



# Beautiful Monster

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

**Description:** He's a widower with a bloodstained past. She's the reluctant bride of a Bratva king.

Mikhail Zhukov has ice in his veins and war in his soul. The eldest son of a powerful Russian mafia boss, he buried his heart with his wife—and vowed never to love again. But when duty demands he marry Kira Malakhov, the pampered daughter of a corrupt oligarch, he expects a nuisance. What he gets is a firestorm.

Kira wants nothing to do with the world her father sold her into—or the man she's being forced to marry. Cold, ruthless, and haunted, Mikhail is everything she despises...until she begins to see the man behind the legend. A protector. A warrior. A man who watches her like she's the only thing keeping him breathing.

Mikhail never wanted a new wife. But once he sees Kira, he knows one thing: he will have her. Protect her. Obsess over her. Even if he has to burn down the empire to do it.

A reluctant marriage. A deadly legacy. An obsession that could consume them both.

**Total Pages (Source):** 51

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Mikhail

I still remember the exact shade of Alina's blood against our white marble floor.

Four years and the memory hasn't faded. Nothing about that day has. The faint scent of her perfume still lingers in our bedroom. The half-empty cup of tea on the kitchen counter that I refuse to clean. The silence that greets me when I call her name.

I take another sip of vodka, letting it burn a path down my throat. Outside my office window, Brooklyn sprawls beneath a gunmetal sky, the buildings sharp-edged against approaching dusk. It's the kind of evening Alina would have loved—cool enough for the cashmere sweater I bought her in Moscow but not so cold that her fingers would ache.

"You cannot live with ghosts forever, Mikhail." My father's voice cuts through my thoughts, rough as sandpaper. His reflection appears in the window glass behind me, his silhouette as unmovable as the empire he built. Dmitri Zhukov is the original monster—the Beast of Brighton Beach.

I turn to face him, keeping my expression blank. "I'm not discussing this again."

"The Malakhov girl is perfect. Young, beautiful, educated." He counts off her qualities like inventory. "And her father's fortune will strengthen our position against the Novikovs."

The name makes my jaw clench. Novikov. The family who ordered the hit on my wife.

"She's a child," I say, setting my glass down with deliberate control.

"Twenty-two is hardly a child. And from what I hear, she has spirit." His lips curl into what passes for a smile. "Not like Alina. Your first wife was... rough around the edges. This one comes polished."

Something dangerous flares inside me. "Do not speak of Alina."

My father waves his hand dismissively. "The past is the past. The arrangement with Anton Malakhov is nearly complete. His daughter will be safer with us than with him. There are already whispers of kidnapping plots."

"So I'm to be her bodyguard as well as her husband?" The bitterness in my voice surprises even me.

"You are to be the man I raised you to be." His voice drops, becoming the one that made men tremble in the old country. "You'll be the head of this family. And heads of families make sacrifices for the greater good."

I stare at the city lights blinking to life below. Another arrangement. Another woman traded like a commodity. I remember Alina's face the day we met—defiant, frightened, resigned. We eventually found love, but it took time—time that ended with her blood on our floor.

"I want to meet her first," I say finally.

My father's eyebrows rise slightly. "This is not a negotiation, Misha."

"I didn't say it was. But I will meet this girl before I agree." I turn back to the window, dismissing him. "Arrange it but sign nothing."

His footsteps retreat, the door closing with a soft click that somehow sounds like the chambering of a round. I close my eyes, seeing Alina's face, trying to remember if I ever truly chose anything in my life.

The Malakhov girl. Kira. Even her name feels foreign on my tongue. I wonder if she knows what she's being sold into. If she understands that in our world, marriage isn't about love—it's about survival.

And no one survives for long.

I pour another glass of vodka, the clear liquid catching the city lights like liquid fire. My phone buzzes against the mahogany desk—a text from Viktor, my lieutenant.

Meeting arranged. Sunday morning, 2 PM. Neutral ground - the Russian Tea Room.

The Russian Tea Room. How civilized. I wonder what Anton Malakhov told his precious daughter about me. Probably nothing. Men like him prefer to keep their children ignorant of the blood that pays for their silk dresses and private schools. Better that way—it's easier to sleep at night when you pretend the monster under the bed doesn't exist.

But I am the monster under the bed.

Since the age of sixteen, I etched my legacy with a bullet through a man's skull for daring to slight my father. The name Zhukov is a banner that commands respect, and in our unforgiving world, respect is carved from the marrow of fear itself.

My reflection gazes back at me from the shadowy window, and suddenly, I glimpse

my father's face merged with mine. His ice-blue eyes, that harsh mouth—so familiar yet unsettling. I see the same relentless drive for power, a drive that once seemed admirable. But now, I question whether it's worth the price. The willingness to sacrifice everything—even love. Especially love. Is it truly what I want, or just what I've been taught to pursue?

I drain the glass and feel the familiar numbness spread through my chest. It's better this way. Safer. Love makes you vulnerable and gives your enemies a target to aim for. Alina taught me that lesson in the most brutal way possible.

The intercom crackles to life, its static buzzing like a swarm of distant bees. "Boss? You want me to send the car around?" Lev's voice filters through, muffled yet clear enough to convey his readiness.

## Page 2

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"Not tonight, Lev," I reply, my voice echoing in the empty room, sounding hollow and distant even to myself. The glow of the lamp casts long, solitary shadows across the walls. "I'm staying in."

Tonight, I'll lock myself away with my ghosts and suffocating guilt. I'll spend another evening imprisoned by memories that remind me why I must never allow myself to feel again. Tomorrow, I'll meet Kira Malakhov, this cloistered princess wrapped in billions and innocence. Does she know she'll meet her doom in two days?

The city hums below, alive with secrets and sins. Somewhere out there, she's probably reading a book or painting her nails, blissfully unaware that her life is about to end and something else entirely is about to begin.

Something that will swallow her whole.

### Chapter 2

#### Kira

The Hermès bags slip from my fingers as I catch the tremor in my mother's voice, their expensive contents forgotten against the marble floor of our penthouse foyer.

"Kira, darling." Mama's manicured fingers worry at her pearl necklace, a tell I've learned to read like storm clouds on the horizon. "Your father is waiting in his study."

The late afternoon sun slants through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting long shadows across the pristine white surfaces of our Manhattan sanctuary. Everything

here is curated and controlled—from the fresh orchids that arrive daily to the way the light hits the Monet hanging in the hallway. But today, something feels different. The air itself seems to hum with an undercurrent I can't quite name.

"Is this about the London arrangements?" I ask, bending to retrieve a silk scarf that's escaped one of the bags. The fabric is cool against my palm, smooth as water. I've been looking forward to the move—Aunt Katya's stories of her life in Mayfair, the freedom of distance from Papa's watchful eyes, even the prospect of meeting Lord Charles Pemberton properly instead of through carefully orchestrated social encounters.

Mama's smile doesn't reach her eyes. "He'll explain everything, little dove. You know how he prefers to handle these matters himself."

The endearment sounds hollow in the vast space, echoing off the marble and glass. I study my mother's face—the same striking bone structure I inherited, though mine lacks the careful mask she's perfected over decades of being Anton Malakhov's wife. Her blue eyes, so like my own, dart toward the hallway leading to Papa's sanctuary.

"Mama." I step closer, catching the faint scent of her Chanel perfume mixed with something else—anxiety, sharp, and metallic. "What's wrong?"

She reaches out to smooth a strand of my auburn hair, her touch gentle but fleeting. "Nothing's wrong, Kira. Your father simply needs to discuss some changes to the timeline."

Changes. The word settles in my stomach like ice.

I nod, though unease prickles along my spine like static electricity before a storm. The marble beneath my feet feels suddenly cold, seeping through the thin soles of my Italian leather flats. I leave the scattered bags where they fell—somehow, they seem

trivial now, these tokens of a life built on surfaces and appearances.

The walk to Papa's study feels longer than usual, each step echoing in the cathedral-like silence of our home. The Persian runner muffles my footsteps as I pass the gallery of family portraits—generations of Malakhovs staring down with eyes that have seen too much, survived too much. My own face looks back at me from the most recent addition, painted last spring when I still believed my biggest concern was choosing between graduate school in Oxford or Cambridge.

The heavy oak door stands slightly ajar, an unusual sight for Papa, who guards his privacy like a state secret.

"Papa?" I knock softly, pushing the door wider, and find him sitting alone at his desk with a glass of whiskey at his side. My father is not a man who requires liquid courage, so the half-finished decanter fills me with dread.

He looks up as I enter, and I'm startled by how much older he appears—the lines around his eyes deeper, his usually perfect posture slightly curved. The late afternoon light streaming through the windows behind him casts his face in shadow, making his expression unreadable.

"Sit, Kira." His voice carries that familiar authority, but underneath it, I detect something I've rarely heard from my father—uncertainty.

I settle into the leather chair across from his mahogany desk, the exact spot where I've received countless lectures about propriety, responsibility, and the weight of our family name.

"The London arrangements," I begin, hoping to steer this conversation toward familiar territory. "I know Charles is eager to formalize our engagement before the season begins. I've been reading about the proper protocols?—"



"There will be no London." Papa's words cut through my carefully prepared speech like a blade through silk. "And there will be no Charles Pemberton."

The room tilts slightly as if the floor beneath my chair has shifted. "I don't understand."

He reaches for his glass, taking a measured sip before meeting my eyes. "Your marriage has been arranged, but not to the man you expected."

Marriage? The word feels like a death sentence. I knew this day would come—it's the unspoken reality of being Anton Malakhov's daughter. But Charles was supposed to be safe and predictable. A British lord with old money and older manners, someone who would treat our union like the business arrangement it truly was.

"Who?" The question scrapes against my throat like broken glass.

Papa sets down his whiskey with deliberate care, the crystal making a soft clink against the wood that seems to echo in the sudden silence.

"Mikhail Zhukov."

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The name hits me like a physical blow, stealing the breath from my lungs. For a moment, I wonder if I've misheard, if the blood rushing in my ears has distorted his words. But the grim set of his mouth and the way his knuckles have gone white where they grip the armrest of his chair confirm my worst nightmare.

"No." The word tears from my throat, raw and desperate. "Papa, no. Not him. I won't marry him."

Papa's face hardens, transforming into the mask I've seen him wear during business calls—cold, implacable, final. "This is not a negotiation, Kira. The arrangements have been made."

I surge to my feet, the leather chair scraping against the hardwood floor. My hands shake as I brace them against my father's desk, leaning forward like I can somehow force him to take back those poisonous words.

"He's a monster, Papa. Everyone knows what he is—what he's done." My voice climbs higher, hysteria bleeding through my carefully cultivated composure. "They call him the Butcher of Brighton Beach. He killed men with his bare hands. He?—"

"Enough." Papa's voice cracks like a whip, but I'm beyond caring about his authority now.

"I won't do it. I'll run away first. I'll disappear where you'll never find me." The threat spills out before I can stop it, desperate and foolish. "You can't make me marry him."

Something flickers across Papa's face—pain, maybe, or regret—but it's gone so

quickly I might have imagined it. "You have no choice in this matter. Neither of us do."

The admission stops me cold. Papa always has choices. He's Anton Malakhov—he owns politicians, judges, and half of Manhattan's elite. He doesn't bow to anyone.

"What do you mean?" But even as I ask, pieces begin clicking into place. The increased security lately. The way conversations stop when I enter rooms. The tension that's been coiling through our household like smoke.

"The Novikov family has put a price on your head." His words are flat, matter-of-fact as if he's discussing the weather. "Two million dollars to anyone who delivers you to them alive."

Ice floods my veins. The Novikovs—our oldest enemies, the ones who've been circling our territory like vultures for years. "Since when?"

"Three weeks ago. Since their eldest son died in that warehouse fire." Papa's eyes bore into mine. "They blame me for his death. They want to make me suffer by taking what I love most."

The warehouse fire. I remember the news reports and the speculation about gang warfare. I never connected it to us, to me.

"But surely there's another way—security, relocation?—"

"There is no other way." Papa stands, moving to the window overlooking Central Park. "Mikhail Zhukov has the power and men to protect you. His organization has the reach and the connections. And he's willing to take on the Novikov threat in exchange for your hand."

"So you're selling me." The words taste like ashes in my mouth. "Trading me like livestock to save your own skin."

Papa whirls around, his composure finally cracking. "To save YOUR skin, Kira. Do you think this is easy for me? Do you think I want to give my daughter to that man?"

But I'm beyond reason or caring about his pain or his impossible position. Rage burns through me like wildfire, consuming everything in its path. I grab the crystal paperweight from his desk and hurl it at the window. It strikes the reinforced glass with a satisfying crash, spider-webbing the surface but not breaking through.

"I hate you!" I scream, sweeping his carefully arranged papers to the floor. "I hate all of this!"

I overturn his chair, sending it clattering into the bookshelf. Leather-bound volumes rain down—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, all the Russian classics he insisted I read to understand my heritage. Now, they lie scattered like broken promises.

"Kira, stop this at once?—"

But I can't stop. I tear at the curtains and claw at the family photographs lining his desk. My manicured nails leave scratches on the mahogany surface as I rake them across the wood.

"He's a killer, Papa! A butcher! And you want me to share his bed, bear his children?—"

The study door bursts open. Two of Papa's bodyguards fill the doorway—Luka and Sergey, men who've been part of our household since I was a child. They look uncomfortable but determined as they step into the wreckage of the room.

"Take her to her room," Papa says quietly. "And lock the door. She needs time to accept this."

"No!" I lunge for the desk drawer where I know Papa keeps a gun, but Viktor's massive hands close around my waist, lifting me off the ground like I weigh nothing. "Let me go! I won't marry him! I'll kill myself first!"

Sergey opens the door wider as Luka carries me through it, my legs kicking uselessly in the air. I claw at his arms, but his grip is iron-strong, immovable.

"Papa, please!" I twist in Luka's grasp, catching one last glimpse of my father standing amid the chaos I've created. He looks older than ever, defeated in a way I've never seen before. "Don't do this to me!"

But the study door closes with a final click, cutting off my pleas. Luka carries me down the hallway past the portraits of my ancestors, their painted eyes seeming to judge my hysteria. The marble floors I walked across so confidently an hour ago now blur past in a haze of tears and panic.

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My bedroom door opens, and Luka sets me down gently inside. For a moment, I think about running, pushing past them both, and somehow escaping this nightmare. But Sergey's bulk fills the doorway completely, and I know it's hopeless.

"I'm sorry, little princess," Luka murmurs in his heavily accented English. "Your papa, he only wants to keep you safe."

The door closes. The lock turns with a sound like a coffin lid slamming shut.

I'm alone with the truth that's going to destroy everything I thought I knew about my life: I'm about to become Mrs. Mikhail Zhukov, wife to the most dangerous man in New York.

The thought sends me to my knees on the pristine white carpet, where I finally let the sobs come—raw, ugly sounds that tear from my throat like pieces of my soul breaking away.

Night falls completely, and with it comes the suffocating weight of inevitability. I curl up on my bed, still fully dressed, the backpack clutched to my chest like a shield. Sleep evades me, replaced by an endless parade of horrors my imagination conjures—Mikhail's hands, which have choked the life from men, touching my skin; his mouth, which has ordered countless deaths, pressing against mine.

A soft knock at the door startles me from my spiraling thoughts.

"Go away," I call, voice hoarse from crying.

"Kira, it's Mama." Her voice is soft, pleading. "Please let me talk to you."

"The door's locked from your side, remember?" Bitterness coats every word.

I hear the jingle of keys, then the lock turning. She slips in, closing the door behind her. In her hands is a tray with tea and little sandwiches I have no intention of eating.

"You need to eat something," she says, setting the tray on my nightstand. The porcelain clinks softly in the silence between us.

"I need to not be sold to a murderer," I counter, sitting up and hugging my knees to my chest. "Can you help with that?"

Mama sighs, perching on the edge of my bed. In the dim light from my bedside lamp, the lines around her eyes seem deeper, her beauty marked by years of compromise and silence.

"Your father is doing what he thinks is best?—"

"Don't." I cut her off. "Don't defend him. Not for this."

She reaches for my hand, and I let her take it, too exhausted to pull away. Her fingers are cool against mine, the diamond of her wedding ring catching the light.

"What do you know about Mikhail Zhukov?" she asks quietly.

I laugh, the sound sharp and humorless. "That he's killed people with his bare hands? That he runs the largest criminal organization in Brighton Beach? That they call him the Butcher?"

"Yes." She doesn't deny any of it, which somehow makes it worse. "But do you know

why they call him that?"

I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak.

"When he was twenty-two, the Novikovs—the same family that wants you now—kidnapped his sixteen-year-old cousin, Artem. They sent him back to his family in pieces." Her voice is flat and emotionless as if she were reading from a particularly dry textbook. "He hunted down every man responsible and carved them apart the same way they did his cousin."

My stomach turns. "And this is supposed to make me feel better about marrying a murderer?"

"It's supposed to make you understand that he protects his family." She squeezes my hand. "And soon, that will include you."

"I don't want to be his family." The words come out as a whisper, a confession.

"We rarely get what we want in this life, Kira." Mama's smile is a sad, knowing one. "But sometimes what we need comes disguised as our worst nightmare."

She stands, smoothing her skirt with practiced grace. "We'll meet with the Zhukovs tomorrow, and the wedding is planned for two weeks. It will be a small ceremony. It's safer that way."

"Two weeks?" The timeline hits me like another blow. "That's impossible."

"It's necessary." She moves to the door, pausing with her hand on the knob. "Your dress will arrive next week from Paris, and the designer's assistant is coming with it. He'll do your fitting. Try to rest, darling. You'll need your strength."



The door closes behind her, the lock clicking into place once more. I stare at the space where she stood, her words echoing in my mind. Two weeks. Fourteen days until I become Mrs. Mikhail Zhukov.

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Unless I find a way out first.

I move to the window again, pressing my palm against the glass as I stare out at the glittering city. Somewhere out there, he's waiting for me—the man who will either be my protector or executioner.

Either way, I refuse to go to him like a lamb to slaughter. If Mikhail Zhukov wants Anton Malakhov's daughter, he'll get her—but he'll soon learn I'm nothing like the docile bride he expects.

### Chapter 3

Mikhail

I tap my fingers against the lacquered table, each rhythmic strike echoing through the Russian Tea Room's opulent dining room like a countdown to war.

Fifteen minutes late. In my world, punctuality isn't courtesy—it's survival. The red walls seem to close in around me as I inhale the familiar scent of borscht and caviar, memories of childhood dinners here with my family bleeding into this moment of barely contained fury. My father, Dmitri, sits across from me, his weathered hands folded with the patience of a man who's orchestrated a thousand deals, but I can see the steel in his pale eyes.

"They test us," he murmurs in Russian, his voice carrying the weight of decades in this business.

I don't respond. My jaw clenches as I study the ornate samovars lining the walls, their polished surfaces reflecting the amber light from the crystal chandeliers. This place reeks of old money and older secrets—fitting for a transaction disguised as tradition.

The mahogany doors swing open with a theatrical flourish, and Anton Malakhov strides in wearing his wealth-like armor. But it's the figure behind him that makes my blood freeze, then ignite.

Auburn hair escapes from what was probably a pristine arrangement this morning, wild strands framing a face flushed with exertion and defiance. Kira Malakhov's gray dress—expensive, I note automatically—bears the subtle wrinkles of struggle, and there's something feral in her ocean-blue eyes that speaks of recent rebellion. She moves like a caged wildcat forced into submission, every step radiating barely leashed energy.

Kira Malakhov. My intended bride.

Heat shoots through my chest, unwelcome and dangerous. I bury it beneath layers of ice, letting my fury rise instead. This slip of a girl—this spoiled princess—dares to make us wait while she plays at freedom in the streets of New York.

Her gaze finds mine across the room, and something electric passes between us before she looks away, chin lifted in challenge.

The defiance in that gesture should infuriate me further. Instead, it sends a dangerous thrill down my spine that I crush with practiced brutality.

I rise slowly, letting my height cast a shadow across their approach. My father's eyes narrow slightly—a warning I choose to ignore. The scent of her reaches me first: jasmine and rain mixed with the metallic tang of adrenaline. She's been running. Hard.

"Anton." I extend my hand to her father, my voice carrying the frost of a Siberian winter. "Your daughter seems to have gotten... lost."

Kira's eyes flash, and I catch a slight tremor in her hands before she clasps them behind her back. Good. She should be afraid.

"Traffic," Anton lies smoothly, his accent thicker than usual. "You know how the city can be."

I let the silence stretch until it becomes uncomfortable, studying the wild creature before me. There's dirt on Kira's designer shoes and a small tear in her stockings that suggests she's climbed something—or someone has tried to stop her. The thought of other hands on her skin ignites something primal and possessive that I ruthlessly suppress.

"Indeed." My gaze locks with hers, and I see her jaw tighten. "Though it appears your daughter has been... exploring."

She lifts her chin higher, those blue eyes blazing with unspoken curses. The urge to step closer, to crowd her space until she backs down, wars with the need to maintain the facade of civilized negotiation.

My father clears his throat. "Perhaps we should sit. We have much to discuss."

But I can't look away from her. Can't stop cataloging the way her chest rises and falls with each controlled breath, the way she holds herself like a blade, ready to cut anyone who gets too close.

She's magnificent in her rebellion. And she's going to be mine.

But she'll need to be tamed first.

"Please," I gesture to the table with calculated precision, watching as Anton guides his daughter toward her seat. Her movements are fluid despite her disheveled state—a dancer's grace that betrays years of expensive training. But there's nothing rehearsed about the storm brewing behind those eyes.

"Kira," Anton hisses under his breath, nudging her forward when she hesitates.

I pull out her chair with mechanical courtesy, allowing myself to stand close enough that my breath stirs the loose strands of hair at her neck. She stiffens but doesn't flinch. The subtle scent of her skin beneath the city grime hits me like a blow. Something primal stirs—a hunger that has nothing to do with the gleaming silverware and everything to do with conquest.

"Thank you," she says, her voice surprisingly steady, accent crisp and cultured. But as she sits, I catch the slight tremble in her fingers as they brush the tablecloth.

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I take my place opposite her, allowing myself the luxury of truly examining what Anton Malakhov believes is worthy collateral. High cheekbones flushed with defiance. Full lips pressed into a thin line of resistance. The pulse at her throat flutters rapidly, betraying her calm exterior.

"We were beginning to worry," my father says smoothly, his weathered hands reaching for the vodka. "These days, fifteen minutes without a word can mean many things—none of them pleasant."

Anton laughs too loudly. "My Kira was simply... getting ready. Women, you understand."

The lie hangs between us like smoke. I watch a muscle in Kira's jaw flex as she stares at the caviar, refusing to participate in her father's charade.

"Is that so?" I lean forward slightly. "And did 'getting ready' involve the subway? Or perhaps a taxi chase through Manhattan?"

Her eyes snap to mine, widening fractionally before narrowing into blue flames. A smudge of dirt marks her temple, and I resist the inexplicable urge to brush it away.

"I wanted fresh air," she says, each word precisely chosen. "The weather was too beautiful to waste in a car."

"In those shoes?" I counter, my eyes dropping to her feet beneath the table. "Impressive."

The server approaches with more caviar and blini, breaking the silence of our battle. My father launches into pleasantries about the restaurant's history, drawing Anton into nostalgic reminiscences of Moscow. I allow their voices to fade into background noise, focusing instead on the way Kira's fingers curl around her water glass, knuckles white with restraint.

"Your security is lacking," I murmur in Russian, soft enough that only she can hear. "If you were mine already, you wouldn't have made it past the lobby."

She takes a deliberate sip of water before responding in flawless, cutting Russian. "If I were yours already, I'd have made it to Canada."

The unexpected retort draws an involuntary twitch of my lips. Dangerous. This spark of admiration is precisely what I cannot afford.

"You misunderstand the arrangement, Kira Antonovna," I say, reverting to English as the first course arrives. "This isn't a negotiation."

"Everything is a negotiation," she counters, finally meeting my gaze directly. There's intelligence behind that defiance—sharp, assessing. She's searching for weaknesses, for cracks in my armor.

She won't find any. I've buried them too deep.

"Your father seems to think otherwise." I gesture subtly toward Anton, who's laughing too loudly at something my father has said, desperation leaking through his jovial facade.

Something flickers across her face—hurt, quickly masked by contempt. "My father sells things for a living. I shouldn't be surprised I've become inventory."

The raw truth of her statement hits harder than it should. Something about her clarity, her unvarnished assessment of her situation, scrapes against something buried deep inside me.

I lean forward, dropping my voice to a whisper that carries promises of both threat and protection. "You're not inventory, Kira. You're an investment."

Her nostrils flare slightly, the only indication that my words have landed. She reaches for her vodka glass with practiced elegance, but I catch the slight tremor in her fingers before she steadies them.

"And what's your expected return?" she asks, her voice low and dangerous. "My father's connections? The Malakhov fortune? Or just the satisfaction of owning something that doesn't want to be possessed?"

The server appears with steaming bowls of borscht, the rich crimson liquid matching the walls surrounding us. The interruption gives me a moment to consider Kira's question—and to examine the strange effect she has on me. Most people cower in my presence; their fear is a currency I've grown accustomed to collecting. Her rebellious spirit should infuriate me. Instead, it intrigues me.

"All of the above," I answer honestly when we're alone again. "Though I suspect you're worth more than your father has disclosed."

She stirs her soup without tasting it, the silver spoon making soft circles. "You speak as if the deal is done."

"The deal is done, Kira." I taste the borscht, the earthy sweetness of beets mingling with the tang of sour cream. "Your father has debts that can't be paid with money alone."



Her eyes flash up to mine. "So I'm the interest payment."

"You're the collateral." I correct her, watching as she processes this. "And under my protection, you'll have freedoms you can't imagine."

A bitter laugh escapes her lips, drawing a sharp glance from her father. She composes herself quickly, offering him a placating smile that doesn't reach her eyes. When she turns back to me, that smile has transformed into something dangerous.

"Protection," she repeats, testing the word like it's poison. "Is that what you call it? Strange. It looks remarkably like a cage from where I'm sitting."

I lean forward, close enough that I can see the flecks of darker blue in her irises. "The difference between protection and imprisonment depends entirely on what you're running from,kisa."

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The endearment—pussycat—slips out unbidden. Kira's eyes widen fractionally at the unexpected intimacy, a flush creeping up her neck that has nothing to do with the room's warmth. For a heartbeat, the hostility between us transforms into something menacing—a current of awareness that makes my skin prickle with unwanted heat.

"Don't call me that," she whispers, but there's less conviction in her voice than before.

I allow myself a small, predatory smile. "You'll need to get used to it. A wife should answer to her husband's endearments."

"I'm not your wife yet."

"A technicality that will be remedied in a week."

Her spoon clatters against the bowl. "A week? That's?—"

"Generous," I interrupt. "My father wanted three days. Your mother requested two weeks. We settled on one."

The color drains from her face, and for the first time since she entered, I see genuine fear beneath her bravado. It doesn't satisfy me the way it should. Instead, I feel an unexpected urge to reassure her, to explain that while this marriage is non-negotiable, I have no intention of breaking her spirit—only redirecting it.

Our fathers' conversation grows louder, signaling the negotiation phase is beginning in earnest. Anton's gestures become more animated as he outlines what he considers fair compensation for his daughter's hand. As if she's a business asset being

transferred between corporations.

Which, in essence, she is.

Kira watches them with a detachment that speaks of years of practice, of being discussed as property rather than person. But beneath that practiced indifference, I sense a calculation happening behind those ocean eyes. She's planning something—perhaps another escape.

"Don't," I say quietly.

Her attention snaps back to me. "Don't what?"

"Whatever you're plotting." I hold her gaze steadily. "It won't end well for anyone involved."

A smile curves her lips, genuine in its coldness. "You don't know what I'm thinking."

"I know that look. I've seen it in men before they make fatal decisions." I take another spoonful of borscht, never breaking eye contact. "You won't make it past my security. And your father will pay the price for your disobedience."

The threat lands precisely as intended. Kira's shoulders tense, then deliberately relax as she processes the implications. I've found her weakness—not fear for herself, but concern for her father, despite everything.

Interesting.

"You're very confident for someone who just met me," she says finally.

"I did my research, Kira Antonovna." I set my spoon down. "I know you studied art

and want to be an artist or work in a grand museum. You love expensive things and enjoy accepting jewelry from men who are dying to marry you. I expect you to return every piece after our wedding.

Kira frowns, and her lips curl with distaste.

I continued in a hushed tone. "I've also heard you have a tendency to lose your security detail at least once a month. That won't happen under my watch."

With each detail, her eyes grow wider, her breathing more shallow. Good. She should understand that nothing about her has been private. Nothing has been truly hers.

"That's—" she struggles to find the word "—invasive."

"That's thorough," I correct. "I never enter into a contract without understanding exactly what I'm acquiring."

"I'm not a company merger."

"No." I allow my gaze to drift deliberately over her face, down to where her collarbones peek from beneath her disheveled dress. "You're much more valuable."

The flush returns to her cheeks, anger and something else battling for dominance. She opens her mouth to respond, but Anton's voice cuts through our private battlefield.

"Kira will bring her trust fund, of course," he says, his eyes slightly glazed from the vodka he's been steadily consuming. "Access upon marriage, as is tradition."

My father nods, his expression giving away nothing. "And the properties in Switzerland and Spain?"

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"Part of the package," Anton agrees too quickly.

I watch Kira's face as her father barter away her inheritance piece by piece. The resignation in her eyes tells me this isn't the first time she's been used as a pawn in his games. But beneath that resignation smolders something fierce and unbroken—a core of steel that makes my blood heat despite my best efforts to remain detached.

"And what does the bride receive in this arrangement?" Kira asks, interrupting their negotiation.

Both older men turn to her in surprise. My father's expression hardens with a warning, but she maintains an expression of mild interest as if the question is purely academic.

"Protection, of course," her father answers, glancing nervously at his daughter. "Security. Status."

"A gilded cage is still a cage," Kira murmurs, the words barely audible.

I smile, the predator in me recognizing the perfect moment to strike. "Tell me, Kira Antonovna. What would make this cage... comfortable enough to be called home?"

## Chapter 4

### Mikhail

Cold cases never die—they only hibernate, waiting for the first thaw of spring to rise

again.

I stand at the window of my office, watching New York spread beneath me like a crime scene map, lights flickering in patterns only I can decipher. My wedding is three days away. A marriage arranged like furniture in a room no one will ever visit for pleasure. Yet I find myself thinking of Kira's eyes—how they flash defiance even as her small body tenses with fear.

The door opens behind me without a knock. Only one person dares.

"Misha," Vanya's voice carries the weight of Los Angeles sunshine and blood money. My cousin has always been the handsome one—charm where I have menace, smiles where I have scars.

"You're early," I say, not turning from the window. The crystal tumbler in my hand catches the light, amber liquid gleaming like trapped fire.

"Some things can't wait." He crosses the room, his reflection appearing beside mine in the glass. Ten years in California have lightened his hair but not his eyes. Those remain Zhukov's eyes—calculating, cold when necessary. "Not even for your wedding day."

I turn now, studying him. We grew up together, fought together, and buried his brother Artem together after the Novikovs tore him to pieces and sent him to us in a box. That was fourteen years ago. The memory still tastes like metal in my mouth.

"Speak," I command, my accent thickening as it always does when family business arises.

Vanya reaches inside his jacket—a sleek Italian cut, too light for New York in February—and produces a folded piece of paper. "Your bride has more enemies than

you know."

"Anton's enemies are my concern now," I reply, taking the paper. The list of names makes my jaw tighten. Three are crossed out. Two are circled in red.

"These are not just Anton's enemies." Vanya's voice drops. "Someone is watching her movements. Following her to her art classes, the boutique, and even that little café she visits. My men spotted them and recognized them as professionals."

The glass in my hand threatens to shatter under my grip. "How close?"

"Close enough that I wouldn't wait until after the honeymoon to address it." His eyes meet mine, and I see the ghost of Alexei between us. "This isn't just business, Misha. The chatter suggests they want her before the wedding. Before she becomes untouchable as a Zhukov."

I drain my whiskey, feeling it burn a path to where my heart used to be. The part of me that died with Alina stirs unexpectedly. I had promised myself never to feel that kind of fear again, yet here it is, crawling up my spine.

"You've tripled security?" I ask though I know Vanya would have already done so.

"Da. But these are not amateurs we're dealing with." He takes the paper back, folding it precisely. "The bride you're getting for political alliance may become a corpse before she's even a wife if we don't move now."

Something primal rises in me at his words. The thought of Kira—defiant, beautiful Kira with her books and paintings and quiet strength—becoming another body I must bury makes my blood turn to ice.

"Tell me everything," I say, moving to my desk. "And then call Dmitri. My father

should know that his new daughter-in-law's dowry might cost more than he bargained for."

Vanya's expression darkens. "And the bride? What will you tell her?"

I think of Kira's face yesterday evening, how she looked at me across the dinner table—like I was a puzzle she couldn't quite solve. As if she were searching for something human beneath my carefully constructed exterior.

"Nothing," I decide, the word heavy on my tongue. "Kira will never know how close death came to her door. That is the first gift of many I will give her as my wife."



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Vanya moves to the bar cart without invitation, pouring himself three fingers of vodka. The bottleneck clinks against crystal—a sound that reminds me of church bells and funeral dirges.

"The Novikov family sends their regards," he says, downing the drink in one fluid motion. The words hang in the air like smoke from a gun barrel.

My blood turns to permafrost. "Repeat that."

"You heard me." Vanya sets the glass down with deliberate care. "Kazimir Novikov was spotted at JFK yesterday. Flying in from Prague with a clean passport, but my contacts recognized him. The same Kazimir who ordered his men to kill Alina."

The room tilts slightly, reality reshaping itself around this new information. I've spent fourteen years waiting for Kazimir to surface again, like a hunter tracking wounded prey through endless winter. Now he's returned, drawn by the scent of my impending happiness.

"They think striking at Kira will cripple both families," I murmur, pieces clicking into place. "Anton loses his daughter, I lose my bride, and the alliance crumbles."

"Clever bastards." Vanya's accent thickens with old rage. "They've been patient, waiting for the perfect moment when you had something to lose again."

I walk to my safe, fingers working the combination from muscle memory. Inside, nestled between stacks of cash and legal documents, lies my Makarov—the same gun I used to kill my first man at seventeen. Its weight feels like absolution in my palm.

"How many men did Kazimir bring?"

"At least six that we've identified. Professional killers, not street thugs." Vanya watches me check the weapon's chamber. "They're staying in a warehouse in Sheepshead Bay, near the docks—Novikov territory. I suspect the families have joined together."

The irony tastes bitter. Sheepshead Bay, where Alina used to buy flowers from a little Russian grandmother who spoke no English. Where I first learned that love could be weaponized against you.

"Kira doesn't leave the penthouse until after the ceremony," I decide, holstering the gun beneath my jacket. "Double the security detail. I want men on every floor, every exit, every goddamn window."

"And if she objects to being caged?"

I think of her auburn hair catching lamplight, the way she argues with me like I'm just a man instead of a monster. Threedays. I need to keep her alive for three more days, and then she'll have the Zhukov name as armor.

"She'll object," I say quietly. "But she'll be breathing to do it."

## Chapter 5

Kira

The scent of gardenias and fear mingle in the air as silk rustles against my skin like whispers of a life I'm leaving behind.

The women move around me like ghosts, their fingers cold as they pin and tuck and

transform me into something I barely recognize. The mirror reflects a stranger—porcelain skin dusted with powder, lips painted the color of fresh blood, eyes that seem too bright against the ivory lace cascading from my shoulders. The couture gown hugs my body like armor, each hand-sewn bead catching the filtered light streaming through St. Olga's stained glass windows.

"Turn your chin up, devochka," the makeup artist murmurs, her Russian accent thick as honey. Her brush sweeps across my cheekbones, adding shadows where none existed before. "You must look radiant for your husband."

My husband. The words leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Papa's pearls rest heavy against my throat—three strands of Mikimoto perfection that feel more like shackles than jewelry. The clasp presses against my nape like a cold kiss, and I resist the urge to tear them away.

Through the carved wooden door, I hear the low rumble of masculine voices—Mikhail's men positioned like sentinels in the cathedral's hallway. Their presence should comfort me, but I can't shake the question that's been gnawing at me all morning: are they here to protect me from the enemies circling like vultures or to ensure I don't flee before the vows are spoken?

The stylist's hands work through my auburn hair, weaving it into an elaborate chignon that pulls at my scalp. Each bobby pin feels like a small surrender, securing not just my hair but my fate.

"Hold still," she commands, sliding another pearl-tipped pin into place. I flinch, and she sighs. "Almost finished."

Outside, church bells toll and send tremors through my chest. One hour remains before I walk down that aisle toward Mikhail Zhukov—the man whose name makes

the toughest men in Brighton Beach lower their voices, whose reputation precedes him like a shadow stretching across the Atlantic.

"Something borrowed," whispers Irina, Papa's cousin, as she fastens a delicate diamond bracelet around my wrist. Her fingers linger on my pulse point, and our eyes meet in the mirror. For a fleeting moment, I see something like pity cross her lined face. "It was your grandmother's."

I wonder if my grandmother felt this same hollow dread on her wedding day or if she walked willingly into the arms of the monster who would become my grandfather.

"Something blue," says another voice, and a small handkerchief with blue embroidery appears in my lap. I touch it gingerly, feeling the initials—K.Z.—already stitched into the corner. Kira Zhukova, or Zhukova among fellow Russians. My future name weighs heavily on my mind.

The door opens, and the women scatter like startled birds. Viktor, Mikhail's right hand, fills the doorframe, his scarred face impassive as his eyes sweep over me.

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"The Father wants a moment with the bride," he announces, stepping aside.

Papa enters, looking dapper in his tailored suit, the silver at his temples catching the light. His presence fills the room, pushing out the air until I feel I might suffocate. The women melt away, leaving us alone with the ghosts of decisions made in back rooms over vodka and blood oaths.

"Kira," he says, his voice soft in a way that only makes me more afraid. "You look beautiful."

I say nothing, meeting his gaze in the mirror rather than turning to face him directly. His reflection seems safer somehow, less real.

"This alliance," he continues, resting his hands on my bare shoulders, "will secure our family's future for generations. The Zhukovs control the ports. We control distribution. Together..." He squeezes gently, his wedding ring cold against my skin.

"Together, we'll be untouchable," I finish for him, the words rehearsed and hollow. "I know, Papa."

His eyes narrow slightly at my tone, but his smile remains fixed. "Mikhail is a good man, and I trust him to take care of you. That's more important than any business, my sweet girl. He'll keep you safe."

A good man who had his friend's fingers removed one by one for skimming profits. A good man whose name is whispered in nightmares across five boroughs. I've heard the stories—we all have—but Papa pretends they're just tall tales.

"He will protect you," Papa adds, "when I no longer can."

I reach up and touch his hand. Despite everything, I love him. Despite knowing I'm being traded like a prize mare for political advantage, I can't hate him.

"I know, Papa," I say again, softer this time.

A knock at the door signals it's time. Papa offers his arm, and I rise from my chair, the weight of the dress settling around me like a beautiful prison.

"Ready, moya dusha?" he asks, still referring to me as his heart, even though mine is breaking in two.

I nod, though inside, I'm screaming. As we move toward the door, I catch a final glimpse of myself in the mirror—a bride perfect in every way, except for the terror hiding behind her eyes.

The cathedral doors swing open with a groan that echoes through my bones. The organ's deep notes wash over me like a tide, and suddenly, I'm drowning in the scent of incense and old wood, in the weight of a hundred expectant gazes turning toward me. Candlelight flickers across the faces of men I recognize from Papa's dinner parties—men whose smiles never quite reach their eyes, whose wives wear diamonds like armor.

My feet move without my permission, one step after another, down the endless aisle. The train of my dress glides against the stone floor, and I focus on that sound rather than the thundering of my heart. Papa's arm beneath my hand feels solid, anchoring me to this moment I wish I could escape.

But then I see him.

Mikhail stands at the altar like a dark angel carved from marble, his imposing frame filling out a midnight-black suit that must have cost more than most people's cars. Even from this distance, I can feel the pull of those ice-blue eyes, the way they seem to strip away every defense I've carefully constructed. His dark hair is slicked back, revealing the sharp angles of his face, and there's something almost predatory in his stillness as he watches me approach.

The scar that runs from his left temple to his jaw catches the candlelight—a souvenir from the war that claimed his firstwife—Papa told me. I wonder if he thinks of her now, if he's comparing me to the ghost I'll never be able to compete with.

Three steps from the altar, my heel catches on the hem of my dress. I stumble slightly, and Papa's grip tightens, steadying me. Heat floods my cheeks, but when I look up, Mikhail's expression hasn't changed. If anything, there's something almost gentle in the way he inclines his head—a barely perceptible nod that somehow feels like reassurance.

Papa places my hand in Mikhail's, and I'm surprised by the warmth of his palm, the calluses that speak of violence and hard work despite his wealth. His fingers close around mine with surprising gentleness, and I catch the faint scent of his cologne—something dark and expensive with notes of cedar and smoke.

"Dearly beloved," Father Fyodor begins, his voice carrying across the cathedral like a prayer or a condemnation.

I try to focus on his words, but all I can think about is the man standing beside me, the way his thumb brushes almost imperceptibly across my knuckles. It's such a small gesture, barely noticeable, but it sends warmth spiraling up my arm.

When it comes time for the vows, Mikhail's voice is steady, each word pronounced with careful precision. There's no tremor of uncertainty, no hesitation. This is just

another business transaction to him, I remind myself. Another deal to be sealed.

But when he says "I do," his eyes never leave mine, and I glimpse something beneath the ice—a flicker of something that might be longing or might be my imagination painting hope where none exists.

My own voice sounds foreign when I repeat the words that will bind me to him. The ring he slides onto my finger is heavy, a perfect circle of platinum and diamonds that catches the light like trapped stars. It fits perfectly—of course it does. Nothing has been left to chance.

"You may kiss the bride."

Mikhail's hands frame my face with unexpected tenderness, his thumbs tracing the line of my cheekbones. For a heartbeat, we're suspended in this moment, and I see something crack in his carefully controlled expression.

Then his lips touch mine, and the world narrows to this single point of contact. The kiss is soft, almost reverent, lasting only seconds but searing itself into my memory. When he pulls away, his eyes search mine as if looking for something he's lost.

The cathedral erupts in applause, but it sounds muffled and distant. All I can hear is the rapid beating of my heart—all I can feel is the lingering warmth of Mikhail's mouth on mine.



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Someone calls me Mrs. Zhukov. I am Mrs. Mikhail Zhukov now.

But what does that mean?

### Chapter 6

Mikhail

She belongs to me now, yet she fights it like a caged bird that remembers the sky.

I watch Kira from across the reception hall, the crystal chandeliers of the Plaza Hotel casting her in a golden glow that makes her auburn hair shimmer like fire. She's wearing a champagne-colored dress that hugs her delicate frame, revealing just enough skin to drive me mad. My wife. The word still feels foreign on my tongue, like vodka that burns but leaves you craving more. I never thought I'd use them again.

The string quartet plays something melancholy in the corner, the notes hanging in the air between us like unspoken promises. I drain my glass of whiskey, welcoming the familiar burn as I observe Kira's smile politely at some associate of her father's. It doesn't reach her eyes. I've cataloged all her smiles already—the fake ones she gives to strangers, the tight ones she reserves for me.

"Your bride is exquisite, Mikhail." My father appears at my side, his voice low and approving. "Much better suited for our family than Alina was."

I stiffen at the mention of my first wife's name. "Don't."

My father raises his hands in mock surrender, but his eyes are calculating. "The Malakhov girl brings more than beauty, and don't pretend you haven't noticed. I see the way you watch her when you believe no one is looking."

"I didn't marry her for her beauty," I growl, though I'm not entirely sure why I did. A business arrangement, protection for her, expansion for us—these were the reasons that made sense. Not the way my chest tightens when she enters a room.

I excuse myself from my father and move through the crowd. Bodies part before me—they always do. Fear has its privileges. But when I reach Kira's side and place my hand on the small of her back, she flinches slightly before composing herself.

"Having fun, kisa?" I murmur against her ear, inhaling the scent of jasmine and something uniquely her.

"Immensely," she replies, voice dripping with sarcasm only I can detect. "Nothing quite like being paraded around like a prize mare."

My fingers press slightly harder against her back. "You're not a mare. You're more like a wildcat I've somehow coaxed into my home."

She turns to face me, those striking blue eyes meeting mine with defiance. "Coerced, not coaxed."

I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips. Most people wouldn't dare speak to me this way. Most people value their lives. But Kira Malakhov—no, Kira Zhukov now—seems to fear nothing, least of all me.

Throughout the evening, I keep her close. My hand finds her waist, her shoulder, the nape of her neck. Each touch sends electricity through my fingertips, and I hate myself for wanting her this much. She was supposed to be a transaction, not a

temptation.

When she excuses herself to the powder room, I give her exactly three minutes before following. The hallway is dimly lit, all dark wood and heavy sconces casting shadows that dance along the walls. I spot her immediately—not heading to the restrooms but toward a service exit.

My footsteps are silent as I approach. Years of moving through shadows have taught me how to remain unseen until I choose otherwise.

"Going somewhere, wife?" My voice echoes in the empty corridor.

She whirls around, startled, a hand flying to her throat. "I needed air."

"There are balconies for that. Much safer than alleyways." I close the distance between us until she's backed against the wall, my arms caging her in. "Did you think I wouldn't notice you slipping away?"

"I thought you might be too busy discussing my dowry with your father," she retorts, but her breathing has quickened.

"I don't give a fuck about your dowry." The admission surprises even me.

Her eyes search mine, looking for the lie. "Then what do you want from me, Mikhail?"

The question hangs between us, heavy and dangerous. What do I want? Peace. Revenge. Power. But at this moment, with her pressed against the wall, her lips parted, and her pulse visible at her throat, I want something else entirely.

I capture her mouth with mine, swallowing her gasp of surprise. The kiss is nothing

like our sterile exchange at the altar. This is hunger and heat and something dangerously close to need. Her hands push against my chest for a moment before clutching my lapels, pulling me closer.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard. Confusion and desire war in Kira's eyes, mirroring the battle in my own soul.

"That," I whisper against her lips, "is what I want from you,kisa. And I think you might want it, too."

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Her lips are swollen from my kiss, her chest rising and falling rapidly beneath the silk of her dress. The sound of her breathing fills the narrow space between us, mingling with the distant hum of the reception. She's staring at me like I'm a puzzle she can't solve, her fingers still twisted in my jacket.

"I don't know what I want," she whispers, and the honesty in her voice cuts through me like a blade.

My thumb traces the line of her jaw, feeling the delicate bone beneath her velvet skin. "Then let me show you."

She shudders at my touch, and I can see the moment her resolve wavers. The careful walls she's built around herself crack just enough to let me glimpse the woman beneath—not the oligarch's daughter or the reluctant bride, but Kira. Raw and honest and terrifyingly beautiful.

"This isn't supposed to happen," she breathes, but she doesn't pull away. "We agreed this marriage would be in name only."

"No," I agree, my voice rougher than I intend. "It wasn't."

The scent of her perfume mingles with something darker—fear, arousal, the metallic tang of inevitability. My body responds despite my efforts to maintain control, and I press closer, trapping her more completely against the wall. She's so small beneath me, so fragile, yet I can feel the steel in her spine.

"People will notice we're gone," she says, but her hands haven't released their grip on

my jacket.

"Let them." My lips find the sensitive spot just below her ear, and she makes a sound that goes straight to my groin. "They already know you belong to me."

"I don't belong to anyone." The words are defiant, but her body betrays her, arching into my touch.

I pull back to look at her, taking in the flush that's spread across her cheekbones, the way her pupils have dilated until they're dark pools ringed with blue. "Don't you?"

Her mouth opens as if to argue, but no words come. Instead, she reaches up and traces the scar that runs along my left temple—a souvenir from the night Alina died.

"What happened to you?" she asks softly.

The gentleness in her touch, the concern in her voice—it's more dangerous than any weapon I've ever faced. I catch her wrist, stilling her fingers against my skin.

"Nothing that matters now."

But she doesn't look away, doesn't flinch from whatever she sees in my eyes. "It all matters, Mikhail. Everything that made you who you are."

The sound of approaching footsteps echoes down the hallway, and reality crashes back into focus. I step away from her, immediately missing her warmth, and straighten my tie. She smooths her dress with shaking hands, trying to erase the evidence of what just passed between us.

"Mr. Zhukov?" One of the hotel staff appears around the corner, his expression carefully neutral. "Your father is looking for you, sir."

"Tell him I'll be right there." My voice carries enough authority to send the man scurrying away.

When I turn back to Kira, she's watching me with an expression I can't read. The vulnerable woman from moments ago has disappeared behind her carefully constructed mask, but I've seen what lies beneath now. I know what she tastes like, how she sounds when she's breathless with want.

"This conversation isn't over," I tell her, adjusting my cufflinks.

"Isn't it?" She lifts her chin, every inch the defiant princess. "We have a lifetime of conversations ahead of us, husband. I'm sure this one will get lost among them."

I step closer, close enough that she has to tilt her head back to meet my eyes. "Nothing about you will get lost, kisa. I remember everything."

My words make her shiver, and I have to force myself to walk away before I do something that will compromise us both beyond repair.

But as I move down the hallway, I hear her soft footsteps following behind me, and something primitive and possessive unfurls in my chest. She's learning already—that running from me is futile.

We return to the reception separately, maintaining the fiction of propriety, but I feel her awareness of me like electricity in the air. Every glance she steals in my direction, every time she unconsciously touches her lips—I catalog it all. When she accepts a glass of champagne from a waiter, I notice how her hand trembles almost imperceptibly.

"You look pleased with yourself," Anton Malakhov comments as he approaches, his weathered face creased with something that might be approval. "My daughter

seems... settled."

I follow his gaze to where Kira stands near the windows, the city lights of Manhattan creating a glittering backdrop behind her. She's speaking with some banker's wife, but her fingers worry the delicate gold bracelet at her wrist—a nervous habit I've already committed to memory.

"She's adjusting," I reply carefully.

"Good." Anton's voice drops lower. "The Novikov situation has escalated. Three of their men were spotted near her grandmother's home yesterday. This marriage couldn't have come at a better time."



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Ice floods my veins. "You didn't tell me they were already making moves."

"I'm telling you now." His gray eyes meet mine steadily. "She's safer with your name, but only if you can keep her close. Kira has always been... independent. She won't make it easy."

Across the room, my new wife laughs at something her friend has said, but I can see the tension in her shoulders, the way she keeps glancing toward the exits. She's still planning to run, still believing she can somehow escape the web we've all been caught in.

"She'll learn," I murmur, and Anton nods grimly.

The reception winds down with excruciating slowness. I play my part—the satisfied groom, the dutiful son, the shrewd businessman expanding his territory through matrimony. But beneath the surface, something darker prowls. Every time another man looks at Kira for too long, every time she smiles at someone who isn't me, I feel the familiar burn of possessiveness that I thought died with Alina.

When it's finally time to leave, I place my hand on Kira's lower back to guide her toward the exit. She stiffens but doesn't pull away, not with dozens of eyes watching our every move. The photographers capture our departure—the powerful Bratva heir and his beautiful oligarch bride, a union that will reshape the balance of power in the city.

The limousine ride to my home in Brooklyn is filled with unspoken tension. Kira sits as far from me as the leather seats allow, staring out at the passing streetlights. The

champagne-colored dress has ridden up slightly, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of her calves, and I have to clench my fists to keep from reaching for her.

"Regretting your escape attempt already?" I ask, my voice cutting through the silence.

She turns to face me, and in the dim light of the car, her eyes look almost luminous.

"Should I be?"

"That depends on whether you plan to try again."

"And if I do?"

I lean forward, closing some of the distance between us. "Then I'll have to get creative about keeping you close, kiss. And trust me—you won't enjoy my methods nearly as much as I will."

Her breath catches, but she doesn't look away. "Is that a threat, husband?"

"It's a promise."

## Chapter 7

Mikhail

The door to our penthouse closes behind us with the finality of a coffin lid. My new wife—this woman I barely know—seems to shrink in the dim light of the foyer.

"Welcome home." The words feel strange on my tongue, hollow as I watch Kira take in her surroundings. Her blue eyes dart from the high ceilings to the fortified windows, scanning each corner where I know she spots my men positioned like shadows against the walls.

Nikolai nods from his post by the stairs, his hand never far from the pistol at his hip. Yuri stands sentry by the back elevator, expressionless as always. Their presence is a reminder of what we both know—this marriage isn't just about paperwork and promises. It's about protection. Survival.

"Your father's men delivered your belongings earlier," I tell her, watching as she wraps her arms around herself. The delicate perfume she wears—something floral and expensive—fills the space between us. "Everything's upstairs."

Kira doesn't respond, just nods once, a quick jerk of her chin. The defiance in that small gesture stirs something in me—admiration, perhaps. Or irritation. It's hard to distinguish between them these days.

"I'll show you the bedroom," I say, moving toward the stairs.

She follows, her footsteps nearly silent against the hardwood. I feel her presence behind me like a physical weight pressing against my spine. When we reach the master suite, she brushes past me, her shoulder barely grazing mine. The contact sends an unexpected jolt through my system.

"There's a bathroom through there," I point to the door on the far wall. "And your clothes are?"

Before I can finish, she's darting for the bathroom, slipping inside with the quickness of a startled animal. The lock clicks into place.

I stand there, staring at the closed door. Count to ten in Russian, then in English. The old anger management technique my father mocked, but Sasha, my security chief, insisted I learn after I put three men in the hospital last year.

"Kira." My voice is controlled and measured. "Come out."

Silence.

"This is childish." I step closer to the door. "We need to talk about how this arrangement will work."

I hear movement inside, water running. Kira's ignoring me.

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"Kisa." The pet name slips out even though my annoyance. "Open the door."

More silence, though the water stops.

My patience—never my strong suit—snaps like a dry twig. "You have three seconds before I break it down."

"Go away!" Her voice is muffled but strong. "I'm not sleeping with you."

The misunderstanding would be amusing if it weren't so infuriating. "One."

"I mean it, Mikhail!"

"Two."

I hear something heavy being dragged against the door. A futile barricade.

"Three."

My shoulder connects with the door, the wood splintering around the lock with a satisfying crack. It takes a second hit before it gives way completely, revealing Kira standing in the center of the bathroom, a heavy towel rack clutched in her hands like a weapon.

Her eyes widen, a flush of anger or fear—maybe both—coloring her cheeks. She's beautiful in her rage, like a storm about to break.

"Put that down before you hurt yourself," I say, stepping into the bathroom.

"Stay back." She raises the makeshift weapon higher.

I move faster than she expects, closing the distance between us in two strides. One hand wraps around the towel rack, the other around her waist. She struggles, surprisingly strong for someone so small, but I lift her easily, tossing the rack aside and hoisting her over my shoulder.

"Put me down!" She pounds against my back, her fists like bird wings against stone.

I carry her into the bedroom, ignoring her protests, and deposit her onto the king-sized bed. She immediately scrambles to the opposite side, putting as much distance between us as possible.

"You can't lock yourself in the bathroom all night," I tell her, crossing my arms. "This is your room. Your bed."

Confusion flickers across her face. "My room?"

"Yes." I gesture to the space around us. "I sleep across the hall."

"But..." She trails off, suspicion narrowing her eyes. "We're married."

"On paper." I move toward the door, suddenly needing space from the scent of her, from the way her auburn hair spills across my pillows. "This marriage is about protection and profit, not fucking. You'll be safe here. That's all that matters to your father."

I pause at the threshold, looking back at her. She's sitting up now, her back against the headboard, watching me with those piercing blue eyes that seem to see more than

I want.

"Lock your door if it makes you feel better," I tell her. "But know this—no one gets in or out of this house without my knowledge. Not even you."

I close the door behind me, her silence following me like a shadow as I cross the hall to my empty room.

I strip off my jacket and loosen my tie, the silk slithering through my fingers like water. The muffled sounds of movement from across the hall draw my attention—soft footsteps, the creak of a drawer opening, the rustle of fabric. I picture her exploring the space that is now hers, testing the boundaries of her gilded cage.

The bed in my room remains untouched, sheets pulled tight with military precision. Sleep won't come easily tonight. It never does.

I pour two fingers of vodka into a crystal tumbler, the bottle still cold from the freezer. The liquid burns a familiar path down my throat, warming my chest while doing nothing to thaw the ice that's settled around my heart years ago.

A soft thud from her room makes me pause mid-sip. Then silence.

I wait, counting heartbeats.

Another sound—glass breaking.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

I'm across the hall in three strides, not bothering to knock as I push open her door.  
"What happened?"

Kira stands frozen by the vanity, surrounded by shards of what was once a crystal perfume bottle. Her feet are bare, vulnerable among the glittering fragments. The scent of jasmine fills the air, heady and overwhelming.

"Don't move," I command, scanning the floor for a safe path to her.

"I can clean it myself," she says, chin lifting in that defiant way that's becoming familiar. "I don't need your help."

I ignore her, crossing the room in careful steps. "You'll cut yourself."

"Why would you care?" Her voice is sharp, but there's something beneath it—uncertainty, perhaps. Or loneliness. I recognize it because it mirrors what echoes inside me.

Before she can protest, I lift her easily, one arm beneath her knees, the other supporting her back. For a moment, she tenses against me, and I prepare for another fight. Instead, she exhales slowly, her body softening just slightly against mine.

The unexpected surrender catches me off guard.

I set her down on the bed, careful to keep my touch impersonal. Professional. "Stay here. I'll clean it up."



"You don't have to?—"

"I know I don't have to." The words come out harsher than intended. I soften my tone.  
"Just... stay put."

In the bathroom, I find a hand towel and return to collect the larger pieces of glass. Kira watches me from the edge of the bed, her gaze heavy on my back.

"You're not what I expected," she says finally, breaking the silence between us.

I don't look up from my task. "What did you expect? A monster?"

"Yes." The honesty in her answer makes me pause. "My father said you were dangerous. That you've killed men with your bare hands."

My jaw tightens. I resume collecting glass shards. "Your father should be more careful about the stories he tells."

"Is it true?"

I meet her eyes then, not bothering to mask the darkness I know she'll see there.  
"Yes."

To my surprise, she doesn't flinch. "Would you kill me, too?"

"No." The word escapes before I can think better of it. Truth is a liability in my world, yet here I am, offering it to her like a gift. "You're my wife."

"On paper," she reminds me, throwing my own words back at me. Her lips curve into something not quite a smile. "For protection and profit, not?—"

"I remember what I said." I cut her off, gathering the last of the glass. The perfume clings to my skin, feminine and foreign. It will linger on my hands long after I leave this room. "That doesn't mean I'd harm you."

When I stand, she's watching me with those clear blue eyes that seem to strip away layers I've spent years building. I turn away, uncomfortable with the scrutiny.

"Why did you agree to this?" she asks. "To marry me?"

I dispose of the glass in the bathroom wastebasket, taking my time before answering. "Your father made an offer. I accepted."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting tonight." I wash my hands, watching her perfume swirl down the drain in pale amber ribbons. When I return, she's still sitting exactly where I left her, legs tucked beneath her on the bed.

"You should sleep," I tell her. "It's been a long day."

She glances at the bed, then back at me, uncertainty flickering across her face. "I don't have anything to sleep in. My things..."

"Check the dresser," I say, nodding toward the mahogany chest against the wall. "I had the housekeeper, Elena, purchase some necessities."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

Kira slides off the bed and crosses to the dresser, pulling open the top drawer. Her fingers trail over silk and cotton, her expression unreadable. She selects something and retreats to the bathroom without another word.

I should leave. Return to my room, to my vodka, to the solitude I've grown accustomed to. Instead, I find myself standing at the window, gazing out at the Brooklyn skyline beyond the bulletproof glass. The night presses against the panes like an unwelcome visitor, dark and insistent.

The bathroom door opens. Kira emerges wearing a simple white nightgown that falls to her knees. The material is modest enough, but the sight of her in it tightens something in my chest.

"Will I be allowed to leave?" she asks suddenly. "This house, I mean."

I turn from the window. "Not alone."

"So I am a prisoner."

"You're protected," I correct her. "There's a difference."

"Not from where I'm standing." Her bare feet make no sound as she approaches, stopping just out of reach. The nightgown shifts around her legs with each movement, a whisper of fabric against skin.

"Do you have any idea what the Novikov family would do to you?" I ask, voice dangerously soft. "Do you understand how much they despise your father?"

She lifts her chin, but I catch the way her throat works as she swallows. "I have some idea."

"Some idea isn't enough." I step closer, closing the distance between us until I can smell the jasmine still clinging to her skin. "They'd take you. Use you. Break you in ways that would make death seem merciful. And they'd make sure your father watched every moment of it."

A shiver passes through her, but she holds her ground. "Is that what happened to Alina?"

The question lands like a physical blow. My vision narrows and darkens at the edges. I can feel my control slipping, the beast inside me rattling its cage.

"Who told you about her?" My voice has dropped to something barely human.

Kira takes a small step back, but her eyes never leave mine. "My father mentioned her. Your first wife."

The rage builds in my chest, a familiar fire that threatens to consume everything in its path. I force myself to breathe, to count. One. Two. Three. But the numbers blur together, meaningless against the memories clawing their way to the surface.

"He had no right." The words scrape against my throat like broken glass.

"He was trying to prepare me for what I was walking into." Her voice remains steady despite the tremor I can see in her hands. "He said she was killed because of?—"

"Enough." The word cracks like a whip through the room. I turn away from her, my fists clenching at my sides. The tattoos on my arms seem to burn, each mark a reminder of blood spilled, debts paid, vengeance served cold.

Behind me, I hear her soft intake of breath. When I glance back, she's pressed one hand to her throat, and I realize how I must look—like the monster she expected after all.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I shouldn't have?—"

"No." I force my hands to unclench and my breathing to even out. "You shouldn't have."

The silence stretches between us, thick with unspoken truths and half-buried ghosts. I can feel Alina's memory hovering at the edges of the room like smoke, choking the air from my lungs.

"Alina was nothing like you," I say finally, the admission torn from somewhere deep inside me. "She was quiet, obedient, and always knew her place."

The words taste bitter on my tongue—lies dressed up as truth. Alina was anything but obedient. She always asked questions about my work, family, and scars. She'd traced the tattoos on my chest with curious fingers, demanding stories I was too proud to tell.

Kira's eyes flash with something that might be hurt or anger. "How convenient for you."

"It was." Another lie, but it's easier than admitting the truth. "She understood what was expected of her."

"And what's expected of me?" Kira's chin lifts again, that stubborn tilt that's already becoming familiar.

I study her face, memorizing the way her nostrils flare when she's angry, the way her

blue eyes darken to storm gray. "I haven't decided yet."

"Well, let me make something clear." She takes a step toward me, bare feet silent on the hardwood. "

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"I am not Alina. I never will be." Her voice trembles but holds firm. "If you want quiet and obedient, you should have married someone else."

The challenge in her words ignites something in me—not anger, but something more dangerous. Interest. Curiosity about the fire behind those blue eyes.

"I'm well aware of who you are, Kira Malakhov." I move closer, close enough to see the pulse fluttering at her throat. "The question is whether you understand who I am."

She doesn't back away. "A killer. A bratva captain. My husband."

"And the man who now owns everything your father built." I reach out, not touching her but letting my fingers hover near her cheek. "Including his most precious possession."

Her breath catches. "I'm not a possession."

"In this world, kisa, everyone belongs to someone." The endearment slips out again, unbidden. "The sooner you accept that, the easier this will be."

"This?" She gestures between us, the movement causing her nightgown to shift across her collarbone. "What exactly is this, Mikhail?"

The sound of my name on her lips does something to me I can't explain. Something I'd rather not examine too closely.

"A marriage of convenience," I say, stepping back, needing distance from her scent,

her warmth. "Nothing more."

"Then why do you look at me like that?" Her question is soft but direct, a bullet finding its mark.

"Like what?"

"Like you're hungry."

The words hang in the air between us, dangerous and electric. I turn away, moving toward the door before I do something I'll regret.

"Lock your door," I tell her, my hand on the doorknob. "And stay in this room tonight."

"You didn't answer my question."

I pause, not looking back. "Get some sleep, Kira. Tomorrow, we establish ground rules."

"I don't respond well to rules," she says, and I can hear the stubborn lift in her voice without seeing her face.

"Then you'll need to learn." I step into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind me. "Because in this house, my rules are what keep you alive."

I stand there for a moment, listening. No movement, no sound. Then, the soft click.

Good girl.

Chapter 8



Kira

Manhattan unfolds beneath me like a glittering chessboard, each building a piece in a game I never agreed to play. In the three days since I became Mrs. Zhukov, I've mastered the art of disappearing within the walls of my gilded prison.

The terrace has become my sanctuary. I curl my bare feet beneath me on the plush outdoor sofa, wrapping my cardigan tighter against the summer breeze that carries the faint scent of rain. My tea has gone cold, forgotten as I watch shadows stretch across the city below. From thirty stories up, everyone looks insignificant—pawns rather than people. Perhaps that's how Mikhail sees the world.

My husband. The word still feels foreign on my tongue, bitter like unripe fruit. I've barely spoken ten words to him since the ceremony, and he seems content with this arrangement, disappearing into his office before dawn, returning long after I've retreated to my separate bedroom.

Yet I feel him now, the weight of his gaze like a physical touch across my skin. I don't turn around, but the tiny hairs on my neck rise in silent acknowledgment. He thinks I don't notice how he watches me from the shadowed doorway, how his ice-blue eyes follow my movements when he thinks I'm unaware.

What does he see when he looks at me? Was a transaction completed? A trophy acquired? Or is it something more complex that I can't yet decipher?

I trace the rim of my teacup with one finger, remembering how his hand engulfed mine at the altar, warm despite everything I'd heard about the cold-blooded Zhukov heir. For just a moment, I'd felt something spark between us—something dangerous and electric that made me wonder if there might be a man beneath the monster.

"Will I ever love him?" I whisper to the skyline, the question carried away by the

wind. The city offers no answers, only the distant wail of sirens and the perpetual hum of eight million lives continuing without care for my fate.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

Behind me, I hear the soft click of the terrace door closing. Mikhail's gone, but the lingering scent of his cologne—sandalwood and something distinctly masculine—tells me he was there, listening. Watching. Waiting.

And despite everything, despite knowing exactly who and what he is, I find myself wondering what it would be like to break through those walls he's built. To discover if there's anything left of his heart beneath the scars.

The thought terrifies me more than his reputation ever could.

I close my eyes and let the wind tangle through my hair, trying to banish the image of his hands—scarred knuckles and elegant fingers that could probably kill with the same precision they'd used to slide the wedding ring onto my finger. There's a darkness in me that responds to his dangerous magnetism, a traitorous flutter in my chest whenever he enters a room.

Days blur together in this marble mausoleum he calls home. I wander the halls like a ghost, fingertips trailing along imported Italian wallpaper, bare feet silent on Persian rugs worth more than most people's homes. The staff—a rotating cast of silent sentries—nod respectfully but keep their distance. They know what I am: another acquisition in Dmitri Zhukov's collection delivered gift-wrapped to his son.

Sometimes, I catch glimpses of Mikhail through the crack beneath his office door—the amber glow of his desk lamp burning late into the night, the low rumble of his voice conducting business in rapid-fire Russian. He speaks to his associates with clipped authority, but I remember how his accent softened when he said my name at the altar. "Kira." Like a prayer or promise.

Or perhaps a threat.

This morning, I found a single white orchid on my breakfast tray. No note, no explanation. When I asked Elena, the housekeeper, she merely shrugged with practiced ignorance. But I know it was him. The gesture feels delicate and beautiful yet somehow ominous.

I lift the flower and inhale its subtle fragrance. In the distance, storm clouds gather over the East River, painting the sky in shades of pewter and charcoal. The air grows heavy with electricity, matching the tension that thrums through my veins whenever I think of my brutal husband.

My father called this a marriage of convenience. But nothing about Mikhail Zhukov feels convenient. He's all sharp edges and hidden depths, a puzzle I'm not sure I want to solve.

Yet here I am, counting the hours until he returns home, my pulse quickening at the thought of those ice-blue eyes finding mine across the dinner table we've yet to share.

The first drops of rain patter against the terrace glass as I retreat inside, abandoning my cold tea and racing thoughts. Lightning flashes, illuminating the penthouse in stark white before plunging it back into the shadows. I count—one, two, three—before thunder rolls across the sky, vibrating through the floorboards beneath my feet.

Three seconds. The storm is close.

I pause at the threshold of Mikhail's office, drawn by a sliver of light beneath the heavy oak door. My fingers hover over the polished brass handle, trembling slightly. What would happen if I simply walked in? Would he look up from his work with those glacier eyes, annoyed at the interruption? Or would something else flicker

across his face—surprise, perhaps even pleasure?

I let my hand fall away. Not today.

In the kitchen, I find Elena preparing dinner, her knife moving with practiced precision through vibrant red peppers. The rhythmic chopping stops when she notices me.

"Mrs. Zhukov," she says, the title still jarring to my ears. "Mr. Zhukov called. He will be home for dinner tonight."

My stomach tightens. "What time?"

"Seven o'clock." Her eyes, dark and knowing, scan my face. "He requested the private dining room be prepared."

Not the cavernous formal dining room where we could sit at opposite ends of a table built for twenty, but the intimate space overlooking the city. My pulse quickens traitorously.

"Thank you, Elena." I turn to leave, then hesitate. "The orchid this morning..."

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "Mr. Zhukov has them flown in from Thailand each week. His mother loved them."

The information settles in my chest like a small, warm stone. A glimpse behind the curtain, unexpected and somehow more intimate than if Mikhail had handed me the flower himself.

Upstairs in my bedroom—my separate bedroom—I stand before the closet that Elena has meticulously filled with designer clothes I never chose. Each garment feels like

another decision made for me, another reminder of my new role as Mikhail Zhukov's possession.

The storm intensifies, rain lashing against the windows as I select a simple black dress. Not too formal, not too casual. Armor of a sort.

In the bathroom, I let hot water cascade over my skin, washing away the day's thoughts. Steam rises around me like Manhattan fog, and I close my eyes, trying to remember who I was before I became a chess piece in this game between powerful men.

But instead of memories, I see Mikhail's face—not the cold mask he wears in public, but the unguarded expression I caught when he thought I wasn't looking. Something haunted lived in those eyes, something that recognized the cage around me because he inhabits one of his own.

At precisely seven, I descend the curved staircase, my heartbeat a countdown in my ears. The private dining room is bathed in soft lighting, and the table is set for two with crystal and silver. Beyond the windows, lightning illuminates the storm-washed city in electric blue flashes.

And there he stands, his broad back to me, silhouetted against Manhattan's storm-dark skyline. He's shed his suit jacket, his white shirt stretched across shoulders that carry the weight of his father's empire. A glass of amber liquid dangles from fingers marked with scars I long to ask about.

He turns, sensing me before I make a sound, and those ice-blue eyes lock onto mine. For one breathless moment, the masks slip—both his and mine—and I glimpse something raw and hungry in his gaze that makes my skin flush hot despite the air-conditioned chill.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Kira." My name in his mouth sounds different tonight, rougher around the edges. "I was beginning to think you'd found a way to escape."

His attempt at humor falls somewhere between a threat and a confession. I step into the room, the door closing behind me with soft finality.

"Where would I go?" I ask. "This is my home now, isn't it?"

Something flickers across his face—regret, perhaps, or something more complicated. He gestures to the chair he's pulled out for me.

"Is it a home?" he asks quietly. "Or just another beautiful cage?"

"Both," I admit, meeting his gaze directly for perhaps the first time since our wedding. "Isn't that what you intended?"

He doesn't flinch at my honesty, but something shifts in his expression—a slight softening around the eyes that disappears so quickly I might have imagined it. Mikhail moves with surprising grace for a man his size, pulling out my chair with practiced precision.

"I intended many things," he says as I slide into my seat, the silk of my dress whispering against the upholstery. "Not all of them have gone according to plan."

The proximity of him sends a current across my skin—his cologne wrapping around me like an invisible touch. When his fingers brush my shoulder, seemingly by accident, I suppress a shiver.

"Your plans or your father's?" I ask, reaching for my water glass to occupy my suddenly trembling hands.

Mikhail takes his seat across from me, close enough that our knees could touch beneath the intimate table. The storm creates a private universe around us, rain streaking down the windows like tears.

"Is there a difference?" His mouth curves into something not quite a smile. "You're here either way."

Elena appears with the first course—delicate scallops arranged like pale moons on black ceramic. She pours wine, a crisp white that catches the candlelight, then vanishes as silently as she arrived.

I take a sip, letting the cold acidity wash over my tongue. "The orchid was beautiful," I say, surprising myself. "Elena told me they were your mother's favorite."

His fork pauses midway to his mouth, and something unreadable flashes across his face. "Elena talks too much."

"Or perhaps you don't talk enough." The words slip out before I can stop them, emboldened by wine and the strange intimacy created by the storm.

Lightning illuminates his face in stark relief—the sharp planes of his cheekbones, the shadow of stubble along his jaw, and the small scar that bisects his left eyebrow. For a moment, he looks almost vulnerable.

"What would you like to know, Kira?" He sets down his fork, giving me his full attention. "What secrets do you think I'm keeping from my wife?"

The word 'wife' in his mouth sounds both possessive and uncertain as if he's testing



how it feels on his tongue.

"Everything," I whisper. "And nothing. I don't even know where to begin."

He leans forward, elbows on the table, studying me with an intensity that makes my pulse flutter at the base of my throat. "Begin with what you want."

"What do I want?" I laugh, the sound brittle even to my own ears. "Does that matter now? I'm already here, aren't I? The contract signed in blood and black ink."

"It matters to me." His voice drops lower, rumbling like the distant thunder. "Despite what you may believe."

I stare at him, searching for the lie, for the manipulation behind his words. Instead, I find only that same haunted look, quickly masked by practiced indifference.

"I want..." I begin, then falter. What do I want? Freedom seems too obvious an answer, too simple for the complex web I'm caught in. "I want to understand why you agreed to this arrangement. Why did you agree to it when you clearly have no interest in a real marriage."

Mikhail takes a slow sip of his wine, considering. Outside, the storm reaches its crescendo, rain hammering against the glass like desperate fingers seeking entry.

"My father believes your family's connections will strengthen our position on the East Coast," he says finally, the business answer I expected. But then he continues, his voice changing subtly. "I agreed because when I saw you at the Russian Tea Room, you looked... familiar."

"Familiar?" I repeat, confused.

"Like someone who understands what it means to be surrounded by people yet completely alone." His eyes hold mine, unblinking. "Someone who wears masks as skillfully as I do."

The honesty stuns me into silence. I reach for my wine glass, needing something to hold onto as the ground seems to shift beneath me.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"And the separate bedrooms?" I ask, my voice barely audible above the storm. "Is that part of understanding me?"

A muscle tightens in his jaw. "That was for your protection."

"From what? From you?"

"Yes." The single word contains multitudes—confession, warning, perhaps even regret.

Elena returns, clearing our plates and replacing them with the main course. The interruption gives me time to collect myself, to rebuild the walls his unexpected candor had begun to crumble.

When we're alone again, Mikhail cuts into his steak with surgical precision, the knife glinting in his scarred hands. "You asked if you would ever love me," he says without looking up. "I heard you on the terrace."

Heat floods my cheeks. "You weren't meant to hear that."

"Yet I did." He raises his eyes to mine, and for the first time, I see something that might be vulnerability in their icy depths. "The better question might be whether I am capable of being loved at all."

The confession hangs between us, raw and unexpected. I find myself reaching across the table before I can think better of it, my fingers stopping just short of his.

"What happened to her?" I ask softly. "Your first wife?"

Pain flashes across his face, so visceral I can almost feel it. "Alina was killed because of who I am. Because of what I am." His voice is flat and controlled, but his knuckles have gone white around his knife. "I made a mistake, believing I could have something normal. Something good."

"And now?"

"Now I know better." His eyes meet mine, a storm raging behind them that rivals the one outside. "But knowing better doesn't seem to matter when it comes to you."

My breath catches. "What does that mean, Mikhail?"

He sets down his cutlery with deliberate care, then reaches across the distance between us. His fingers brush mine, calloused skin against soft, and the simple contact sends electricity racing up my arm.

"It means I'm making the same mistake twice," he murmurs. "And this time, with eyes wide open."

I lean back in my chair, trying to escape the intensity of his touch, but his fingers follow mine, tracing the delicate bones of my wrist. The wine has made me bold and reckless in a way that should terrify me.

"Maybe it's not a mistake," I whisper, the words escaping before I can cage them. "Maybe it's just... inevitable."

His thumb finds my pulse point, pressing gently against the frantic rhythm there. "You don't know what you're saying, kisa."

The endearment falls from his lips like honey and smoke, and something deep in my belly tightens at the sound. "Don't I?" I turn my hand palm up, letting our fingers intertwine. "I may have been sheltered, Mikhail, but I'm not naive."

Lightning splits the sky, casting us both in stark relief for one breathless moment. In that flash, I see something break open in his expression—a crack in the armor he wears so carefully.

"The wine is making you brave," he says, but his grip on my hand tightens.

"Good." I lift my glass with my free hand, taking another deliberate sip. The alcohol burns warm in my chest, loosening the careful control I've maintained for days. "I'm tired of being afraid."

"You should be afraid of me." His voice is rough velvet, a warning wrapped in desire. "I'm not a good man, Kira."

"I know exactly what you are." I lean forward, close enough to catch the scent of his cologne mixed with something darker, more dangerous. "The question is whether you know what I am."

His eyes narrow, studying me with a predatory focus. "Enlighten me."

"I'm not the porcelain doll my father presented to your family." The words flow like silk, emboldened by wine and storm and the electric current running between us. "I'm not fragile. I won't break."

Something feral flickers in his gaze. "Careful, little wife. You're playing with fire."

"Then burn me." The challenge slips out before I can stop it, brazen and wanting.

The effect is immediate. Mikhail's chair scrapes against the marble as he pushes back from the table, rising to his full, intimidating height. But instead of walking away, he moves around the table with fluid grace, stopping beside my chair.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Stand up," he commands softly.

My legs feel unsteady as I rise, whether from wine or proximity to this dangerous man I've married. He towers over me, close enough that I have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes.

"You want to play games?" His hand cups my jaw, thumb tracing my lower lip with agonizing slowness. "I've been playing them longer than you've been alive."

"Then teach me the rules," I breathe against his thumb.

His control snaps like a taut wire. In one fluid motion, he lifts me, setting me on the edge of the table. Crystal glasses chime softly as the surface trembles, but his hands are steady on my waist, holding me captive between his arms.

"The first rule," he murmurs, leaning down until his breath fans across my lips, "is that there are no rules."

Thunder crashes overhead as he closes the final distance between us, his mouth claiming mine with a hunger that steals my breath. The kiss is nothing like the chaste press of lips at our wedding ceremony—this is possession, demand, a claiming that sends fire racing through my veins.

I thread my fingers through his dark hair, pulling him closer, and he groans against my mouth. His hands slide up my sides, reverent and desperate, as if he's mapping territory he never expected to claim.

"Come here," he rasps against my lips, his accent thicker now, roughened by desire. Without waiting for an answer, he lifts me from the table, carrying me to the leather chair by the window, where he settles with me across his lap.

The storm rages beyond the glass, but inside this cocoon of heat and wanting, nothing exists except the taste of him on my tongue and the solid strength of his body beneath mine. His fingers tangle in my hair as he deepens the kiss, and I arch against him, shameless in my need.

"Kira," he breathes my name like a prayer, like a curse. "You're going to destroy me."

"Good," I whisper back, claiming his mouth again as lightning illuminates us both in silver fire.

## Chapter 9

### Mikhail

Kira's mouth is soft fire against mine and every rational thought I've ever possessed burns to ash. The taste of wine on her tongue, the way she yields and then demands in equal measure—Christ, she's going to be the death of me.

My hands find the silk of her dress, bunching the fabric as I pull her closer. She shifts in my lap, and the friction nearly undoes me completely. I've had women before—many women—but none who've made me feel like I'm drowning and being saved all at once.

"You taste like sin," I murmur against her throat, pressing open-mouthed kisses to the delicate skin there. Her pulse flutters like a caged bird beneath my lips, and I can't resist the urge to bite gently. She gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders through my shirt.



"Mikhail..." His name on her lips is better than any prayer I've ever heard. She rocks against me, unconscious and devastating, and my control frays further.

The storm outside mirrors the chaos in my chest. Rain lashes the windows while thunder shakes the walls, but all I can focus on is the way she melts against me, how her auburn hair spills over my hands like liquid copper.

"Look at me," I command roughly, pulling back just enough to see her face. Her lips are swollen from my kisses, her eyes dark with desire and wine. Beautiful. Dangerous. Mine.

"I'm looking," she whispers, and there's something in her gaze that stops my heart—trust, want, and something deeper that I don't dare name.

I trace the line of her jaw with trembling fingers. When did my hands start shaking?  
"You don't know what you're doing to me, kisa."

Her smile is pure temptation. "Show me."

The words break something fundamental inside me. I capture Kira's mouth again, hungry and desperate, pouring years of loneliness and pain into the kiss. She meets me stroke for stroke, her hands fisting in my hair, and I forget everything except the weight of her in my arms and the storm that rages both outside and within me.

Lightning flashes, illuminating her face in stark white before plunging us back into the amber glow of candlelight. In that brief moment, I see everything—her vulnerability, her courage, the calculation behind her eyes. She's testing me as much as I'm testing her.

I slide my hand up her spine, feeling each delicate vertebra through the silk. When I reach her nape, I tangle my fingers in her hair and tug—not hard enough to hurt, just

enough to assert control. Her eyelids flutter, pupils dilating.

"Is this what you expected when you agreed to marry me, Kira Malakhov?" My voice is gravel, barely recognizable to my own ears. "To be devoured?"

She hums, the sound both nervous and aroused. "I don't know what I expected. I wasn't sure you'd want me for more than my money." The confession stuns me. Has she looked in a mirror? Does she not see what I see?

"Foolish girl," I murmur, tracing the curve of her collarbone with my thumb. "I've wanted you since the moment I first saw you."

Her breath catches. "Did you?"

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

Something primal surges through me. I stand abruptly, lifting her with me. Her legs wrap around my waist instinctively, and I carry her to the edge of the table, setting her down among the remnants of our meal. Wine glasses teeter dangerously. I don't care.

"Tell me to stop," I challenge, pushing her knees apart to stand between them. "Tell me you don't want this."

Instead of answering, she reaches for my tie, loosening it with surprising dexterity. Her fingers brush against my throat, and I swallow hard.

"I've made my choice," she says, her voice steadier than it has any right to be. "The question is, Mikhail Zhukov, what will you do with me now that you have me?"

The storm crescendos outside, a roll of thunder so powerful it vibrates through the floorboards. At this moment, with Kira looking at me like that, I could confess everything—the truth about my empire of blood and the danger she's in. Instead, I press my forehead to hers and breathe her in.

"I will ruin you," I promise, the words a caress against her lips. "And then I will rebuild you as mine."

Crystal and china scatter, the sound of breaking glass lost beneath another crash of thunder. Her dress pools around her like spilled ink, the silk riding up to reveal the smooth expanse of her thighs.

"Mikhail," she breathes, uncertainty flickering in her eyes for the first time tonight.

I catch her chin between my fingers, forcing her to hold my gaze. "Trust me,kisa." The endearment falls from my lips like a benediction. "I won't hurt you."

Her nod is barely perceptible, but it's enough. My hands find the hem of her dress, pushing the fabric higher until it bunches around her hips. The scrap of lace between her legs is delicate, expensive—and completely in my way.

The sound of tearing fabric mingles with her sharp intake of breath. She stares at me with wide eyes as I pocket the ruined silk, a trophy I'll keep long after tonight ends.

"Beautiful," I murmur, drinking in the sight of her spread before me like an offering. Her skin is porcelain pale in the candlelight, marked only by the flush that creeps down her throat and across her chest.

I press my palms to her inner thighs, feeling the tremor that runs through her at my touch. She's nervous—of course she is. But beneath the uncertainty, I can see the want burning in her blue eyes, the way her lips part as her breathing quickens.

"Let me taste you," I growl, my voice barely human now. "Let me show you what it means to be mine."

Before she can respond, I drop to my knees and bury my face between her thighs. The first taste of her nearly brings me to my knees—sweet and clean and utterly intoxicating. Her cry echoes off the walls as I explore her with my tongue, learning every sensitive spot that makes her arch against the table.

Her fingers weave into my hair, a hesitant dance reflecting her indecision—should she push me away or draw me nearer? I make the choice for her, my hands tightening their hold on her thighs, gently urging them apart to grant me deeper access to the intimate terrain. My tongue traces languid circles around her clit, a tantalizing tease that hovers just shy of delivering the satisfaction she craves.

"Oh God," she whimpers, head falling back, throat exposed like a sacrifice.

I hum against her sensitive flesh, enjoying the way she jerks at the vibration. "God has nothing to do with this, kisa."

She tastes like innocence and sin combined—a contradiction that matches everything about her. The knowledge that no man has tasted her like this before, that I'm the first to map the contours of her pleasure, sends a savage satisfaction coursing through me.

I slide one finger inside her, feeling her tightness, the proof of her virginity. She tenses immediately.

"Relax," I murmur against her thigh, pressing a gentle kiss there. "Trust me."

Her eyes find mine, vulnerable yet defiant. "I'm trying."

Something shifts in my chest—an unfamiliar tenderness I thought had died with Alina. I curl my finger slightly, watching her face as I find the spot that makes her gasp.

"That's it," I encourage, adding a second finger while returning my mouth to her clit. "Let go for me."

She's so wet now, her body accepting the intrusion of my fingers as I work them slowly in and out. Her hips begin to move of their own accord, seeking more, and I give it to her—curling my fingers, sucking her clit, pushing her toward the edge.

The storm outside provides a soundtrack to her moans, thunder crashing as her pleasure builds. She's close—I can feel it in the way she tightens around my fingers, in her shortened breath, and the trembling of her thighs.

"Mikhail, I—I can't—" Her voice breaks into a sob.

I look up at her without stopping my ministrations, wanting to see her face when she falls apart. "You can. Come for me, Kira."

My command seems to break something in her. Her back arches off the table, her body going rigid as the climax takes her. Her cry pierces the air, raw and honest, as she shudders against my mouth. I work her through it, gentling my touch as the aftershocks ripple through her.

When she finally collapses, boneless and panting, I rise to my feet. My own need throbs painfully, but this moment isn't about me. It's about claiming her, marking her as mine in the most primal way.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, watching as she struggles to focus, her eyes hazy with pleasure. Her chest heaves with each breath, her lips parted and swollen from our kisses. She's never looked more beautiful—disheveled and satisfied, sprawled across my dining table like the feast she is.

"Still think I only want you for your money?" I ask, my voice rough with restrained desire.

A surprised laugh escapes her, and she covers her face with her hands. "I don't know what to think anymore."

I gently pull her hands away, needing to see her. "Think that you're mine now. In every way that matters."

Something flickers in her eyes—not quite surrender, but acceptance. She reaches for me, drawing me down for a kiss that tastes of her own pleasure and something deeper, something dangerous.

"And are you mine?" she whispers against my lips, the question hanging between us like a challenge.

The honest answer terrifies me. Instead, I brush my thumb across my wife's lower lip and say, "Let's get you to bed, kisa. The night is far from over."

Chapter 10

Mikhail

I lift her from the table and carry her through the shadowed hallway. The candlelight from the dining room fades behind us, leaving only the intermittent lightning to illuminate our path. Her head rests against my shoulder, and I can feel the rapid flutter of her pulse against my throat.

My bedroom door opens with a soft creak. I've never brought a woman here—this space has always been sacred, untouchable. Even Alina had her own room. But Kira... Kira belongs here, in my bed.

I set her down beside the massive four-poster bed, her bare feet silent on the Persian rug. The storm's fury continues outside, rain pelting the windows like bullets. She looks up at me with those blue eyes, still dazed from pleasure but alert, waiting.

"Kneel," I command softly, my voice cutting through the thunder.

She hesitates for only a moment before sinking gracefully to her knees on the plush carpet. The sight of her there, hair tumbled around her shoulders, dress askew, sends liquid fire through my veins.

I reach for my belt, watching her face. "Have you ever seen a man's cock?"

Her cheeks flush deeper. "Never... not in the flesh."

The admission makes me harder if that's even possible. I free myself slowly, letting her absorb the sight of me. Her eyes widen, and I see the flicker of uncertainty cross her features.

"Take it in your mouth," I instruct, threading my fingers through her auburn hair. "Use your tongue. Your lips."

She reaches for me with trembling fingers, her touch feather-light as she explores.



When her lips finally part around the head of my cock, I have to grip the bedpost to stay upright. She's clumsy at first, uncertain, but eager to please.

"That's it," I growl, guiding her movements. "Open wider."

She struggles with my size, her jaw stretching to accommodate me, but she doesn't pull away. The wet heat of her mouth, the tentative swirl of her tongue—it's exquisite torture. Her hands rest on my thighs, nails digging in as she finds her rhythm.

Lightning illuminates the room in stark white, casting her in sharp relief—this woman who's brought me to my knees while kneeling at my feet.

I cradle her head in my palms, feeling the delicate curve of her skull beneath my fingers. Her hair spills like liquid fire between my knuckles. Each inexperienced stroke of her tongue sends shockwaves through my body—all the more potent for her innocence.

"Look at me," I command.

Her eyes flick upward, meeting mine through the veil of her lashes. The vulnerability, combined with determination, threatens to undo me completely. She's fighting to take more of me, her throat constricting as she pushes past her comfort.

I ease back slightly. "Breathe through your nose, kisa."

She adjusts and follows my instructions with the same quick intelligence I've glimpsed in business negotiations. The thought that she applies this focus to pleasuring me makes my cock throb against her tongue.

Outside, the storm mirrors the tempest in my blood. Rain lashes the windows in sheets, and thunder cracks so loudly that the crystal decanter on my nightstand

trembles. But nothing—not the elements, not the empire waiting beyond these walls—compares to the sight of my wife on her knees before me.

Her confidence grows with each passing moment. She hollows her cheeks, creating a suction that draws a guttural sound from deep in my chest. Her hands, previously uncertain, now explore with greater boldness—one bracing against my thigh, the other tentatively cupping my balls.

"You're a fast learner," I growl, tightening my grip on her hair.

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A moan vibrates around my length, and I recognize the sound—pleasure. She's enjoying this power she has over me. My innocent bride, discovering the weapon of her sexuality.

I guide her movements, setting a pace that has my muscles coiling tight. The wet sounds of her mouth fill the room between thunderclaps, obscene and beautiful. Her eyes never leave mine, even as tears gather at their corners from the strain.

"Enough," I finally rasp, pulling her off me. Her lips are swollen, glistening, and parted in confusion.

I haul her to her feet, spinning her toward the bed. "I won't come in your mouth. Not the first time."

Her chest heaves as she catches her breath. "The first time?"

I smile, slow and predatory. "There will be many times,kisa. We're just beginning."

I push her back onto the bed, the dark silk sheets pooling around her like spilled ink. The storm's fury illuminates her face in stark contrasts—shadow and light, innocence and awakening desire.

My hands find the zipper of her dress, sliding it down with deliberate slowness. The fabric parts like water, revealing the pale expanse of her back and the delicate curve of her spine. She shivers as the silk whispers to the floor.

"Beautiful," I murmur, tracing the line of her collarbone with my lips. Her skin tastes

of rain and something uniquely her—sweet, intoxicating.

Her breathing hitches as I map every inch of newly exposed flesh with my mouth. The hollow of her throat, the gentle slope of her shoulders, the valley between her breasts. When I take her nipple between my lips, she arches beneath me, a soft cry escaping her parted lips.

"Mikhail..." My name on her tongue sounds like a prayer and a curse combined.

I lavish attention on her breasts, sucking and nipping until she's writhing beneath me, her fingers tangled in my hair. My hand slides lower, finding the heat between her thighs. She's already wet, ready for me.

"You want this," I growl against her ear, my fingers stroking through her slickness. "Your body betrays you, kisa."

She whimpers, hips lifting to meet my touch. I circle her most sensitive spot, feeling her tremble as pleasure builds. Her innocence makes every reaction more precious, more intoxicating.

I strip away the last of my clothes, positioning myself between her thighs. The head of my cock brushes against her entrance, and she gasps at the contact.

"I'm going to have you all night," I promise, my voice rough with need. "By morning, you'll crave my cock, until you can't think of anything else."

I push forward slowly, feeling her body stretch to accommodate me. Her gasp turns into a sharp inhale, her nails digging crescents into my shoulders. The tightness is exquisite—a velvet vise that threatens my control.

"Breathe, kisa," I murmur against her temple, holding myself perfectly still. "Let your

body adjust."

Tears glisten at the corners of her eyes, but she nods, forcing herself to relax beneath me. I can feel the exact moment her muscles soften, accepting the invasion. The sensation nearly undoes me.

I begin to move, each thrust careful and measured. Kira's soft whimpers fill the air between us, a symphony of pain transforming into pleasure. Lightning illuminates her face—eyes wide, lips parted, completely surrendered to me.

"More," she whispers, surprising us both.

The word shatters the last of my restraint. I pull back and drive deeper, claiming her completely. She cries out, her back arching off the silk sheets. The sound goes straight to my cock, making me throb inside her impossible tightness.

"You feel so good wrapped around me," I growl, setting a rhythm that has her meeting each thrust. "So perfect. So mine."

Her body learns quickly, rising to meet mine with growing confidence. The initial discomfort fades, replaced by something primal and desperate. She wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper.

"I can feel you everywhere," she gasps, her voice breaking on a moan.

The storm outside mirrors the tempest between us—wild, uncontrolled, and consuming. I lose myself in Kira's heat, in the way she takes everything I give her and demands more. My innocent bride becomes something fierce beneath me, her submission transforming into active participation.

When her climax takes her, she shatters around me like crystal, her inner walls

pulsing in waves that drag me over the edge with her. I bury myself to the hilt and let go, marking her as mine in the most primitive way possible.

Her muscles clench around me in rhythmic pulses, milking every drop as I empty myself inside her. The sensation is unlike anything I've experienced—a claiming so profound it borders on spiritual. I brace myself on my forearms, careful not to crush her beneath my weight, watching her face as she rides out the aftershocks of pleasure.

The storm has momentarily quieted as if even the heavens paused to witness our union. Rain taps a gentler cadence against the windows now, and in this lull, I can hear the soft catch of her breath, the hammering of her heart against mine.

"Are you alright?" I ask, brushing damp strands of auburn hair from her flushed face.

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Her eyes flutter open, that impossible blue darkened to midnight. "Yes," she whispers, voice hoarse. "I didn't know... I never imagined..."

I smile against her lips, tasting the salt of exertion on her skin. "That was only the beginning,kisa."

I shift my hips, still buried inside her, and watch as her mouth forms a perfect 'o' of surprise. Despite having just come, I'm hardening again within her tender heat. The evidence of her virginity stains the sheets beneath us—a crimson badge that stirs something primitive in my chest.

"Already?" she gasps, eyes widening as she feels me swell.

"For you? Always." I withdraw slowly, savoring the friction, before thrusting back with deliberate force. "Turn over."

Confusion flickers across her features, but she complies when I guide her, rolling onto her stomach. I lift her hips, positioning her on her hands and knees. The sight of her like this—ass raised, back arched, hair cascading down her spine—nearly brings me to my knees.

"Mikhail?" Uncertainty colors her voice.

I run my palm down the curve of her back, feeling goosebumps rise in my wake. "I want to take you like this. Deeper. Harder." My hand finds the slick evidence of our joining, stroking through it. "Can you handle that,kisa?"

She shivers, pressing back against my fingers. "Yes."

Her pussy is still slick with her arousal and my seed. The penetration is smoother this time but no less intense. She gasps as I fill her completely, the new angle allowing me to reach places untouched before.

"God," she chokes out, fingers clawing at the sheets.

I grip her hips, establishing a rhythm that has the headboard striking the wall in steady percussion. Each thrust draws a breathless moan from her lips, each retreat a whimper of loss. I reach around to find her swollen clit, circling it with my thumb.

"Come for me again," I command, voice strained with the effort of maintaining control. "I want to feel you break apart."

Her body responds instantly to my touch, trembling on the precipice. I lean over her, chest to her back, and sink my teeth into the tender junction of her neck and shoulder. The sharp pain pushes her over the edge—she convulses around me, a sob tearing from her throat as pleasure crashes through her for the second time.

The tight, pulsing grip of her body triggers my own release. I drive into her one final time, holding her flush against me as I spill myself deep inside. For a moment, the world narrows to this single point of connection—her body joined with mine, our breaths synchronized, our heartbeats thundering in tandem.

We collapse together onto the mattress, a tangle of sweat-slicked limbs and ragged breathing. I gather Kira against my chest, unwilling to break our connection just yet. Her small form fits perfectly against me as if designed specifically for this embrace.

"Sleep now," I murmur against her hair, feeling her exhaustion in the boneless weight of her body.



She turns her face toward mine, eyes heavy-lidded but searching. "Is it always like this?" she whispers.

I trace the curve of her cheek with my thumb. "No,kisa." I press my lips to her forehead. "It's never been like this for me." As soon as I've uttered the words, my heart clenches with guilt.

It's the most honest thing I've said to anyone in years. In my world of calculated moves and strategic alliances, this—whatever this is between us—wasn't part of the plan. As I watch sleep claim Kira, I'm struck by something unexpected, something I hadn't accounted for in my calculations.

Her lashes cast delicate shadows across her cheeks in the dim light. The storm has gentled to a steady rain, a rhythmic lullaby against the windows. I trace the outline of her lips with my gaze, memorizing the slight part, the fullness that had been wrapped around me earlier. Her breath comes in soft, even measures now.

Something tightens in my chest, an unfamiliar ache that spreads outward. I've wanted her from the moment I saw her—that much I understood. Desire is familiar territory. But this... this feels like standing at the edge of an abyss with no bottom in sight.

I brush a strand of auburn hair from her forehead, and she murmurs something unintelligible, nestling closer to my warmth. In sleep, the defiance that so often hardens her features melts away, revealing the youth beneath the bravado. Twenty-two. She's barely more than a girl, yet she faced me with the courage of a seasoned warrior.

The realization slams into me with the force of a bullet: I care for her, not just as a possession, not just as a body to warm my bed. I care for the spark in her eyes when she challenges me,the tremble in her voice when she stands her ground despite her fear.

"Fuck," I whisper into the darkness, my voice barely audible.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Kira was just a means to an end, a wife in name only, not someone who would infiltrate my heart. Yet here I am, feeling the weight of betrayal towards my Alina. I'm torn, caught between loyalty and this unexpected pull.

I stare at Kira's sleeping form, the gentle rise and fall of her chest beneath the silk sheets. Moonlight spills through the window, casting her in a silvery glow that softens the sharp edges of my bedroom.

I run my fingers through my hair, careful not to disturb her as I shift my weight on the mattress. She makes a slight sound—something between a sigh and a murmur—and turns toward me instinctively, her auburn hair spilling across my pillow like liquid copper.

"Forgive me," I whisper, though I'm not sure if I'm speaking to Kira or to a ghost. "I never meant this to happen."

Chapter 11

Kira

I wake to sunlight streaking across unfamiliar sheets, their softness whispering against my skin as I stretch. For a moment, I'm disoriented, my body aching in places I've never felt before. Then the memories flood back—Mikhail's hands gripping my hips, lips trailing fire across my skin, pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. Heat rushes to my face as I remember the things I did and the sounds I made.

Mikhail.

I reach across the vast expanse of his bed, finding only cold sheets where his body should be. The impression of his head remains on the pillow beside mine, but he's gone. I sit up, wincing at the tender soreness between my thighs, and pull the silk sheet around my naked body.

"Mikhail?" My voice sounds small in the cavernous bedroom.

No answer comes. Morning light filters through partially drawn curtains,

and I notice his clothes from last night are gone. Even his watch, which I remember him placing on the nightstand with deliberate care, has vanished without a trace.

I slip from the bed, my bare feet sinking into the plush carpet as I search for my discarded nightgown. The silk is wrinkled and slightly torn at the shoulder—evidence of Mikhail's urgency and hunger. My cheeks burn at the memory of how he'd pushed the fabric aside, his mouth hot against my throat.

The house feels hollow as I make my way downstairs, that familiar echo of emptiness bouncing off marble floors. In the kitchen, I find coffee already made but cold, as if he'd prepared it hours ago. A business card lies beside the pot—his driver's number, nothing more. No note. No explanation.

The days blur together after that. I catch glimpses of Mikhail leaving before dawn while I'm still tangled in sheets that smell like him. When he returns, always after midnight, I pretend to sleep. I listen to the shower running and feel the mattress dip as he slides in beside me, but he doesn't reach for me. Doesn't speak.

By the fourth morning, doubt gnaws at my chest like a living thing. I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, searching for some flaw that might explain his sudden distance. My mother's voice echoes in my mind, sharp and knowing: "Men take what they want, Kira. Once they've had their fill, you become invisible."

But he's my husband. Isn't he supposed to want more than just one night?

I wrap my arms around myself, the marble countertop cold against my palms as I lean forward. The woman in the mirror looks fragile, breakable—everything I swore I'd never become. My lips are still slightly swollen from that night, a reminder that refuses to fade even as he distances himself from what we shared.

The silence in this house now has weight, pressing down on my shoulders like a shroud. I find myself listening for the rumble of his voice on phone calls, straining to catch fragments of conversation that might explain where he goes and what consumes his thoughts. But even when I hear him speaking in rapid Russian to his men, his tone carries a coldness that wasn't there before.

I occupy myself with books, with sketching, with anything that might quiet the questions circling in my mind like vultures. But every page I turn reminds me of how his fingers traced my spine—every pencil stroke echoes the way he'd mapped my

body with reverent touches. The contradiction tears at me. How can someone make love to you like you're precious, then treat you like you're invisible?

On the fifth evening, I position myself in the living room where he can't avoid me. The grandfather clock ticks away the minutes past midnight when I finally hear his key in the lock. My heart hammers against my ribs as his footsteps approach, leather soles clicking against marble with military precision.

He appears in the doorway, still wearing his suit, tie loosened around his throat. Those piercing blue eyes find mine across the room, and for a moment, something flickers there—want, regret, I can't tell which. His jaw tightens as he takes in my silk robe, the way I'm curled in his favorite chair like I belong there.

"You should be sleeping, Kira." His voice carries that familiar Russian lilt, but it's edged with something sharp, almost warning.

I don't move from the leather chair, even though every instinct screams at me to flee from the coldness in his tone. Instead, I pull my robe tighter and meet his gaze directly.

"I've been sleeping alone for days. You may be there, but you might as well sleep in the other room." The words slip out before I can stop them, carrying more vulnerability than I intended. "I thought maybe we could talk."

Something dangerous flashes across his features, gone so quickly I almost miss it. He moves deeper into the room but maintains his distance—a predator aware of his own capacity for destruction.

"About what?" He pours himself three fingers of vodka from the crystal decanter, the liquid catching the lamplight like liquid silver. His movements are controlled and deliberate, but I see a slight tremor in his hand.

"About why you disappeared." I stand slowly, my bare feet silent on the Persian rug. "About why you won't even look at me anymore."

He downs the vodka in one smooth motion, his throat working as he swallows. When he finally turns to face me fully, his eyes are arctic. "You got what you wanted, didn't you? A proper wedding night. Consider your wifely duties fulfilled."

The words hit me like a physical blow. I actually take a step back, my hand flying to my throat where Mikhail had left marks with his mouth just days ago. "Is that what you think it was? Duty?"

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "What else would it be?"

"I don't know—maybe something real? Maybe—" I stop myself before I can say the word that's been haunting me. Love. Because that's what it felt like when he whispered my name, when he held me like I might break, and when he looked at me like I was the only thing in his world that mattered.

"Real." He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Nothing about this marriage is real, kisa. You'd do well to remember that."

The endearment sounds like mockery now, and I flinch as if he'd struck me. "Then why did you—why were you so?—"

"Gentle?" His smile is sharp enough to cut. "Did you prefer I treat you like the business transaction you are?"

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

Tears prick at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Not in front of him. Not when he's looking at me like I'm something he wants to erase. "You're lying."

"Am I?" He sets down his glass with deliberate care and stalks toward me. I should run, but I'm frozen as he stops, just close enough that I can smell his cologne and feel the heat radiating from his body. "You want to know where I've been, Kira? Cleaning up the mess your father left behind. Dealing with the Novikovs who think our marriage makes us weak. Trying to keep us both alive."

His voice drops to a whisper, raising goosebumps along my arms. "That night was a mistake. It made me forget what you are—a liability I can't afford to care about."

The word "liability" burns through me like acid. I take a step back, then another, my bare feet retreating across the cool marble. Something inside me cracks open, spilling all the vulnerability I've tried so desperately to contain.

"A liability," I repeat, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. "Is that all I am to you?"

He doesn't answer, just watches me with those ice-blue eyes that gave away so much that night and now reveal nothing. The space between us feels infinite, unbridgeable.

"I understand." My voice is steady, though my insides tremble. "Thank you for the clarity."

I turn away before he can see what's written plainly across my face. Pride is all I have left now, and I cling to it as I walk toward the door, each step measured and deliberate despite the chaos inside me.

"Kira." My name in his mouth still makes something twist painfully in my chest. I pause but don't turn. "Where are you going?"

"To be a liability somewhere else," I say quietly.

Back in my room—not ours—I lock the door behind me and press my forehead against the cool wood. Tears threaten, but I swallow them down. Crying won't solve anything. It never has.

I move to the window, pushing aside heavy curtains to stare out at the moonlit grounds of the estate. Guards patrol the perimeter, their shadows cutting across manicured lawns.

My reflection stares back at me, superimposed over the night-darkened landscape. I barely recognize myself anymore. Five days ago, I believed something real had sparked between us.

Five days of silence taught me otherwise.

## Chapter 12

Mikhail

I watch her retreat to her room, the soft click of the lock an accusation that echoes through the hollow space between us. My fingers tighten around the empty glass until I fear it might shatter in my grip. The vodka burns in my throat, but it doesn't numb the ache spreading through my chest.

Liability. The word hangs in the air, poisonous and necessary.

I pour another drink, downing it in one harsh swallow. The grandfather clock ticks



relentlessly in the corner, marking each second she spends behind that locked door, each moment I spend standing here, paralyzed by my own cruelty.

Five days. Five days of deliberately avoiding Kira's touch, her gaze, her very presence. Five days of leaving before dawn and returning after midnight, of showering away her scent, of lying beside her rigid body in the dark, every muscle straining not to reach for her.

Five days of absolute fucking torture.

And yet, my mind betrays me, replaying that night in vivid detail—her skin flushed beneath my hands, her breath catching as I entered her, the way she whispered as she unraveled in my arms. The trust in her eyes as she gave herself to me completely.

Trust I've now shattered.

"Fuck," I mutter to myself. I should never have touched her. Should never have allowed myself that one night of forgetting who I am, what I've done, and what awaits us both if I falter. Alina is gone because I made the mistake of loving my wife too openly, of treating her as more than the political alliance she represented.

I will not make the same mistake twice.

Yet, as I climb the stairs to the east wing, my feet carry me not to my room but to her door. I stand outside, listening. No sound comes from within—no sobbing, no movement. Just silence—as absolute as the space I've forced between us.

My hand rises and hovers near the polished wood. One knock and I could undo the damage. I could tell her that the coldness is an act, that I've been distant because the alternative terrifies me more than any enemy ever could.

But then what? Hold her close only to have her ripped away? Watch her bleed out in my arms while I stand helpless, destroyed not just by her death but by the knowledge that I caused it?

No. Better Kira hate me and live than love me and die.

My hand falls away from the door. I retreat to my study, pour another drink, and lose myself in work until dawn bleeds across the horizon.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

When I emerge, she's already in the kitchen, dressed in jeans and a simple blouse, her hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. She doesn't look up when I enter but continues spreading butter on her toast with controlled movements.

"Good morning," I offer, the words falling flat between us.

She doesn't respond, doesn't acknowledge my presence at all. She finishes her toast, rinses her plate in the sink, and walks past me as if I'm invisible. Her perfume lingers in the air. I inhale deeply, hating myself for craving even this slight trace of her.

Days pass this way. She becomes a ghost in our home, present but unreachable. When I enter a room, she leaves it. When I speak, she doesn't listen. When I reach for the salt at dinner, she withdraws her hand as if my touch might burn.

It's what I wanted. It's exactly what I fucking wanted.

And it's killing me.

I find myself watching her when she doesn't notice. The way she curls in the window seat with a book, the afternoon light turning her auburn hair to fire. How she speaks softly to Yuri, my most hardened enforcer, making him blush like a schoolboy as she asks about his mother's health. The graceful line of her neck as she tilts her head to study one of the paintings in the hallway.

My wife. Mine. Yet never more unreachable.

Tonight, I come home earlier than usual. The house is quiet, but a light burns in the

library. I loosen my tie as I approach, preparing for another silent encounter, another exercise in restraint.

I find her asleep on the leather couch, a book open on her chest, rising and falling with each breath. Her face, in repose, is younger, softer, unmarked by the coldness I've taught her to wear in my presence. A strand of auburn hair has escaped her ponytail, curling against her cheek.

Without thinking, I reach down to brush it away.

Her eyes snap open, startlingly blue and instantly alert. For a fraction of a second, before memory returns, I see warmth there—then nothing. The shutters come down, and she sits up abruptly, the book tumbling to the floor.

"Don't," she says, the first word she's spoken to me in days. It hangs between us, heavy with meaning.

"Kira—"

"No." She stands, putting the couch between us. "You made yourself clear. I'm a liability. A business transaction. I understand my place now."

"That's not—" I begin but stop. What can I say? That I lied? That the truth is worse—that I'm terrified of how much I want her, need her, could love her if I allowed myself?

"Not what?" Her voice is steady, but I see I see the pain in her eyes. "Not what you meant? Then what did you mean, Mikhail?"

My name in her mouth still does things to me, still makes heat pool low in my belly despite everything. I take a step toward her, and she takes one back.

"I meant that I can't afford distractions," I say finally. "The Novikovs?—"

"Are a convenient excuse." Her eyes flash. "If you don't want me, just say it. Don't hide behind business and danger and whatever else helps you sleep at night."

"You think I'm sleeping?" The words escape before I can stop them, raw and revealing. "You think I close my eyes and don't see you? Don't remember how you felt under me, around me? Don't hear you saying my name like it's something sacred instead of something damned?"

She stares at me, color rising in her cheeks. For a moment, neither of us speaks—the only sound is our ragged breathing in the quiet library.

"Then why?" she whispers finally. "Why push me away?"

The truth hovers on my tongue, desperate to be spoken. I swallow it back, tasting ash.

"Because wanting isn't enough," I say instead. "Because some things are more important than desire."

"Like what?"

"Like keeping you alive."

Her face goes pale, then flushes with something that might be anger or understanding or both.

"That's not your choice to make," she says, but her voice wavers.

"Isn't it?" I move closer, and this time she doesn't retreat. "I've buried one wife, Kira. I won't bury another."

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Her breath catches. "So you'd rather bury us instead? Whatever this could be?"

"There is no us." The lie tastes like poison. "There's only survival."

She laughs, sharp and bitter. "Then why do you watch me? Why do your hands shake when you pour your vodka? Why do you stand outside my room at night?"

Because I'm a masochist. Because torturing myself is preferable to losing you entirely. Because even this cold war between us is better than the alternative.

"You're imagining things," I say.

"Am I?" She steps closer, close enough that I can smell her shampoo and feel the heat radiating from her skin. "Then touch me."

"What?"

"If I mean nothing, if this is just business, touch me. Put your hand on my arm. Kiss my forehead. Do what any husband would do with a wife who's just a liability."

The challenge in her voice nearly undoes me. My hands clench at my sides, fighting the urge to reach for her, to pull her against me and show her exactly how much she means.

"I can't," I whisper.

"Because you don't want to, or because you want to too much?"

The question breaks something inside me. Before I can stop myself, I reach out and cup her face in my palm. Her skin is silk and warmth and everything I've denied myself. She leans into the touch, eyes fluttering closed.

"Kira." Her name is a prayer and a curse.

She opens her eyes, and the want I see there mirrors my own. "I'm not her, Mikhail. I'm not Alina."

The sound of my first wife's name on her lips snaps me back to reality. I drop my hand and step away.

"No," I say roughly. "You're not. You're alive. And I intend to keep it that way."

I turn to leave, but her voice stops me.

"Running away won't change how you feel."

I pause in the doorway without turning around. "Watch me."

Hours later, I'm drunk. The vodka burns less now and slides down easier with each glass. The fire in my study has died to embers, casting dancing shadows on the walls. The house is quiet. Everyone is asleep except me.

Except I can hear her moving around upstairs. Pacing, maybe. Or maybe she can't sleep either, can't stop thinking about the way I touched her face, the want that crackled between us like electricity.

I pour another drink. My hands are steadier now, or maybe I'm just too numb to notice the shaking.

The clock strikes two. Then three. The bottle grows lighter in my hand.

I find myself at her door again, swaying slightly. The lock is a simple thing, nothing that can keep me out if I really want in. My fingers find the picks in my pocket, muscle memory guiding them even through the vodka haze.

The tumblers give way with soft clicks. The door swings open silently.

She's in bed, curled on her side, auburn hair spilled across the pillow. The moonlight through the window turns her skin luminous. She's wearing one of my shirts—when did she take it? The sight of her in my clothes does something primal to me, marking some territorial instinct I didn't know I still possessed.

I shed my clothes quietly, dropping them in a careless pile. The mattress dips under my weight as I slide in behind Kira, and she stirs.

"Mikhail?" Her voice is thick with sleep.

"Shh." I pull her against me and bury my face in her hair. She smells like vanilla and something uniquely hers. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

She tries to turn in my arms, but I hold her still, not ready to see the questions in her eyes.



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"You're drunk," she murmurs.

"Yes." There's no point in denying it. "Too drunk to pretend I don't want you."

Now she does turn, and I let her. Her eyes are wide in the darkness, searching my face.

"Mikhail—"

I kiss her before she can finish, pouring all my hunger, desperation, and fear into the contact. She tastes like toothpaste and sleep and forgiveness I don't deserve. Her hands tangle in my hair, pulling me closer.

"Please," I whisper against her lips. "Let me... I need..."

"What do you need?"

"You. Just you."

She kisses me back then, soft and sweet and devastating. I trail my mouth down her throat, tasting salt and silk, feeling her pulse flutter under my lips.

"I've been going insane," I confess against her collarbone. "Watching you, wanting you, knowing I can't have you."

"You can," she breathes. "You can have me."

I work my way lower, pushing up the shirt she wears—my shirt—to expose the curve of her waist and the soft swell of her breasts. She arches under my touch, a soft moan escaping her lips.

"So beautiful," I murmur, mapping every inch of exposed skin with my mouth. "So perfect."

When I reach the apex of her thighs, she tenses, hands fisting in the sheets.

"Let me worship you," I whisper, pressing kisses to her inner thighs. "Let me show you what you mean to me."

She nods, breathless, and I lose myself in her taste, her scent, and the way she calls my name like a prayer when I use my tongue to drive her toward the edge of pleasure.

Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging desperately as I work her with my mouth, alternating between gentle caresses and firm pressure. She tastes like honey and sin, like everything I've been denying myself these past torturous days. The soft sounds she makes—gasps and whimpers and my name broken on her lips—fuel something primal in me.

"Misha," she breathes, and the nickname she's never used before nearly undoes me. "Please, I?—"

My finger plunges into her soaked pussy, my tongue relentlessly circling her swollen clit. Her body's reaction to my every touch is fucking perfection, her back arching, hips writhing like she was born for this moment, born for me. The thought scares the shit out of me and turns me on like nothing else.

Her thighs clench around my head as I drive her closer to her climax, my free hand gripping her hip to keep her in place. She's on the edge—I can feel it in the way her

body tightens, hear it in the increasingly desperate moans escaping her lips.

"Come for me, kisa," I growl against her dripping cunt. "Let me feel you come all over my face."

She detonates with a scream that goes straight to my throbbing cock, her body spasming as orgasmic waves crash through her. I ride her through it, easing my touch as she descends, pressing feather-light kisses to her trembling inner thighs, tasting her release.

When I finally lift my head, she's gazing at me with fuck-drunk eyes, chest heaving. Her hair is a chaotic mess against the pillows, lips parted and bee-stung. She's a vision of raw, sexual abandon.

"Fuck me," she pants, reaching for me.

I prowl up her body, settling my weight carefully over her. She crushes her mouth to mine, licking her release from my lips without an ounce of inhibition, and it nearly obliterates the last of my self-control.

"I want you," she breathes heavily against my mouth. "All of you. Not just tonight."

Her words cut through the vodka haze, making the world come crashing back. The danger. The Novikovs. Alina's blood on my hands.

"Kira—"

"No." She grips my face with determination, forcing me to lock eyes with her. "No barriers. Not tonight. Just be with me. Really with me."

Her legs envelop my waist, and I can feel the burning heat of her against me. It would

be so easy to sink into her depths, to lose myself in her intoxicating warmth and pretend the outside world doesn't exist.

Too easy. Too dangerous.

But when she kisses me again, soft and imploring, I surrender completely.

### Chapter 13

Kira

the following week

The crystal tumbler slips from his fingers as he drives into me, vodka cascading over my breasts like liquid fire.

“Fuck,” Mikhail growls into my throat, his accent thickening with desire as he watches the clear liquid trace paths down my skin. The cut crystal shatters somewhere on the hardwood floor of his study, but neither of us cares—not when his mouth is already following the vodka's trail, his tongue hot and demanding as it laps at the hollow between my breasts, savoring every drop.

The mahogany desk beneath me is unforgiving, its polished surface cool against my back as he pounds into me with a desperation that borders on violence. His blue eyes blaze with primal hunger, almost feral, as he watches me arch beneath him, my body responding to each thrust. The scent of liquor mingles with the musk of our raw coupling, creating an intoxicating haze that makes my head spin, heightening every sensation, every gasp, every moan as we lose ourselves in this dizzying dance of lust.

My nails dig into Mikhail's shoulders, scraping over the ink embedded in his skin.

He's consuming me, stretching me, pounding into me with a force that's bordering on brutal. His cock fills every inch of me, relentless and demanding.

"Eyes on me, kisa," he growls, his voice a ragged rumble as his fingers grip my jaw tightly. "Watch me while you come undone."

I obey, my gaze fixed on his glacial eyes, which transform into a stormy sea, swirling with intensity. My orgasm crashes through me like a tidal wave, my body surging and clenching around his thick shaft with an overwhelming force. A raw, primal sound erupts from his throat, a guttural cry as he explodes, his release flooding deep within me, and I feel his body tremble against mine.

But he doesn't relent. Refuses to pause. His hands move with purpose, repositioning me, pushing me down over the polished wood of the desk. Papers flutter to the ground like autumn leaves caught in a breeze, and a leather portfolio hits the floor with a thud, its contents scattering in a forgotten mess. His slick cock presses insistently against me once more, poised to claim me again with relentless determination.

"Again," he rasps, his voice rough and urgent, as his palm presses firmly between my shoulder blades, guiding me as he enters from behind. "I need—Christ, Kira, I need?—"

This time, everything feels different. The pace is slower and more deliberate. Mikhail's hands, usually so steady, now tremble as they grip my hips with a mixture of intensity and vulnerability. With each measured thrust, I sense something within him breaking open, a flood of emotion pouring out. The careful control he's maintained for weeks is crumbling, exposing something raw and desperate.

"Promise me," he whispers urgently against my ear, his breath hot, uneven, and laced with a plea. "Promise me you'll be careful. That you won't take risks." His voice

fractures on the last word, filled with an ache that reverberates through me as he stills inside me, holding the moment. "I can't lose you, Kira. I can't—I won't survive it." His words hang heavy in the air, a testament to his vulnerability and the depth of his feelings.

The vulnerability in his confession makes my chest tight. I turn my head, catching his gaze over my shoulder. Those beautiful, dangerous eyes are bright with something that looks suspiciously like tears.

"I promise," I breathe, meaning it with every fiber of my being. "I swear to you, Mikhail. I'll be careful."

He closes his eyes, relief washing over his features as he begins to move again. Gentle now, reverent, as if I'm something precious he's afraid to break.

"I love you," he says against my spine, the words muffled but unmistakable. "God help me, I tried not to love you, but I failed."

His confession shatters something inside me, a wall I didn't realize I'd built. Three words I never expected to hear from Mikhail Zhukov's lips. Three words I've been afraid to acknowledge even in the darkest corners of my own mind.

I feel the weight of them settling into my bones as he holds me, his chest pressed against my back, our bodies joined in the most intimate way. His heartbeat thunders against my spine, a wild, untamed rhythm that matches my own.

"Say it again," I whisper, needing to hear it, to know it wasn't just something carried away on a tide of passion.

His lips brush the nape of my neck, sending shivers cascading down my body. "I love you, Kira." Each word is deliberate, carved from stone, and offered like a dangerous

gift. "More than I thought possible."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I push back against him, taking him deeper. This man who was supposed to be my jailer, my punishment—this beautiful, broken creature of violence and tenderness—has somehow become my salvation.

"I love you too," I confess, the words tearing from my throat. They taste like freedom and terror on my tongue.

His arms tighten around me, one hand splaying across my stomach possessively while the other cradles my throat. Not threatening, but claiming. Protecting.

"You weren't supposed to happen," he murmurs, resuming his languid thrusts, each one sending sparks of pleasure radiating through my core. "This arranged marriage was meant to be business, nothing more. But you..." His teeth graze my shoulder. "You've ruined me, kisa."

I reach back, threading my fingers through his dark hair. "Good," I gasp as he hits that perfect spot inside me. "We can be ruined together."

The evening light filtering through the study windows bathes us in amber and gold, transforming sweat-slicked skin into something ethereal. Papers still litter the floor around us, forgotten casualties of our desire. The scent of vodka lingers in the air, mingling with the musk of our bodies.

When he comes this time, it's with my name on his lips—not a curse or a command, but a prayer. I follow him over the edge, my body clenching around him as waves of pleasure wash through me, gentler than before but somehow deeper, more profound.



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Afterward, he gathers me into his arms, cradling me against his chest as if I'm something infinitely precious. His fingers trace idle patterns on my skin, following the path of fading vodka trails and blossoming bruises—evidence of his passion that I'll wear proudly tomorrow.

"This changes everything," he says quietly, his voice rumbling through his chest beneath my ear.

"I know." The magnitude of what we've admitted hangs between us, heavy with implications. In our world, love isn't just vulnerable—it's dangerous. A weakness enemies will exploit without mercy.

Mikhail lifts my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. Those ice-blue eyes, usually so guarded, now lay bare his soul to me. "We'll have to be smarter. More careful. The meeting with the Italians next week?—"

I press my fingers to his lips. "Not now. Just... hold me. The world can wait a little longer."

His expression softens, and he pulls me closer, wrapping his strong arms around me. For this moment, we're just a man and a woman in love, not pawns in a dangerous game of power and vengeance. Tomorrow, we'll return to the harsh realities of our lives. But tonight—tonight belongs to us alone.

## Chapter 14

Mikhail

Two weeks later

The crystal chandelier above us casts fractured light across faces I've learned to read since childhood, and tonight, every shadow whispers betrayal.

The Russian American Children's Welfare charity gala unfolds around us in waves of champagne and false laughter, the kind of glittering performance where millions change hands through silent auctions. At the same time, blood debts are settled with handshakes. Kira moves beside me in midnight blue silk, her small hand resting on my forearm with a touch so light I barely feel it.

"You're tense," she murmurs, her voice barely audible above the string quartet. Those striking blue eyes sweep the crowd with an intelligence that both thrills and concerns me. She sees too much and understands the undercurrents in this room better than I'd hoped.

"I always am at these things." The endearment makes her pulse quicken at her throat. Two weeks of this careful dance between us, and still, she affects me like aged vodka—a smooth fire that burns long after it goes down.

Anton hovers nearby, his billionaire smile never quite reaching his eyes as he works the room. My father holds court by the bar, his presence commanding even among wolves. But it's the figure emerging from the shadows near the auction tables that turns my blood to ice water.

Vladimir Petrov. Once one of my closest friends, now something far more dangerous—a man who knows exactly where to place the knife for maximum damage.

The Novikovs trail behind him like carrion birds, their very presence here a calculated insult. Kazimir's scarred face splits into a grin when our eyes meet across

the marble floor, and I feel Kira stiffen beside me as she follows my gaze.

"Misha." Vladimir's voice carries the same warmth it always did, which makes it infinitely more threatening than any growl. He approaches with arms spread wide, the picture of old friendship, but his dark eyes hold promises of pain. "Look at you, playing the devoted husband. How... domestic."

The scent of his expensive cologne mingles with something darker—gunpowder, perhaps, or simply the metallic tang of fresh betrayal. Kira's grip tightens almost imperceptibly on my arm, and I cover her hand with mine, a gesture that appears protective but serves to keep her close should I need to move fast.

"Vladimir." I keep my voice steady, a quiet storm beneath the surface. The gala swirls around us, a masquerade of elegance. Still, I can feel the oppressive weight of predatory gazes, the subtle recalibration as other bratva leaders maneuver like pieces on a deadly chessboard. "Interesting choice of guests."

His laughter erupts, deep and genuine, a sound that reverberates with the confidence of a man who holds every card in his hand. "The Novikovs? They've proven to be quite... enlightening. It's astonishing what secrets people divulge when they're pushed hard enough."

Kira's breath quickens, each inhale sharp and shallow, and I catch the chilling scent of her fear—not of me, but of the impending storm brewing around us. She's perceptive, keen enough to sense the undercurrents of treachery.

"Mikhail Dmitrievich," Kazimir Novikov's gravelly voice cuts through the tension like a rusty blade. "Congratulations on your marriage. Such a beautiful bride." His eyes rake over Kira with undisguised hunger, and it takes every ounce of control not to paint the marble floor with his blood.

Instead, I step slightly forward, angling my body to shield her from his gaze. "I would be careful if I were you. I've heard rumors that the depths of the East River are calling your name.

Vladimir's smile widens, and he leans closer, his voice dropping to an intimate whisper that only we can hear. "She'll never be safe, you know. Not while she carries your name. There are too many of us who remember how many innocent men you killed after Alina, and there are too many debts left unpaid." His eyes flick to Kira, then back to mine. "This one is softer, more breakable. It will be... educational."

The words nearly knock the air from my lungs, but I force my expression to remain stone. Around us, the gala continues its elegant charade—clinking glasses, polite laughter, the whisper of silk against marble—but my world has narrowed as my mind quickly analyzes his threat.

"Educational," I repeat, my voice barely above a whisper, each syllable carved from ice. "You always did have a gift for choosing the wrong words, Vlad."

His use of Alina's name is a violation, a desecration of something sacred, and the careful control I've maintained these past weeks begins to fracture. The memory of her broken body flashes through my mind, and I feel that familiar darkness rising like a tide.

Kira's fingers press against my forearm, a subtle anchor. She can't hear our whispered exchange, but she reads the violence radiating from my body like heat from a forge. Her touch steadies me, reminds me that this is neither the time nor the place—not with her so close, so vulnerable.

"The past has a way of repeating itself," Vladimir continues, his smile never wavering as he nods to a passing senator's wife. "Especially when we fail to learn from our mistakes. Your father thinks this alliance and injection of money will

protect you, but protection is an illusion when it comes from the wrong source."

The string quartet shifts into a waltz, the melody hauntingly beautiful against the backdrop of barely contained violence. Other guests drift past us, their conversations a meaningless hum, oblivious to the predators circling around them.

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"Is there something you gentlemen need to discuss?" Kira's voice cuts through the tension with deceptive calm, her cultured tones carrying just enough steel to make both men take notice. She steps forward slightly, her spine straight, blue eyes moving between Vladimir and me with the kind of fearless curiosity that makes my chest tighten with equal parts admiration and terror.

Vladimir's attention shifts to her fully now, and I watch his expression change—surprise flickering across his features before settling into something more calculating. "Ah, the bride speaks. How refreshing." He extends his hand toward her. "Vladimir Petrov. An old friend of your husband's."

The word 'friend' drips with poison, but Kira accepts his handshake with the practiced grace of someone born to navigate treacherous social waters. "Kira Zhukova," she replies, and hearing my surname on her lips in this context sends something primal coursing through my veins.

"Zhukova," Vladimir repeats, holding her hand a moment too long. "Such a lovely ring to it. I do hope you're enjoying married life."

"I'm still adjusting," she answers smoothly, reclaiming her hand and moving closer to my side. The warmth of her body against mine is both comfort and torment. "Marriage requires learning new... languages."

The double meaning isn't lost on any of us. Vladimir's laugh is now genuinely delighted. "Indeed it does. Your husband is fluent in several, aren't you, Misha? Violence, vengeance, grief?—"

"Enough." The word leaves my lips like a gunshot, quiet but final. Around us, conversations pause momentarily before resuming, but the damage is done. Lines have been drawn in blood and champagne.

Vladimir's eyes glitter with satisfaction at having drawn a reaction from me. He straightens his platinum cufflinks with deliberate care, the gesture as threatening as any weapon. "Of course. This is a celebration, after all." His gaze shifts to Kira once more, lingering on the pulse point at her throat. "Enjoy the evening, Mrs. Zhukova. I suspect there will be fewer opportunities for such... pleasantries in the future."

The warning hangs in the air like smoke from a funeral pyre. Kazimir Novikov chuckles, a sound like gravel grinding against bone before they melt back into the crowd with practiced ease. But their presence lingers—a stain on the marble, a shadow across the crystal light.

Kira remains perfectly still beside me, her breathing controlled, but I can feel the tremor running through her small frame. When I look down, her knuckles are white around her clutch.

"We're leaving," I murmur against her ear, my lips brushing the delicate shell. The scent of her perfume—jasmine and something uniquely her—cuts through the metallic taste of adrenaline coating my tongue.

"No." Her voice is steady, resolute. "That's what he wants. To see us run."

The observation surprises me. Kira understands the game better than I gave her credit for and recognizes that retreat now would be blood in the water. But understanding the rules doesn't make her any less fragile, any less of a target.

"Kira—"

"Dance with me." She turns in my arms before I can protest, her blue eyes fierce with determination. "Show them I'm not afraid."

The string quartet swells, and couples drift toward the center of the ballroom like moths to flame. My father's eyes find mine across the room—a silent question. I give him the barest nod, and he returns to his conversation, but I know he's cataloging every face, every potential threat.

My hand settles at the small of Kira's back, and she steps into my embrace with surprising grace. Her palm finds my shoulder, fingers spread against the wool of my tuxedo, and suddenly, the rest of the room fades to background noise.

"What did he say to you?" she asks as we begin to move, her voice pitched low so only I can hear.

"Nothing that matters."

"Don't lie to me." Her eyes search mine, and I see steel beneath the silk. "I may have been sheltered, but I'm not stupid. That man wants to hurt us. Hurt me."

The honesty in her voice, the way she says 'us' as if we're truly a unit, does something to the walls I've built around what's left of my heart. I spin her gently, bringing her back against my chest, and for a moment, we're just a man and woman dancing while the world burns around us.

"Yes," I admit finally. "He does."

She nods as if she expected nothing less. "Then we make sure he can't."

The simplicity of her statement, the quiet acceptance of violence as a necessity, tells me more about Anton Malakhov's daughter than weeks of careful observation. She's



been raised in this world, even if kept from its darkest corners. She knows the price of survival.

"You don't understand what that means," I warn her, my thumb tracing small circles against her spine.

"Then teach me."

Those two words ignite something in my blood—something I've kept carefully banked since the day she stepped into my home. The orchestra crescendos around us, and I draw her closer, my hand splaying possessively across her lower back.

"Be careful what you ask for," I murmur against her temple, where I can feel her pulse fluttering like a trapped bird. "Some lessons can't be unlearned."

Her eyes meet mine, defiant blue flame against ice. "I didn't marry you to remain a sheltered little girl, Mikhail."

No, she married me because she had no choice. Yet there's something else in her gaze now, something that wasn't there when she first walked into my life, with hatred burning behind her eyes.

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"No," I agree, guiding her through a turn that brings her back against my chest. "You married me for survival. There's a difference."

The dance floor has become a chessboard, and I'm acutely aware of every player circling us. Vladimir and the Novikovs have positioned themselves near the east exit. My father's men have naturally formed a perimeter. Anton watches us with the haunted eyes of a man who knows his daughter's life is in danger.

"Tell me what he threatened," Kira insists, her fingers tightening on my shoulder. "I need to know what we're facing."

The music slows, and I lower my lips to her ear, using the intimacy of the moment as cover. "Vlad mentioned Alina."

I feel her stiffen almost imperceptibly. She knows the name—of course, she does. The whispers about my first wife's murder have followed me for years, each retelling more gruesome than the last. Most get the details wrong, but the ending is always the same: a young woman's body is found in pieces, and a husband paints the city red with blood in response.

"He's suggesting history could repeat itself."

"Yes."

Her throat works as she swallows, but her steps never falter. "Then we make sure it doesn't."

I study her face, searching for cracks in her composure. Instead, I find only determination mingled with fury.

"You should be terrified," I tell her, my voice rougher than intended.

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "Who says I'm not?" She leans closer, her breath warm against my neck. "But fear doesn't help us survive, does it?"

The song ends, and we separate with practiced courtesy, but her hand remains in mine as we move toward the edge of the dance floor. I feel eyes tracking our every move—Vladimir's calculating gaze, Kazimir's hunger, my father's assessment.

"I need to speak with my father," I tell her, scanning the crowd for potential threats. "Stay where I can see you."

Her chin lifts slightly. "I'm going to get some air. The terrace is right there, and your men are at every door."

Before I can object, she adds, "If I cower in a corner all night, we show weakness. Is that what you want?"

She's learning too quickly, adapting to this life with an instinct that both impresses and alarms me. I nod once, reluctantly. "Five minutes. Don't speak to anyone."

"Yes, husband," she replies, the formality undercut by the subtle challenge in her eyes.

I watch her glide through the crowd, midnight silk flowing around her like water. Men turn to look—they always do—but she moves past them with practiced indifference. Only when she reaches the glass doors to the terrace, do I turn toward my father, who stands in conversation with an aging senator whose loyalty we

purchased years ago?

"A moment," I say in Russian, and my father excuses himself with the smooth charm that has disarmed countless enemies.

We move to a quieter corner, where the string quartet's music provides cover for our voices. "Vladimir's made his move," I tell him, accepting a glass of vodka from a passing waiter.

My father's weathered face remains impassive, but his eyes—the same ice blue as mine—harden to steel. "The Novikovs are an insult. Their presence here means someone is backing them."

"Vladimir Petrov has already confessed he's in league with them. He's building a coalition."

"Against us specifically, or the agreement with Malakhov?"

I consider this, remembering the way Vladimir looked at Kira. "He wants to punish me for guessing his involvement in Alina's death and holding his men responsible."

My father's hand tightens around his glass, the only outward sign of his anger. "Then we respond accordingly."

The words are simple, but their meaning is clear: blood will answer blood.

"Not yet," I say, surprising myself with the restraint. "We need to know who else stands with Vladimir. One wrong move and we could trigger something bigger than we can handle."

My father studies me, his gaze penetrating. "The girl has changed you."

It's not a question, and I don't bother denying it. "Kira's observant. Resilient."

"And beautiful," he adds with unexpected gentleness. "I knew you couldn't resist her for long."

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

Vladimir Petrov stands too close to my wife, his hand on her bare arm, his mouth curved in what appears to be a pleasant smile. But I can read the tension in Kira's posture even from across the room, seeing the way she's angled her body to maintain distance without creating a scene.

I move without thinking, cutting through the crowd with the focused intent of a predator. Conversations falter as I pass, the instinctive recognition of danger causing people to step back. My father follows at a more measured pace, but I feel his presence behind me like a gathering storm.

Vladimir sees me coming and smiles wider, his fingers still wrapped around Kira's arm. "Ah, the protective husband arrives. We were just discussing your honeymoon plans. Did you know I considered asking for her hand before you? Unfortunately, Anton was not receptive to my proposal."

Kira's eyes meet mine, a silent warning not to react too strongly, too publicly. She's right, of course—this is precisely what he wants, to provoke me into showing my hand here, surrounded by witnesses who move in both our worlds.

I place my hand over his, where it grips Kira's arm, applying just enough pressure to make him wince. "Remove your hand from my wife, or I will cut it off and shove it up your ass."

My voice is conversational, almost friendly, but Vladimir knows me well enough to hear the promise beneath. He releases her, raising both palms in mock surrender.

"Just being neighborly," he says, his eyes glittering with malice. "After all, Kira and I

will soon get to know one another much better.”

I slide my arm around Kira's waist, drawing her against my side. She comes willingly, her body fitting against mine with a rightness that momentarily distracts me.

"Your memory is selective, Vladimir," I reply evenly. "You seem to have forgotten how things ended the last time someone threatened what's mine."

He leans closer, his voice dropping to ensure only we can hear. "No, Misha. I remember perfectly. That's why I'm going to enjoy watching you suffer the same loss twice. Only this time, you'll know it was coming." His gaze slides to Kira. "We'll see each other again soon."

Kira goes rigid against me, but her voice remains steady when she speaks. "Threats against a woman? How cowardly." She tilts her head, studying him with the cool assessment of someone cataloging weaknesses. "I expected more creativity from someone who believes he can take down Mikhail Zhukov.""

Vladimir blinks, clearly not expecting this response. For a brief moment, I see uncertainty flicker across his face before his mask of confidence returns.

"The kitten has claws," he murmurs. "Good. It's always more satisfying when they fight back."

My father steps forward then, his presence commanding immediate respect even from Vladimir. "This conversation is finished," he says with quiet authority. "You've made your position clear, as have we. What follows will be decided elsewhere."

It's a dismissal but also a warning—the real battle will take place away from these glittering lights, in the shadows where we all truly live.

Vladimir inclines his head slightly, acknowledging the shift from words to action. "Always a pleasure, Dmitri Alexandrovich." His eyes return to me, then Kira. "Enjoy the remainder of your evening. The auction items are particularly... revealing this year."

When he's far enough away to speak freely, Kira turns to me and says, "We should check the auction items. That didn't sound like an idle threat."

Her intuition continues to surprise me. I nod, scanning the room for Anton. He stands near the bar, deep in conversation with the chief of police, maybe hoping to curry favor for his daughter's sake.

"Stay with her," I tell my father, then cut through the crowd toward the auction tables. The items are displayed on black velvet—jewelry, vacation packages, rare wines, artwork—each with a minimum bid that would feed a family for years.

I move systematically down the line, looking for anything out of place, anything that might carry Vladimir's promised message. At first, nothing seems amiss. Then I reach the final table, where a leather-bound book sits innocuously among crystal decanters and a vintage Patek Philippe watch.

The auction card reads simply: "Rare first edition, family history of notable Russian-American figures. Opening bid: \$50,000."

I flip open the cover, and my blood freezes in my veins. It's not a book at all, but a cleverly disguised portfolio containing photographs—surveillance images of Kira leaving the penthouse, shopping in Manhattan with her mother, and having lunch with her parents, her bodyguards never far behind. Each image is marked with a date and time, some of which are as recent as two days ago.

But it's the final page that makes my hand shake with barely contained rage. A



photograph of Alina, taken the day before she was murdered, side by side with one of Kira in the same pose, same angle, taken just yesterday outside our home.

Across both images, someone has written in red ink: "History always repeats itself. Tick tock."

## Chapter 15

Kira

"You're holding your breath again,kisa," Mikhail's cousin Vanya says, circling me like a hawk assessing its prey. His accent is thicker than Mikhail's, the vowels rounder, more Russian than Brooklyn. "You must breathe through the shot. Like this."

He demonstrates with his own weapon, inhaling slowly, then releasing half his breath before squeezing the trigger. The crack of the gunshot echoes through the underground firing range beneath the Zhukov estate. The paper target at the end of the lane shudders, a fresh hole appearing precisely where the silhouette's heart would be.

"Now you," he commands, stepping back.

Yuri—my ever-present bodyguard, with shoulders like granite boulders and a face that rarely shifts from a stoic expression—adjusts my stance with clinical detachment. His fingers press against my shoulder blades, forcing them down and back.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Relax here," he murmurs, his voice surprisingly gentle for a man who probably knows fifty ways to kill with his thumbs alone. "Power comes from being loose, not rigid."

I nod, feeling the weight of their expectations. Three hours ago, I was sketching in my studio, the afternoon light spilling across my canvas. Now I'm learning how to put bullets through imaginary men's hearts because this is what being a Zhukov bride means—adapting, surviving, transforming.

I raise the Glock again. The metal warming to my skin. I think of Mikhail's face this morning when he mentioned these lessons—the slight softening around his eyes, the way his jaw clenched when he said, "I won't always be there to protect you."

Inhale. Half-exhale. Squeeze.

The recoil vibrates up my arm, but I'm ready for it this time. I fire again. And again. And again. Until the magazine empties and silence floods back into the space between heartbeats.

Vanya hits the button to retrieve the target, his expression unreadable. When the paper slides toward us, I see his eyebrows lift incrementally—the Zhukov equivalent of shocked disbelief. Eight holes cluster tightly in the center mass, with one through the head.

"Where did you learn to shoot like this?" he demands, suspicion edging his voice.

I shrug, a small smile playing on my lips. "My father may have been paranoid enough

to keep me in a gilded cage, but he wasn't stupid enough to leave me defenseless. I've been shooting since I was thirteen."

Yuri makes a sound that might almost be a laugh. "The boss didn't mention this."

"Mikhail doesn't know everything about me," I reply, setting the empty gun down with newfound confidence. "Not yet."

The air shifts as we move from the firing range to the training mats. Here, Yuri takes the lead, demonstrating escapes from various holds and grabs. His movements are fluid, economical, and deadly in their precision. I watch, absorbing every detail, every subtle weight shift and leverage point.

"Remember," he says as his massive hands encircle my wrist in a demonstration, "you are small, but this is an advantage. Use their strength against them."

I nod, committing his words to memory along with the movements. When it's my turn to practice, I throw myself into each technique with a fervor that surprises even me. My body responds with an eagerness I hadn't anticipated as if it's been waiting for this permission to fight back.

"Good," Vanya nods after I successfully break free from his hold for the third time. "But in real situations, you must be faster. More vicious."

I wipe sweat from my brow, auburn strands of hair sticking to my temples. "Show me again."

Hours pass like this—learning the language of violence through repetition and muscle memory. By the time we finish, every inch of me aches, but there's a new awareness humming beneath my skin. I understand my body differently now—not just as something to be adorned or desired, but as a weapon I can wield.

As we gather our things to leave, Vanya's phone buzzes. He checks it, his expression shifting minutely before he looks at me.

"Mikhail is back early," he says. "He wants to see your progress."

My heart quickens, though I'm not sure if it's from apprehension or something else entirely—something dangerous that flutters whenever I think of those ice-blue eyes watching me.

I reload the Glock with steady hands, waiting for my husband to arrive, wondering what he'll make of this new version of his bride—one who can put nine bullets exactly where she intends them to go.

The heavy door to the firing range opens with a metallic groan, and I feel Mikhail's presence before I see him. The air seems to thicken, charged with that particular intensity he carries like a second skin. His footsteps are measured and deliberate—the predatory grace of a man who owns everything he surveys.

"Show me," he says simply, his voice cutting through the underground chamber's stale air.

I don't turn around immediately. Instead, I steady my breathing, feeling the weight of Mikhail's gaze on my shoulders like a physical touch. When I finally face him, his expression is unreadable—that careful mask he wears so well. But his eyes... his eyes are alive with something I can't quite name.

He's changed from his business suit into dark jeans and a black henley that clings to the muscled planes of his chest. Even dressed down, he radiates danger. A thin line of blood decorates his knuckles—fresh enough that I wonder what kind of meeting he just left.

"New target," I tell Vanya, my voice steadier than I feel.

The paper silhouette slides into position with mechanical precision. Twenty-five yards this time—farther than before. I'm acutely aware of Mikhail moving closer, positioning himself just behind my left shoulder. Close enough that I catch the scent of his cologne mixed with something darker—gunpowder, perhaps. Or violence.

"Breathe, kisa," he murmurs, and the endearment in his accented voice sends heat spiraling down my spine. "Let me see what my wife can do."

The possessiveness in those words should annoy me. Instead, it ignites something fierce and hungry in my chest. I raise the Glock, muscle memory from countless afternoons at my father's private range flooding back. But this is different. This isn't about appeasing a paranoid father's fears—this is about survival in a world where being weak means being dead.

I empty the magazine in a steady rhythm, each shot deliberate and controlled. The familiar burn fills my nostrils as smoke curls from the barrel. When the target returns, silence stretches between us like a held breath.

Ten shots. Ten holes clustered so tightly in the center that they could be covered by a playing card.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Bozhe moy," Vanya breathes, his earlier composure finally cracking.

Mikhail says nothing for a long moment. I can feel him studying the target, then me, his analytical mind processing this new information. When he finally speaks, his voice carries a note I've never heard before—something that might be pride.

"Again," he commands. "But this time, I want to see you move."

Yuri sets up multiple targets at varying distances while Mikhail watches with the focused attention of a man accustomed to evaluating assets.

"Scenario," Mikhail says, his voice taking on the cold authority I've heard him use with his men. "Three hostiles. You have limited ammunition. Show me how you survive."

I feel my pulse quicken, but not from fear. Something darker unfurls in my chest—anticipation, perhaps. Or the thrill of finally being seen as more than a decorative acquisition.

"How many rounds?" I ask, checking the fresh magazine Yuri slides across the table.

"Six," Mikhail says without hesitation. "And you're moving from cover to cover."

The training area transforms before my eyes. What moments ago felt like a sterile underground range now pulses with imagined danger. I can almost see the shadows where enemies might hide and feel the weight of phantom threats closing in.

I take position behind the concrete barrier, my heart hammering a steady rhythm against my ribs. The first target stands fifteen yards out, the second at twenty, the third angled behind partial cover at twenty-five. In a real scenario, I'd be dead before I could blink. But this isn't real—not yet.

"Begin," Mikhail's voice cuts through my thoughts like a blade.

I move.

The first shot takes the nearest target center mass as I pivot toward the second position. My feet find their rhythm across the concrete floor, muscle memory from years of ballet translating into fluid motion. Duck behind cover. Breathe. Rise. Fire.

The second target drops.

But it's the third that will test me—the one positioned to simulate a sniper's advantage. I sprint across the open space, feeling exposed and vulnerable. In my peripheral vision, I catch Mikhail's stillness, the way he tracks my movement with a predatory focus.

I slide behind the final barrier, concrete scraping against my shoulder. One shot left. One chance.

I close my eyes for a heartbeat, visualizing the angle, the distance. When I emerge from cover, the world narrows to the space between the gun's sight and my target's center mass.

The final shot echoes through the chamber like thunder.

When the smoke clears and the targets return, the silence stretches taut as a wire. Three clean kills. Two rounds to spare.

"Where?" Mikhail's voice is deadly quiet, but I hear something else underneath—something that makes my skin flush hot. "Where did you learn to move like that?"

I set the gun down carefully, meeting his gaze without flinching. "You're not the only one with secrets, husband."

His eyes narrow, and I watch him process this new variable in whatever equation he's been calculating since our wedding day. Vanya and Yuri exchange glances, but neither speaks.

"My father made sure I could defend myself if his enemies ever found me. Ballet for grace. Shooting for precision. Wing Chun for when bullets aren't available."

Mikhail steps closer, and I fight the urge to retreat.

"Dangerous," he murmurs, though whether he's referring to my skills or something else entirely, I can't tell.

"Good," I whisper back, holding his stare. "I'd hate to be boring."

Something shifts in his expression—a crack in that carefully maintained control. For a moment, I glimpse the man beneath the monster, and what I see there makes my breath catch.

Heat. Hunger. And something that looks almost like respect.

Chapter 16

Mikhail



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

The sound of her bare feet padding across marble draws me down the hallway like a predator following the scent of prey.

I find her in our bathroom, standing before the mirror in nothing but black lace that barely conceals the curves I've memorized with my hands. The memory of her stance at the shooting range burns fresh in my mind—the way she held that Glock like she was born to it, the deadly precision in those blue eyes as she emptied the clip into the center mass. My innocent little wife isn't so fragile after all.

"Kisa," I murmur from the doorway, watching her reflection meet my gaze in the mirror. "You lied to me."

Her fingers pause on the clasp of her necklace. "About what?"

I step into the bathroom, closing the space between us until the heat of my body presses against her back. My hands find her hips, thumbs tracing the delicate lace at her waist. "About being helpless."

"I never said I was helpless." Her voice carries that careful control she wears like armor, but I feel the slight tremor that runs through her when my lips brush the shell of her ear.

"No?" I slide one hand up her spine, fingers tangling in that auburn silk. "Then why do you play the fragile little bird for everyone else?"

In the mirror, I watch her pupils dilate as my other hand trails lower, skimming the edge of those black panties that have been taunting me since she stepped out of her

jeans. The scent of her perfume mingles with something darker—arousal, anticipation, the electric tension that's been building between us all day.

"Maybe," I whisper against her throat, "my sweet wife isn't as innocent as she pretends to be."

Her breath catches as I press closer, the hard evidence of my desire against the small of her back. In the mirror, her eyes are storm-dark, pupils blown wide as I drag my teeth along the elegant column of her throat.

"Answer me, Kira." My voice is rough velvet in the marble-tiled space. "Why do you hide what you are?"

She tilts her head back against my shoulder, exposing more of that pale throat. "Maybe I like keeping secrets."

The admission sends heat straight through me. I fist Kira's hair tighter, angling her head so I can see every flicker of emotion across her face in the reflection. "Bad girls who keep secrets get punished."

A soft whimper escapes her lips, and I feel the way she arches into me, pressing that perfect ass against my growing hardness. The black lace of her panties is already damp when I trace the edge with my fingertips.

"Is that what you want?" I murmur, my free hand splaying across her flat stomach, holding her against me. "To be punished for lying to your husband?"

Her only answer is the way her breathing quickens, the flush that spreads from her cheeks down to the swell of her breasts barely contained by that scrap of lace she calls a bra.

I spin her around, and her legs part instinctively as I step between them, my hands gripping her thighs. The bathroom lights cast shadows across her skin, turning her into something ethereal and dangerous all at once.

"You're going to tell me everything," I promise, my thumb brushing across her bottom lip. "But first, I'm going to show you what happens to bad girls."

I turn her again and bend her forward, palms flat against the cool marble, her reflection fractured across the mirrored wall. Her hair falls like a curtain of fire around her face as she watches me through hooded eyes. The perfect arch of her spine makes my mouth water.

"You think I didn't notice how your hands never trembled on that trigger?" I growl, gathering the thin lace of her panties and pulling them aside with one finger. The exposure makes her gasp. "How you breathed through each shot like you'd done it a thousand times before?"

The slick heat of her betrays everything her silence tries to hide. I trace my fingers through her wetness, circling but never giving her what she needs. Her hips twitch backward, seeking more.

"Stay still," I command, using my other hand to press between her shoulder blades, pinning her to the counter. "You don't get to decide when you've had enough."

"Mikhail," she breathes, my name a prayer and a curse on her lips.

I unzip my pants, freeing myself, letting the heavy weight of my cock rest against her exposed flesh. The contrast of my olive skin against her pale curves sends electricity down my spine. I slide against her once, twice, coating myself in her arousal.

"Tell me why you pretended," I demand, positioning myself at her entrance but not

pushing forward. "Why play weak when you're anything but?"

Her eyes lock with mine in the mirror. "Because people underestimate what they don't fear."

The truth in her words hits me like a bullet to the chest. This woman—my wife—is more dangerous than anyone realizes. The thought makes me throb with need.

"Smart girl," I murmur, and then thrust forward in one smooth motion, burying myself to the hilt.

She cries out, fingers scrabbling for purchase on the slick marble. I give her no time to adjust, setting a punishing rhythm that rocks her forward with each thrust. The bathroom fills with the obscene sound of skin against skin, her soft moans echoing off the tiles.

I gather her hair in my fist, pulling just enough to arch her neck back, forcing her to watch us in the mirror. "Look at you," I rasp against her ear. "Taking your punishment so well."

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Her inner muscles clench around me at the words, drawing a groan from deep in my chest. I reach around to find the swollen bud between her legs, circling it with precise pressure that makes her thighs tremble.

"You think you're clever, hiding behind those innocent eyes," I continue, my rhythm never faltering. "But I see you, Kira. I see everything you are."

Her breathing fractures, little hitching gasps that tell me she's close. I slow my movements deliberately, making her whimper with frustration.

"Please," she whispers, the word barely audible.

I lean forward, covering her body with mine, my lips at her ear. "Please, what? Tell me what the bad girl needs."

"Please don't stop," she begs, trying to push back against me, seeking the friction I'm denying her.

I smile against her skin, teeth grazing the sensitive spot below her ear. "I won't stop," I promise, "but after this, no more pretending. No more fragile act. Not with me."

She nods frantically, and I reward her with a hard thrust that makes her cry out. I increase my pace, my control slipping as her body tightens around mine. The marble counter creaks beneath us, her knuckles white, where she grips the edge.

"Mine," I growl, the word ripped from somewhere primal inside me. "Every secret, every strength, every weakness—all mine."

Her reflection shatters into fragments of need as she comes apart beneath me, my name torn from her throat in a sound that's half prayer, half sin. The way she convulses around me, milking every inch, sends me over the edge with a growl that reverberates through the marble space.

I collapse against her back, both of us breathing hard, the mirror fogged with our exertion. Her hair clings to her damp skin, and I can taste salt when I press my lips to her shoulder.

"No more games," I murmur against her ear, still buried deep inside her warmth.

She turns her head slightly, those blue eyes finding mine in the fractured reflection. There's something different there now—an acknowledgment, perhaps. Or a challenge.

"Who says I was playing?" she whispers, and the smile that curves her lips is nothing like the demure expressions she wears for the world.

This smile has teeth.

I pull out slowly, watching her shiver at the loss, then turn her to face me. Her legs are unsteady, but she doesn't break eye contact as I straighten her panties with deliberate care, my knuckles brushing against sensitive flesh that makes her breath hitch.

"Dinner's in twenty minutes," I say, stepping back to zip my pants. "Don't be late."

I start to leave, then pause at the doorway. "And Kira? Wear the red dress. The one with no back."

Her reflection watches me go, and I can feel the heat of her gaze like a brand between

my shoulder blades. My innocent little wife is full of surprises, and I find myself hungry to discover them all.

## Chapter 17

Kira

The aroma of dill and paprika envelops the kitchen as a single electronic beep turns my world upside down.

I freeze, my wooden spoon suspended over the bubbling borscht that I've spent the last two hours perfecting—a surprise for Mikhail when he returns from his meeting downtown. The rich burgundy broth reflects the overhead light like spilled wine, and for a moment, I think I've imagined the sound. But my phone beeps again, insistent and sharp against the simmering stove.

The security alert glows on my screen:

Motion detected - Front entrance - Unknown individual.

My pulse hammers against my throat as I swipe to the camera feed. A man I don't recognize stands in our foyer, his weathered face scanning the marble columns and crystal chandelier with calculating eyes. He's not alone—Bogdan hovers beside him, gesturing toward the main staircase with an easy familiarity that makes my stomach clench.

Bogdan is one of Mikhail's most trusted soldiers, installed as my bodyguard only last week when my security detail needed "reinforcements." He knows better than to allow unauthorized people into our home.

The stranger's coat drips rain onto our Persian rug, and something about the way he

moves—predatory, patient—sends ice racing through my veins. This isn't a business associate or family friend. This is something else entirely.

My bare feet make no sound against the hardwood as I abandon the stove and slip toward the back hallway. The secret room Mikhail showed me on our second week of marriage—just in case, *kisa*—suddenly feels less like paranoia and more like salvation.

The hidden panel slides open with a whisper, and I'm swallowed by a darkness that smells of concrete and fear. My fingers shake as I find Mikhail's number, the phone's glow casting eerie shadows on the reinforced walls.



One ring. Two.

"Kira?" His voice cuts through the silence, rough with concern. *"\*What's wrong?\*"*

"Someone's here," I whisper, pressing myself deeper into the shadows. "A stranger. Bogdan let him in. I'm in the safe room."

"Stay where you are." Mikhail's voice sharpens to steel, and I hear shuffling on his end, the distant murmur of interrupted conversation. "Do not make a sound. Do not open that door for anyone but me."

The line goes silent for three terrifying seconds before he returns. "Are they armed?"

I strain to recall the grainy footage. "I... I don't know. I couldn't see clearly, but the way he moved..." My voice catches on the fear lodged in my throat. "Mikhail, Bogdan was showing him around like a tour guide. Like he belonged here."

A Russian curse hisses through the speaker, low and venomous. The secret room suddenly feels smaller, the air thicker with each shallow breath I take. The walls—reinforced concrete that could withstand a bomb—press in around me like a tomb.

"I'm coming home. Ten minutes." The background noise on his end grows chaotic—doors slamming, engines roaring to life. "Stay on the line, kisa."

I slide down the wall until I'm huddled on the floor, knees drawn to my chest. The phone trembles against my ear as I listen to Mikhail's breathing, punctuated by terse

commands to whoever is with him.

"The borscht," I whisper stupidly, thinking of the pot still simmering on the stove. "I left everything out. They'll know someone's here."

"Good," Mikhail replies, his voice a controlled burn. "Let them know they've interrupted something. Let them wonder."

I close my eyes, trying to steady my racing heart. Beyond the reinforced door, our home—still more his than ours despite the marriage certificate—feels violated. I'd been cooking in bare feet and one of his shirts, hair piled messily atop my head, pretending at domesticity in a household built on blood, money, and power. The irony isn't lost on me, even now.

"Tell me what you see on the cameras," he demands. "Can you still access them?"

I fumble with the phone, switching to the security app without ending our call. The front entrance is empty now. I swipe through feeds—living room clear, dining room clear, the study?—

"They're in your office," I breathe, watching the stranger run his fingers along the spines of leather-bound books while Bogdan stands at attention by the door. "He's looking at your things. Touching everything."

The growl that emanates from Mikhail sends a shiver down my spine that isn't entirely fear.

"Five minutes," he promises. "And then I'll show him exactly whose home he's violated."

I should be terrified by the deadly calm in his voice. Instead, I find myself clinging to

it like a lifeline in the darkness, realizing that for the first time since our arranged marriage, I'm grateful for the violence that simmers beneath my husband's careful control.

"Are you armed?" Mikhail asks, his voice dropping an octave lower.

I glance at the small safe embedded in the wall—another feature he showed me during that first tour. Inside rests a sleek Glock, almost identical to the one he insisted I carry everywhere.

"Yes," I say, not wanting to move from my huddled position.

"Good girl," he says, and despite everything, warmth blooms in my chest at his approval. "I'm three minutes out. Viktor and Alexei are with me."

I switch back to the camera feed, my breath catching as I watch the stranger settle into Mikhail's leather chair, spinning slightly as if testing its comfort. The audacity makes my blood simmer. Bogdan stands nearby, his posture relaxed but his eyes vigilant, scanning the room methodically.

"They're still in the office," I whisper. "The man—he's sitting in your chair now."

Mikhail's response is a string of Russian obscenities so colorful they almost sound poetic.

I swipe through more feeds, checking other areas of the house. "Wait—there's someone else. Kitchen." My heart sinks as I watch a second man lift the lid from my pot, wafting the steam toward his nose. He dips a finger into my carefully crafted borscht and tastes it, then nods with appreciation.

"He's eating my soup," I say, oddly indignant despite the danger. "I spent hours on

that."

A tiny chuckle escapes Mikhail, surprising us both. "You'll make more, kisa. When this is over."

The casual promise of a future—of another evening in our kitchen—steadies me. I draw a deeper breath, forcing my shoulders to relax.

"Tell me about this dinner you were making," he says, and I recognize the tactic—keep me talking, keep me calm while he races home.

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"Borscht with fresh dill," I murmur, closing my eyes to focus on his voice rather than the claustrophobic darkness. "Pelmeni that I spent all afternoon folding. Honey cake for dessert."

"My favorites," he says softly. "You were cooking my favorites."

The raw surprise in his voice makes my chest ache. Six weeks of marriage, and this is the first time I've tried to please him with something that didn't involve sex. The realization sits between us, unacknowledged but heavy with meaning.

"I wanted—" I start, but the words die as movement on the screen catches my attention. "They're moving. The second man joined them in the office. They're looking at your desk drawers now."

"One minute out," Mikhail responds, and I hear car doors slamming. "Stay where you are until I come for you. No matter what you hear."

My throat tightens. "What are you going to do?"

"What is necessary." His voice has transformed—the brief moment of warmth calcified into something cold and lethal. "This is still Bratva business, Kira. Even with you involved."

The line goes silent except for his measured breathing. The front door opens without a sound. On my screen, the men in Mikhail's office continue their search, unaware of what is to come. Bogdan glances at his watch, nodding to himself as if on schedule.

I should look away. I should close the app and cover my ears. Instead, I watch with terrifying clarity as my husband—tall and lethal in his tailored suit—appears in the doorway of his office, flanked by men whose faces betray nothing.

The stranger in Mikhail's chair looks up, startled but not afraid. His lips move, forming words I cannot hear. Bogdan steps forward, hands raised in explanation or defense, but Mikhail's expression doesn't change—a beautiful marble sculpture of controlled rage.

I press my palm against the cool concrete wall, anchoring myself as the feed cuts to static. The security system has been overridden. Whatever happens next, Mikhail doesn't want it recorded.

The silence stretches out like an elastic band pulled too tight, wrapping around me and making the air feel thick and suffocating. It's so quiet that I can almost hear the dust settling around me, broken only by the faint, rhythmic sound of my own shallow breathing. I focus on counting the steady thud of my heartbeats, reaching three hundred before a sound finally cuts through the oppressive stillness—three sharp raps against the hidden door, each one echoing like a shout in the quiet, followed by two slower, more deliberate knocks.

Our signal.

"Kira." His voice reaches me through the reinforced panel, steady but strained. "It's over. You can come out now."

My legs tremble as I stand, fingers searching for the interior release. The door slides open, revealing Mikhail's broad silhouette against the hallway light. His face is composed, but a smear of crimson stains his white shirt cuff, and his knuckles are raw.

"Are you hurt?" he asks, eyes sweeping over me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

I shake my head, stepping into his outstretched arms without hesitation. His embrace is crushing, desperate in a way I've never felt from him before. His heart thunders against my cheek, belying his calm exterior.

"Who were they?" I whisper against his chest.

His fingers thread through my hair, cradling my head as if I might shatter. "Not tonight, kisa. Tonight, we clean up and eat whatever can be salvaged of your dinner. Tomorrow, we talk about Bogdan's betrayal."

I pull back enough to see his face, searching for answers in the glacial blue of his eyes. "He let them in deliberately. He was working against you."

Something flickers in Mikhail's gaze—a grudging respect for my perception, perhaps. "Yes. And now we know."

The implications sink into me slowly, like poison. If Bogdan could betray us, others could, too. The fortress of our home suddenly seems made of paper, vulnerable to fire and wind.

"Come," Mikhail says, leading me toward the kitchen with a hand pressed firmly against the small of my back. "Your soup is still warm. I want to have dinner with my wife."

## Chapter 18

Mikhail

I inhale deeply on my cigarette, the smoke curling lazily around me as I observe Vanya apply his unique form of persuasion to the mangled remnants of Bogdan's kneecaps. The once-gray concrete floor beneath the chair has become a sinister tapestry, darkened with blood and other unidentifiable fluids I prefer not to contemplate. We've been entrenched in this grim task for three relentless hours, and at last, the stubborn bastard's tongue has begun to unravel.

"Petrov family," Bogdan gasps, his voice a tortured, wet rasp that reverberates through the shadowy room. "They... they swore to give me my own territory in Brighton Beach."

I flick ash onto his quivering hands with deliberate disdain. "And what was the cost?"

"Information. About your wife."

The cigarette sears down to my knuckles, but the pain is nothing. Inside, I'm a storm of ice and steel, as biting and ruthless as the January wind slicing off the Hudson. Vanya locks eyes with me—he recognizes that expression. He's witnessed the wrath unleashed when someone dares to threaten what's mine.



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Keep talking," I growl, grinding the cigarette under my heel.

Twenty minutes later, we leave Bogdan alone in the dim, cold warehouse to ponder the poor choices that led him here—choices that have left him with precious little time. The warehouse door slams shut behind us with a resounding metallic clang that echoes in the silence.

"It's the Romero Cartel," Vanya mutters, his voice low and tense as he flicks his lighter with trembling fingers to ignite a cigarette. Smoke curls up into the air, swirling like a ghostly serpent. "They're moving up from the border, and the Petrovs are backing them with money and intel."

I slide into the driver's seat of the sleek black Escalade, the leather steering wheel cool and smooth beneath my grip. My fingers clench around it until my knuckles turn bone-white. The engine purrs to life, a deep, rumbling growl that fills the cabin, but I remain still. Can't move. Not yet. The weight of the situation presses down like a heavy fog, holding me in place.

"Call Inez," I tell Vanya. "Your contact in Bravo Cartel. If Romeros are making moves in our territory, the Bravos will want to know."

Vanya's scarred fingers glide swiftly across the phone screen, dialing with an urgency that speaks volumes. Each scar tells a story, etched into his skin like a history written in pain. The conversation that follows is brisk, conducted in a rapid-fire Spanish that I only partially comprehend, catching stray words like "peligro" and "ahora." As he ends the call, his complexion turns a ghostly shade of ash, his expression mirroring the gravity of whatever news he's just received.

"They want her, Misha. The plan is to take Kira and hold her for ransom. They need her father's money to fend off their rivals and build their empire. But Inez says..." He swallows hard. "Says the Romeros don't usually keep their hostages breathing long. Too messy. Too risky."

The world tilts sideways for a moment, and I taste something metallic in my mouth. Blood. I've bitten through my tongue without realizing it.

Kira. My stubborn, beautiful girl with her defiant blue eyes and soft auburn hair. The woman who's somehow crawled under my skin and made herself at home in the hollow spaces I thought were dead forever.

They want to kill her.

I gun the engine, tires screaming against the asphalt as we tear out of the warehouse district. The city blurs past in streaks of neon and shadow, but all I can see is Kira's face, the way she looked this morning over coffee—sleepy and unguarded, almost trusting.

"Get me everything on the Romero operation," I bark into my phone as Vanya holds onto the dashboard. "Locations, personnel, weapons. I want to know what they had for breakfast and how they like their mothers."

Because they've made one critical error in judgment.

They've threatened my wife.

And I've killed men for far less.

The penthouse feels like a mausoleum when we arrive, all marble and shadow in the dying light. Kira sits curled in the leather armchair by the floor-to-ceiling windows, a

book balanced on her knees, utterly unaware that death continues to circle her like a vulture. The sight of her—alive, breathing, makes my heart beat lighter.

She looks up when we enter, those striking blue eyes taking in my expression with the sharp intelligence I've come to both admire and fear. Nothing gets past her.

"What's wrong?" she asks, closing the book with a soft thud. Her voice carries that cultured cadence, but underneath it, I hear the tension. She knows me well enough now to read the storm clouds gathering.

I pour three fingers of vodka, the crystal decanter catching the last rays of sunlight streaming through the windows. The liquid burns clean down my throat but does nothing to wash away the metallic taste of rage.

"Pack a bag," I tell her, my voice coming out rougher than intended. "We're leaving the city tonight."

"Leaving?" She rises from the chair with fluid grace, her auburn hair catching the light like burnished copper. "Mikhail, what's happened?"

I can't tell her the truth—not yet. Can't watch those defiant eyes fill with the kind of fear that breaks something inside a person. Instead, I move to the window, studying the street below for any sign of surveillance. Every shadow could hide a threat now.

"Business," I say finally. "There are complications that require my attention elsewhere."

Behind me, I hear the whisper of her bare feet against marble as she approaches. Her reflection appears in the glass beside mine—petite and ethereal against my bulk, but there's steel in her spine that most men twice her size lack.

"Don't lie to me." Her words are soft but edged with that quiet authority that always surprises me. "I can see it in your face, Mikhail. Someone's threatened us."

Us. The word hits like a physical blow. When did Kira start thinking of us as an 'us'?

I turn to face her, and the distance between us feels charged with electricity. "Kisa," I murmur, reaching out to trace the curve of her cheek with fingers that have spilled blood today. She doesn't flinch. Never flinches. "Trust me to handle this."

"I do trust you. But I won't be kept in the dark like a child. If someone wants to hurt me, I have a right to know."

"The Petrov family has allied themselves with a Mexican cartel," I say finally, each word carefully measured. "They want me to believe they target you as revenge, but what they really want is to use you as leverage against your father's assets."

Her face goes pale, but she doesn't crumble. Doesn't dissolve into tears or hysteria like most women might. Instead, she nods once, sharp and decisive.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"How long do we have?"

The question catches me off guard. Not 'How will you stop them' or 'What are we going to do'—but an acceptance of the reality, an immediate shift into a survival mode that makes something fierce and proud unfurl in my chest.

"Not long enough," I admit. "They've been planning this for weeks. Maybe months."

Vanya appears in the doorway, his phone pressed to his ear, speaking in rapid Russian. When he hangs up, his expression is grim. "Three black SUVs were spotted circling the building. Could be nothing, but..."

"But we don't take chances." I'm already moving toward the bedroom, Kira close behind me. "Five minutes,kisa. Essentials only."

She disappears into the walk-in closet with military efficiency while I unlock the safe hidden behind a false panel. Cash, passports, ammunition. The weight of the Glock against my ribs is a familiar comfort as I slide it into my shoulder holster.

"Mikhail." Her voice carries from the closet, strangely calm. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere they can't follow." I pull out my phone, scrolling through my contacts until I find the number I need. "I have a house upstate. Remote. Secure."

The call connects on the second ring. "Dmitri? Da, it's me. I need the cabin prepared. Full security detail. We leave in ten minutes."

Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, dusk settles over the city like a shroud. Somewhere out there, men with guns and empty consciences are closing in on us. On her.

The thought makes my trigger finger itch.

Kira emerges with a small leather duffel bag, dressed now in dark jeans and a fitted black sweater that makes her look like a shadow. Her hair is pulled back in a severe ponytail, and I catch the glint of the small knife I gave her weeks ago tucked into her boot.

"Ready," she says simply.

I cup her face in my hands, thumbs brushing across her cheekbones. "Stay close to me. No matter what happens, you don't leave my side. Understood?"

"Understood."

But as we head toward the private elevator, I can't shake the feeling that we're already too late.

## Chapter 19

Kira

The night splits open with the first gunshot.

One moment, we're hurrying across the underground parking garage—Mikhail's hand firm around mine, our footsteps echoing against concrete—and the next, the world fractures into chaos. The black Range Rover waits fifty feet away, driver alert, engine purring. Freedom so close I can almost taste it.

Then the squeal of tires. The sudden flood of headlights. The parade of black SUVs that appear from nowhere, blocking our path like a wall of obsidian.

"Stay behind me," Mikhail growls, his voice dropping to that dangerous register that makes my skin prickle. In one fluid motion, he pulls me against his back and draws his gun. The metal catches the fluorescent light overhead, cold and lethal.

Men pour from the vehicles—six, eight, maybe more—their faces obscured by black balaclavas. The garage air, already thick with exhaust fumes, now crackles with tension.

"Mikhail Zhukov," one calls out, his accent distinctly Eastern European. "We only want the girl. Walk away now, and you might live to see morning."

I feel Mikhail's body tense against mine, the solid wall of his back becoming impossibly harder. His heat radiates through his tailored suit, warming my trembling hands where they clutch at the expensive fabric.

"Kisa," he whispers, so quietly only I can hear, "when I create an opening, you run to the stairs. Don't look back."

"I won't leave you," I breathe, surprising myself with how much I mean it. Six weeks ago, I despised this arranged marriage. Now, the thought of abandoning Mikhail makes my chest constrict painfully.

The first shot comes without warning—not from Mikhail, but from one of the masked men. It ricochets off a concrete pillar inches from our heads, sending dust and fragments flying. I flinch, a small cry escaping my lips.

Mikhail moves like a predator unleashed. His first shot finds its mark—a gunman crumples to the ground. His second creates a spray of blood from another attacker's

shoulder. The garage fills with the deafening cacophony of gunfire, the acrid smell of cordite burning my nostrils.

A strong arm wraps around my waist, yanking me backward. Not Mikhail's. I scream, kicking wildly as a stranger drags me toward one of the SUVs. My heel connects with something soft—a knee, perhaps—and I hear a satisfying grunt of pain.



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 6:30 am*

"Feisty bitch," my captor snarls, his breath hot against my ear.

Through the chaos, I catch a glimpse of Mikhail. Blood trickles from a gash on his forehead, his eyes wild with a fury I've never witnessed before. When he sees me struggling in the stranger's grip, something primal transforms his face. It's terrifying and somehow beautiful—like watching a storm roll in over the ocean.

"Touch her again, and I'll cut off your hands," he roars, his accent thickening with rage.

I feel the cold press of metal against my temple. The click of a safety being released.

"Drop your weapon, Zhukov," my captor demands. "Or your pretty little wife gets a bullet in her brain."

Time suspends. I meet Mikhail's ice-blue eyes across the garage, and in that moment, I understand something fundamental about the man I married. Behind the cold exterior, behind the calculated brutality, there beats a heart capable of something like love.

And I realize, with startling clarity as the gun digs deeper into my skin, that I'm not ready to lose him either.

My purse dangles against my hip, and its weight reminds me of the contents. With a desperate twist, I wrench my body sideways, my hand diving inside to find my Glock. Unfortunately, the man holding me doesn't expect resistance—they never do. That's their mistake.

I feel the satisfying weight of the gun in my palm as I yank it free. In one fluid motion born of hours at Mikhail's private range, I aim downward and pull the trigger.

The sound is deafening. And so is his scream.

My captor crumples, howling as he clutches the bloody ruin between his legs. His mask has slipped, revealing a contorted face I don't recognize but will never forget.

"Kira!" Mikhail's voice cuts through the chaos, a mixture of pride and panic I've never heard before.

The stairwell door crashes open, and Vanya bursts through with three men, their weapons already blazing. Relief floods through me for an instant before another attacker lunges, grabbing for my hair. I duck, spin, and fire again. The bullet catches him in the shoulder, spraying crimson across the concrete floor.

Mikhail is a demon unleashed, moving with lethal precision. He slams his elbow into a masked face, the crunch of cartilage audible even amid the gunfire. His eyes find mine across the chaos, a flash of electric blue that somehow steadies me in this storm of violence.

"Behind you!" I scream, raising my weapon again.

Mikhail drops to one knee as I fire over his head, catching an attacker in the chest. The man staggers backward, surprise visible in his dying eyes.

The garage echoes with moans and shouts, the acrid smell of gunpowder burning my throat. I step over a body, my designer heels slick with blood. There's a strange clarity in this moment—like the world has crystallized into simple truths: survive, protect, fight.

Vanya's men methodically clear the space, their movements precise and practiced. One by one, the attackers fall or surrender.

When it's over, when the final shot rings out, and silence descends like a heavy curtain, I find myself standing in the middle of the carnage, gun still raised, breath coming in short gasps. My beautiful dress is torn and spattered with crimson. My hands don't shake. That's what surprises me most.

Mikhail crosses to me in three long strides, his face a mask of blood and fury that softens only when his hands cup my face. His thumbs brush my cheekbones, leaving smears of red I can feel but not see.

"Kisa," he whispers, his accent thick with emotion. "My fierce, beautiful wife."

I should be horrified. I should be falling apart. Instead, I feel reborn in blood and gunpowder, standing amid the wreckage of men who thought I would be easy prey.

"I told you I wouldn't leave you," I say, my voice steadier than I expect.

His eyes darken as he pulls me against him, his heart thundering against mine. Around us, Vanya's men secure the survivors, their efficiency chilling.

"Who sent them?" I ask against Mikhail's chest.

His arms tighten around me. "Someone who will not live to see tomorrow's sunset."

The promise in his voice should terrify me. Instead, I find myself nodding against the solid wall of his chest, breathing in his scent of sandalwood and gunpowder and blood.

"Good," I whisper, surprising myself with how much I mean it.

The Range Rover's door slams shut behind us with a definitive thud that seals out the chaos we've left behind. My ears are still ringing from the gunfire, my pulse hammering against my throat as Vanya slides into the driver's seat. The partition rises between us with a mechanical hum, cocooning Mikhail and me in leather-scented darkness.

"Drive," Mikhail commands, his voice rough with residual adrenaline. "The safe house. Now."

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The engine purrs to life, and we pull away from the carnage. Through the bulletproof glass, I watch the garage disappear into shadow, taking with it any remnants of the woman I was an hour ago.

Mikhail's hands are on me before we've cleared the parking structure, his fingers threading through my hair, tilting my face toward his. In the dim interior light, his eyes burn with something primal—a hunger that has nothing to do with the violence we've just survived and everything to do with how I wielded that gun.

"You magnificent creature," he breathes against my lips, his accent thick as honey. "Do you have any idea what you've done to me?"

His mouth crashes against mine, tasting of copper and desperation. I can feel the tremor in his hands as they map my face, my throat, the torn fabric at my shoulder. He's never touched me like this—like he's drowning and I'm oxygen itself.

"Mikhail," I whisper, but his name dissolves into a gasp as his teeth graze my lower lip.

"You stood your ground," he growls, his voice dropping to that dangerous register that makes heat pool low in my belly. "You fought beside me. You saved my life."

His hands find my waist, spanning it completely as he lifts me with effortless strength. My knees bracket his hips, the torn silk of my dress riding up my thighs as I settle against him. Through the expensive wool of his trousers, I can feel exactly how much my display of violence has affected him.

"I can still smell the gunpowder on your skin," he murmurs, his lips trailing fire down my throat. "Still see you standing over that bastard with smoke curling from your barrel."

The Range Rover takes a sharp turn, the motion pressing me more firmly against him. I bite back a moan as his arousal presses against the silk between my legs, already damp with my own need.

"You're not the same woman who walked into that garage," he continues, his hands sliding beneath the torn fabric to find bare skin. "You're something else entirely. Something mine."

His fingers trace the edge of my lingerie, and I arch into the touch despite myself. The contrast is intoxicating—his gentleness now against the lethal precision I witnessed minutes ago. Both sides of him call to something dark and hungry in my chest.

"Yes," I breathe, the word escaping before I can stop it. "I'm yours."

His pupils dilate at my admission, swallowing the ice blue until only a thin ring remains. Something shifts in his expression—possession mingled with wonder as if I've given him a gift he never expected to receive.

"Again," he commands, his voice hoarse. "Say it again."

The car sways beneath us as we speed through the night, the tinted windows sealing us in our own private universe of blood and desire. Outside, the city lights blur into streaks of neon against the darkness. Inside, there is only his heat, his hands, the thundering of my heart.

"I'm yours," I repeat, the words which have never sounded so true. "And you're

mine."

A growl rumbles from deep in his chest. His hands slide up my thighs, leaving trails of fire in their wake, bunching the silk of my ruined dress around my waist. The cool leather seats press against my bare skin as he hooks his fingers into the delicate lace of my underwear.

"These are in my way," he murmurs, and with one sharp tug, the expensive fabric tears like tissue paper.

I should be scandalized. I should remember that we're in a moving vehicle with his most trusted soldier just beyond a thin partition. Instead, I find myself reaching between us, my fingers fumbling with his belt buckle, desperate to feel him.

"So eager," he says, his lips curving into that dangerous half-smile that never fails to quicken my pulse. "What happened to my reluctant bride?"

"She discovered what it feels like to choose her own fate," I whisper against his mouth. "To fight for what's hers."

His hands cup my face, surprisingly gentle for a man who, minutes ago, ended lives without hesitation. "And am I yours, Kira? Is that what you're choosing?"

The question hangs between us, weighted with everything unsaid. Six weeks of arranged marriage. Six weeks of careful distance punctuated by moments of unexpected tenderness. Six weeks of wondering if I could ever truly belong in his world.

Tonight, I stopped wondering.

"Yes," I breathe, finally freeing him from the confines of his trousers. He's hot and

hard in my palm, a stark contrast to the cool metal of his watch that brushes against my wrist. "You're mine, Mikhail Zhukov. And I want what's mine."

His control—that legendary restraint I've watched him maintain through negotiations and threats and tonight's violence—shatters. His hands grip my hips hard enough to bruise as he positions me over him.

"Look at me," he demands, his accent thick with desire. "I want to see your eyes when I make you mine."

I obey, locking my gaze with his as he lowers me onto him in one powerful thrust. The fullness, the stretch, the exquisite pressure tears a gasp from my throat. My fingers dig into his shoulders, clinging to him as the world narrows to the place where our bodies join.

"Perfect," he groans, his forehead pressing against mine. "So perfect for me."

The Range Rover hits a bump in the road, driving him deeper, and I cry out—a sound caught between pleasure and pain. His hands guide my hips, setting a rhythm that matches the racing of my pulse. Each movement sends sparks cascading through my nervous system, building a pressure that threatens to consume me.



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"That's it, kisa," he murmurs, one hand sliding up to tangle in my hair. "Take what you need."

The endearment—that Russian word for "kitten" he uses only in our most private moments—undoes something in me. I arch my back, taking him deeper, reveling in the way his breath catches. My thighs tremble with the effort of rising and falling, but the pleasure building inside me is worth every ache.

Outside, the city gives way to darkness as we speed toward the countryside. Inside, there is only heat and friction and the intoxicating scent of sex mingling with the lingering smell of gunpowder on our skin.

"You have no idea," he groans, his accent thickening as his control frays, "what you do to me when you fight. When you show your teeth."

His thumb finds the center of my pleasure, circling with devastating precision. I bite my lip to keep from screaming, aware of the driver despite the partition separating us.

"No," Mikhail says, his eyes flashing. "I want to hear you. Let him hear who you belong to."

The possessiveness in his voice sends a fresh wave of heat through me. This is what I've awakened in him—this primal need to claim and be claimed. To my surprise, I find I want it too. Want to mark him as mine just as surely as he's marking me.

I roll my hips, changing the angle, and am rewarded with a curse in Russian that sounds like a prayer. His fingers dig harder into my flesh, guiding me faster, deeper.

The leather seat creaks beneath us, the sound nearly drowned out by our labored breathing.

"You're close," he observes, his eyes never leaving mine. It's not a question—he reads my body like a book he's memorized. "Come for me, kisa. Let me feel you."

His command, combined with the relentless pressure of his thumb, pushes me over the edge. The orgasm crashes through me like a tidal wave, stealing my breath, my thoughts, my very sense of self. I cry out his name—not his title, not "husband," but "Mikhail"—as my body clenches around him.

He follows me seconds later, his control finally completely shattered. His release fills me as he pulls me against his chest, his face buried in my neck, my name a broken litany on his lips.

For long moments afterward, we stay joined, our breathing gradually slowing. Mikhail's hands stroke my back beneath the torn dress, tracing patterns I can't decipher. When he finally speaks, his voice is soft against my ear.

"I would burn this city to the ground for you," he confesses, the words sounding as if they've been torn from somewhere deep inside him. "After tonight... after seeing you fight... I know there is nothing I wouldn't do to keep you safe."

I pull back just enough to see his face, to read the truth in those ice-blue eyes that no longer seem cold to me.

"I don't need you to burn cities," I tell him, surprised by the steadiness in my voice. "I need you to stand beside me while I learn to fight my own battles."

Something like respect flickers across his features mingled with the lingering heat of desire.

"As you wish, kisa," he says, his thumb tracing the curve of my lower lip. "But know this—anyone who tries to take you from me will die screaming."

The promise should terrify me. Instead, I find myself nodding, understanding at last the rules of this new world I've chosen.

"And anyone who tries to hurt you," I reply, "will answer to me."

His smile—slow and dangerous and full of dark promise—is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. He may be a monster, but this beautiful monster belongs to me.

## Chapter 20

### Epilogue: A Week Later

Mikhail

I step over the last bodyguard's corpse, his blood pooling into the Persian rug like spilled wine.

Vanya moves like a shadow beside me, his breathing controlled despite the carnage we've left in our wake. Three floors of Petrov's mansion, and not one of his men proved worthy of the bullets we put in them. The silence now feels almost sacred—a cathedral of death that we've built with our bare hands and loaded guns.

I pause outside the mahogany doors of what I know to be Vlad's office, my fingers tracing the cold steel of my Makarov. Through the crack beneath the door, warm light spills out, and I can hear the faint scratch of pen on paper. The bastard doesn't even know his empire is bleeding out around him.

"Ready?" Vanya's whisper carries the weight of years of loyalty, of shared kills, of

brotherhood forged in fire.

I don't answer with words. Instead, I kick the door open with enough force to splinter the frame, my gun already trained on the man behind the ornate desk. Vlad Petrov looks up from his ledger, his pale eyes widening for just a fraction of a second before that familiar arrogance slides back into place like armor.

"Mikhail Zhukov," he says, setting down his fountain pen with deliberate calm. "I was wondering when you'd come calling."

The scent of expensive cologne and fear mingles in the air between us, thick as smoke.

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I step deeper into the room, my boots silent against the marble floor. Vanya flanks to my right, cutting off any hope of escape through the French doors that lead to the balcony. The city lights beyond cast fractured shadows across Vlad's face, making him look like the broken man he's about to become.

"Expecting someone else?" My voice carries the weight of every sleepless night, every nightmare that's haunted me since Alina's screams echoed through our bedroom. "Maybe one of your boys downstairs? They're indisposed."

Vlad's fingers drum once against the leather desk pad before he stills them. Even now, he's calculating—measuring distances, weighing odds. It's what keeps men like us alive, this constant mathematics of survival. But his equation is missing too many variables.

"You always were dramatic, Misha." He leans back in his chair with an annoying smirk. "Breaking into a man's home, tracking blood through his halls. Your father taught you better manners than this."

The mention of my father sends ice through my veins, but I don't let it show. Instead, I move close enough to see the rapid pulse jumping in his throat.

"My father isn't here." I press the barrel of my gun against his temple, feeling him flinch despite his bravado. "Just you, me, and a conversation that's long overdue."

His breath comes faster now, shallow and desperate, though he tries to mask it with that practiced smirk. "So talk."

"The Novikovs are dead." I let the words hang in the air like smoke from a funeral pyre. "Every last one of them. Viktor, hissons, even that pretty little nephew he was so fond of. They died slow, Vlad. They died knowing it was because of you."

Something flickers behind his eyes—not remorse, but calculation. Always calculating.

"You think killing my allies frightens me? There are always more?—"

"Your wife." The words cut through his bravado like a blade through silk. "Katarina, isn't it? And your children—little Alex must be what, eight now? And your daughter, Anya. Such a beautiful girl."

Now I have his attention. The mask slips completely, revealing the animal beneath. His hands grip the arms of his chair until his knuckles turn white.

"You wouldn't dare."

I lean closer, my voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "I would dare everything, Vlad. You took Alina and threatened my Kira. Do you believe I have more sympathy than you?"

The silence stretches between us, heavy with promise and threat. Through the windows, the city continues its restless dance, unaware that a man's fate is being decided in this room of shadows and spilled blood.

"But I'm feeling generous tonight." I straighten, the gun never wavering. "One life for three. Yours for theirs. Choose."

Vlad's laugh starts low in his chest, a humorless rumble that grows until he's showing his teeth like a cornered wolf.

"You think I'd die for them?" He shakes his head, something cold and reptilian slithering behind his eyes. "Katarina is replaceable. The children, too. I can always make more family, Mikhail. That's the difference between us—you mourn your dead wife like she was irreplaceable. Pathetic."

The rage that floods through me is white-hot, a lightning strike that momentarily blinds me. I press the barrel harder against Vlad's temple, feeling the give of his flesh.

"Wrong answer," I whisper.

Vanya shifts behind me, his presence a steadying force.

"Your father would be disappointed," Vlad says, his voice steady despite the tremor in his hands. "Dmitri understands business. This—" he gestures vaguely at the blood on my sleeve, "—this is personal. Messy."

"It became personal when you ordered the hit on my wife." The words taste like ash in my mouth. "When you threatened Kira."

Something shifts in his expression—a flicker of genuine surprise before it's smoothed away. "So the rumors are true. The ice-cold Zhukov heir has fallen for his arranged bride." His lips curl into a sneer. "How predictable."

"You see, Vlad, I've learned something important." I circle his desk slowly, savoring the moment. "A man who doesn't value his family doesn't deserve to live."

Vlad's eyes dart to the door, then to Vanya, calculating escape routes that don't exist. The knowledge settles over him like a shroud.

"You won't get away with this," he says, but the words sound hollow even to him. "Your father?—"

"My father sent me." The lie slides easily from my lips, tasting of opportunity and vengeance. "He sends his regards."

I watch the color drain from Vlad's face as the implications sink in. If Dmitri Zhukov has sanctioned this, there will be no repercussions, no blood debt to pay. Just another power shift in the endless game we play.

"You're lying," he whispers, but uncertainty bleeds through his words.



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I shrug, the weight of my gun comfortable in my hand. "Call him. Ask him yourself." I nod to the phone on his desk, knowing he won't reach for it. Knowing he can't risk being wrong.

The silence stretches between us, thick with possibilities. Outside, rain begins to patter against the windows, nature's quiet applause for the drama unfolding within these walls.

"What do you want?" Vlad finally asks, his voice cracking slightly. "Money? Territory? Name it."

I lean in close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath. "I want you to know fear, Vlad. The kind Alina felt when your men broke into our home. I want you to taste desperation like Kira did when your lackeys cornered her."

His eyes widen fractionally. "The girl wasn't supposed to be harmed. That was never?—"

"Save it," I cut him off, disgust churning in my gut. "Your intentions mean nothing against your actions. You know you wouldn't have let my wife live."

I straighten, stepping back just enough to see his whole face, to memorize the moment. "You know what the difference is between us, Vlad? I would die for my family. You won't even live for yours."

His hand moves suddenly—a desperate lunge for the drawer where I know he keeps a revolver. Before his fingers can touch the handle, my bullet catches him in the

shoulder, spinning him back into his chair with a howl of pain.

"That was discourteous," I say, my voice eerily calm even to my own ears. "I wasn't finished speaking."

Blood blossoms through his crisp white shirt, a crimson flower unfurling in slow motion. He clutches the wound, his breath coming in short, pained gasps.

"Mikhail," he manages, voice strained. "Be reasonable. We can work something out."

"Like you worked things out with the Novikovs?" I ask, circling behind him.

I press the barrel of my gun against the back of his head, feeling him tremble. The power is intoxicating—this moment of perfect control, of justice balanced on a knife's edge.

"Please," he whispers, and the word sounds foreign on his tongue. "My children?—"

"You don't give a damn about your children or your wife. It's too late to have a heart. You won't be needing it anymore."

I nod to Vanya. He moves with practiced efficiency, securing Vlad's wrists to the chair arms with zip ties that bite into his flesh. The sharp plastic clicks as they lock into place.

"Your children will be fine," I say, holstering my gun. "Better than fine, actually. They'll grow up without a monster for a father."

Vlad struggles against his restraints, blood seeping through his expensive shirt. "You're making a mistake, Mikhail. There are things you don't understand—alliances that will crumble when I'm gone."

"Let them crumble." I remove my jacket, folding it carefully over the back of a leather armchair. The room is warm, the scent of copper hanging heavy in the air. "Some things deserve to fall."

Vanya sets a black duffel on the desk, unzipping it with deliberate slowness. The metallic gleam of tools catches the lamplight—pliers, knives, a blowtorch. Instruments of confession. Of retribution.

"You don't have to watch this part, Misha," Vanya says, his voice soft despite the violence his hands promise. "I can handle it."

But I shake my head, rolling up my sleeves. "No. I need to be here for this."

Vlad's eyes widen as understanding dawns. His bravado finally cracks, revealing the coward beneath. "Wait—wait! I can give you names! The people who helped me, the ones who betrayed you!"

"I already know their names," I tell him, selecting a pair of pliers from the bag. The metal is cold against my palm, heavy with purpose. "But you're going to confirm them anyway."

The next hour passes in a symphony of screams and confessions. Vlad breaks easily—too easily for a man who has caused so much pain. He gives up his contacts, his hidden accounts, and the names of every traitor within my father's organization. With each revelation, my suspicions are confirmed. The conspiracy runs deeper than I imagined, touching people I've trusted for years.

Through it all, Vanya takes meticulous notes, his expression never changing. This is business to him—necessary, if unpleasant. For me, each scream is a balm on wounds that have festered for too long.

When Vlad has nothing left to give but whimpers, I clean my hands on a monogrammed handkerchief I find on his desk. The white silk comes away stained crimson.

"Do you want to know something, Vlad?" I lean close to his ear, his blood hot against my skin. "I lied earlier. My father doesn't know I'm here. This isn't business—it's personal, just like you said."

His one remaining eye widens, bloodshot and desperate.

"But he'll understand when I tell him what you've done. What you planned to do." I straighten, nodding to Vanya. "We're finished here."

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Vanya draws his gun, the silencer already attached. "Any last words for him, Misha?"

I consider the broken man before me. In the end, Vlad Petrov was nothing but a greedy coward who reached too far. It's not worth the elaborate speeches I've rehearsed in my darkest moments.

"No," I say finally. "Nothing he deserves to hear."

The silenced shot is anticlimactic—a soft bang that barely disturbs the room's heavy silence. Vlad's head slumps forward, his secrets and sins finally silenced.

I feel... nothing. Not the satisfaction I expected nor the weight of another death on my conscience. Just emptiness where vengeance once burned.

"We need to go," Vanya says, already packing up our tools. "The staff will return by morning."

I nod, slipping my jacket back on. "Make it look like a rival hit. The Sicilians, maybe."

"Already planned for it." Vanya's efficiency is comforting, a constant in my chaotic world. "Listen, Misha, we need to talk about the next steps."

"Next steps?" I ask, my mind already drifting to Kira, to the warmth waiting for me at home.

"I need to head back to LA. My men have been without me for too long." He zips the

bag closed, wiping down surfaces as he speaks. "Then Mexico City. Inez Bravo expects a personal thank you for her assistance with Petrov's plans. Her help wasn't cheap."

"When do you leave?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Tomorrow." Vanya's expression softens slightly. "No rest for the wicked."

I cast one final glance at Vlad's body, already beginning to cool in the air-conditioned room. Another ghost to add to my collection. Another debt paid in full.

"No, but you'll be missed." I follow Vanya toward the door.

The night air hits my face as we slip out through the service entrance. Somewhere across the city, Kira waits, and for a moment, I allow myself to imagine a different life—one where I am simply a man returning to the woman he loves, not a killer with responsibilities heavier than most men could bear.

But such fantasies are dangerous in my world. They make you soft and vulnerable. And I cannot afford to be either.

Not yet. Not until everyone who threatens what's mine is in the ground.

## Chapter 21

### Epilogue: Six Months Later

Kira

The silk of my dress slides against my skin as I smooth it over the curve of my belly, seven months full with Mikhail's child.

The Tulum sun filters through the gauze curtains of our private villa, casting everything in honeyed light that makes the white stone walls glow like pearls. Salt air drifts through the open terrace doors, carrying the distant sound of waves and the faint music of preparation from the main estate where Inez and Vanya's wedding will unfold in mere hours.

I pause before the mirror, my fingers tracing the emerald necklace Mikhail fastened around my throat this morning, his calloused hands surprisingly gentle against my nape. The stones are cool against my heated skin, a stark contrast to the warmth pooling low in my belly—not from the baby, but from the memory of his lips brushing my shoulder as he whispered how beautiful I looked.

"You're thinking too hard, kisa." His voice rumbles from the doorway, rough with that Brooklyn edge that still makes my pulse quicken after all this time.

I meet his eyes in the mirror—those piercing blue depths that first terrified me are now my sanctuary. "I'm thinking about them. Inez and Vanya." I turn to face him, the silk catching the light. "Two alphas, both used to commanding, both forced into this arrangement. How does it work?"

Mikhail steps closer, his presence filling the space between us like smoke. The white linen shirt he wears is unbuttoned at the collar, revealing the edge of his tattoos, and I can smell his cologne mixed with something darker, more primal. "You questioning arranged marriages now, Mrs. Zhukov?"

The teasing note in his voice doesn't mask the intensity in his gaze as it travels over me, lingering on the swell of our child.

I shake my head, letting my fingers drift to my belly. "Not questioning ours. Just wondering if they'll find what we did."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips as he crosses the room, a predator in repose. His hands, instruments of both violence and tenderness, cradle my face.

"Not everyone gets lucky," he murmurs, thumb brushing my lower lip. "Most unions like ours remain what they are—transactions."



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The baby kicks against my ribs as if in protest of his cynicism. I place his palm against the movement. "Feel that? We weren't just a contract."

His eyes soften, something raw and unguarded flickering across his features. These are the moments I treasure—when the mask slips and I glimpse the man beneath the monster others fear.

"No," he agrees, voice rough. "You two were the fine print I never read."

The air between us thickens with unspoken words. Our beginning wasn't gentle—a bride offered as collateral, a groom with a heart frozen by grief. Neither of us expected this transformation.

"Inez is stronger than she looks," I say, turning back to the mirror to fasten diamond studs to my ears. "And Vanya... he's not you."

Mikhail's reflection darkens. "No one is me,kisa."

The possessive growl in his voice sends a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with fear. "That's not what I meant. Vanya follows orders. You never did, not really."

He moves behind me, hands settling on my hips, chin resting atop my head. "My father would disagree."

"Your father sees what you allow him to see."

"We should go," I whisper, though I'd rather stay cocooned in our villa, away from the politics and performances that await us at the main house. "Your father will be looking for you."

"Let him look." Mikhail's lips brush my temple. "Dmitri Zhukov can wait. The world can wait."

For a moment, I believe him—that we exist outside the gravity of his family's empire, that our love is stronger than the blood ties that bind him. But I know better. The Bratva is his inheritance, just as this child is ours.

"The world never waits," I counter softly, turning in his arms. "Not even for Mikhail Zhukov."

His laugh is a low rumble against my chest. "No? Then perhaps I should make it."

Before I can respond, he captures my mouth in a kiss that tastes of possession of the man I feared becoming the one I can't live without. My fingers curl into his shirt, feeling the heat of him through the thin fabric, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against my palm.

When we finally break apart, my lips are swollen, and my carefully applied lipstick has transferred to his mouth—a mark of ownership that sends heat spiraling through me despite my condition.

"Now I need to fix my makeup," I breathe but make no move to step away from the circle of his arms.

"Leave it." His thumb traces the corner of my mouth. "Let them see what I do to you."

The heat in his words makes my cheeks flush, and I wonder if this is how it will always be between us—this constant pull, this electricity that crackles even in the most mundane moments. Seven months pregnant, and I still feel like a schoolgirl when he looks at me like that.

"We're going to be late," I say, but my hands betray me, sliding up his chest to his shoulders. My fingers find the nape of his neck, threading through the short hair there.

"Late is a matter of perspective." His voice drops an octave, the sound vibrating against my skin as his lips find my neck. "When you're the boss, everyone waits."

I tilt my head, giving him better access, and close my eyes as his teeth graze the sensitive spot below my ear. "And what about when you're the boss's son?"

His laugh is dark velvet against my throat. "Then you make them wait even longer."

My protest dissolves into a sigh as his hands slide around to the small of my back, drawing me closer despite the roundness between us. The baby shifts, pressing against my ribs as if making room for its father's embrace.

"Mikhail," I breathe, but it's not a rejection. My fingers curl into his shirt, wrinkling the pristine linen. "The ceremony..."

"Can start without us." His mouth claims mine again, hungrier this time, demanding in a way that makes my knees weak.

I surrender to it, to him, to the heat that blooms beneath my skin despite the impracticality of it all. His hands are everywhere—cupping my face, skimming my sides, cradling my belly with a reverence that makes my heart ache.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. Mikhail's forehead rests against mine, our shared air warm and intimate.

"We really do need to go," I whisper, though my body protests the very idea. "I promised Inez I'd help with her veil."

Mikhail sighs, his breath fanning across my lips. "Fine. But tonight..." His eyes, darkened to stormy blue, promise things that make my pulse quicken.

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"Tonight," I agree, pressing one last kiss to the corner of his mouth before reluctantly extracting myself from his arms.

I smooth my dress, now more rumpled than before, and glance at the clock on the bedside table. "We're officially fifteen minutes late."

"Worth it." His smile is wolfish as he wipes a smudge of my lipstick from his mouth.

I roll my eyes but can't suppress my own smile as I reapply my makeup at the vanity. In the mirror, I watch him straighten his tie, the casual efficiency of his movements a reminder of the controlled power that lives in every line of his body.

"Do you think they'll be happy?" I ask suddenly, the question escaping before I can contain it.

Mikhail pauses, his eyes meeting mine in the reflection. "Vanya and Inez?"

I nod, pressing my lips together to even out the fresh coat of color. "I hope they find what we did. That they stop fighting long enough to see each other."

He comes to stand behind me again, his hands settling on my shoulders. "Not everyone gets our ending, kisa."

"It's not an ending," I correct him softly. "It's a beginning. Every day with you is a beginning."

Something shifts in his expression, a softening around the edges that few besides me

ever witness. He bends to press his lips to the crown of my head.

"When did you become so wise?" he murmurs against my hair.

I smile, reaching up to cover one of his hands with mine. "I was born wise, and don't you forget it."

His laugh is genuine this time, rumbling through his chest and into mine. "Come on, then. Let's go watch this train wreck of a wedding."

"Mikhail!" I protest but laugh as he helps me to my feet. "Don't jinx them. I hope they settle their battle of wills and fall in love, just like we did."

His expression sobers, just for a moment, and he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear with surprising tenderness. "There's only one Kira Malakhov in this world. Vanya will have to find his own miracle."

The words wash over me, warm as the Tulum sun. I take his arm, feeling the solid strength of him beside me as we step out into the afternoon light, heading toward the celebration of another union born of duty rather than desire.

But as Mikhail's hand covers mine where it rests in the crook of his elbow, I can't help but hope that Inez and Vanya discover what we know now—that sometimes, the coldest arrangements can forge the hottest flames.