move. I just lie there, staring at a single spot on the ceiling. Then—*buzz*. A low hum from the nightstand. My phone. It's three in the morning. Who would be calling me now?

I sit up fast. *Pick up before it stops!*

"Roman? Roman, is that you?"

Silence on the other end. Then a breath. And finally, his voice—calm and steady.

"Yeah. It's me."

"Roman, please, listen to me. I can explain everything!"

"No, Eva. You listen."

Another breath. A lump rises in my throat so hard I can't speak. His even voice slices through me like a blade.

"When I flew to Sochi, all I wanted was to find you. To help. I wanted you to remember—your life, me, our son. And if you couldn't... then to fall in love with me again. I had no plans to divorce you. I loved you too much. Even after all these years."

Loved, echoes in my head. Not *love*. *Loved*.

"I didn't have time. Everything happened too fast. But that one day with you was enough. Enough to realize I can't do this anymore. I just... can't."

The silence that follows is deafening. I hear nothing but my own racing heartbeat pounding in my ears. My throat is a bottle of broken glass. I can't force a single word through it.

"I'm calling you now because this is the only time I'm sure of what I need to say. By morning, I might start doubting myself again. Might change my mind. When it comes to you, I don't recognize myself. But this conversation—this is the end. I can't go on like this."

"I..."

"I asked you to be honest with me. To tell me everything. We could've decided what to do—*together*. That would've shown me you trusted me. But instead, you shut down. You made your own call, like always. Eva. Eva, Eva, Eva..." He sighs. "You might not remember this, but this is who you've always been. That's why I knew what was coming. That's why I insisted we keep eyes on you. And I was right. Whether you like it or not, I know you now—better than you know yourself. But I can't do it anymore. I won't. I have a son. I won't risk his peace of mind. I don't want to come home and wonder—are you there or not? And if you've left, are you coming back? That's no way to live. You always hold everything in. But what you don't see is that this silence, this refusal to trust—it destroys not just you, but everyone who loves you."

He pauses. Then says, quietly, "So yes. You were right—we're getting divorced. It'll be a lot easier for me to live with someone like Sofia—someone I don't love but can count on—than to live with you, on the edge of a volcano. And Max... Max will be better off too. Not seeing you. Not knowing. I think you know that yourself."

I focus only on breathing. On staying conscious. I have to hear this through to the end. I need to remember every word—so I can replay it later, every time I wonder where things went wrong.

Inhale. Exhale.

Inhale...

"I'll support you financially, don't worry. At least until you're back on your feet. You still have that apartment in Moscow—I gave it to you before we got married. Live in it, sell it, whatever you want. I'll send the address. Kamil will give you the keys. My lawyer will help restore your last name and handle the divorce papers. You don't have to worry about anything. Just start over. Even if you never remember me—there's still good ahead of you. I believe that. I really do. Live your best life. And I'll do my best never to cross paths with you again."

...exhale...

Silence.

"And I ask the same of you," he adds. "Please don't cross mine."

I have to say something. Anything. Stop him. Make him change his mind.

I close my eyes.

But it doesn't matter. None of it matters. He's made his decision. And it's the right one. If I ignore the screaming of my shattered heart and listen only to cold reason—it's the right one. And the heart? It'll learn to cry quietly. Someday.

"Be careful," I whisper. My voice is gone. "And take care of Max. Mark still has fans—they could be dangerous."

"I will," he says, voice still eerily calm. "Goodbye, Eva."

"Goodbye..."

Chapter 35

Roman

"Goodbye."

I sit there, staring blankly at my phone. The screen dims, then goes dark. Like the final flicker of everything I've lived for these past five years. Because this is it—this is the end.

And I don't doubt for a second that I made the right choice. I let my emotions drive too many of my decisions. Threw myself off the edge too many times. Never again. This time, my wife is truly gone. As if she died.

When she pulled the same stunt behind my back again—it wasn't even disappointment anymore. Just... emptiness. I knew she'd do it. I was waiting for it. And when it happened, it was like I finally sobered up. Looked at my life with clear eyes. Realized this is how it'll *always* be. She'll always do what she wants, when she wants, without even telling me. That's not a marriage. That's a mess. I've been obsessed with Eva for far too long. My love for her was like a train with no brakes. Gaining speed, crashing forward—and not even the news of her death could stop it. That train just kept going, so fast I couldn't see anything else. Life passed me by in flashes—Sofia, friends, work. Even Max.

And today, finally, that train hit a wall. Her indifference.

Did it hurt? No. It just... shattered everything.

For as long as I can remember, I was always chasing her. Always proving myself. Over and over. And she never really believed me. I kept wondering why. Was it her childhood? Her trust issues? That instinct to rely on no one but herself? I kept telling her, "You're not alone anymore. I'll never leave you. You're the most important thing in my life." And I thought she believed me. She relaxed. Stopped expecting me to let her down. I was even proud—proud I'd managed to tame that wildcat. I loved her. I was proud of her.

Until she vanished again. And this time, I thought it was forever.

And yet today, watching her leave the hotel to bring her fake husband his things, I had a new thought: *Maybe she never really loved me.*

Maybe that's why she never believed me. Why it was so easy to let go. So easy to replace me with someone else. Maybe I was the only fool clinging to that love. And she just... tolerated it. Took it when it suited her. Pushed it away when it didn't.

Yeah, the sex was insane. The moment I saw her reaction at the hotel in Prague, I lost my mind. But, honestly? Women throw themselves at me all the time. Maybe that's why I was so drawn to her.

That stupid hunter instinct. When everyone else is easy, the one who fights back becomes a prize. But in the end, she wasn't different. She wanted me too—she just pretended not to. But sex isn't love. Time to face the truth. I didn't want anyone but her. And she? She never really held on to me at all.

That's it. This time, for real—I have to free her from my love. And free myself, too. Tearing away hurt like hell. But it's time to move on. She should, too.

I pull off my sweater, toss it on the armchair, and step out into the dark hallway. The half-asleep house listens to my footsteps. I walk through the living room and head upstairs. The house creaks softly in return. Every corner of it feels like a museum of our love. Photos of us on the mantel. Our books in my study. The furniture. Rugs. Paintings. She chose all of it. Put so much joy into making this place our home.

Did she really never love me at all...?

I have to move out.

As soon as possible. Otherwise these thoughts will never stop spinning. And once the divorce is final—I'll marry Sofia. I need to explain the delay to her. There won't be problems with Sofia. She won't run. At least I chose this woman right.

Max is curled up in a little ball, only the tip of his nose sticking out from under the blanket. No sign of Timon. I lie down next to him and wrap my arms around him over the covers. Suddenly, he jerks like a startled bird and starts kicking, screaming.

"Hey, hey—little guy! What's going on? It's me!"

He turns toward me, blinking, uncertain.

"Daddy? Is that you?"

"Of course it's me. Who else?"

He hesitates, like he still doesn't believe it. Then he throws himself at me, wrapping his arms around my neck.

"I thought you were never coming back!" he whispers into my ear. "And they were gonna send me to an orphanage. And I'd have to live there! Without you! Without Timon! Because I was bad! But you came back, Daddy! Please, please don't send me away, I'll be so good!"

"Whoa, hold on. Max!" I gently pry his arms off my neck and look him in the eyes—those huge, tear-filled eyes. "Who told you I'd send you away?"

"I... I..." He opens and closes his mouth, like the words are stuck.

I sit up, pull him onto my lap, and hug him tight.

"Tell me, kiddo. Don't be scared. I swear—I will never, ever give you up. Not for anything."

"Really?" His voice is shaking.

"Promise."

I look him straight in the eye.

"Come on now—who told you that nonsense?"

He leans toward my ear. I bend down.

He whispers, "Grandma."

I feel my fingertips go numb. Cold starts creeping up my arms like frost. Then it spreads—chilling everything inside. My whole body turns to ice, my heart locking behind layers of armor. It's a reflex I learned in childhood, when my mother used to criticize me for everything, endlessly. My whole life, she beat me down, convinced me I was worthless. And now—now she's doing the same thing to my son. I'm the idiot who let her get close to him. Thought maybe she'd changed. Yeah, right. A viper doesn't become a mother hen.

I shift Max in my lap, make sure he's comfortable, and ask what exactly Grandma said. He hesitates—still scared I might change my mind. Then, whispering:

"She said you're gonna marry Sofia soon. And that if I don't behave, or listen to her, or call her Mommy... you'll send me to an orphanage. Because you love her. And you won't let me get in the way. And 'cause now you're gonna have *real* kids... and I was just a mistake. I wasn't even supposed to happen."

I swear to God—she crossed every line.

"That all?"

"She said I wasn't allowed to tell you. That you'd get mad I was tattling and... and she took Timon!" His face crumples, full-on sobbing now. "Because Sofia... M-Mommy... has a-a-allergy!"

"Shh-shh-shh," I soothe him, rocking gently. "Listen to me, buddy. Everything Grandma said—that was a lie. You're not a mistake. You're my joy. My greatest joy. Not everyone gets that in life, but I did. I got you. That's how lucky I am. Got it?"

He nods, sniffing.

"And I don't want any other kids when I already have the best son in the world. Tomorrow I'll go get Timon back. Okay? And you don't have to call Sofia Mommy unless *you* want to. Yes, I'm going to marry her. But I'll never, ever love you any less. Not ever. Not in this life."

"You're really not gonna send me away?" he asks, eyes full of hope.

"No orphanages! How could I ever be without you? Who's gonna teach me all those science experiments?"

He gives a shaky smile and rubs his eyes.

"Max, you always—*always*—have to tell me everything. Got it? Because I'm always on your side. Deal?"

"Deal!"

I rock him until he drifts back to sleep. And I think—what the hell? Why didn't he say anything sooner, while that old witch was feeding him poison? Did he actually believe her? Or is Eva's mistrust already in his blood? Is that even possible?

Am I really going to have to *prove* my love to my own son?

I lay him down gently and pull the blanket up to his chin. Then I grab my phone and text my mother:

"I want my dog back home by morning. And I never want to see you anywhere near my son again."

Chapter 36

Eva

"When was the moment you knew for sure that you weren't the woman you thought you were?"

"There were signs. A lot of them. But I was only truly convinced after I saw the video."

"Which one?"

"The one with the real Polina. And... later, others."

This conversation goes on and on. The same questions, over and over, without end. First in Sochi, then in Krasnodar. Now in the capital. The Krause case got the attention of higher-ups and was transferred to Moscow. His center in Krasnodar was shut down. All of Krause's patients are being reviewed thoroughly. But I'm the only one who came forward. Which makes me their central witness. And they work me nonstop, as if trying to wear me down.

"How does someone forget their identity? Is it possible you had a reason to hide? Eva, why did you run away from your husband?"

Viktor Zorin, the attorney Roman arranged for me, raises his hand with quiet authority.

"That's enough. Stop pressuring her."

I mouth to him, *I'm exhausted*. He understands without a word. Nods.

"Let's call it a day."

We step outside—and are hit with a wall of snow and wind. A blizzard slaps us in the face. Instantly, reporters descend.

Again, the same barrage:

"Eva, why did you hide from your husband? Did Roman Sokolov hurt you? Was he abusive? Eva!"

Zorin opens an umbrella over me, shielding me from the snow and camera flashes. He walks me to the car. We ride in silence. He'd advised me not to speak to the press—not to feed the fire. So I turn my face away from the lenses and cover up.

We pull up in front of a luxury high-rise. Roman didn't cut corners when he gave me this place—it's beautiful. I'm not sure I'll be able to stay long. Living here, day after day, knowing it was a gift from the man I betrayed.

"I've got it." I stop Zorin as he reaches for the door. "No need to walk me up."

"You sure?" He shows no hint of judgment. A true professional—you'd never guess what he's thinking. I bet he plays a killer poker game.

"I'm sure."

I step into the snowstorm. Wrap my scarf tighter, try to get my bearings. As his car pulls away, I head toward the building.

And there they are again. Vultures. Cameras, microphones, questions shoved in my face. God.

"Eva, tell us the truth! Did Sokolov threaten you? Did he buy your silence? Why did he give you the apartment? What are you hiding, Eva?"

The rage ignites instantly—red-hot, blinding. How did they twist everything so completely? Why is no one asking about Mark? Why is *Roman* the villain in their story?

I turn. Snow whirls in the air, catching in my hair. My voice is calm, level.

"Roman Sokolov is a good man. Don't try to bait me into saying otherwise—it's not going to happen. Were you hired by Krause's legal team? Doesn't matter."

"You want the truth? Fine. Here it is: Mark Krause is a monster. He created a psychoactive drug that suppresses identity and makes people highly suggestible. That's why I didn't remember my real life for the last five years. Roman Sokolov helped me. He exposed Krause. But if you want a real story, here's one: dig into Krause's patient list. And ask yourselves—how many of them are acting of their own free will, and how many are still under his influence?"

Krause's client list reads like a who's who of power—politicians, lawyers, high-profile businessmen. Let's see how eager the press will be to stalk *them* at their front doors.

Even the reporters seem out of words. Just endless camera flashes cutting through the snow. I use the lull to swipe the key fob and slip through the building's front door. Ugh. Zorin's going to give me hell for this tomorrow. Whatever. I'm done. Done being someone's puppet. Always being handled—*Say this, not that. Look here, don't look there.* God, I'm so tired of it all. And I can't stand hearing them drag Roman through the mud.

In the elevator, I stare blankly at my reflection. A blonde woman with empty eyes looks back. Yeah, I dyed it back and straightened it. If only it were that easy to get my life back.

The apartment on the seventh floor is dark when I walk in. I still can't get used to living here. Maybe I should get a cat. Though I doubt I'll stay. Roman gave me too much—and still keeps giving. And

it's eating me alive, this feeling that I'll never stop owing him. For everything he's been through. Everything he's *still* going through. All because of me. Some people make mistakes. People like me *are* mistakes.

He still shows up in my dreams. Every night. Laughing, teasing—saying he was just messing with me. *What, you really thought I'd live without you? Don't be ridiculous, Snowy. And you believed me? Seriously? You might be the most naïve girl on the planet.*

Then the talking stops, and the kissing starts. Desperate. Consuming. I kiss him until I'm dizzy, until sparks explode behind closed eyes. And every time I wake up alone in this empty apartment, I bite the corner of the pillow to keep from crying out. Just moan into it, face buried. God, when does it stop? Is there a limit to how much pain a person can take?

And that voice inside me: *You broke it—now live with it. Taste his pain.*

Our pain—his and mine—tastes like blood from lips bitten raw. And salt running down my cheeks. It's the color of the void in my chest, and the fire eating me alive.

Christmas is a week away. Guess I should make some resolutions. Goal #1: Don't jump out the window.

I walk into the open-plan kitchen and flip on the espresso machine. Double shot. Black. Bitter. Exactly what I need. Let the bitterness in my mouth drown out the bitterness in my heart—even if just for a minute.

Yesterday I finally got my new passport. I'm now, officially, Eva Sokolova. Today Zorin gave me the divorce papers. Signed by Roman. The folder's sitting on the table. I'll sign them too. Not now. After coffee.

I grab my phone and dial an international number.

"Hello? Lina—uh, I mean..."

"Eva. Yes, it's me. Hi, Anna."

"Hi! I saw everything in the news! That's just..."

"A total shitshow? Yeah. Pretty much. Listen, I wanted to ask—if I send you new banking details, can you forward the advance for the paintings?"

I don't want to live off Roman. I'll pay him back—every cent he had to spend on me.

"Yeah... I'll need to check with our legal team, but I don't see why not. Uh, Eva, do you know what you're going to do next?"

"Honestly? No idea."

"Well... come here. Seriously. You need a change of scenery. And—okay, being totally real: you're in the spotlight right now. Everyone's asking if there's going to be a new exhibition. People *want* to buy Krause's work."

"Sokolova's."

"Right. Sorry. Sokolova's."

I smirk.

"You know... I've got some early sketches. For a new collection."

"Really? That's amazing!"

"Yeah. I even came up with a title: *My Life*."

"So it's a deal?"

"I'll think about it. But honestly... I like the idea. There's nothing keeping me here anymore. As soon as they let me leave the country—I'm gone."

"Then let's talk again after Christmas?"

"Definitely."

I hang up. Glance around. In the corner of the living room stands an easel and a few fresh sketches. Distorted, grotesque figures. Dark corners filled with shadows. Broken silhouettes scratched out in frantic strokes.

Yeah. I couldn't have picked a better name for the exhibit.

Chapter 37

I must've been right—those reporters were sent by Krause's lawyers. At least after what I said yesterday, the street is empty. The snowfall stopped just before dawn, and now the sidewalks shimmer under a layer of untouched white. For the first time in ages, I feel something close to a good mood. I've always loved winter.

Then comes the familiar question: who loves winter—Polina or Eva? This time, the answer is easy. Polina hated it. A warm southern December suited her just fine. Her ideal Christmas? Somewhere on an island.

So it's me who loves the winter.

My lips curl into a smile. Another little puzzle piece falling into place. A tiny victory, but mine.

First thing this morning, Anna sent the advance for the paintings. I actually whistled when I saw the amount. I had no idea I was that good. So I said to hell with everything and decided to go to the Christmas market. Just to clear my head for a while.

It's that same feeling I had wandering through the crowds in Sochi at night—being among people, soaking up their energy. Right now, I really need that.

Red Square is packed. I can't help remembering where that last desire to lose myself among strangers led me. A bright avenue, a bar, a hotel room. And before I know it, I'm scanning the crowd, looking for Roman.

I catch myself standing still, staring at the broad back of some man in a gray coat. I think, turn around. Please, look at me.

The man turns. Looks. Of course, it's not Sokolov. I duck toward the nearest stall and pretend to be very interested in... bagels? My cheeks flush. Okay, I've definitely lost it.

I buy a cup of mulled wine and stroll slowly along the rows of pickles and treats, noticing out of the corner of my eye that Mr. Gray Coat seems intrigued. And—of course—he's now walking right behind me. He's speeding up... oh no, please don't talk to me.

"Excuse me, miss!"

He's handsome. With mischievous gray eyes and a pickup-artist's smile. The kind of smile that might loosen the grip around my heart—at least for a day. Might even let me forget...

"Miss, where are you going?"

...if I wanted to forget.

"Eva? Hey! Polina—Eva!"

A woman's voice, somewhere to my right. I latch onto it like a sailor hearing a siren's song. Anything to get away from Gray Eyes.

A girl in a gray puffer coat and a fluffy hat with ear flaps is waving at me from a souvenir stall. I don't recognize her at first—but then it clicks.

"Yulia?!"

I freeze. What is she doing here? Did Mark send her?

Seeing me stop, she runs over, beaming so genuinely that I have no idea what to think anymore.

"Lina—oh my God, Eva! What are the chances! I'm so happy to see you! How are you? Are you here with Roman?"

"With Roman?.."

"You know—Sokolov? Oh, sorry. Or are you guys... not together anymore?"

I don't understand any of this. What does Roman Sokolov have to do with Yulia, of all people? A liar. A traitor.

I pull away from her touch, frowning. "What are you doing here?"

She picks up on my mood immediately and answers, a bit lost now, "Well... I live in Moscow now. Krause's center was shut down after your case, and Roman helped me get a job at a good clinic here. So, you know..."

"I don't get it," I say out loud. "What's the connection between you and Roman? Why would he help you?"

"There isn't really one," she says, clearly flustered now. "He just... helped. I guess out of kindness. Maybe because I called him, back then... when Mark took you out of the hospital."

"You called him?!"

"Well, yeah. Didn't you know?"

"No..."

"Okay, come on." Yulia grabs my arm and pulls me off to the side.

Half an hour later, I'm standing there, holding a cup of mulled wine gone cold, my brain flattened by this new wave of information. Roman never told me how he found me. But then again, there was so much we never got the chance to say. Everything happened too fast. And then it was too late.

Yulia had to rush off, but she left her number. I didn't even get to thank her—or apologize. If it weren't for her, Roman might never have found me. And all this time, I thought she'd betrayed me. It feels like I'm always two steps behind everyone else. Always too late.

So much for my good mood.

I toss the cup into the trash and breathe on my frozen fingers.

But at least now the picture is complete. I've finally pieced together what happened that day—when Yulia and I realized I wasn't sick. Who I talked to. What I did. And I'm sure now who Mark was talking to that night, when I overheard him. Roman needs to know.

I pull out my phone and type: *We need to talk. It's urgent. Not over the phone.*

For a second, pure panic grips me—what if he's blocked my number? But the message goes through. Two anxious minutes later, a reply: a restaurant name, and a time—two hours from now.

My face flushes hot. I'm going to see him—*soon*! My heart pounds, my thoughts race. I need to get home. Get ready. Should I do my makeup? Maybe go to a salon? God, I haven't had a manicure in ages. What am I going to wear? I don't even own a decent dress. Not even an indecent one, for that matter—I haven't bought anything in months! Two hours. How am I going to manage?

Then suddenly, cold clarity slams into me.

Stop. Where are you going with this? You think this is a date? He made it perfectly clear—he doesn't want anything to do with you anymore. The fact that he agreed to meet doesn't mean a thing. He's a grown man, Eva. And your little games with makeup and dresses are just pathetic. *You're* pathetic. You think he's going to take one look at you, all dolled up, and forget everything you did?

My jaw clenches until it hurts. Screw that. Yes, I want to see him—desperately. But this is a business meeting. I asked to see him because of something important. And there will be no flirting. No stupid smiles. Just facts.

Two hours later, I'm sitting in a private room in an upscale restaurant. Wearing jeans and a plain white sweater. I feel completely out of place. They probably wouldn't have let me in if not for Roman's name. I pull the sleeves down over my hands to hide my short, unpolished nails. Even the waitresses here look more put-together than I do.

Roman sweeps in like a gust of winter air, bringing with him the intoxicating scent of cologne and the chill of the street. He hands off his coat to a waiter without looking. Charcoal-gray suit, collar undone, hair slightly tousled. He looks incredible, as always. And as always, my heart kicks into overdrive and my fingers go numb.

He stops for a moment, taking me in with that sharp, scanning gaze. Like he's capturing the whole image of me in an instant, committing it to memory.

I slowly straighten my back and lift my chin. So what if I'm not as polished as your fiancée, darling. Only I know just how awkward and small I feel right now—barefaced, without a hint of luxury. No need for you to see that.

Finally, he sits, picks up the menu, stares at it without flipping a single page. Then, without warning, his eyes snap up to meet mine.

"I carved out an hour for lunch. What did you want?"

No hello. No how are you. And what were you expecting, exactly? That he'd fall to his knees?

My jaw twitches. I apologize for disturbing him and then, calmly and without embellishment, tell him everything I came here to say.

Chapter 38

Roman

She dyed her hair again.

For a full minute, it's the only thought I can hold onto. The waiter's talking, but it's just a meaningless drone in my ears. My heart's pumping like a runaway train. She looks exactly the way she used to. Delicate. Soft. Ridiculously beautiful. And those same sharp, defiant eyes. I feel it right away—tightening in my gut, heat pooling between my legs. Damn it. Just what I needed.

I drop into the chair like I've been punched. Pretend to read the menu while trying to get my breathing under control. Pointless. I want her. Like a teenager. Right here, right now. Lock the door, lay her out on the table, peel off those stupid jeans and take her until I black out, until her knees give out, until—

Goddamn it. I *knew* meeting her was a bad idea.

I say flatly, "I carved out an hour for lunch. What did you want?"

She lowers her head. Speaks in an even, steady tone, not looking at me. I stare at her mouth. Imagine what would happen if I just leaned across the table and kissed her. Would she push me away? No. I know she wouldn't. She'd melt into me, slide her fingers under my shirt... Christ. Knowing that doesn't help.

I look away—finally—and only then start registering *what* she's actually saying. Like a bucket of ice water to the face. What were you expecting, idiot? A love confession?

The waiter brings silverware, cutting through the tension. He asks for our order. I answer on autopilot. Inside, I'm seething. Frustration bubbling into anger.

"Sorry to bother you," she mutters, eyes fixed on some point beyond me. "Just thought you should know."

I nod, spinning a fork slowly between my fingers. Yeah, of course. That's all she thought.

I say it out loud: "That's it?"

She blinks. Her lips part like she might say something else—but she presses them shut, hard enough her jaw goes pale. Nods.

"Thanks for your time. I hope you'll do something with this information."

"I will."

She stands.

Sirens go off in my head: *She's leaving. Stop her. Grab her. Don't let her walk out!*

"Goodbye, Roman. Enjoy your lunch."

"Wait!" It slips out. She freezes. I don't look up, just stare at the damn table like an idiot. "Aren't you staying to eat?"

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry."

She bolts, like the devil himself is after her.

My throat's dry as sand. I grab a glass of water and down it in one gulp. Appetite? Gone. Mood? Shot. The whole thing—pointless and pathetic.

I text my assistant: "*Cancel all my meetings for today.*"

Walk out without waiting for my order.

"Mr. Sokolov, is everything all right?" the restaurant manager rushes over, concerned.

"Everything's fine."

No, the hell it isn't.

While the car heads home, I fire off a few more messages. Ask the lawyer if Eva's signed the papers yet. When I hear she hasn't, the pressure in my chest eases—just a little.

"And what exactly are you going to do with this information?" I mutter under my breath.

"Sir?" the driver glances in the rearview mirror.

"Hm? Oh. Just recording a voice note."

He nods.

I turn my face to the window. I *cannot* see her again. Not under any circumstances. She turns my brain to mush. I become this sad little puppet on strings—dancing, twitching, ready to collapse at her feet. Whatever you wish, my Snow Queen. Your wish is my command.

My jaw locks so tight I could grind my own teeth to dust.

It's already getting dark by the time we pull up to the house. Sofia's sleek red SUV is already parked by the gate. Sofia herself is in the living room, cradling a teacup, looking perfectly composed as always. Her glossy hair is styled to the last strand. A fitted knee-length dress hugs every curve.

And yet—I see her now like I'm seeing her for the first time. Or maybe really *seeing* her for the first time as a woman.

Only now do I realize Sofia always wears what I like. I once mentioned in college that I preferred women in dresses, and I don't think I've seen her in pants since. The jewelry? Mostly gifts from me. And for the past three years she's kept her hair platinum blonde. I never once thought to ask why.

How the hell could I be so blind? I truly believed this marriage was just practical for both of us.

"Roman?" she says. "You look... off."

I pour myself a whiskey and sit across from her. Raise an eyebrow—Want one?

"No, I'm driving."

She frowns. Doesn't recognize me like this.

I lean in, lock eyes with her.

"How long have you known Eva was alive? Don't lie to me, Sofia. Don't sidestep. Just give it to me straight."

Her mouth opens and closes, but no sound comes out. She just... freezes.

Say it. *Say it, damn you.*

I toss the whiskey back in one gulp. Go pour another.

"Pour me one too," she says, voice drained, almost resigned. And I'm not even angry at her. I'm angry at myself.

I come back, hand her the glass. She takes a sip and winces—she rarely drinks. Another Eva echo?

I sit again and give her a steady look.

"I need the truth, Sofia. All of it."

She shrugs.

"Honestly? I'm relieved it's all come out. You're going to leave me now, aren't you? Not that it matters. You were just waiting for an excuse. You didn't know how to go back to her..."

"Sofia."

"What? *What*, 'Sofia'? I've spent years orbiting you like some loyal satellite, and all you ever see is her. Think about is her. She's a wall you keep crashing into. God, I hope you both rot! I'm so done with this."

"Tell me. Everything." I cut in, crisp and cold. She deflates.

Finally, she says through clenched teeth, "Three years."

I let out a long breath. My fingers turn white around the glass. I set it down, carefully.

"Keep going."

She shrugs again.

"I saw the photos on social media. A little art exhibit in Sochi, some up-and-coming artist. And that artist... she looked *exactly* like your Eva. I didn't say anything, just flew to Sochi myself. Thought I'd look her in the eyes. I went to the exhibit, spoke to her. And I realized—she didn't remember. No one could fake that level of calm. Especially not Eva. She's like dynamite. But this one? Not a flicker. Still, I *knew* it was her. She has that tattoo on her arm. Same one you have. So I started digging. Hired a PI. He didn't find much—basic info. Her name was Polina. Where she's from, who her husband is. And turns out, this husband of hers had once treated your Eva too. It was obvious something was off. So I made an appointment with him, posed as a patient. And I got him talking. Not everything, of course. He never admitted the drug caused the amnesia. But I hinted we could run a DNA test—and that'd bring out the truth anyway. I don't know any of Eva's relatives besides Max. But Max is more than enough."

Every word is a nail in the lid of a coffin. She was so close. So close—and I knew nothing.

"After that, it was simple. I calmed Krause down. Told him I had no interest in exposing him. He could play house with your wife all he wanted, just as long as you didn't find out. I told him to keep her away from social media, be more careful. And I'd keep an eye on you. Track your movements. Make sure you two didn't bump into each other. And even then—it still happened. You decided to go to that damn conference last minute. Who'd have thought one city wasn't big enough for the two of you?"

She takes a sip of her whiskey. And I look at her—and for the first time I feel something sharp.

I hate her.

"Cold-hearted bitch."

She gives a bitter smile.

"No, Roman. I've just been in love with you my entire life. And you've never loved me back. Do you have any idea how that feels? Back in college, when you slept with me a couple of times and nothing

came of it—I accepted that. You were always focused on work, your goals, your friends. Women didn't matter. No matter how many you had, you never changed. So I told myself that's just who you are. And then that crazy Eva showed up. And suddenly—she had you dancing to her tune! God, I hated her. Hated watching you bend over backwards for her. It killed me to see how deeply you loved her. And what killed me even more was knowing you'd never—*ever*—love me like that...”

Her breath catches. She slams her glass aside; it rolls, leaving a dark mark on the rug. Then she buries her face in her hands and sobs. Loud, broken sobs. Painful, ugly.

I watch her, and I feel... nothing. She's right where she put herself. And I'm just tired. Tired of the detective games. The drama. The lies. The searching. The losing.

I get up to leave. There's nothing left to say. I heard what I came to hear.

That's when there's a knock. The door swings open before I can respond. Antonia, Max's nanny and our housekeeper, pokes her head in, face tight with worry.

“Roman?” She scans the room, her expression darkening further. “Isn't Max with you?”

Chapter 39

Eva

“It wasn't love at first. Quite the opposite. First came hatred. I painted it in broad, furious strokes, pouring myself out with every brush. Gasping for breath, I threw myself at the canvas over and over again, my brushes an extension of my hands—my hands like jagged blades swinging wide and mercilessly. Hatred burned bright red...”

I don't remember the book, or when I read that passage, but it's etched so deeply in my mind that it resurfaces every time I face a blank canvas. Just like now—I'm not painting, not drawing. I'm slashing. Hurling myself at the canvas, spilling that same bright-red hatred. At Mark. At Sofia. At the world. At myself.

Tears are streaming down my cheeks. My hands are shaking. But I can't stop. The hatred keeps pouring out of me, taking shape as a jagged, crimson figure.

I only snap out of it when I hear the phone ringing. Who could that be? I quickly wipe my hands and rush to the table. Roman?!

I grab the phone.

— Hello?

— Hey.

Well, well. We're saying hi now?

My thoughts are biting, but my heart's already racing: thump-thump-thump-thump-hi-hi-hi!

Before I can reply, Roma asks:

— Has anyone called you?

His voice sounds strangely tense. Not like his usual I'm-a-Winter-Soldier tone. No—this is different. Like Roman... on the edge of a breakdown?

— No.

His anxiety jumps the line and hits me like a shockwave. I practically scream into the phone:

— Roman, what happened?!

A beat of silence. Then:

— Max is missing.

The air sticks in my lungs. I sink to the floor. I can't exhale.

— Eva? Are you okay?

I croak, barely managing to push out a breath.

— No. What? Roman! What do you mean—missing?!

— I don't know. He was in his room. I was in the living room. Talking to... Sofia. Then the nanny came in and said Max wasn't in the nursery.

— How is that even possible?! Where could he go?! Did you check the cameras?

— Of course. He left the house on his own. Through the back door. The cameras caught him heading toward the turn in the road—and that's it.

— What do you mean "that's it"?!

— The only other camera's by the store. And in that gap, someone probably picked him up.

— Roman! — I'm shouting like a lunatic. — It's Mark, it has to be him! One of his followers, his fanatics! I'll go to him, right now! I'll do whatever he wants!

— Stop. Wait. Don't do anything stupid. Got it? I'm coming over now. Stay home and wait for me!

— Got it, — I whisper into the phone, but he's already hung up.

God, I thought we were done with him. But even from prison, he won't leave us alone!

I'm pacing the apartment like a wounded tigress. Biting my fingers till they bleed. I need to do something, anything—it's physically painful to sit idle. Finally, the doorbell rings. I open immediately—it's Roman. His pupils are huge. Lips pressed into a hard line.

— Huh, — he says in that same strange voice. — I was almost sure you wouldn't wait for me.

I don't answer. I grab my coat and bolt into the hallway.

Roman's driver is a real pro. He cuts through traffic wherever he can, drives fast but smooth. And still, it feels like we're not moving fast enough. I'm a bundle of nerves, jittery and twitching, ready to leap out of the car and run ahead on foot.

When I start gnawing at nonexistent hangnails again, Roman takes my hand and wraps his fingers around it. That's how we ride the rest of the way—to the detention center where Mark is being held.

"They'll let us in," Roman says curtly as we walk from the parking lot toward the steps.

My head is completely blank. All I can hear is the crunch of frozen snow under our feet. Roman is still holding my hand, and all I can think is that soon, I'll have to let it go again. Mark will come up with some new punishment for me—something even worse this time, no doubt.

The building is brightly lit. The duty officer's window is cheerfully decked out in tinsel. Roman pushes on the turnstile—it's locked.

"Let us in!" he growls. "I need to talk to Krause!"

The duty officer nearly falls out of the booth from the sheer audacity of it. Just then, I spot the investigator walking down the corridor.

"Detective!" I shout. "Det...!"

He turns, eyes narrowing. After a pause, he walks over, but doesn't let us through. Instead, he talks to us through the turnstile.

"No one called you?" Roman's temper is on its last thread. "We need to talk to Krause! He took our son!"

The investigator gives Roman a long once-over.

"He wasn't involved."

"Oh come on—not with his own hands!" Roman yells. "I'm not an idiot! He's got a whole gang of followers!"

"We've checked all his patients. Every single one is under special supervision. None of them took your son. And besides..."

"What?"

"Krause had no reason to. The case against him has been dropped."

"What?!" Roman and I shout in unison. Then, one after the other:

"Where is he now?" Roman.

"What do you mean, dropped?" Me.

"Exactly that." The investigator locks eyes with me. "Lack of evidence. No crime committed."

Then, softening a bit, he adds under his breath,

"He's not free. Don't worry. He had nothing to do with your son's disappearance. They took him away." He raises his brows and rolls his eyes upward, gesturing: "upstairs."

"I don't get it. What the hell does that even mean? Just say it straight, quit dancing around!" Roman grabs the investigator by the collar, and the man jerks free with a sharp motion.

"Watch those hands!" the investigator says coolly. "I'll let it slide this time, but next time you'll be charged with assault. And I don't give a damn how many lawyers you've got working for you. Now get the hell out of here!"

He turns on his heel and marches down the corridor. Then he stops, turns back, and shouts:

"File a missing person report! The first few hours are critical!"

Roman turns and looks at me. His eyes are wild, unfocused, but gradually they settle on my face.

"To the police!" I prompt, my voice trembling. "The report, Roman—please!"

He nods and bolts outside.

What follows spins by like a carousel. The missing person report, the call to Search and Rescue. Roman is constantly on the phone with someone. I feel like a background extra in someone else's drama again.

It's unbearable. I can't help. I don't even know anything about my own son! His distinguishing features, his habits, what he was wearing—Roman answers all the questions. He's the one sending out Max's photo. I have a few too—downloaded them off the internet. But Roman's are the most recent. I try not to think about Mark being free. That thought is too painful. I'll deal with it later.

"Roman, I can't just sit here anymore!" I grab his sleeve. "I need to help the volunteers! I'm useless like this!"

"Let's go to your place first," he says wearily. "If it's a kidnapping, they might try to contact you. Let's check. Then we'll join the search."

I nod. Like some damn bobblehead—I only know how to nod.

We're back in the car again. As we drive, Roman says,

"Kamil's looking into where they took Krause. He doesn't have anything concrete yet."

He grips my fingers so hard they crack.

"So... maybe—ow!" I pull my hand free. "Maybe it really wasn't him who took Max?"

"I don't know."

We drive in silence. I'm biting my nails again. The anxiety is eating me alive. I can't think about anything except where my tiny, terrified son might be right now.

Snow starts falling again. The driver slows near my building. I jump out and run to the steps. And then I see him—a small, hunched figure on the stairs.

"Max?" I whisper, afraid to believe it. But my heart takes off in a gallop—it knows the truth.

The little one lifts his head inside his hood. His eyes light up with joy in the lamplight.

"Mommy! Mommy!" he squeals, springing up like a jack-in-the-box and launching himself into my arms. And I grab him and sob and laugh all at once—my baby, my hero, my son!

"I found you, I found you, Mommy! Daddy, look—I found her!"

Chapter 40

The apartment is quiet. But not the awful, hollow quiet that tore me apart this morning. No, now it's the peaceful hush of a home where a child has fallen asleep. Roman and I are sitting silently in the kitchen, sipping tea. We glance at each other. Say nothing. I can feel electric pulses passing between us, connecting us with a constant, invisible current. I want to reach out, touch his cheek. Bury my fingers in his hair, feel the warmth of his lips. He's so close—and yet so far. I have no idea what to do.

So I just sit, sneaking looks at him. Feeling his eyes on me, just as cautious. Maybe he doesn't know what to do either. Trusting me again... that's hard. I get it. That's why I don't want to push. I stay still while my soul curls up like a kitten on his lap.

My mind replays the evening.

After our wild reunion, Max was so wound up he couldn't calm down. He wouldn't let go of me for a second and only fell asleep holding my hand. And honestly—I kept breaking into tears, too. While I had been dreaming of holding my son again, while Roman was doing everything to shield him from more stress... the kid just went and made his own decision! Turns out, when reporters ambushed me at the front door, the house number and street made it into the frame. And that little Sherlock Holmes saw me on the news and figured it out in a flash. He swiped his nanny's phone—and ordered a taxi.

"Wait, the driver just agreed to take you? Alone?!" Roman is barely holding himself back from tracking down and strangling that driver.

"Nuh-uh, Daddy—not just like that!" Max is swinging his legs from the high bar stool, fishing out marshmallows from his cocoa with his fingers. "I pointed to Miss Angela from next door and said she was my mom. And that I needed to get to Grandma's."

"And he believed you?" Roman asks, trying to sound stern.

"Not at first. But then I waved at Miss Angela, and she waved back. So I told the driver my baby brother was inside and she couldn't walk me out 'cause she had to watch him. That's why she was standing at the door." He grins. "But the driver doesn't know that she doesn't even *have* a baby boy! Just my best friend Kate!"

Roman turns away, and I see him biting his lips, trying hard not to laugh. But when he looks back at Max, his eyebrows are furrowed, and he's putting on his best *serious dad* face.

"Max... I honestly don't know whether to be proud or terrified of your scheming. Why was Angela standing out there anyway?"

Max peeks at Roman from behind his mountain of marshmallows, eyes gleaming.

"She was walking Fluffy! Kate told me her mom does that every day— she just opens the door and lets the dog sniff around while she stands there. Doesn't even go outside 'cause she's watching soap operas on Discord with the other ladies!"

He bursts into a bright, bubbling laugh, and Roman just shakes his head. Words have clearly failed him. I stare at my little genius, unable to hide my admiration. Where did he even get that clever brain of his? Surely not from me. Must be Roman's genes.

"All right, kid," Roman says. "I mean, yeah, points for creativity—but this time you went too far. I'll have to punish you."

"Really?!" Max's eyes light up like Roman just promised a trip to the toy store. "How?"

"I'll think about it." Roman frowns, trying to look stern. But both Max and I can see the little devils dancing in his eyes.

"Wait! Dad, I've got an idea! Let's go to the climbing gym! Remember how you punished me like that last time? When I nearly burned the house down with that experiment? We climbed the tallest wall—it was awesome!"

"You sure know how to make punishments work for you," I say, unable to hold back a grin. I glance at Roman, biting my lip to keep from laughing.

"Hey. Quiet in the courtroom," he snaps, still doing his best to keep a straight face. "All right, Max, jokes aside—you do understand what you did was wrong, right? The police were out looking for you. Dozens of volunteers searched the whole city. It's winter out there! And we were terrified. We thought bad people had taken you."

"But why would bad people want me, Daddy? I'm so spoiled!"

He smiles from ear to ear, cocoa streaks stretching from the corners of his mouth. His blond hair is a tousled mess, and his eyes—bright, blue, just like mine—sparkle. I can't help smiling back. And once again, my eyes fill with tears. God, how much have I missed? How did this little miracle grow up without me?

Sensing something in my face, Max sets down his mug and wraps his arms around my neck.

"Mommy, don't worry—we'll never be apart again! I'm going to live with you now! I missed you so, so much!"

"Well, that's news to me!" Roman says. "You're just going to leave me?"

Still clinging to me, Max turns toward him and says sadly, "Dad... you're gonna get married anyway. You have Sofia now. And probably more kids later. You'll love them. But I don't like Sofia, Daddy. She's mean. She yells at me. And at Timon, too. And I don't want to call her 'Mom,' because I already have my mommy. I wished for her on New Year's. And now I'm staying with her."

He hugs me even tighter, nose buried in my neck. I look helplessly at Roman—and suddenly I know it deep down: I'm not letting go. Not willingly. Not ever again. I'll fight for him. I'll tear the world apart if I have to. I won't let him go.

Roman must see that determination in my eyes. He sighs, steps down from the stool, and slowly circles around us. Then he bends down to look Max in the eyes. I feel his breath on my hair, and shivers run down my spine. My chest tightens. Like a stray dog desperate to be taken back in, I want him to embrace us both. I want him to let me back in. To give me one more chance.

Please, I scream inside. Please. I swear I'll never let you down again.

"Max, there's something I want to tell you," Roman says softly. "Sofia and I—we broke up."

"Really?!" Max immediately lifts his head and looks at him.

"Yes." Roman nods seriously. "I can't marry her. Because, well... it just so happens your mom is still my wife."

I can't see his face, but my cheeks burn, and my heart is ready to leap out of my chest. Is he serious? Has he forgiven me?

"Yaaaay!" Max shouts, scrambling into his father's arms. "So now we'll all live together? Right, Daddy? Right?"

"That's right, kiddo."

Roman sits down on Max's stool. He's talking to his son, but his eyes are locked on mine—hard, unblinking, without a trace of a smile. And just like that, it feels like a bucket of ice water has been poured over me. Of course he hasn't forgiven me. His eyes say it all. He's only willing to live with me for Max's sake.

He raises his brows, questioning.

He knows I understand.

And inside, everything twists with hollow pain. Get used to it, Eva. This is your life now.

I straighten up and nod silently.

Chapter 41

The sunlight hits my eye full force. I turn away, sleepily realizing I forgot to close the blackout curtains last night for the first time. Then I remember why—and I'm fully awake. And yet the beam of light keeps shining straight into my face. Even though I've turned away. Huh.

I open my eyes and see Roman sleeping next to me. Last night, Max had gotten all teary, refusing to sleep unless one of us stayed with him. So we ended up lying on either side of the huge bed, with our son in the middle like a living divider. Now he's gone, and Roman is lying face to face with me.

And I can't help but look at him, completely forgetting everything else. Who would've thought construction moguls could be so insanely sexy? His chestnut hair is tousled, falling across his forehead in soft strands. His white T-shirt stretches over his strong chest. He's smiling at something in his sleep, and I want—desperately, unbearably—to kiss the corner of those smiling lips. Especially since...

I glance down.

...his hand is casually resting on my butt.

"Ahem!" comes a voice right by my ear, and I practically jump out of my skin like I've been caught doing something very inappropriate. Max is sitting behind me, holding a little round mirror in his hands. I glance from his mischievous, grinning face to the mirror—and realize exactly where that beam of sunlight came from.

I hold out my arms, and a little whirlwind crashes into me. Tiny arms wrap tightly around my neck, and I don't mind one bit. I laugh out loud and squeeze my son right back.

My son! I have a little boy, and we're never, ever going to be apart again!

There's no way to describe what I feel right now. Overwhelming joy. Boundless happiness. Pure euphoria. No, even those words don't come close to capturing what's happening inside me. It's some new kind of emotion—something that only exists when a dream finally comes true.

I'm bursting with so much energy I want to scream, dance, and kiss the whole world. I decide to act on it and start by kissing the world in the form of a giggling little boy. I tickle him as I go. He squeals and squirms but makes no real effort to escape. When we're finally done being silly, I sit up and notice Roman watching us. And in his eyes... there's a whole firework show of feelings. Which he immediately smothers the moment he sees me looking.

"Hi, Dad!" Max yells, crawling over me to throw his arms around Roman.

"Morning," I say shyly, smiling. "Want to grab some breakfast?"

He studies me in silence for a few seconds, then checks his phone. Taps out something quickly in a messenger and shakes his head.

"No, I'll grab something at work. I've got a meeting—and I overslept. Pack your things. I'll send a driver for you."

"A driver? Why?"

He frowns. "To take you home, obviously. We live together now, remember?"

I nod slowly. "Right. I remember."

Nope, not even your grumpy face can ruin my mood today, darling.

Max and I are making an omelet, with coffee for me and cocoa for him. We wash up, pack, and chat non-stop. And we laugh. Constantly. The euphoria hasn't let go of me even for a second. Max only gets serious once—when he sees *Hatred* on the easel. He frowns just like his father, studying the painting in detail. Then he turns and asks:

"Mom, why is that lady so sad?"

I glance over his shoulder at the crimson strokes on the canvas, coming together into a shape.

"You think it's a lady?"

He steps closer to the painting. Then farther back again. I watch him—my thoughtful little art critic. He nods with certainty.

"Yup! Definitely a lady."

"Then a lady it is," I say with a smile. "She's sad, sweetheart, because she's alone."

"Then she needs a friend!" he says firmly. "Can you draw her a friend? Right here!" He points to an empty spot on the edge of the canvas.

"I absolutely will."

I'm ready to draw her a million friends—enough to bury all that sadness for good.

The driver shows up around noon. There wasn't much to pack. While I was living off Roman's generosity, I never bought anything unnecessary. I didn't even have the heart for shopping. So the only things I truly want to bring with me are the easel and my canvases. But they won't fit in the car, of course. The driver grabs my two lonely bags and carries them out. We drive through a sparkling, snow-covered Moscow, out of the city and into a gated luxury neighborhood.

The house is small, and doesn't seem like it belongs to a billionaire—but somehow, it suits Roman perfectly. When I spot the white brick walls and the deep blue roof in the distance, something tightens painfully inside me. I freeze the moment I step out of the car. The icy air fills my lungs—and I can't move. I remember this house. I know there are three granite steps leading up to the front door. I know there's an African wooden mask hanging on the wall inside the entrance. I know what the staircase looks like. I can hear the creak of the steps in my head. I remember...

I close my eyes. Tears roll down my cheeks.

I remember how Roman and I picked out furniture for the nursery.

The memories rise up all on their own, like they'd always been there, just buried under layers of artificial forgetfulness. I walk into the house as if it's sacred—barely breathing. Max tugs on my hand, excited to show me his room and his toys. A beagle puppy darts around, barking happily.

"That's Timon!" Max yells.

I crouch down beside him and start petting the dog. Breathe in, breathe out. Come on, hands, stop shaking. Timon plants his paws on my lap and licks my face with joyful abandon. I lose my balance and fall back, laughing. Max bursts out laughing too, watching from the stairs.

"He accepted you, Mom!"

I get up, holding the puppy in my arms—and realize with surprise that I feel completely calm. All my nerves have vanished into that laughter.

For the rest of the day, until Roman gets home, I actually feel... comfortable. Like I truly belong here. Max and I play, build LEGO cities, and later he introduces me to Nick—his tutor. He's very young and, for some reason, super nervous around me at first. But soon he gets into his groove, explaining something basic about physics, and before I know it, they're both leaning over the computer, excitedly modeling some experiment. Max hangs on his every word—and I get it. Nick acts more like a big brother than a teacher.

Roman walks into the room right in the middle of their experiment. As always, the second I see him, my heart skips a beat. A flutter in my chest, dry lips. His blank gaze scans the room and lands on my bags.

"I didn't know where to put them," I say softly, low enough that Max won't hear. "I think there's a guest room on the first floor... but I wasn't sure."

"You remember?" Roman asks, tense.

I nod and shrug. "A little. Just bits and pieces."

But Max hears us anyway and runs to his dad. Roman immediately smiles and lifts him up in his arms.

I take a step back, suddenly feeling awkward, like I've intruded on something sacred. Without looking at Roman, I say quietly:

"If you tell me where to put my stuff, I'll—"

"What do you mean where?!" Max interrupts. "Dad's room is down the hall! Parents always live together! I've seen it! Kate's, Mike's, even Alex's!"

"Well, if even Alex's parents manage it..." Roman says with a smirk, looking me up and down like I'm on sale at the market. "Then sure, kiddo. Of course Mom and I will share a room!"

I have no idea what that look of his means—but my cheeks burn under his gaze.

Chapter 42

Roman

This must be some new, twisted circle of hell. I thought I could handle anything now—after barely surviving the searing agony of loss. But I didn't make it out. No, that hell only led me straight into the torment of crushing disappointment. And now, having passed through that too, I find myself in yet another circle—or more like a spiral—of endless temptation.

Eva isn't just in my thoughts anymore—she's everywhere. Her maddening scent, the T-shirt she left draped over the chair, her toiletries in the bathroom.

I can see she's trying to take up as little space as possible. The T-shirt disappears five minutes after I notice it. Her shower gel is tucked away on the smallest, furthest shelf. And she herself seems to

shrink when I enter the room, as if trying to vanish. She quietly slips out, leaving me and Max alone. Like she's already accepted that she's only temporary in our lives. It drives me insane! Why does she act like that? Does she really think we don't need her? Or is she still hung up on her bleached-out excuse of a husband?

Jealousy twists in my gut like acid. I keep hearing her words on a loop in my head: *"I know now that my name isn't Polina, but I don't feel like Eva either."* So who are you, stranger that looks so much like my wife? Who did I let into my home, into my life? Into my heart. Into my bed.

She sleeps in my bed while I stay up late working and crash in the office. I know if I step foot in that bedroom—into that bed—I won't be able to leave willingly. So I tiptoe in early, when she's already up making coffee in the kitchen, just to grab my clothes and wash up. And so Max doesn't start asking questions. He's so happy now that his mom's back. Glowing like a lightbulb, a nonstop Christmas sparkle. I can't disappoint him. Not now. But after a few days of this, I'm completely drained. Christmas is right around the corner, and I have no idea how we're going to spend it. Sit at the table pretending everything's fine? Or will Eva once again leave us alone to "stay out of the way"?

Things are quiet at work. We signed the contract—we'll start building in the new year. The old projects are running on schedule. Everyone's already counting down to the holidays. I hear the whispers behind my back, and I know what they're about. News that the long-lost wife of Sokolov has reappeared is everywhere on social media. I don't care. I just wish someone could tell me what the hell I'm supposed to do now.

I came home early today—just to grab my gym bag and head out. Lift some weights, swim a few laps. Drain every last ounce of energy so I can finally get a decent night's sleep.

The house has been buzzing lately. Holiday music playing, garlands everywhere. Pine decorations wrapped around the staircase railing. It's cozy. Really cozy. And here I am, hiding in my office like some kind of Grinch, wishing I could just wave a magic wand and make all my problems disappear. Do things ever work out that way? Maybe for some people. Not for me.

I step into the house. It's quiet. I go upstairs—Max is in his room, coloring. No Eva. And just like that, anxiety starts screaming inside me. I rush to the bedroom.

She's there. Lying on the bed, wearing headphones. Asleep. Her phone is still playing something. I freeze in the doorway. Will this ever stop? The constant tension, the fear of losing her again?

I step in, closing the door softly behind me. My bag's in the closet—I just need to grab it and go. But then I catch sight of the video on her screen. And I can't move another inch. Because it's Eva. Gaunt, with dark shadows under her huge eyes. That's how she looked when she left me. I didn't realize back then that she was so sick. I thought—well, she'd just had a baby. Of course she was tired. What an idiot I was. If I'd only looked a little closer...

Eva is saying something to an unseen person on the screen. I hesitate for only a moment before picking up the phone and plugging in my own headphones. I need to understand. I need to hear this.

I rewind to the beginning and hit play.

A small office with white walls. The camera is aimed at a chair in the center. Eva walks in, lingering by the door. She looks forward nervously. Off screen, Krause's voice comes through:

"Come in, Eva. Take a seat."

Then silence. And again Krause, dryly:

"Today I found out that you lied to me. Turns out you have a husband. And a child. On top of that, your husband is a very influential man—he could make my life quite complicated if your treatment goes wrong. What were you thinking? Did you really believe I wouldn't find out?"

Eva sits, her head bowed low. She folds the hem of her hospital gown in her lap. When she doesn't answer, Krause snaps:

"Under the circumstances, I can no longer continue your treatment. The rules are the same for everyone. Please gather your things and leave the clinic."

Eva lifts her eyes—they shine feverishly.

"No! Please, don't send me away!"

There's a pause. Then Krause again:

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I'll do anything to get better! I trust you completely! I'll do whatever you say. Listen... Roman—my husband—he doesn't know I'm here. He won't cause you any trouble, I swear! I... left without telling him where I was going. He has no idea, I promise!"

Another stretch of silence. Then Krause:

"Is that true? Why didn't you tell him?"

Eva drops her gaze.

"It's complicated."

"Try."

His voice grows softer now, more persuasive—like he's leaned forward on his desk, closer to the camera.

"Whether you stay or go depends entirely on you—and how convincing you can be."

My fingers go numb around the phone.

She stayed. So she convinced him.

Let's see if she can convince me.

Chapter 43

Eva lifts her head and looks firmly into the camera. In this lighting, the signs of her illness are even more striking. My heart clenches at how blind I was. Back then, I was too euphoric over the birth of our son to notice the obvious. What an idiot I was. No wonder she left! The poor girl had to face her illness completely alone.

"I'll start from the beginning," Eva says, glancing away from the camera. Her gaze shifts off to the side, and her voice turns quietly thoughtful. "My mother is a very beautiful woman. She used to be a runway model, but her career ended when I was born. Things didn't work out with my father—they divorced. And her career eventually stalled too. By the time I got a little older, her old connections were gone, and she couldn't build new ones. But instead of letting go of that dream, my mother decided to live it through me. My whole childhood was spent at auditions, castings, and fashion shows. Birthdays and holidays happened on set. I didn't have any friends—because, as my mom used to say, in the fashion world there's no such thing as friendship, only competition. And I did manage to reach certain heights... I walked in children's fashion shows in Milan and was part of Kids' Fashion Week in Paris. My mom constantly drilled into me: a woman doesn't need to be smart to succeed in life. But she *must* be beautiful. Men love beauty. They admire it. They carry beautiful women in their arms and shower them with gifts. I was lucky, she'd say—I was born pretty. With a face like mine, I'd easily marry rich, and that was all that was expected of me."

Eva sighs. Her voice trembles a little, betraying her nerves.

"Until I was about thirteen, I lived by that rule. And I could see that my mother was right—every boy at school was in love with me. They hung on my every word. Would've jumped off the roof if I asked. And I was... well, a little brat. Arrogant. Spoiled."

She gives a short laugh.

"Then one day a new kid joined our class. And to my great surprise, he didn't join my fan club. When we first talked, the first thing he asked was what I liked to do. I said fashion. He asked, 'What else?' And that was..."—she laughs again, nervously—"a moment of revelation. I realized I had no answer. Nothing. I didn't care about anything but that. I mean, don't get me wrong—I wasn't in love with that boy. But he opened my eyes. It was like I saw myself from the outside: a shallow little thing with nothing but glossy magazines in her head.

That day, I told my mom I wanted to enroll in art school. I'd always liked to draw, but never took it seriously. Mom was stunned—what for? I wouldn't have time for shows! But I threw a fit, and she had to give in. I started taking art classes. Then dance classes. I started reading. And eventually, I realized my mother had raised me to be emotionally crippled, showing me only one very narrow path in life. I understood that fashion was her thing, not mine. I didn't want to do it forever.

By sixteen, I stopped going to castings and told my mom I wanted to become an architect. I actually loved drawing, but she always said architecture was a man's job—and at that point, I was doing everything just to spite her. So I studied hard, passed my exams, and got into architecture school. I had some money saved from my modeling days, and when I turned eighteen, I finally got access to it. I graduated with honors, became a pretty decent professional... and stopped talking to my mother a long time ago. When I moved into the university dorms, she told me I was on my own. If I was so smart and did whatever I wanted, I shouldn't come running back. And I didn't.

So now, after all these years, I don't even have her phone number. I know she married an American and moved to the States. But that's all I know. I hope she's doing well."

Her voice hardens. She turns and looks back into the camera, cracking her knuckles.

"I was sure I had changed. That I'd rebuilt my whole life. Made myself. But no! *She* made me. Because the beliefs she instilled in me as a child... they never really left. I kept living with the idea that men only cared about appearances. And I was constantly trying to prove—mostly to myself, more than anyone else—that I was more than just a pretty face. That I had worth beyond being a doll."

She exhales sharply.

"I've always found it hard to trust men. To believe that their interest was ever in *me*—my mind, my soul—not just my face and body. To prove to myself that my mom was wrong, I wore jeans and sneakers. Barely wore any makeup. I almost never put on dresses or heels. But life kept proving the opposite—that *she* was right.

There was this one moment with Roman... By then, we'd already been working together for six months. And when he kissed me for the first time, I was all dressed up and made up—like a doll. The next day, I looked like my usual self... and he acted like nothing had happened. And that only reinforced what my mother had always said. Later, things did start up between us again... but it was so hard to trust him. Especially because he's gorgeous himself—and unlike me, he's not ashamed of it. He flaunts it. Everyone's crazy about him! Women were always throwing themselves at him. And he never turned them away. I don't know how many there were—but I'm sure it was a lot. And I can't forget that. I burn with jealousy! God, I love him so much it makes it hard to breathe. I live in constant fear—wondering when I'll bore him, and he'll find another pretty little doll.

And the worst part is—I *know* it's not his fault. He keeps proving that he loves me. That he doesn't want anyone else—pretty or not, no one! He gives me no reason to doubt him, you understand? I invent the reasons myself. Because it turns out... you can't escape the damage done in childhood."

She angrily wipes her cheeks, brushing away the tears.

I feel my chest burning. I think I've forgotten how to breathe.

"I started seeing a therapist. I knew I had to work through all this trauma. Otherwise, I'd destroy everything. I had to learn to trust him. But I didn't have time."

"Because you got sick?" Krause asks gently.

Eva nods. She's biting her nails. Then forces herself to keep going.

"After the diagnosis, I couldn't stop thinking about it. About how I'd just keep getting worse. How the pain would grow unbearable. How they'd put me on morphine—and eventually even that wouldn't help. How I'd change—on the outside and the inside. And in the end... when I die, Roma would feel *relieved*."

Eva gasps. Krause appears on screen, handing her a glass of water. She drinks, her teeth clinking against the glass. Then lowers it and looks up at him.

"I kept thinking about it. Over and over. And that was the last straw."

Her voice trembles, and for a moment it seems like she's about to break down—but instead, Eva straightens her spine, lifts her chin, and says with quiet strength:

"I love Roman more than life itself. I want him to be happy. But I can't let him feel relief when I die. I'd rather he remembers me as the woman he loved—beautiful, radiant. *Alive*. Not a shadow wasting away."

My hands are shaking so badly I'm afraid I'll drop the phone. It feels like someone stabbed a red-hot iron rod into my gut and is slowly twisting it, pulling everything inside me into a tight knot. So much she's been carrying on her own. So much pain burning her from the inside. And I didn't even know about her childhood in the modeling world. What *did* I know about her? And what else don't I know?

I look up—and see that Eva isn't asleep. She's watching me from the bed, eyes wide in fear.

Chapter 44

Eva

Roman lifts his eyes, and I see that his gaze is wild. Furious. His jaw clenches, twitching. Why is he so angry? I can't believe I dozed off while watching that video! I haven't been sleeping well. I get up too early. It's impossible to rest in that huge bed, soaked in his scent, where everything reminds me of him. Lying there, waiting—knowing full well he won't come. He'll spend the night in his office again.

"I saved all of Mark's videos in the cloud before giving him the laptop," I say, my voice hoarse, slipping into a whisper. "I sent you a timed link on Telegram. It was supposed to arrive the day after..."

He doesn't look away. He says nothing. God—did I mess everything up again?

I feel a chill in my chest, but I keep trying to explain.

"Then everything changed, and I deleted the message, because... well, what was the point? You left—and you were absolutely right! And I thought maybe I should stop getting on your nerves."

His lips are pressed into a thin, pale line. His nostrils flare. He looks like he wants to kill me. What did I even do?!

My voice gets stronger, and I finish sharply:

"Lately, I've started getting flashes—scenes from before. I know now how Mark's method works—under the influence of that drug, you can make someone believe anything. I don't have the drug,

but I do have the videos. And I thought... maybe if I see more details of who I used to be, it might help me... remember."

He sits there, rigid and silent. Like he's turned to stone. Finally, he gets up and walks over to the bed. I shrink back under his gaze, but he doesn't say a word. He just places the phone next to me on the pillow—and leaves the room. My lips start to tremble. That felt like a line drawn in the sand. And I've just crossed it. There's no going back now.

I take a deep breath, but inside, my anger is boiling up. I didn't do anything wrong—if anything, I tried to help. I wanted to understand! And I did understand. I realized just how much I love him. I still don't remember everything from my past life, but this crazy feeling that came rushing back the second I saw him again—it's more alive than ever. I have to tell him. Let him do what he wants after that. Make whatever decision he needs to make. But I'll say it. And let the whole world burn if it has to.

I run out of the room, searching for Roman—he's nowhere. Then I hear a car door slam. The gates humming open. Still barefoot, I fly outside—his black BMW roars off, spraying me with snow from the tires. What now? Call him? No. He's too wound up, and he's driving. A crash would be the easiest thing in the world to happen right now.

Wringing my hands, I go back inside. I spend the whole evening with Max. I tuck him in, read him a story. He asks where Dad is—I tell him he's working. But my mind is racing. Can I call now? Is it safe? Is he off the road?

Back in the bedroom, I text him: "Call me when you can. I need to talk to you."

Thirty minutes go by. Message unread.

I lose my patience and call. Out of service. Damn it.

I almost hurl my phone at the wall—but hold myself back at the last second. I call Kamil. One ring, two, three...

"Hello?"

"Kamil!" I babble like a lunatic. "I'm really worried! Roman lost it and took off, his phone's off, I don't know where he is or what happened! I'm scared he might've gotten into an accident! Can you find out through your—"

"He's with me, don't worry."

"What?" I freeze mid-word, dumbstruck.

"He's fine, I'm telling you. He's right here. Alive and well. Mostly."

"Mostly?" I whisper.

"Bit drunk. That's all."

I let out a groan of relief. He's going to drive me crazy! Get a grip, Eva—he's alive, that's what matters.

"Okay," I say. "Just make sure he doesn't get behind the wheel if he's been drinking."

"Aye-aye, ma'am!" Kamil gives a mock salute, and I realize he's not exactly sober either.

Why the hell am I even worrying?

I snort and laugh, half from nerves, half from relief.

What a fool I am! He's just pouring his heart out to a friend over drinks, and here I was imagining all kinds of disasters!

For the first time in days, I fall asleep in peace.

In the middle of the night, I feel someone climb into bed beside me. Panic hits instantly—déjà vu slams into me like a wave. For a split second, I think it's Mark again, with his syringes. I gasp and try to sit up. Strong arms hold me down. I catch the sharp scent of whiskey.

"Shhh," a voice whispers. "It's me, Snowy."

"Roman," I breathe, overwhelmed with relief—and, without thinking, like it's the most natural thing in the world, I wrap myself around him, arms around his neck. Every word I'd planned to say vanishes. We just melt into each other, tangled—legs, arms, lips. With a groan, he crashes his mouth into mine, murmuring something I can't quite make out. His hands roam over me with a desperate hunger, and my skin ignites under his touch. The fire spreads instantly, reaching deep inside.

A moan tears from my throat. I arch toward him, wanting to be even closer, to fuse with him, become one.

He yanks my T-shirt off and kisses me wildly—everywhere he can reach. He grabs me, squeezes so hard it feels like my bones might snap, but it's not enough! I need more—closer, harder!

"Mine," my lips whisper. "You're only mine. I won't let anyone else have you."

I strip off his shirt, his pants, his boxers. Press myself to his burning skin. Better, but still not enough. Not nearly enough.

With one pull, he lays me on my back and looms over me. His eyes shine feverishly in the dark. He stares at me like he's seeing me for the first time. His lips tremble—he's whispering something. I don't care what. I can't wait any longer. I hook my legs around him, pulling him down. He lowers himself onto me—one thrust—and we're one. Finally.

I move with him—closer, closer, more!

He moves in silence, in ragged jolts, eyes locked on mine. That look—intoxicating, feral, ravenous—drives me mad. He watches and watches and watches, and under that burning gaze, I melt, I dissolve into particles.

"Harder!" I cry. This closeness isn't enough—I need to feel him with every cell, every pore! I need this to survive. This isn't sex—it's a ritual, a healing of souls.

The world around us evaporates. Nothing exists but this rhythm, these movements, those eyes—black, wild, hungry. And then, suddenly, the thrusts grow frantic, disordered. Roma groans, breathing

in sharp, stuttering gasps, and I know—I *feel* it in my bones—he's right at the edge. He's barely holding back—waiting for me.

That realization, that unspoken gift, collides with his next thrust and something inside me detonates, and we're soaring—together, as one—soaring and then falling...

Chapter 45

He's breathing into my hair, face buried in the crown of my head. His arms are wrapped tightly around my chest. Our legs are tangled. We're lying so close, and to my surprise, it's incredibly comfortable. I could never fall asleep cuddling with Mark—it was always too hot, stifling, awkward. But now, in Roman's arms, it suddenly makes sense. Of course. My place has always been here.

Sunlight peeks through the gap in the curtains. It must be late. I need to check on Max—whether he's eaten and what he's doing now. Antonia, Roman's housekeeper... no, *our* housekeeper, and also Max's nanny, has an apartment in Moscow. It's hard for her to commute here every day, so she usually stays over and only occasionally goes home. She's an early riser, so I'm not worried that Max is hungry... Still, I carefully slip out of Roman's embrace and head to the bathroom. I brush my teeth and step into the shower. Through the noise of the water, I hear the door open. My heart skips—and then races. I hear the buzz of an electric toothbrush, and see Roman moving around the bathroom through the foggy glass. What's he doing in here? Why isn't he saying anything? Not even a hello?

Then it hits me: he was drunk last night! Does he even remember what happened? Or maybe he does—and already regrets it?

In the span of a minute, I spiral into full-blown despair. And then the shower door slides open. My Winter Soldier stands before me—completely naked—and I gasp out loud. Lean, toned, muscular. And judging by the look downward—he clearly doesn't regret a thing. In fact, he's craving more.

A fire flares in my belly.

"I woke up and you weren't there," Roman says, his voice hoarse. "I already started to panic. Thought maybe I'd dreamed it all. Like a thousand times before. Then I heard the water running."

His gaze sweeps slowly over me. That same look from last night—wild, hungry. My belly isn't just on fire anymore—it's melting.

I smirk slightly.

"I left, like, a minute ago."

He licks his lips.

"And I'm not letting you out of my sight again. Not even for a minute."

He nods toward the shower.

"May I?"

I step back to make room. In one fluid motion, he slides into the stall, pulling the door closed behind him, never breaking that predator's gaze. He's standing right next to me—but I *feel* it again: the distance. Still too far. I grab his hand and tug him toward me, under the warm water cascading from above. His breath turns ragged as he presses up against me, kissing me with desperate hunger. Then, without hesitation, he lifts my leg around his waist and thrusts into me in one swift motion.

"Sorry," he whispers, brushing his tongue along the curve of my ear, sending a sharp tremor through me. "But I've waited for you too damn long."

And it happens again—rising heat, tangled flames, our flight and our fall. When it's over, we stand under the water, breathless, the droplets hissing off our skin like steam. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice small red marks on Roman's shoulders. I realize I left them with my nails. I kiss the scratches softly, then trace them with my tongue.

Roman inhales sharply and lets out a quiet laugh.

"We're never getting out of here at this rate!"

I whisper in his ear, brushing my tongue along his earlobe,

"I didn't really plan on leaving today..."

My lips find his stubbled neck, trailing toward his cheek; I cover him in kisses, tease the edge of his mouth with my tongue. I can see how much he likes it—he goes still, eyes closed, lost in the sensation. My fingertips move across his chest, lower. He leans into me with a moan, and I ache to kiss him everywhere—his neck, his chest, the dip of his stomach, and lower still, where the fire in him is already reigniting. I crave this maybe even more than he does. And I can't think of a single reason to deny myself this want.

A couple of hours later, we're sitting in the dining room, exchanging glances like a pair of naughty kids. Max had breakfast long ago and is busy in his room with Nick. Antonia, clanking dishes with stern efficiency, is setting the table.

"I'm scared of her," I whisper as soon as she steps out.

"So am I!" Roman whispers back, widening his eyes dramatically.

We giggle quietly.

Antonia returns with a tray. She places cups of coffee, toast, and jam in front of us. Then comes and goes several more times until the table looks like it's set for ten. Finally, she delivers a stern 'Bon appétit' and sails out like a galleon.

Roman attacks the bacon omelet. I sip my coffee and just... admire him. He catches me watching and snorts. Then he spreads butter on a toast and hands it to me.

"Chew!" he orders. "You eat like a bird."

"Uh-huh," I mumble, obediently taking a bite. "Like a hummingbird. Twice my own weight."

He nearly chokes on his coffee and starts laughing again.

And I just keep looking at him. I can't stop. I still can't believe this is real—that it's not all in my head.

"Why were you so angry yesterday?" I ask, finally mustering the courage. I'm scared to disrupt this fragile balance, but I *have* to know. Yesterday, while rewatching my confession, I realized what harm silence can do. And I swore I'd never make that mistake again. "It felt like you wanted to kill me... And then you showed up in the middle of the night."

He stops chewing, his eyes darken instantly. He sets down his fork and takes my hand, stroking my palm with his thumb. I flush at the touch.

"Not you," he says quietly. "I wanted to kill *myself*. I was angry at me. Sorry I didn't explain right away... and made you worry. But I really was... furious. I needed to clear my head."

I nod like I understand. Truthfully, I don't understand a damn thing. But he gets it. Without words. And he says:

"I just realized what a selfish asshole I've been."

"What?!"

I choke on the injustice of it. He's blaming *himself*? After everything *I've* done?

I open my mouth, ready to give him a piece of my mind—but I don't get the chance. Max comes running into the dining room and climbs into my lap in a flash. And just like that, everything else fades into the background.

Chapter 46

I spend half the day working. Roman asked if I could help him with a project. I said yes, though I warned him honestly—I might mess it up. After all, I haven't done any drafting in five years, and I'm not even sure I remember how. But as soon as I open the program, it all comes rushing back. I know it like the back of my hand. I dive into the work so deeply, I don't even notice three hours fly by. Only later do I realize Roman didn't really need my help—he just wanted to pull me back into something familiar from my old life. But I enjoyed it so much, I can't be mad at him. On the contrary—I'm deeply grateful.

Max is sitting on the floor building something out of Lego. Roman left earlier, but promised he wouldn't be long. I resurface from the blueprints when I hear a car engine outside the window. My lips stretch into a smile—he's back!

"Max! Daddy's home!" I say brightly.

We race to the door. Noise, chaos! Timon is barking, overwhelmed with excitement. Holding hands, Max and I stand in front of the door, beaming like Christmas ornaments. The garland overhead twinkles approvingly. The anticipation drags out—then Roman walks in, brushing snowflakes from his

hair. He's carrying a box and a huge bag. He turns, freezes when he sees us—and his eyes light up with such joy it makes my chest ache.

"What a magical sight!" he exclaims, and Max and I rush into his arms.

He laughs, "Careful—I'm freezing!"

Still, he kisses me on the cheek. I feel a flicker of disappointment—but I stop myself. Not in front of our son. Who's now bouncing around like a rubber ball, tugging at his father's sleeve.

"Me too! Me too!"

Roman sets everything down, shrugs off his coat, and sweeps Max up into his arms. Spins him in the air! Max squeals with delight, hugging his dad like he hasn't seen him in a month—not just three hours.

I can't stop smiling. Don't even want to. Because this is it—happiness. We're alive. We're safe. We're together. And I don't need anything else.

Roman sets Max down, and he dashes off to finish building his Lego masterpiece. Stepping over the bags, Roma peeks into the living room. Once he's sure Max is distracted, he pulls me into the shadows under the staircase. And there, he kisses me—hungrily, until I'm trembling, until the stars burst behind my eyelids. Our breaths mix into one. It's like we're breathing the same air. When he finally pulls away, I make a disgruntled sound and try to kiss him again.

He whispers:

"Snowy... I completely lost track of time. Turns out our company's having the holiday party tonight. Totally forgot. I really don't want to go—but I have to. Everyone will be there, and if I don't show up, it'll look bad."

I manage to peel myself off him and catch my breath.

"Yeah... of course. You should go."

He lifts my chin, making me look him in the eye. His gaze burns into me—doesn't want to let go.

"Will you come with me?"

I stop breathing for a second.

"You want me to come?"

"I don't want to go without you," he admits. "Honestly, it's getting harder and harder to leave you alone."

"Okay..." I start scrambling for a solution. "I don't even have a dress. Is there anything left from my old wardrobe?"

"Everything's still there," Roma nods. "But... I bought you a new one. The bags in the hallway."

He catches my astonished look and quickly adds,

"Just in case!"

Two hours later, I feel like the lead in a romantic drama as I descend the staircase. The white, glittering gown trails behind me in a soft shimmer. The heels fit perfectly—as if Roman knows every inch of my body. Everything's flawless. I curled my hair and added a bit of volume, letting soft waves tumble over my shoulders.

Roman is standing at the foot of the stairs. And, true to genre, when he looks up, he freezes. His gaze fills with such awe that I blush all over again. I know I look stunning—I was honestly speechless when I saw myself in the mirror. Like the Snow Queen come to life. But the way he's looking at me—that's what makes my heart soar.

He's wearing a white tuxedo and looks like a young god. I shake my head with a grin.

"We're going to turn heads tonight, darling."

"You are," he murmurs, his voice husky as his fingers glide along my bare arm. "But you know... I think I changed my mind. I don't want to go anywhere."

"Oh? And what do you want?" I narrow my eyes, smiling.

"You," he says simply, pulling me close. His nose brushes my cheek, his breath warm on my skin. His fingertips graze my chest—the fabric so sheer it might as well not be there...

"Sweetheart..." I gasp. "Another minute of this and I won't be going anywhere either."

His hand traces the curve of my hip before he pulls away with a frustrated groan.

"We'll make it quick," he promises—to me or to himself, I'm not sure. "An hour tops. I'll give my little speech and then we're out of there."

"Deal." I lick my lips, forgetting they're glossed.

Roman wags a finger at me in mock warning. I stick out the tip of my tongue in response and peek into the living room. Max and Nick are sprawled on the floor, drawing on a giant sheet of poster paper.

"Hey! No peeking!" Max yells, scandalized. "It's a surprise!"

"Alright, alright!" I laugh. "We won't be long, kiddo!"

"Go on, go have fun, my children!" Max calls out in a dramatic tone, mimicking Antonia.

Roman bursts out laughing, throws my coat over my shoulders, and we head outside.

Snow glitters in the headlights, and soft music hums in the car. Roman and I sit in the backseat, holding hands like teenagers. My mood is hovering somewhere around "bliss," and I'm honestly not sure it can go any higher. Lately, everything has felt so perfect that it almost scares me. Sometimes, this quiet fear creeps in—what if this is all just a dream? What if I wake up alone again in that Moscow apartment, with only grotesque, cross-hatched silhouettes on massive canvases for company? I push those thoughts

away. I won't spiral. I won't repeat old mistakes. I make myself a promise: to live in the moment. To savor every single minute life is giving me.

I squeeze Roman's fingers tightly as we step into the warm glow of an upscale restaurant. Holiday music plays softly in the background. A host rushes over, takes my coat and Roman's jacket. I catch a glimpse of us in the mirror—we really do look amazing. Tall, dark, and handsome in his white tux. Me in a dress that sparkles like it's been dusted with snowflakes, with the same sparkle in my eyes. The Winter Soldier and the Snow Queen.

My mood lifts into the stratosphere.

Until I walk into the main hall—and spot the breathtaking, long-legged blonde on stage.

Sofia.

Chapter 47

We walk down the aisle, out in the open, all eyes on us. And inside me, a siren is screaming. YOU DON'T BELONG HERE. NO ONE WANTS YOU HERE.

People are seated around round tables. Some look vaguely familiar, others I don't recognize at all. And just as that voice keeps blaring in my head, I hear a real one—female, sharp and cutting:

"She's such a bitch. Can you believe she actually showed up tonight?"

I whip my head around, scanning the table. A group of women are staring at me without blinking. Which one said it? Doesn't matter. They all think it. One of them just had the nerve to say it out loud.

My whole body goes cold. I walk like a wooden doll.

"And here he is, the man of the hour!" the host bellows, dashing toward us. "And he's not alone! Looks like he brought an angel with him! Mr. Sokolov, who is this heavenly creature?"

Roman smiles like he doesn't even notice the daggers being thrown at me with every glance.

"My wife. Eva."

The host freezes for a second. Apparently, he didn't have time to read the news this holiday season—and no one warned him about Roman Sokolov's suddenly resurrected wife. I stretch my lips into a smile. It probably looks more like a snarl.

The host recovers quickly and launches into a stream of flattery to cover his blunder:

"Eva, you look absolutely stunning! Believe me, in my line of work I see plenty of beautiful women, but you are... beyond!"

Still smiling, I nod politely. Roman takes the mic.

"Eva's not just beautiful—she's the best architect this company has ever had. So she's not only here as my wife, but also as my full partner."

The host gushes some more, and we move toward the main table—the one closest to the stage. Only two seats are left. One is obviously Roman's, with untouched place settings. The other has a red clutch hanging off the chair and a champagne flute with a bold red lipstick print like a wax seal. No need to be Sherlock Holmes to guess who left it.

I look up. Sofia is staring me down from the stage. Her expression says, *So, darling... what's your move now? Gonna sit in his lap?*

"Eva, take this seat," says Kamil, standing from the chair to the right of the empty one. "I was planning to mingle anyway. Can't stand all this formal stuff."

He winks. I smile at him gratefully, though my mood has crashed hard. It's somewhere far below ground now, quietly squeaking, *You don't belong here. You never did.*

Roman pulls out my chair and helps me sit. A waiter swiftly replaces the settings.

The evening carries on. Sofia stands onstage, offering warm congratulations to the company—and to Roman, personally. She smiles at him as if nothing ever happened. As if she's still his fiancée, and I'm just a minor inconvenience standing in the way of their happiness.

When she's done, she gathers the hem of her long red gown and steps down. She sits to Roman's left, chatting cheerfully, ordering champagne like she owns the place.

I sit frozen, a smile plastered on my face, pretending to listen to the conversation at our table. They're talking about the company's recent achievements, future goals, projects for the coming year. I understand none of it.

I can't think. I can't feel. I don't even know what I want anymore.

I'm no queen.

I'm a frozen sculpture, stuck to my chair.

Why did Roman bring me here? To humiliate me? To make me a spectacle? Maybe this is his revenge.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye—and meet his worried gaze. He leans in, his warm breath brushing my ear.

"Hang in there, Snowy. We'll leave soon."

And just like that—because he sees how miserable I am, and because of that warmth on my skin—I feel my whole body ache, like I'm literally thawing from the cold. I let out a sharp breath and nod with a smile.

"I need to fix my makeup. Excuse me."

I grab my clutch and head for the exit. I need a moment. Need to pull myself together. Need to make sure I still *am* the Queen.

In the restroom, glowing with gold and mirrors, I wash my hands and look at myself. Everything's fine. Everything's perfect. My panic is locked deep inside—on the surface, I still look stunning. I tell myself: You've got this. You're strong. You've been through hell. You deserve happiness. It doesn't help. My hands are trembling as I try to open the compact.

I hear someone walk in, but I don't look—too busy wrestling with the smooth lid.

Until long, pale fingers with blood-red nails pluck it gently from my hands, open it with ease, and pass it back. I look up. Who else could it be?

Sofia stands beside me, smirking at my reflection.

"Nervous?" she says, voice low and velvety—the kind men love. And unlike me, she's in perfect control.

"You should be. You shouldn't have come, sweetheart. That train left the station. You jumped off, remember? I don't even get what you're trying to do now. It's obvious to anyone with half a brain—Roman's only with you because of the kid. But believing that a child can save a marriage? That's your first mistake. Roman's no fool. He hasn't forgotten you left him. Traded him in for a doctor. He's just pretending to buy that crap about amnesia. On old emotions."

She gives a dismissive laugh.

"But come on—we're not in a Turkish soap opera. He'll scratch that itch with you, and once the chemistry fades, the resentment will stay. Trust me, it doesn't go anywhere. He'll never forget what you did. *Never.*"

She takes out her lipstick, the same bold red, and touches up her lips. And out of nowhere, I think of *Hatred*. Still sitting alone in my Moscow apartment. I never gave her any friends like Max asked. Maybe she grew. Filled the whole apartment. Maybe she slipped through the cracks, slithered down the street—and now she's here. Reaching beneath the floor. Stretching her tendrils forward. Painting Sofia's lips in thin, crimson strokes...

My fingers clench into fists. No. I won't let her out.

"Here's some advice, darling," Sofia purrs, snapping her lipstick shut. "Don't wait for him to throw you out. Step aside on your own. You're used to that, aren't you?"

She winks and walks out. And I stay. Hands shaking. Lips pressed tight. Heart burning with hate—fierce, blinding hate. But for whom?

Sofia?

Or myself?

Chapter 48

For a few dreadful minutes, I'm drowning in a sea of despair. I stare into the mirror and feel the urge to smear the makeup across my face, to claw at that pretty little face with my nails. She's right—right—right! I only get in the way. I'm a burden to everyone. Even to Roman. I still haven't recovered my memory, still don't understand who I am. Yes, I love Roman—more than life itself. So what? How long before he gets tired of playing house and leaves me? Realizes I'm not the woman he once loved?

I lift my gaze and take a deep breath. Then another. The face staring back at me isn't the Snow Queen—it's a frightened girl with a hunted look in her eyes. Pathetic and helpless.

And then it hits me with startling clarity: that girl is me. *Me*. Eva Sokolova. With the same old fears, the same insecurities that have haunted me my entire life. The ones that made me leave my family. That made me walk away from the man who loved me. And the ones still tormenting me now.

I force myself to breathe deeply, steadily. Push the emotions aside and try to see things clearly. Sofia's words begin to rearrange themselves into a logical sequence. And when they do, they take on a whole new meaning. Her entire speech—so precisely crafted—was the desperate act of a deeply unhappy woman. She's in just as much pain as I am. She's just better at keeping it under control. But she knows she's lost. That's why she followed me into the restroom—to say what she couldn't say in front of others. To try and humiliate me. To bring back the insecurity Roman once saw in me.

Step aside so Roman can be happy with the beauty in red? Not a chance. Like Sofia herself said, Roman isn't stupid. He's not some puppy on a leash—you can't just tug him wherever you want. If he loved her, he wouldn't have left her behind for a relationship that ended five years ago—not even for the sake of a child. That's just not who Roman is. No.

The eyes in the mirror look different now—sharper, more certain. There's a fire in them I haven't seen in a long time, and for once I like what I see. I made myself a promise: I'll never let him down again. Never leave him again. Never hurt him. And even if that promise ends up breaking *me*—so be it. If he truly changes his mind, I'll accept it with dignity. But I'll never be the one to walk away again. Not ever.

Relief floods through me. It's like a weight has lifted off my chest. I feel light. Lighter than I've felt even before this whole trip began. Like I could fly if I just jumped.

I laugh out loud. I bet Sofia wasn't expecting that outcome when she tried to humiliate me.

I dab on some lip gloss and walk out the door. Time to show everyone who really rules this evening.

I immediately run into a line of girls heading toward me. A pretty brunette—Tori, my inner voice tells me right away—smiles and says,

"Eva, you have no idea how glad we are to see you! Seriously. While you were gone, Roman totally went back to Soldier Mode!"

They laugh. Genuinely. As if they weren't just the ones complaining about me showing up. I shrug.

"That's just the kind of man he is."

I try to slip past them, but Tori gently grabs my arm. I raise an eyebrow at her.

"Sorry," she says quickly, letting go. "You might not remember, but... we used to be friends. I really hope we can be again. Maybe we could meet up sometime, talk a bit? I wanted to say something earlier, but Roman hasn't left your side! And, well, he's still technically my boss. I don't want to keep hanging around him—he might forget we're on break and dump more work on me!"

They all laugh again.

I sigh, lace my fingers together, and say,

"Girls, you don't have to do this. You don't have to pretend to be friends with me just because I'm your boss's wife. I heard what you said at the table when I walked in—'How did she even have the nerve to show up?' Well, I *did* have the nerve. And from now on, I always will. So please—spare me the fake kindness."

They exchange awkward glances. The second one—(Ellie!)—manages an uncomfortable smile.

"You misunderstood. We weren't talking about you."

"Oh? Then who were you talking about?"

"Sofia," she says.

"She just drives us crazy!" Tori jumps in, eyes blazing. "She's such a vicious snake! Roman was the only one who didn't see what a witch she really is. Honestly!"

We exchange a look. Then we snort. And then we burst out laughing—all of us, together.

Suddenly, the girls pull me into a group hug, wrapping their arms around me from every side. And in that warm cocoon, I feel myself lifting, as if I might float right up to the ceiling. Just a minute ago, I thought I couldn't feel any lighter—and yet here I am, rising. A small sob escapes my lips.

"Girls... thank you," I whisper.

They kiss me on both cheeks.

"That's it then, it's settled!" Tori says, wagging a playful finger. "We're hanging out over break—deal?"

"Deal," I say, biting my lip to keep from crying.

It's amazing how much we assume—how many things we get wrong—just because we misinterpret someone's words. And yet so often, everything is much simpler than it seems... if only we talk.

I hear the host asking Roman to come up on stage. I quicken my pace and step into the room just as Roman rises to his feet and scans the crowd. He spots me—and his face lights up in relief.

I walk toward him, remembering that moment in Prague. How he stood in the middle of the road, smiling at me... and how I already knew—with *all my soul*—that I loved this man. Loved him with every trembling corner of my heart. I didn't know how, or why. I just knew—he was mine. And I was his.

He meets me at the table, lifts my fingers to his lips, and kisses them. Then he bounds lightly onto the stage. As he starts his speech—about the team, the company’s success—I feel Sofia’s heavy stare on me. But it fades, like a spent match, against the look of love in Roman’s eyes. He speaks to everyone, but he keeps looking back at me. Again and again. And when he loses his place and laughs at himself, the whole room joins in. Still smiling, he says,

“And finally, I want to wish you happiness in the New Year. I know it sounds simple—maybe even cliché—but it’s such a complicated feeling, isn’t it? We all find happiness in different things: travel, time with friends, a quiet evening with a book in a cozy chair... But at the core of it all is love. So here’s to love, my friends.”

The applause is thunderous as he steps down from the stage, grabs my hand, and pulls me to my feet. There’s so much light in him, so much joy, I can’t help but follow. I rise, and to the cheers of the crowd, Roman kisses me the way only he can. And I kiss him back.

Everyone else disappears. There’s only my husband. And this time, I know it for certain—this is forever.

Chapter 49

Roman

I sit on the edge of the bed. My head is buzzing from the champagne. My chest—from the storm of emotions. I wonder, is it possible to stop being an idiot with time, or is it a built-in feature? And if Eva already loves me the way I am, is there any point in trying to change?

Over the past five years, I’ve gone through so much in my head. Made myself so many promises. I tried to fill the hole she left in my life—with my son, with work, with Sofia. And then, when I finally found her again—the one piece of the puzzle that actually fit, that finally made me whole—I threw it all away. Took off like the world’s biggest fool. Left the woman I’d been searching for all that time. Why? What the hell was that—resentment, revenge? Was I trying to hurt Eva the way she once hurt me? All I did was prove her old fears right—prove that I couldn’t be trusted.

It’s unreal that she forgave me so easily. That she’s willing to look past everything I did and start again. Even though her memory isn’t fully back. Even if she’s not ready to trust me completely. She still crossed that threshold, still brought me her heart—fragile and exposed—all over again. And this time, I swear to myself, I won’t break it. I’ll treat this gift like it’s made of glass and gold. She’ll never, ever regret choosing me again.

The door opens silently, and a slender figure in white slips into the room. My angel. My queen.

“He’s asleep,” she whispers, sitting beside me on the bed.

Of course she stopped by the kid’s room on her way here. Couldn’t resist looking in on him. I didn’t get in her way—just came straight to the bedroom.

Her perfume is driving me mad. It's stronger than champagne—more intoxicating. I can't hold back. I pull her into me and press my mouth to hers. One hand slides into her hair, the other slides the dress off her shoulder. She giggles softly.

"You'll tear it."

"I don't give a damn," I growl, my voice hoarse like I've been dying of thirst. And I *am* thirsty—starving for her, desperate to hold her, to cover every inch of that sweet skin with kisses.

I whisper like a mantra, "I love you, love you, love you, love you."

I unzip the side of her dress and finally slide off that snow-white shell, leaving her completely bare. I hear a sharp breath and realize—belatedly—that it's my own. Her skin seems to glow in the dark room. She's lying there on the bed, not hiding, not covering herself. Letting me look at her. Letting me see her. And I lose it. Completely.

I strip off my clothes and climb over her, but this time I don't rush. I do what I've wanted to for so long—kiss her, taste her, adore her. She trembles, moans, and just when I think she might shatter, she gasps, pulls me in, lifts her hips.

"Come to me," she breathes. "I want... to feel all of you."

And just hearing those words nearly undoes me. But she doesn't need to ask twice. I cover her with my body—completely—and lose all control.

We wake up tangled under the same blanket. Just fell asleep holding each other tight. Eva looks into my eyes in silence, biting her lip. Honestly, how is a man supposed to resist that?

I kiss her cheek, her neck... and once again, we melt into each other.

An hour later, freshly showered at last, we discover that it's still pretty early. We even make it down to breakfast on time. Max is sitting on a chair, swinging his legs, and lets out a delighted yell when he sees us.

"Hooray! You're home! Daddy, you're not going to work today, are you?"

"Nope, not today, buddy," I say, dropping into the chair next to him. "It's Christmas!"

He claps his hands in glee.

"Then what are we gonna do?"

We both look at Eva. She gives us a mischievous smile and winks.

"Cookies!"

Max gasps, his mouth forming a perfect O.

"By ourselves? Like Antonia does?!"

"Exactly—just us!"

After a moment of deep thought, he beams and declares,

"You know what? Let's give Antonia the day off! Let her celebrate Christmas with her family! We'll set the table ourselves!"

I laugh.

"This is going to be the most extreme Christmas this house has ever seen!"

"Let's do it, Dad!" Eva's excitement is contagious—Max is practically bouncing in his seat, clapping with joy.

"It's gonna be awesome!"

I throw my hands up.

"Okay, okay! I surrender!"

"Whoa!" Eva raises an eyebrow. "Does that mean you'll help too?"

"What would you do without me?" I sigh dramatically.

Three hours later, after waving off a grateful and slightly teary Antonia—who's promised, for the hundredth time, to come check on us in a couple of days—we're finally alone in the house. And that's when the fun begins.

Eva blasts a holiday playlist, Max dances around like a wild thing, arms flailing, feet bouncing. And me? Somehow, I find myself in the kitchen... stuffing the turkey.

Eva stands in the doorway, grinning and holding up her phone.

"Smile!" she says, glowing like a polished coin.

"Hey, hey!" I frown playfully. "What's with the blackmail?"

"I'm selling this to the trashiest tabloid I can find!" she laughs, switching to a mock-news voice: "*Shocking! Billionaire Caught Making His Own Roast Turkey!*"

"Oh, I'll give you *shocking!*" I toss down the knife and tickle my paparazzi.

Max ambushes me from behind, coming to the rescue of his beloved mom.

"Oh, it's two against one now, huh?" I growl, making a fearsome face.

And the chaos continues.

The doorbell rings while Eva, elbow-deep in flour, is rolling out dough. Max, tongue sticking out in concentration, is cutting out cookies with shaped cutters.

Outside, it's already dark. The garland twinkles on the curtains. Timon, worn out from the day's chaos, is napping in front of the fireplace, purring softly to the sound of Frank Sinatra. I'm carving up the ham, thinking this might just be the best Christmas of my life.

Then the doorbell slices through our little idyll like an alarm siren.

We tense immediately. Exchange glances.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Eva asks.

I shake my head and check the door camera on my phone. Standing there, looking straight ahead, is my mother. Shopping bags at her feet.

And just like that, the whole mood vanishes. That black, bitter feeling creeps back in.

"Open it," Eva says calmly, leaning over my shoulder. "It's Christmas, after all."

I shake my head. No way. She can go to hell. That's exactly where she belongs.

I drop the phone like it's something poisonous.

Eva leans in, wraps her flour-dusted arms around my neck, and whispers,

"Let her in. She's still your mother."

I look up. She's completely calm. Not a trace of anxiety on her face. Just a small, quiet smile.

And I feel myself start to calm down too.

"You make me a better man," I say, kissing her white fingers.

Then I pick up the phone again... and unlock the door.

Chapter 50

Eva

There's a strange tension in the living room. Roman and his mother are sitting across from each other, silently locked in a staring contest. Max and I keep darting back and forth from the kitchen. He thinks it's a game — he's having fun. Me? I'm just too nervous to leave those two alone for long. Roman's mother — *Olga*, my inner voice helpfully supplies — is polished and poised, the kind of woman who looks like she's fifty, max, though I know she's at least ten years older. I vaguely recall that things between us had always been strained. And even though she offered me a formal apology today, it came off more like she was doing me a favor.

I snort to myself. Queen Mother, right. I couldn't care less about her apology — she should be apologizing to Max! Our son stays near her, watchful, even though she brought him a mountain of gifts. He's a smart kid. It's going to take a lot more than toys to earn his trust again. And that's a good thing. Let her learn the world doesn't revolve around Her Royal Highness.

Roman's sitting stiff as a board in his armchair. I feel for him — it sucks having a mother who's a class-A ice queen, but what am I supposed to do? Kick her out right before the holidays? In the end, we

all mess up. And she did say she didn't want her bad choices to cost her a relationship with her only son and grandson. But Roman clearly wasn't moved. There's not a flicker of softness in his eyes.

When the tension in the room is almost unbearable, the doorbell rings again. Like in that childhood game, *Freeze!*, we all go still. Max, caught red-handed sneaking another cookie, freezes with his hand halfway to his mouth. I stop halfway to the table with a tray of appetizers. Roman and Olga are both looking at me for some reason. And only Timon, just as a proper dog should, bolts to the door barking, shattering the spell.

We all unfreeze. I set the tray down, Roman picks up his phone to check the front camera. He frowns. Looks at me. Looks back at the screen. Shrugs.

The doorbell rings again.

"Maybe someone should get that?" Olga suggests.

"I've got no idea who it is," Roman mutters.

I step closer and glance at the screen.

A woman in her early fifties is looking into the camera. She's stunning — tall, slender, with platinum blonde hair.

And she looks... exactly like me.

A choked gasp escapes me. I press my fingers to my lips.

"...Mom?"

"What?!" Roman jumps up, sits me down in his chair, and peers anxiously into my face. "That's your *mother*?!"

I nod, and tears burn behind my eyes. Then, all at once, the old hurt and resentment tear through the veil of lost memory. Like a tangled thread unraveling, knocking down the fragile house of false recollections—pushing them into the background, faded and dim. Images flare in my mind: shouting matches with my mother, tears, the moment she cut me off. Then—one by one—college, friends, work... and my first meeting with Roman. The spark between us, the complicated love—I just didn't know how to do it any other way. The pregnancy, and that overwhelming tenderness for the tiny newborn curled on my chest.

I can't breathe. I stare at Roman with wide eyes, trying to speak. But nothing comes. My lips move, but my voice is gone. Through the rush in my ears, I catch his words.

"Should I let her in? Eva? Do you want to talk to her?"

She left me. Walked out. Abandoned me! Her voice echoes in my head:

"You think you're so independent? Then go live your own damn life!"

I was eighteen when I found myself completely alone in this world. She didn't come to my wedding. She wasn't there when Max was born. She was never there. And now she's standing at the door like nothing happened?

"Eva." Roman is looking straight into my eyes. "Talk to her. It's Christmas, after all."

I snap back. Slowly nod. But I can't get up.

I sit frozen, listening to Roman speak with her in the hallway, helping her out of her coat. Her heels click sharply against the floor—like nails on a coffin lid. Her voice floats through the air, painfully familiar, as Roman introduces her to Max. I catch a narrowed glance from Olga across the room. But I don't move. Not until I see the blue dress and her dry fingers tapping nervously at her side. Then I lift my eyes.

"Hi, Eva," my mother says.

"You haven't changed at all," I say.

Half an hour later, Roman and I sneak a peek from the kitchen. The two women are sitting across from each other, exchanging the occasional remark about the weather in Russia and the U.S., the dollar exchange rate, and how prices have gone up. All while shooting daggers at each other with their eyes.

"What do you think," Roman whispers, hopeful, "if we lock them in there for twenty-four hours, would they eat each other like two spiders in a jar?"

"Might be worth a try," I muse.

We can't help it—we laugh and disappear back into the kitchen. I pull him in and kiss him, pressing close.

"Thank you," I whisper. "For keeping me sane... when everything gets like this."

"Yeah, well," Roman grumbles. "They sure gave us one hell of a Christmas."

Max bursts in, proudly showing off a brand-new remote-controlled robot. A gift from my mother...

My thoughts drift back to thirty minutes ago:

"Eva, I'm so sorry! I didn't know—I swear, I had no idea! God, if I had known... I would've come so much sooner."

"*You would've known—if you'd cared enough to ask.*" I think it, but don't say it out loud. I'm not about to ruin Christmas with a scene.

"As soon as I read the news about everything that happened... Saw those pictures of you and Roman... God, I was in shock! I bought a ticket right away!"

"Eva, forgive me! I've rethought so much, I was such a fool! I've been wanting to come for a long time, but I thought you'd never want to see me again. I didn't know what to say, or how... But then I realized—it doesn't matter! I'll say something, and if you slam the door in my face, then so be it!"

She speaks with a soft American accent. I stare, still unable to believe she's actually here. So familiar, so painfully distant. My anger's cooled down, but I have no idea how to be around her now. I don't know what we're going to talk about at the table. This long-awaited, family Christmas Eve I wanted to spend with just my husband and son... is turning into a farce before my eyes.

The kitchen smells warm and rich, the roast turkey filling the air with comfort. Roman and I stand by the window with glasses of champagne, in no rush to rejoin the others in the living room.

And then the doorbell rings again.

We glance at each other in horror.

"What is this, a soap opera?" Roman mutters.

"Then by the rules of the genre, it has to be your fiancée," I joke tensely. "But I swear, if it is her, I'll brick up that doorway with my own two hands. Just to keep her out tonight."

"Won't be necessary," Roman says with relief, checking his phone. "It's Kamil!"

"Kamil! Thank God!" I cry and run to open the door.

"Hey! Merry Christmas!"

Kamil brushes snow off his dark hair, shifting awkwardly in the doorway.

"I won't stay long. Just wanted to drop off Max's gift and... tell you what I found out about Krause."

He notices the tension on our faces and adds calmly,

"Just a heads-up—it's unofficial info. For friends only. Looks like the security services got interested in him and his invention. Most likely, he agreed to cooperate, and that's why they took him. Case closed."

"Which ones?" Roman frowns. "FSB? CIA?"

Kamil shrugs.

"Beats me. Probably neither. There are rumors about some top-secret R&D unit under the Ministry of Defense. If that division really exists, I'd bet that's where he is. And honestly? It's not a bad place for him. Unlimited funding, zero restrictions. A mad scientist's dream."

We exchange a look. Roman clenches his fists... then exhales.

"Shame," he mutters. "I was really hoping to punch him in the face. But the truth is, he saved Eva's life. So... let him live. For now. Hopefully we never hear from him again."

I can see how hard those words are for him. I know one thing: if Mark ever crosses his path again—whether in a year or ten—it won't end well.

But that's not what we need to think about right now. Right now, there are two problems waiting in our living room.

"Kamil," I look at Roman's friend with desperate hope, gripping his hand. "Where are you celebrating Christmas?"

"Uh..." he fumbles. "I wasn't really planning on it. Figured I'd just head home and—"

"Perfect!" Roman says brightly. "You're our Christmas miracle. You're staying here!"

"I mean, I don't want to impos—" Kamil begins, but Max barrels into him with a joyful shriek, and all hesitation disappears.

As Christmas night settles in, everything suddenly feels clear and easy. Like this is exactly how it was meant to be.

Whatever came before—tonight, we're here. Each of us a little broken, a little strange... But exactly the piece that was missing from the puzzle.

Epilogue

Roman and I are sitting on the rug by the fireplace, wrapped in each other's arms. The Christmas tree glows with soft golden lights, and the firewood crackles gently. Christmas morning taps at the window with golden rays of sun. I should feel tired after the long, festive day—but instead, I feel light, warm, and completely at peace.

The silence is broken by a little whirlwind. He bursts into the living room and starts shaking us awake!

"Christmas!" he shouts, full of excitement. "Mom! Dad! It's Christmas! Hooray!"

We hug him at the same time and almost bump heads. Laughter fills the room. Roman leans across our son and plants a kiss on my lips. Max wriggles like a restless little worm between us, then slips away and races over to the tree to tear into the remaining gifts. He'd fallen asleep on the couch right after the clock struck midnight, so of course, now he's an early morning energizer bunny.

To my surprise, the holiday went much better than I expected. Camille's sudden appearance eased the tension in the room. While he chatted pleasantly with both ladies, Roman and I only had to offer the occasional word or nod. As the evening went on, the last of the awkwardness seemed to melt away. We just talked—about everything. All of us. As if there had never been any fights or doubts. When the evening finally wound down and everyone said their goodbyes, I felt a strange sense of peace. Despite the exhaustion from the long day and the madness of the past two months, I was so happy to see my mother. I had missed her—even if I didn't remember it.

I head into the kitchen and make coffee for Roman and myself, and Max's favorite cereal. Then the three of us sit together. I stare into the flames and carefully rewind the reel of my awakened memory. I want so badly to remember every little detail right now. Christmas feels like the launchpad to my new life.

"Dad!" Max announces between bites of chocolate bears. "I changed my mind! I don't want to be a scientist anymore!"

"Oh yeah?" Roman replies with interest. "What do you want to be instead?"

"Santa Claus!"

We exchange glances.

"Well, well!"

"Yeah! I'll study to become a wizard and grant wishes for little boys—when Santa gets too old! Well... maybe a few girls too..."

"But I thought..." Roman says carefully, choosing his words, "you didn't believe in Santa?"

"Experiment proved he's real!" Max declares, eyes shut, nodding solemnly. "I asked him to bring Mom back—and she showed up right away! Being a scientist is cool and all... but they work way too slow! Kate and I sent our letter to Santa right after Halloween—and *poof!* Mom's here! So I've made up my mind, Dad—when I grow up, I'm going to Hogwarts!"

He tosses his spoon aside and slurps the milk straight from the bowl.

"Timon!" he shouts. "Look—I can do it like you!"

Then he plants a loud kiss on my cheek and zooms out of the room, leaving behind the smell of chocolate milk... and a warmth inside me that nothing else could ever match.

"Right after Halloween..." Roman murmurs, thoughtful. "That's when I suddenly had some free time. And I decided to go to the construction conference in Prague after all—even though I wasn't planning to..."

"You think it really *was* Santa?" I ask with a smile, gazing at my husband.

"After everything that happened with you? I wouldn't be surprised by anything anymore."

I shake my head, thoughtful. Maybe it's true—everything really does happen for a reason. And maybe our lives aren't a straight line from point A to point B, but a delicate lace woven from that line. Sometimes it tangles, sometimes there are knots. But sooner or later, the pattern smooths out—and becomes perfectly clear.

If my mother hadn't tried to live out her dreams through me, I wouldn't be who I am today—resilient, stubborn, and independent. If Roman hadn't wanted a child so badly, I wouldn't have had time to bring ours into the world. If I hadn't walked away from them five years ago... I might not even be alive right now.

And if my mother hadn't come yesterday, I still wouldn't remember anything.

"Roman," I whisper, "there's something I want to tell you."

He sets down his coffee mug and pulls me closer. His eyes darken—and I know exactly what that means. A warm flutter rises low in my belly.

I wrap my arms around his neck.

"I loved you even when I didn't remember. In Prague. In Sochi. And before that, when I didn't even know you existed—you kept showing up in my dreams."

"You remember everything?" he asks, hopeful.

I nod.

"There were fragments in my head before—like pieces of a puzzle. But yesterday, when I saw my mom, it all clicked. I remembered so much. Us. Everything. Only..."

"Only what?" He sits up and pulls me into his lap.

"Some of the details are still blurry. But I want to know it all—every second of what we had."

Sunlight slips through the curtains. Upstairs, Max has turned on music. And in the circle of Roman's arms, I'm in the coziest place on Earth.

"I'll tell you everything," Roman says, chuckling softly. "Every last detail—exactly how it happened, from the very beginning."

He tosses another log into the fire. The flames crackle in response.

Roman leans back against the armchair and pulls me closer. I curl up in his lap and close my eyes. His voice—deep and velvety—wraps around me, and the images it brings to life are so vivid, I can't tell whether he's describing them... or simply awakening what's been there all along.

"I don't know when the first spark passed between us—truth is, there was always something crackling. But I guess it all really began when I decided to organize a team-building event..."

Dear readers,

I would like to sincerely thank you for walking this path alongside my characters! Writing this book wasn't easy—I lived through Roman and Eva's pain and loss with them. But I always knew there was another side to their story: the happiness waiting just ahead.

It wasn't simple. But we made it—together!

And yet...

I realized I'm not quite ready to say goodbye just yet! :) So I'm inviting you to join Eva once more and find out how it all began. I'm currently working on a new novel that tells that story. It's a prequel to *I'm Not Your Wife*, and can be read either on its own or as part of the series.

If you'd like to stay in the loop and be the first to know when the book is released, be sure to follow my author page.

What to expect in the new book:

- a young, ambitious Eva—bold and irresistible
- her strong-willed, no-nonsense boss (whom she calls Winter Soldier)
- scenes that were only hinted at before
- more humor than heartbreak (though yes, there'll still be some feels)

So, it all began when Roman decided to organize a team-building event...