

The Snow Maiden

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“I’m not going back to Foma’s penthouse,” Kira says.

The sky over Moscow is blue and the water in the world’s largest swimming pool is cool and chlorinated. Kira floats in a red bikini that matches her toenails.

“Is that so?” Olik cracks his knuckles one by one, a small black tattoo on each finger: a cross, a whiskered cat, a playing card, dots and numbers, all *regalka* from his stints in prison. Then he splashes her playfully like he would if he were her boyfriend and not her pimp. “You hate every client because he is not me.”

Kira plants her feet so that her body is unmoved by the waves. She’s made up her mind about Foma. She’ll make up Olik’s mind too. There isn’t much inside his shaved bullet of a skull. Except greed. She can count on that.

“Listen.” Olik flexes his arms so that his tattoos bulge, his mother’s ugly face swelling on one bicep, Christ on the other. “You’re not dropping our highest-paying client.”

“I’m not going back,” she says.

“How will you make up for what Foma pays?” Olik says. “He pays top price, 2,000 rubles.”

"If you listen to me, chickens won't peck at 2,000 rubles." Kira releases her rigid stance and drifts amongst the citizens of Moscow, all smiling in the sun, mothers and fathers, teenagers and infants, old men and women, all pale as the underbelly of a perch. "We could be rich as Romanovs. Don't I always have a plan?"

"What? You want us to rob a bank?" Olik keeps his voice light. "Be the next Bunny and Clyde?"

"This is not the kind of money that ever sees the inside of a bank." And Kira knows money. It's the reason she's in this business. Unlike some of the *prostitutki*, she is not trying to feed any hungry children, not trying to make ends meet with a lazy, unemployed husband, not supplementing a teacher's meager income. She's making money, which she loves, the way some people love an evening of ballet at the Bolshoi. She can't fall asleep at night unless she holds a silver kopeck in her hand, the currency buffed to a high shine by her thumb, inspiring dreams of czarist opulence.

Olik swims toward Kira, but she moves backward, her dark hair billowing around her shoulders.

"Things didn't go so well for the Romanovs," Olik says.

"So you listened in history class," Kira says. "But do you know the history of this place?"

"The Moskva swimming pool?" Olik advances, but again Kira drifts outside his reach.

"People used to pray here." Kira smiles for the first time that day. Her teeth are crooked. When Olik catches up to Kira, to her red polka dots and crooked teeth, he holds her close, and she lets him. Her hand slips beneath the waves and brushes over his loose swim trunks, but she only strokes him once before taking her hand away.

"I have a prayer for you right now." Olik nibbles her wet neck and pushes her hand back down to his swim trunks, unconcerned about mothers or children in watercraft.

"This used to be a cathedral," Kira murmurs into his ear, the way he likes, her breath close enough to heat but not tickle. "Stalin tore it down. Then it was a garbage dump. Now it's the world's largest swimming pool." She curls her toes into the chilly concrete, seeking leverage. She thinks of chanting monks and toppled granite, of blueprints and business deals and endless possibilities, all at

her feet. “Rich as Romanovs,” she repeats.

When Kira finishes with Olik, she places her arms around his broad wet shoulders. His breathing is ragged, and he looks furtively around the pool.

“What does any of this have to do with Foma?” he gasps.

“He has money. Old money. An oligarch.”

“You want us to steal from Foma?” he says.

“You should see the paintings in his penthouse.” Kira dips her long fingers into the water and places them on either side of Olik’s head. The water that trickles down his neck is thick and baptismal. “Anyone can become rich here. Why not us?”

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The plan is simple enough, but it requires Kira’s returning once more to Foma’s penthouse, a concession, she decided, for a long-term gain. He lives on Tverskaya, the thoroughfare stretching from the Kremlin to the Garden Ring. After stepping off the red line of the Metro at Pushkinskaya, Kira pulls her red raincoat tight across her chest and walks briskly in the cold rain to Foma’s. With each step she recalls something about him that slows her feet, makes her knees go stiff and numb. His salt-and-pepper mustache. The strength of his gnarled hands. The smell of vodka and menthol on his breath. Kira stumbles and catches herself before she hits the wet pavement. *Just one more night*, she reminds herself. *I can handle this.*

Inside Foma’s building, Kira lets the doorman remove her dripping coat and help her into the gold-framed elevator. Olik has assured her that he took care of the doorman with a hefty bribe so no authorities will be called. On her way up, Kira’s chest grows heavier with each passing floor. She has come to dread the number fourteen, Foma’s floor, and avoids it like bad luck, making sure her coins, her shoes, her footsteps, and even the strokes of her hairbrush never equal this number.

Foma answers the door with a glass of vodka in his hand, offering Kira a drink before she even crosses the threshold. This unusual gesture of hospitality makes her hands sweat and she takes the drink nervously. Does he know? How can he possibly know? He can’t. She steadies herself, takes a sip.

Once inside, he insists on fetching a pair of warm socks for her wet feet and

he leaves her shaking on his plush, cream-colored carpeting. Foma's penthouse is one of the most expensive on Tverskaya, with a balcony overlooking a quaint courtyard and a large, spacious living room decorated with paintings by Degas and Kandinsky and Sergei Tkachev. Foma, and other party elite protected by the State Duma, took these paintings from the Germans after the war. Despite half-hearted efforts by diplomats, most of the corrupt officers, now corrupt oligarchs after Perestroika, never gave them back, feeling justified that they were owed something for their service. When Foma talks about how he acquired the art, he makes himself sound not only justified but heroic for avenging the losses of the Red Army with the pillaging of paintings, his spoils of war hung boldly on his walls for all to see.

Kira spots a painting she has not seen before, an antique triptych hung on the wall beside the door. She runs her fingertips over the slight cracks in the tempera paint knowing that if Foma catches her, he will slap her hand away. Still, she cannot resist.

The girl painted in the center panel has one hand on her hip, the other raised above her head as if she's dancing. Although she wears a modest rose-hued scarf over her head, tendrils of long blond hair escape out the back and twirl in the breeze. In her bright-flowered dress, she could be a gypsy or a princess, but her skin is a light blue that glitters as if frozen. The Snow Maiden. Kira remembers the fairy tale from her school days. An elderly couple, who couldn't have a child, built the little girl out of snow during a long, lonely winter. The girl came to life only to break their hearts at midsummer when she melted back into the earth.

On the adjacent walls are more famous paintings, but it is this panel that captures Kira's attention, this Snow Maiden, with frost-colored eyes and pale, bloodless cheeks.

"You like the Todorov?"

Foma enters the living room and Kira jerks her hand away from the painting.

"It is new?" she asks.

"No," Foma says. "It's something I take out for special occasions."

"How much is it worth?" It's the kind of question that makes Foma salivate. *More money*, Foma always assures her, *than you will ever see in your lifetime*. But what does he know? Nothing.

"I was acquainted with the artist, Ivan Todorov." Foma rubs his mustache thoughtfully. "He was not easily broken."

Kira gulps her vodka. If she is going to hear stories about Foma's days with the secret police, she will need to drink up. But not too much. She wants to be sharp when Olik arrives.

"Todorov was obsessed with his model for the Snow Maiden." Foma's eyes scrutinize the painting, and the Maiden seems to shudder under his gaze. "He painted her on everything. On his lacquer boxes, his panels and murals. She was lovely, but so young. No more than a child really." He takes a lock of Kira's dark hair between his fingers and rubs it. "Much like you. Lighter hair and skin, but the same blank expression."

The liquor rises back up Kira's throat. She wants to bite his hand. She wants to throw her drink in his face. Instead, she decides to keep the Todorov no matter what Olik says. They can sell all the other paintings, but not this one.

"Let's eat." Foma nods toward the kitchen where ingredients are laid out on the counter: tomatoes, basil, eggs, cheese, a sack of flour.

"We're making dinner?" Kira has never known Foma to cook before. They usually order takeout from a nearby deli or abstain from food entirely. It's another deviation from routine, and it claws at her stomach along with the vodka.

"I thought I would give you a lesson," he says.

Kira watches his broad shoulders, stooped with age but still strong as an ox, disappear into the kitchen. She hesitates in Foma's thick socks before joining him in the kitchen, where he has a second glass of vodka poured and waiting for her on the counter. From far away, she hears a woman's voice calling out to someone, and when she asks Foma who it is, he points to the floor above and turns up the stereo.

"The stupid bitch upstairs should stop letting her cat out," he says.

Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* fills the kitchen, and Kira sets her glass in the sink.

The pasta-making devices are laid out on a second counter like instruments of torture: the garganelli board, the hand-cranked pasta machine, the large roller, the cutters, the chitarra that looks like a small harp. Foma picks up the roller and mimes hitting Kira with it, a deranged smile on his face. "Like in the old days," he laughs, "before women got so independent." He puts the roller down, a joke this time.

"Watch and learn how real food is made." Foma cracks an egg and drops it inside a hole he has formed in a small pile of flour. "In Italy they know how to eat. Everything they eat is *al dente*."

Kira watches Foma's palms knead the fleshy dough, pressing and flattening over and over until she becomes light-headed. She steadies herself on the counter and puts down her drink.

"In Italy they know how to eat," Foma repeats. "Not like here where everyone stuffs their faces with Big Macs and french fries. They eat trash because they are trash." Foma is livid about the McDonald's that opened on Tverskaya, a street that he continues to call "Gorky" despite the City Council's vote. It's the biggest and busiest McDonald's in the world, easily filling its eight hundred seats with happily munching Muscovites who no longer have to stand in line for stale subsistence bread. Foma slaps the dough hard, and Kira's attention snaps back to the kitchen. "There," he says, "now we must wait thirty minutes for it to rest."

If any of Foma's neighbors had looked through their windows and seen the two of them standing together in the kitchen, Foma wiping his hands on a dishrag, Kira standing in an old man's heavy socks, both of them speckled lightly with flour, they would have thought that a grandfather was teaching his granddaughter the old ways, that their exchange was about preservation and love.

Foma unzips his pants and Kira kneels on the imported Spanish porcelain tile. She works against the vodka he has been drinking and his age and the pain in her knees and the dizziness that does not seem to go away. When he is finished, she will go out on the balcony, have a smoke, and clear her head. It takes longer than usual, but Foma finally helps her to her feet, satisfied but silent, and she wobbles out to the balcony.

It's still raining, a steady, heavy mist. The hazy street lamps in the courtyard cast quiet shadows under the basswood trees. Maybe Olik is already hiding in these shadows, ready to take her away from Moscow forever. She takes a deep breath. Tonight, the city tastes like wet bark and car exhaust and semen. The night air makes her feel a little better and she leans her head against the railing, cooling her forehead on the dark, solid iron.

Once Olik arrives, which should be in less than a quarter hour, they will tie up the old man and take away his art and antiques, his stashes of money hidden in jars and taped beneath drawers throughout the penthouse, stashes Kira shouldn't know about but does because she has a sixth sense about money. They will leave on the first flight to Paris. Olik has a friend who will move the art as opportunities arise. There is already a demand for the Kandinsky, an offer

from a couple in Switzerland that will finance them for at least a year. Olik has made sure their passports are ready and their tickets purchased, an aisle seat for him and a window seat for her so that the last thing Kira sees will be the lights of Moscow.

But she is so tired she can't imagine how she will make it all the way to Domodedovo airport. Right now, she can't even light her own cigarette. She laughs and thinks, *Olik will have to carry me past customs*. Kira slides wearily into a deck chair. On the floor of the balcony a tarp is folded up and she wonders why Foma hasn't laid it over his deck furniture, but then again why would he when he has an awning that protects everything?

Kira uses the sliding door to help her stand up and stay up. Now she is positive she will not be able to carry anything down from Foma's penthouse. Even with an elevator, everything looks so heavy, so impossible to lift and carry, the Tiffany lamp and Degas's petite ballerinas. In the kitchen, Foma whistles to *Lady Macbeth* as he prepares a large pot of boiling water.

"Psst."

Kira opens her eyes. She hadn't realized they were closed, but when they focus on Todorov's panel, she notices that the Snow Maiden has stopped dancing. She's crouched down at the bottom of the middle panel and gestures for Kira to come closer.

"Hurry," she says. "Get over here."

Maybe Kira has a fever. The weather turned cold and rainy yesterday, perfect for flu and infections. If she has a fever, she could be hallucinating. Paintings don't talk.

"Hurry!" The Snow Maiden looks anxiously past her to the kitchen. "You *byeasmeeslyennee dyevachka*."

Kira wants to protest being called a foolish girl, even by a fever dream, but her mouth is pasted shut, as if glue is oozing down from her sluggish brain. Surely the flu. She stumbles from the balcony and into the living room, holding onto Foma's leather chair for balance.

"I'm not foolish," she says, but her words bubble out in a thick, incomprehensible glob.

"You have to get out of here," the Snow Maiden whispers urgently. "As fast as you can. Don't look back."

Kira wants to explain what's about to happen, but the fog inside her head is growing steadily denser, obscuring details of the robbery, the grand escape, the

happy ending, a life of luxury. She manages to say one thing, “Olik is coming.”

The Snow Maiden snorts. “Who do you think sold you to Foma?”

Kira’s brain stirs a bit then, a jolt that loosens her tongue, strengthens her stance. “I—I sell my services,” she stammers. “No one sells me.”

“You think not?” the Snow Maiden says. “I’ve seen plenty of girls sold. None of them leave this place. You will not be leaving this place either unless you listen to me.”

Kira waves away the Snow Maiden’s words like they are gnats. Any minute now, Olik will walk through the door she left unlocked. They will take the paintings and sell them. In a few days, she will be eating *crêpes* and drinking *café au lait* at a stylish Parisian bistro.

“Please,” the Snow Maiden begs, rocking back and forth in distress as she kneels on her brightly colored dress. “I’ve seen this before. It’s why he brings me out. Every time. He wants me to watch. He’s been planning this for a while.”

“Planning what?”

“To kill you.”

Kira turns to the kitchen. Foma is using his chitarra to cut pasta into long strands of angel hair. Steam escapes from a pot on the stove.

“It will not be fast,” the Snow Maiden continues. “You will wish you were dead long before you are.” She clasps her icy fingers together and wrings her hands. “Please, go!”

Kira releases her grip on the chair and manages one solid step before her legs give out and she falls to the carpet. It feels softer than a bed, certainly more comfortable than the Spanish tiles. Although the Snow Maiden claps her hands frantically to try to keep Kira awake, Kira’s eyelids are too heavy to stay open.

She’s only half-conscious when Foma comes back into the room and spreads the tarp from the balcony out on the floor like a map. He grabs a thick handful of her hair and drags her onto the tarp. The pain should make her scream, but the glue has now filled her mouth completely. Olik isn’t coming. He never was. In her mind, Kira sees him again in the Moskva pool, imagines how easy the betrayal would have been for him. She wonders if that betrayal will merit a tattoo. What will her life become in ink on his body? A dot? A red bikini? A broken heart?

As though from a great distance, Kira hears the Snow Maiden sobbing.

“If you don’t like it,” Foma shouts, “then don’t watch.”

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Foma bends over the girl, his shoulders squared and solid in a light-blue sweater. Pacing back and forth inside the panel, the Snow Maiden treads over patches of Ivan Todorov's grass, smashing the petals of white flowers with her bare feet. But nothing is razed for long in this one-dimensional space. Soon the flowers will be standing straight as soldiers, the grass as fresh as if it had just sprouted in midsummer.

Over the years, the Snow Maiden has tried to escape the painting a thousand times, but she is a static creation, like everything else around her, like the wind that never stirs the branches above her head or the ochre sun that never warms her face. Todorov should have painted her behind bars for all the good she can do this poor girl whose legs are spread open on the floor like a pair of scissors.

Foma lifts the girl's limp body with his knees, careful not to strain his back, the old sinner. The Snow Maiden is too hoarse to continue shouting at him. She has called him every filthy name imaginable, ranted every curse, but he no longer pays her any attention. Once, many years ago, she tried, *I love you*, and it was as if she had reached out and slapped him across the face. *How dare you*, he said, moving furiously toward the canvas, his knife poised as if to slash Todorov's masterpiece. But then he only glared at her before resuming his brutal business, the knife shaking in his hands.

Now Foma ties the girl up with black cords. When he stands, his knees crack, and he shuffles back into the kitchen to place more water on the boil. The air in the apartment becomes intolerably humid, like a public banya, with condensation inside and outside the windows. The Snow Maiden starts to pace again, wishing she could not see the girl lying on the floor in front of her. She is slowly waking up and looking to the Snow Maiden for help, her eyes wild with terror.

Sweat trickles down the Maiden's neck, collecting in the curves of her elbows and between her breasts, dripping onto Todorov's flowers. She stops abruptly and lowers herself to the white petals, lightly touching droplets that hang like dew. She rubs the impossible wetness between her fingertips. Then she hears a steady drip, drip, drip and cranes her neck to peer outside the painting's frame. Water seeps from the panel and runs down the wall in a growing deluge. Can it be that she is melting?

The Snow Maiden's eyes snap to the kitchen. She watches Foma open a cabinet and take out a bottle of vodka. Her heart pounds. How is this possible? In all her years inside the painting she has never once broken a sweat, never once been able to shed a tear. Yet, here she is, melting, like the real Snow Maiden from the fairy tale, into the steamy air of the apartment. She looks down to where water has pooled on the floor beneath the painting and a wave of panic runs through her thawing body. What will the old man do when he sees this mess? Will he reach into the painting and grab her and pull her out? Will he force her to once again be the girl tied up on the floor?

When Foma comes back into the living room, he holds a small glass. He lifts it, toasting the terrified girl, before downing the shot. He doesn't turn his head to notice the water seeping from the painting, though the Snow Maiden closes her eyes, sure that he will. The drip, drip, drip is even louder than her heartbeat. Thank goodness for *Lady Macbeth!* The Snow Maiden takes a deep, steadying breath, her first in decades, and tries to think logically. If she can feel heat from the kitchen, if her colorful summer dress clings to her body, saturated, it means that she is real enough to exist outside of a painting, that her heart is pumping blood, not red tempera paint. It means she is free, no longer a prisoner. It also means she is no longer safe.

Before she can change her mind, the Snow Maiden thrusts her hand outside the painting. The air moves between her fingertips, and she pulls her hand back inside the painting. Then she looks at the girl. Is this her doing? She was the first girl to notice the painting, to notice her, the Snow Maiden, and to reach out and touch her face. Had that broken the spell? The Snow Maiden isn't sure, but one good turn deserves another. She scans the room again. Foma is still turned away from her, taking off his cardigan one sleeve at a time, and tossing it onto the leather chair. The eyes of the girl remain on her, have never left her, and the Snow Maiden prays the girl will be wise enough not to give her away.

Her leg trembles as she steps from the panel, from the protection of the artist's brushstrokes, and into Foma's living room. The girl closes her eyes, whimpers, and starts to beg loudly for her life. She keeps Foma's attention on her, masking any noises the Snow Maiden makes in her descent. Wise girl. Once the Snow Maiden is completely free of the painting, she looks back at the flowers and the sun that were her companions for so long, knowing she will never occupy that space again and wishing it a silent farewell.

When she turns back, Foma is rolling the girl, using the tarp, onto her stomach so he can etch his initials into the skin of her back with a small penknife. Under her dress, the Snow Maiden has the same marks, the same grisly tattoo, except now she imagines it has melted away, diminished into droplets that will evaporate into the heavens. For her, the long winter has at last become summer. Once she is certain Foma is occupied with his task, the girl struggling inside the cords enough to keep him focused, the Snow Maiden tiptoes into the kitchen, leaving behind wet footprints on the carpeting.

In the kitchen, she has to move more carefully, the Spanish tiles are slippery, and after a near collapse at the sink, she finds she can slide over the tiles like an ice skater on a frozen pond. She doesn't even have to lift her feet or make a single sound. The Snow Maiden surveys the utensils on the counter and selects a sturdy rolling pin. In two icy glides, she is back in the living room, water trickling down her spine, the heat of the kitchen winnowing her as quickly as boiling water from a samovar on an ice cube.

Foma is coughing, a wheeze he's developed deep in his chest, worse every year, but whatever it is rattling around his lungs is too slow a killer to do this girl any good. When Foma catches his breath, he reaches for his glass of vodka and finds it empty. He lifts himself stiffly from the floor. The Snow Maiden quickly bends on frosty knees and tucks the rolling pin into the folds of her dress, willing herself tiny and invisible. Foma's body creaks and the floor beneath him creaks and the tarp crackles and the Snow Maiden's heart is fit to explode. Did she ever miss this beating? If he catches her now, standing firm on his legs and facing her, she will never be able to overpower him. Every moment she is diminishing.

When Foma cries out in pain, grasping his calf muscle with a thickly veined hand, the Snow Maiden nearly fumbles the rolling pin. It must be a cramp, since he was kneeling so long, but no, the girl has managed to free one arm from the cords, has snatched the penknife, and plunged it into Foma's leg. He yanks it out, curses, then kicks the girl in the stomach. She tries to protect herself as best she can with one arm still tied behind her, but he keeps kicking her, his foot connecting again and again with her stomach, her hips, her head. He bends and slashes at her with the knife, shallow punctures in her back, jagged slashes across her scalp.

The Snow Maiden moves quickly forward. With all her strength, she lifts the rolling pin and brings it down onto the back of Foma's head. He staggers forward, releasing a grunt, before crashing to the floor like a toppled statue.

The Snow Maiden reaches down and takes the knife from his hand with cold, wet fingers. She slaps his face. He doesn't open his eyes. She unties the girl, who crabwalks backward, the tarp bunching up beneath her. She ignores her own injuries. Her dark eyes flick from the still form of Foma to the blood and hair on the rolling pin to the Snow Maiden.

"Is he dead?" she asks, her words slurred, adrenaline fighting the sedative Foma put in her vodka.

The Snow Maiden checks his carotid artery and finds the pulse still strong beneath his chin.

"Nyet."

"What should we do?" Blood trickles down the girl's cheek from a cut on her forehead and she swipes it away. She teeters on her bare legs as she reaches for her dress, which Foma has draped over a chair as if careful not to wrinkle it, although the Maiden knows well enough that he plans to burn it later, as he burned all the others.

"You must get out of here. Leave Moscow tonight," the Snow Maiden commands.

The girl winces as she buckles her high-heeled shoes, a bruise blooming on her ankle. "What about Olik?"

"Forget Olik. He won't follow you. For now, he thinks you're dead, remember?" The Snow Maiden picks up Foma's penknife in her melting hand and holds it out to the girl. "You have something more important to take care of." She has become smaller, her arms mere sticks of ice, and the knife falls from her shrinking fingertips into a sodden patch in the carpet. "Have you ever killed before?"

Foma's eyes flutter open. He looks from the girl to the Snow Maiden and moans a low, angry animal sound.

The girl picks up the knife. "Not even a chicken," she says.

"Then I will show you how," the Snow Maiden says, "and it will be my last gift."

Foma makes a great effort to roll over onto his side and stand up, but his arms and legs won't cooperate, won't bend to his will, so he only turns partway, his face pressed hard against the floor, half on the tarp, half on the carpeting

"You may want to be merciful. You may even feel pity for him." The Snow

Maiden's voice is a mere whisper as she bends to caress Foma's thinning hair. "But I assure you, he felt none for you, just as he felt none for me."

Ice crystals fall from the Snow Maiden's breast and onto Foma's body like sleet. The cold water awakens him further and he starts to tremble. His words when he tries to speak are jumbled, senseless. The Snow Maiden places her frozen fingers over his mouth, uses her ebbing strength to pull back his head, exposing his neck, still thick and red as it had been in his youth, though now the skin of his jowls is looser, softer.

"Right here," she says.

The girl squats down beside Foma. She places the blade against his throat, near the artery that pumps faster and faster each moment. Foma struggles in the Snow Maiden's cold grip, his horror making him burn beneath her like a furnace.

"Do it quickly, like you would open a melon," the Snow Maiden instructs.

Despite Foma's gurgled pleas, the girl obeys. His blood spurts onto the carpet between them, raising steam when it mixes with the Snow Maiden's melting ice.

The girl puts down the blade and both women watch until his body stops its spasms, until his chest no longer rises and falls. They watch as the blood flows into the carpet, turning the once decadent room into a gruesome bog. The Snow Maiden wants to reach out and pat the girl on the back, to tell her she did a good job, to thank her for setting her free, but her strength is gone, her body a reservoir of relief and exhaustion.

The girl notices the Snow Maiden becoming slighter and slighter, melting into the floor, her frost-filmed eyes streaming like a weeping Madonna. There is nothing she can do to save her. So she takes the Snow Maiden's advice. She forgets the marks on her back, forgets Foma, forgets Olik's betrayal, and even her own greed. She leaves the penthouse and shuts the door behind her, fast and quiet.

