



Bossed Around By the Bratva

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Description: My Bratva boss is much too old for me. And obsessed with my plus-size curves.

I'm his new PA as part of a Bratva alliance, and he monitors me obsessively.

He specializes in dirty Bratva business, and his cold gaze follows me around.

I hate the way he commands me...but my curves want more.

He breathes down my neck constantly and gets jealous when someone approaches me.

He kills without a thought and without getting blood on his dress shirt.

I shouldn't notice how his pants emphasize his crazy hot physique.

I shouldn't notice how his scent wakes up my virgin body.

He orders me around in his rough voice, making me admit embarrassing things.

He backs me up against his desk and whispers he'll leave me alone if I don't want this.

His dirty mouth on me melts away all my excuses.

His bloodied hands on me make me give him my innocence and my control.

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Chapter 1 - Akim

Sitting in the joint Dubow and Morozov board room at my eldest brother, Aleksandr Dubow's main offices, I felt slightly intimidated. Never have I seen a boardroom filled to the brim. Today, though, was different.

Three Bratva families were gathered to conclude the alliance. The top dogs in this alliance, the Morozov family members, were scattered throughout the room. Some were talking with members of my family, the Dubows. Others stood with some of the Chrenykh family members.

Each little cluster was busy working on the kinks of the alliance. There was a mutual respect that could be felt in every corner. It was an amazing day for me as I had a majority hand in this alliance proceeding. I would rather be burned alive than ally with the Aslanov family.

The Aslanov family wanted to ally with the Morozovs. But I felt something in their family dynamics was off. Even though I couldn't say what, I was firmly against the alliance.

When about half of the Morozov family agreed with me on this, I was surprised. They had already started negotiations with the Aslanovs. But some of them could also see the danger ahead should that alliance be formed.

The Aslanov family had no moral values; they would trample anyone who got in their way. The Chernykhs might look at things from different perspectives, but they aren't purely evil. My sister, Tasha, also married Vadik Vasiliev, who works for the

Chernykhs. I had to ensure we kept the alliance tightly knit.

I was pulled from my thoughts as Alexandr, my eldest brother, suddenly spoke next to me. “Akim, did you hear me?”

Shaking my head, I looked up at him, towering over me. “I asked if you would be fine with a shuffling of the family members?”

“Shuffling?” I replied, feeling stupid as I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Open your ears and pay attention,” he said, leaning closed and breathing down my neck.

Nodding, I glanced around. No one else seemed to notice the absence of my mind. Sitting up, I listened as they started ironing out the alliance rules. When I pushed for the Morozov family to create an alliance with the Chernykhs instead of the Aslanovs, I never imagined being caught in the middle.

“We have come to an arrangement,” Roman Morozov said. His voice was clear and loud as it carried his words through the room. A deadly silence suddenly filled every corner.

Iosif Chernyk, the eldest brother of their family, stood up. He folded his arms across his chest. As he spoke, my mouth fell open. I never expected him to be so calm, yet controlling. “I have to insist,” he started. His tone was quiet. Yet, I could hear his authoritativeness coming through. “I feel that to keep things in order and perspective, I must insist that we push the younger members of all three families to the forefront of operations.”

The room was filled with grumbling and mumbling as most didn’t seem to have their own opinions. Especially the younger members like me. Then Iosif raised his hand

and waited for everyone to settle again. “I want this as it is the only way to avoid potential chaos or betrayal from more experienced members.”

Once again, the room filled with whispers and murmuring. “Yes, we agree,” Roman Morozov replied, stepping towards him.

“So do we,” I heard Alexandr stating. “Can we sit back down and draw it up?”

Glancing around, I noticed almost everyone nodding in agreement. Alexandr joined the other two on the opposite side of the table. They pulled out chairs and sat down in a little circle. The room fell silent again as we listened to them assigning offices, warehouses, and other positions to us, the youngest ones.

First, Timofey Chernykh was assigned to one of the Morozov establishments. He would work with Morozov personnel under him. Pavel Vasiliev was also moved to work at one of our warehouses, controlling Dubow workers. They had another Chernykh taking the reins on a shipment warehouse, and a Morozov leading some of the labs.

Then, it was my turn to be reassigned. I was displeased as I loved doing the dirty work, which I excelled at. I’ve gotten so good at the dangerous side of our business dealings and loved it that I wanted to protest. But as I was about to raise my voice, I bit back my words.

We were partially here because of me. I wanted this alliance, so my silence was all I could offer now. I felt my heart sinking to my feet as I was assigned to one of the Morozov real estate project branches, working with Chernykh employees.

I wanted to reject it, but Anton, my second-oldest brother, grabbed my hand and shook his head at me. Lowering my head, I swallowed the anger, pushing up. Sitting in an office, doing paperwork, and meeting with investors and clients wasn’t for me. I

have never found any pleasure in such things.

I listened in silence as more people were assigned other projects and shuffled like chess pieces on a board. Once the alliance agreements were captured and signed, I headed out. Standing in the lobby, drinking coffee, I scanned all the players. This was a one-time meeting. Never again would so many bosses be in one place.

Evelina Morozov came up to me. “Thank you for pushing for this alliance. I am sure it’s going to be good for all sides,” she said.

“I hope so,” I replied shortly. I wasn’t in a good mood and didn’t want to discuss it. I was still struggling to get a grip on my anger with the shuffle.

She extended her hand, holding out a set of keys. “These are for the Estate offices,” she added as I took them. “I’ve sent you a message with all the details.”

I stood flabbergasted as I watched her turn and walk off. I jumped slightly as a big hand closed on my shoulder. Turning, I saw Abram, my other brother, standing there, a smug grin covering his face as he spoke. “A whole new world of adventure awaits you, little brother. Welcome to the corporate part of the business.”

Clenching my fists at my side, I fought the urge to slug him. “Yeah, rub it in,” I spat back as I turned and walked out. I still couldn’t believe my luck as I drove to the address Evelina had sent.

The day’s negotiations had drained the energy out of me. The little I had left, I swallowed with the lump forming in my throat. I wasn’t corporate material. But I knew that I would make it work by giving my all. I have never backed off from any challenge.

Parking outside the office building, I glared at the five-story office building. Office

lights still burned on the second and third floors. It was a great architectural design. The corner offices boasted wall-to-wall windows, and the ones in between were about half the size. The outside was painted a silver grey. This contrasted perfectly with the golden window frames.

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One could see it was a building of stature, excellence, and wealth. Its sheer design was surely one of the attributes that attracted the higher-class clients.

There was a gathering of guards at the front. I assumed the Chernykh men were getting read in on their new duties as I saw Avgust, the second eldest brother, speaking to them. This was something I would take on in the morning, I thought as I pulled out. Now I had to relax.

I hit the clubs looking for a pliant, flirty companion as usual. It was one of the many methods I used to rid myself of a hard day's tension. Arriving home, I noticed it was well past midnight. It was actually a good thing that I didn't find a suitable companion tonight. My sleep would be little to none, I thought as I took a quick shower. It would surely have been even less if I had brought a companion home. This wasn't generally an issue as I mostly worked after hours. But venturing into the paper trail world, I knew things would be different.

After two hours of sleep, I went for my early morning run, showered, and headed to the office. I was in the office by five. No one else had arrived yet; the place was deserted. I met two of the main guards as I entered. They seemed friendly enough, but I knew they weren't my men. Adjusting to trusting others with the safety of our business ventures would take some time.

My office on the top floor, nestled in the corner, had an amazing view of the park and waterfront. There was a small coffee bar in the front section where I made myself a cup before going to stand by the window.

I stood watching as the sun lit up the world below me. People scurrying to the left and

right. It was going to be a hot day. Taking a couple of deep breaths, I headed to meet the staff as they started arriving. At half past seven, everyone was there. I gathered the staff from the top floor in the boardroom and held a morning briefing.

After everyone told me their positions and what projects we had going on, I excused them and called in the managers of each floor. After brief introductions, we discussed the finances, ongoing building projects, and clients.

I headed back to my office with a ton of files, logs, and briefing notes. This was going to be harder than I initially anticipated. There was so much information to consume. I spent the rest of the day behind my desk, reading file after file. Getting caught up was frying my brain. By the day's end, I was too tired to go home. I slept on the double couch in my office. I woke at three and went home for my morning jog and shower.

Day two was the same as day one, but by the end of day three, I had absorbed most of the information. I could start functioning and sorting business as needed.

After a week of chaos, meetings, and paperwork piling up, I felt like I was going insane. After our Friday morning briefing, I grabbed my coffee and stood by the window looking out. I wasn't made for this. The paperwork was getting me down. I now knew the client's expectations and what had to be done.

Yet, there was so much to get around to; one of us wasn't enough. I heard my office door open. Swirling around, I was ready to send whoever it was straight to hell. I needed time alone. But to my amazement, my three brothers all stood there staring at me.

"Guys," I huffed, walking toward them. Relief flooded me as I smiled. It was good to see them. "Am I glad to see you!" I added, fighting the urge to hug them and beg to be relieved of this awful place.

Alexandr smiled at me as he held out his hand. “We had to come see for ourselves if you were still alive,” he said jokingly.

Anton and Abram walked past us to the wall-to-wall window. “Stunning view,” Anton said, glancing back at me.

“It’s the only benefit to being in hell,” I huffed as Alexandr and I joined them.

Abram bumped into me lightly as he spoke. “It can’t be all that bad, man. There are many pretty ladies on the lower floors. Have you even ventured down yet?”

“I have a briefing with them every morning,” I huffed as my three brothers laughed. I was the only one who was still not hitched. I have told them a million times, I didn’t intend to get serious. My work was my wife.

“What’s up, Akim?” Alexandr asked. “You look down. I’ve never seen you like this. It can’t really be all that bad, can it?”

Turning away from them, I walked to my desk and flopped down in the chair. “Look at this. It’s mountains I can’t climb,” I spat, waving at the paperwork on my desk. I felt like a pressure cooker about to explode.

“If that’s your biggest hurdle,” Anton added, coming closer. “Then simply get a PA.”

Looking at him, I wondered when he became the man with ideas. “Maybe,” I replied hesitantly. “But remember the rules of the alliance. I’ll have to use one of the Chernykh staff.”

“They can’t all be bad,” Abram chipped in. “They seem friendly and harmless enough. Take one of the women from the lower levels, you already know.”

“It’s not that,” I responded, lowering my head and breathing in slowly.

It’s that none of these women will be able to do what is required. It took me a day or two to get into it. I need someone who knows their way around the industry. A woman who can handle long hours. One who loves being around stubborn clients, and has a flair.”

Alexandr walked to the door. “So, advertise, and I will get the permissions needed. Maybe they know someone like that at another one of their operations,” he said confidently.

Nodding, I replied softly. “I’ll think about it. You guys want some coffee?”

“Unfortunately, we have to head out. We just wanted to come to see how you are doing. You will be fine, little brother. Stay strong.” Alexandr said, opening the door.

I said goodbye and watched as they left. Turning my chair to face the window, I decided to give it a go. I started by sending an internal memo stating that if any current staff felt they could do the job, they could come and see me. I also sent out a memo to the corporate offices asking for a PA.

Iosif or his brothers may see it this way. They might be uncomfortable, but I knew Alexandr would always have my back. Besides, I couldn’t do this by myself. I was drowning. Heading out, I stopped on the third floor. I didn’t know any of the employees by name yet. But I did know their job descriptions.

Entering the manager's office, I stopped just inside the door as I spoke. “Have you received the memo?”

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He got up so quickly that he almost threw over his glass of water. “Yes, I have,” he uttered.

“Please interview the candidates that come in and make sure I have someone by Monday,” I added.

“Yes, yes, no problem. I will get you the most qualified PA who knows all the ins and outs,” he assured me as I walked out.

I took two boxes of files, notes, and client profiles home to do over the weekend. I didn’t mind hard work or long hours. But the little personal life I had was now nonexistent.

By Monday morning, I was in a storm. I barely slept six hours over the weekend. This week, I held two presentations, and I was far from ready. I placed the boxes in my car and headed to the office. I hoped that the third-floor manager had managed to get someone.

If not, this would be the week I was going to resign and leave the country. My brothers would understand, but the rest. Well, of them, I wasn’t as sure.

It was the first time since I took over that I was late. I parked in my usual spot underground and took the elevator to the top floor. I left the boxes as I would send someone to get them once I had my coffee and signed the documents that came this morning for a bid we placed.

One of the accountants stepped onto the elevator on the fourth floor. He was

mumbling something about the new hire. I was so focused on what I had to get done, I didn't have time for this discussion.

Storming out of the elevator, I didn't even see the woman sitting before my office door. The fourth-floor manager stood waiting at the reception desk. The woman behind the desk rose and held out a stack of notes. "Not now," I breathed out after collecting my messages from the receptionist. The manager nodded and left in a rush.

Turning to the left, I wanted nothing more than to get to my office. Have a cup of coffee and sign the real estate papers. The accountant walked with me towards my office, still mumbling. I was almost there when I caught sight of her.

Her dark caramel eyes filled with passion instantly pulled my attention. Her dark blond hair was tied up with two strands decorating her shoulders. Something inside me shifted. Feeling my breath catching in my throat, I knew I had to get past her quickly.

Remembering the accountant at my side, I turned, chasing him back to his office. I was struggling to pull my eyes from her. Realizing I was staring, I felt angry at myself. Needing to get out of her presence, I stormed into the office.

The coffee could wait. I headed straight to my desk. One thing at a time, I reprimanded myself. Grabbing the documents from the receiving tray, I pulled out my pen. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the movement in the front part of my office. Looking up, I studied her as she stood by the desk in the front section.

Chapter 2 - Zhenya

Standing in front of the massive building, my heart skipped a beat. Excitement rushed through me as I finally got an opportunity to show my brothers what I was capable of. I was going to work as Akim Dubow's PA.

“Good day,” I said softly to the guard at the entrance. Holding up the memo note with Akim’s name and the building address on it, I continued. “Am I at the right place?”

“Yes, miss,” he replied, opening the door. “Elevator to the right. Top floor.”

“Thank you,” I added, walking past him.

Being the youngest Chernykh, my brothers have always treated me like a baby. Especially Iosif! They didn’t want me involved in the family business. But since my eighteenth birthday last year, I have insisted. It is all I have ever wanted. I wanted to be one of them, part of the family.

They tried every trick in the book over the last year to get me to back off. They forbade me, tried to scare the living bejesus out of me, and even took all my privileges away. But nothing has changed my mind yet, and nothing ever will.

My sisters might have been fine with taking a seat on the back burner, but not me. I was a wild soul and burned with a desire to live my life fully. Their recent tactics were to try and fool me. They wanted me to believe they were on board with my choice. But I could see through their eager visage.

They were only keeping me busy with meager tasks. The insignificant tasks they have been throwing my way, like tossing a dog a bone, had left me feeling humiliated. But no more, I was going to show them all!

I heard Iosif and Avgust discuss the new alliance. Sticking out my feelers eventually paid off as I learned about the job opening. Getting in took some work. I had to keep my head low as I duped the managers, the guards, and the staff who knew me. Luckily, there weren’t many.

But I had persuaded one of the managers and he spread the word. They were now all

under the assumption that my brothers wanted me in this position. I had convinced them it was a plot to learn what the Morozov and Dubow families were up to. I was there to spy on them and report back to my brothers. Thus, they couldn't tell anyone who I was, as it would ruin the plans.

Smiling at my reflection in the elevator window, I felt pleased. My white corporate suit fit like a glove, hugging my figure. The skirt had a slight flare at the bottom, ending just above my knees. The mother-of-pearl stilettos glittered, making my calves pop. My large breasts showed just enough cleavage between the folds of the jacket to attract attention.

I had to admit I was surprised that there were no hitches in my plan. Yet, if my brothers hadn't been so distracted by the alliance, I might not have gotten away with it. For that, I was thankful.

This was my time to shine, to prove I wasn't useless. Stepping out on the fourth floor, I greeted the receptionist. "I'm the new PA for Akim," I said, smiling.

She barely looked up from her computer as she replied. "One more floor up, hun."

Getting back in the elevator, I was joined by a young man in a suit. "Morning," he huffed, pressing the button for the first floor. His eyes moved to my breasts and lingered for a second.

"Morning," I replied, moving to the corner. I kept my head down as I didn't know if any of the other staff might know who I was. If they haven't been informed of my cover, it could cause issues. Stepping out on the top floor, I decided I would find the manager during lunch to confirm my cover.

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The receptionist on this floor was much more attentive than the other one. She was a skinny blonde with a smile too large for her face. “Good morning,” she greeted me as I got closer.

“Morning, I’m the PA for Akim,” I replied. Suddenly, I felt nervous. I quickly scanned the office layout. To the right was a short row with seemingly two offices or rooms. To my left was a longer hallway. It had two doors on one side and one on the other.

“Right this way, miss...,” she said, coming out from behind her desk. She looked back at me as she started moving towards the left side.

“You can call me Zhen, Zhen Spear,” I replied hastily.

I had to use another name and last name as I couldn’t afford anyone to know who I really was. It would defeat the purpose of my plan. If I had my way, Akim would soon be working for me. I didn’t intend to stay where I was. I was going to climb the ladder to the top. And I had to do it quickly before my brothers caught wind of my doings.

We stopped just before the double glass doors. There were two seats in the hallway. She spoke as she turned to them. “You can wait here. Mr. Dubow will be with you shortly.”

“Thank you,” I replied, sitting down. I watched as she walked back to her desk. She was reasonably tall for a woman, and way too skinny, in my opinion. But at least she was friendly, and that played in her favor. I felt sure I would enjoy working alongside

her.

Looking toward the window at the end of the hallway, I allowed my mind to drift. I felt sure that Akim would be a pliant man. After all, he was the youngest Dubow and definitely a pampered brat. I felt sure he would have some fight in him, being a Dubow.

But I looked forward to breaking his spirit and taking control. It was one thing I was good at. I mostly got my way with people, except my brothers. Somehow, they were immune to my smart and sassy powers.

The elevator doors opened. Looking towards the reception, I saw a man entering and talking to the receptionist. He was elderly, and I felt sure it couldn't be him. He walked to the side of her desk and stood waiting.

Then the doors opened again. This time, a tall, muscular man with short army-cut hair stepped out. Beside him was another man. He was slightly shorter, had no build to even talk of, and flaunted a mop of dark brown hair.

Rising to my feet, I felt sure that this second guy had to be him. The first guy was probably his bodyguard, being a Dubow and all. They stopped at the reception. The younger man spoke to her. She stood quickly, handing him a stack of papers. He said something to the waiting man, who had come out just seconds before them. The man ran back into the elevator and left.

The two men turned, heading towards me. The shorter man was explaining something to the bigger one. Just before they reached me, both stopped and looked at me for a second. Then the bigger man turned to the smaller one. "Enough," he breathed out like a dragon ready for battle. "Get it done, or don't come back!"

I watched in awe as the smaller man turned, tail tucked, and disappeared. My

assumption of Akim Dubow blew out the window as he stared at me. His amber eyes drilled through my being. I shifted as he came closer. There was some kind of spark in him.

Holding out my hand in greeting, I spoke as soon as he was on top of me. “Good morning, Mr. Dubow. I’m Zhen, your PA.”

Without a nod, a blink, or any other reaction, he just blew past me, entering the office. The door was about to close behind him when I grabbed hold of it. How dare he treat me this way? Who did he think he was? I wanted to tell him what I thought, but knew I couldn’t. However, I realized I couldn’t have been more wrong about him.

He was arrogant, bossy, and seemingly domineering. I had my work cut out for me with him. I enjoyed a challenge, and soon, he would learn that I was just as strong-willed as he was. I could look past being ignored for the moment.

Stepping in, I let the door close behind me. The office was split into two sections. The part I had just stepped into looked similar to the reception area. This was my space, I thought as I looked around. The bigger section at the back was closed off with a glass partitioning. It held a large desk, some cabinets, shelves, and a couple of couches.

I watched him as he walked through the door leading to that part of the office. He moved in behind the desk, grabbing some papers from a tray. He was a handsome man with a well-defined physique. I felt attracted to him. Not only to his looks, but also his demeanor.

Shaking my head, I swallowed hard. I couldn’t see him in this light. I aimed to take over. I wouldn’t become the submissive one. He would, I promised myself as I walked to the desk. I looked at the computer, files, desk pad, organizer, and other little things organized on the surface.

It was neat, and all the surfaces were clean, which was a good sign. In the corner was a small fridge. On the table beside it stood a coffee machine, canisters, and some cups. I could feel his eyes on my back.

Placing down my bag, I took out the business plans and ideas I had put together over the weekend. Turning with the documents in my hand, our eyes met. Those yellowish-brown eyes made my skin tingle. It felt like I was melting under his gaze.

Shaking it off, I fought to get a grip. I was on a mission and wouldn't let him distract me. Straightening my shoulders, I went in ready for war.

Chapter 3 - Akim

Standing behind my desk, with the papers before me, I was ready to sign them. However, I found myself playing with the pen in my hand, unable to draw my eyes to the document.

The upcoming real estate project I was working on just needed a signature. But I was too distracted to do it. Something about the woman in the front of my office drew me in. Her fuller figure in the suit she wore made my mouth water. Her dark blond hair was pinned in a messy bun framing her face with a couple of strands. It seemed to highlight her dark caramel eyes.

Her skin was so smooth it looked like silk, and I burned to touch her. No, I reprimanded myself as I tried looking down at the paper. She's your PA. Get a grip, I told myself. Then, as if she could read my mind, she came towards me. Swaying her lovely hips as she entered my office, I swallowed hard.

She was like a vision out of a wet dream that came to haunt me. Entering my mind, I saw her sitting on the sofa for an interview. She would lean back, take out the pins holding up her hair, and shake them loose.

I felt sweat running down my spine. Sitting forward, she would place her hands on her knees and open her legs slowly. My mouth filled with spit as I imagined her wearing no underwear, her primed flower blooming at me.

“Excuse me,” I heard her saying from across my desk.

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Shaking my head, I tried to clear the images still rolling around. This wasn't making any sense to me. In the first place, she wasn't my type. I preferred strangers I picked up in bars. I liked my women flirty, pliant, and into casual sex.

This woman wasn't like that. She looked like a woman focused on her career, focused on stability. The way she stood, dressed, and carried herself spoke volumes. She looked like the type who would want more. I didn't want attachments that could interfere. Or one that would end up pulling me from my secret, dangerous life. I wanted that life!

Swallowing, I wiped my mouth as I glanced at her. I hoped she didn't see me drooling. Her smile was dazzling, but her breasts had drawn my attention.

I watched as she came to stand beside me. She glided her hand across the edge of the desk as she leaned in. Grinning at me, she spoke in a soft tone. "I'm Zhen, your PA. I just wanted to introduce myself as you came in. But you ignored me. Your brutish attitude does not play well. It is something people will measure you by."

Who did she think she was talking to me like that? Grabbing her hand, I pulled it off my desk and gently pushed her back as I replied. "Please don't! Step back." I could hear the irritation coming through in my tone. But I was annoyed with myself for finding her so alluring.

"You wanted a PA, didn't you?" she spat back with ferocity in her tone.

She was a spunky one. I felt sure the Chernykhs had sent her to challenge and spy on me. Clearing my throat, I knew I had to keep this professional. "Yes," I said shortly,

pulling the form closer and finally signing it.

My body was betraying me as I stepped closer to her. I yearned to reach out and touch her silky-smooth skin. Her plump lips were inviting mine, and I unconsciously licked them.

Zhen smiled as she took another step back. “So, then,” she said, glancing out the window. “I have come in to introduce myself and share some ideas I have with you,” she added softly.

“Ideas?” I asked, shaking my head and trying to get a grip on the heat flooding my body. Why was I battling to control my emotions? My eyes moved from her lips to her breasts again.

She looked so damn good. I found my way back to her face as she cleared her throat. “Yes, I have ideas to share. I know a little about the industry and have studied estate planning along with marketing as a hobby. You know, on the sideline while finishing school.”

I was truly impressed, but just nodded in response. I didn’t want to look like a fool. “Okay, sure, talk to me then,” I replied. Sitting down in my chair, I waited patiently as she walked around my desk to stand on the other side.

Zhen placed a folder down before me and opened it. My mind went whirling as a sweet, rosy odor filled the air. Closing my eyes, I saw the image of her on the couch again.

“Are you going to look at it?” she asked suddenly. I could hear the irritation in her tone.

Glancing at her, I smiled. I hadn’t realized I was keeping my eyes closed for so long

that she noticed. My mind drifted to a wonderful place where I could do all kinds of things to her. I followed her outstretched arm down to where her hand lay flat on my desk.

From this angle, her breasts were even more prominent. My gaze moved back up and settled on the inviting curves blossoming between the material of the top she wore.

“My eyes are up here,” she huffed as she pulled her arm back and straightened her stance. Zhen folded her arms across her chest, glaring at me. I found it hard to look at her as my eyes settled back on those amazing curves. Yet, her sassiness made my blood boil. She seemed to be a fire starter.

Finally, looking up at her face, I saw that her head was turned slightly to one side. I couldn't help but grin. Her serious expression and pouting lips made me want to rise and kiss her. “Hello,” she spat. “Are you at least going to say something?”

Inhaling slowly, I tried to pull my mind back from the couch. “Sorry,” I said softly. “This has not been one of my smoothest mornings. If I offended you in any way, I do apologize.”

I got up and walked around to the front of my desk. “Please sit down and explain to me,” I said, pulling the folder closer and placing it down before her. I waited for her to sit before I continued. “I'm sorry, please, explain your ideas to me.”

As she pulled the file closer, I placed my hand on her back. I swallowed hard as my heart sprang out of the gates, racing from a single touch. Pulling back swiftly, I shoved both my hands into my pant pockets. I had to constrain them from reaching out.

I stared at the papers as she started to talk about her ideas. However, I didn't hear a word she was saying. Every time she glanced at me, I simply nodded in agreement. I

also smiled, trying to assure her I was listening.

If she noticed how uneasy she made me or the distraction she was, she would surely not let it go. I didn't dare show her how much of an impact she had on me. As she was finishing up, she smiled broadly. She seemed in her element and overly excited.

Once she was done, she closed the file, stood up, and placed her hand on my chest as she spoke. "So, what do you think?"

Our eyes met and simultaneously traveled down to her hand. My chest felt like it was on fire as her heat radiated through my shirt. Looking back up at each other, Zhen pulled her hand back. I watched as she pushed a strand of hair that fell forward behind her ear.

I stepped back, needing to put some distance between us. My mind kept telling me to keep it professional, yet my body was crying out to get closer. There was a war inside me. Soon, it would send me climbing walls if I didn't get a grip on them.

Relief filled me as I watched her pick up the file and pull it to her chest. "I hope you can now see that I am right for this job and will allow me to prove it," she said, smiling. She pushed one hip out, placing her hand on it as she waited for me to respond.

Clearing my throat, I prayed my voice wouldn't betray my feelings as I replied. "I hear you. Let's see how things go, okay?"

"So, is there anything specific you would like me to start with?" she added, stepping closer.

Moving to the side, I walked back around my desk as I responded. There should be a list on your desk. Have a look at the projects we are currently busy with." Looking

up, I noticed she had followed me.

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She extended her hand, holding it out towards me. “Thank you,” she said. I stood looking at her hand for a moment, unsure if I wanted to shake it. “I don’t bite. Plus, we’re going to be working together, so let’s not make this uncomfortable again.”

Reaching out slowly, I shook her hand. Her skin was warm and silky soft. I didn’t want to let go. I wanted to pull her closer and feel the rest of her. I could feel her pulling back before snapping out of my thoughts again.

I let go and sat down, glancing at the papers on my desk. I was in desperate need of something to take my mind off her. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed her turning and heading for the door.

Glancing up, I watched her hips sway as she left and went to her desk. I told myself that I was only entranced because I hadn’t been with a woman in some time. It would blow over. I just had to find some time to get out a bit more. To get some release from the strain of this work.

Sitting down, I inhaled slowly, calming my boiling blood. It would never work. She was only here to ensure I colored between the lines.

Chapter 4 - Zhenya

Rubbing my neck as I sat back in my chair, I could feel the knots forming. I knew this job would be demanding, but this first week had started breaking my will. It practically kept me busy day and night. I had no time for myself. I was in the office by seven and then left by six or seven. But other days, I only got out around eight in the evening.

After hours, I still studied to ensure I knew what I was doing. It was time-consuming, and at times, I felt like I was about to lose it. But I didn't. I was intelligent and got things done.

I was tired and needed to take a break. Yet, I didn't expect Akim to be breathing down my neck all day, every day. Staring at the screen, I pulled myself together. This presentation had to be ready for the meeting. It was my baby and my time to shine. I had to get it perfect so I could show him what I was capable of. It was more than halfway done. I just needed to add some touches.

As I started typing, I heard the door behind me open. Glancing back, I saw Akim walking over. He was wearing a tight-fitting dress shirt. It was black at the top, changing to a deep burgundy where it met his pants. Somehow, it highlighted his muscular physique like crazy. The black silky pants just completed the look and had my mouth watering.

He looked like a model who had stepped out of a magazine, and he was coming my way. Biting my lip, I reminded myself I shouldn't notice these things. I was here to crush him, to prove my worth to my family. Turning back, I tried to focus on the screen. I lightly shook my head, trying to push out the invading images of him.

Akim stopped right behind me. I could feel his body heat warming me as he leaned in. Suddenly, my senses were flooded by his unique scent. It was a rich, woodsy odor with a hint of sweetness. It made me think of Cherry trees in bloom.

I shifted nervously, adjusting my seat, when he suddenly spoke. "This is all wrong." He pointed at the screen as he continued to criticize my work. "This needs to come out, and so does this."

Leaning to the side, I looked at him, a bit confused. I could feel the frown lines forming on my forehead.

Turning to look at me, he spoke again. “Why are you just staring at me? Go on, do what I said.”

I took a deep breath and moved back into position with him looking over my shoulder. I started editing the presentation as he asked. I had barely done one when his arm came over my shoulder, and his finger tapped the screen.

“This, what is this? Please change it or take it out,” he huffed. I could feel my anger rising as he continued to tell me what to do.

Finally fed up, I tapped the desk. Enough,” I said as calmly as I could muster. I pushed back from the desk and moved to the side, trying to get away from him. “Sorry, but this is my work,” I added. “You can’t come and completely change it to what you want. I am doing it, so let me do it my way, not yours.”

He moved to stand in my place where I usually sat. He started typing as he replied. “But this isn’t right. You can’t submit something like this to a client.”

“I’m not finished. If you wait for me to be done, you will see there's nothing wrong with it,” I replied, sarcasm dripping from my tone.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that again,” he replied, glaring at me.

Moving closer, I slammed the laptop shut in his face. Rising to my feet, I huffed at him. “I have the right to say that. I could do your work in my sleep.”

He rose, gave me a strange look, and folded his arms across his chest as he stepped back. Grinning, he spoke in a calmer tone. “If you think you’re so good, then prove it!”

I was so surprised by his comeback that I had no words. But I was sure he would ask

something impossible of me to prove myself. Yet, I wasn't backing down. I would show him what I was made of and would succeed in doing whatever he wanted.

"You give the presentation, seeing as you feel you are better at my job than I," Akim added out of the blue.

It was so unexpected that it felt like he had hit the wind out of me. Instantly, my nerves started eating at the back of my mind. He couldn't be serious. He was challenging me to do the presentation for the board.

No, it couldn't be, I thought, grinning back at him. He was going to do what my brothers always did. He wanted me to think he was going to allow it and was on board with me taking the lead, just so he could disappoint me later.

Akim spoke over his shoulder as he turned and walked back to his office. "I hope you're ready for your big show."

Chapter 5 - Akim

Being rejected is fine, I don't mind. But the way she was acting made me skeptical. She was hiding something. I could feel it in my bones. Something was off, and I needed to know what.

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Zhen moved around as if she were searching for something. But then, when she noticed me looking, she suddenly acted normal. Normal under the circumstances was okay, I guess. Yet, normal wasn't something we commonly came across in our line of work.

After all, she worked for the Chernykhs. She had to know how to stay calm. As the day passed, I decided I would follow her after work and see where she lived. If things there might be causing her seemingly restless behavior.

The day seemed to draw out. At some point, I thought it would never end. I ensured I was done with my part of the proposal before she was done with hers. Walking out, I greeted her casually. "Have a good evening. See you in the morning."

"You done already?" I heard her asking as I reached the door. Stopping, I glanced back, grinning as I replied. "Yes. I'm beat. Have a good one."

I quickly headed to the parking garage. I pulled my truck out of its normal spot and stopped so I could see her car. I waited for her to leave work so I could follow. The wait was shorter than I had anticipated.

The elevator doors opened, and out stepped Zhen. I watched her get into her car and pull out. Starting my truck, I drove after her at a distance, ensuring she didn't notice me. As I followed her, my mind pondered her actions. I wondered what she could be hiding. Was she really who she said she was?

This thinking led to a whole new stream of thoughts. What if she were an impostor? She could be bad news for our company and alliance. With this in mind, I decided

what I was doing wasn't wrong.

I had a right to know what she was hiding. I had a duty to protect the company and our alliance. I was doing this not for me, but for everyone involved. I decided to discard any guilt I had.

Noticing the indicator on her car coming on to turn, I pulled up to the opposite curb and stopped. I watched as she pulled into a building consisting of condos. "What?" I breathed out. "How could this be?"

My mind was blown as she had just pulled into one of the town's more luxurious condo apartment buildings. Maybe she was visiting someone, and it wasn't her place. She could be staying with a friend or relative.

But if this was her place, I now knew something was wrong. There was no way she could afford it on her salary. As far as I knew, this was her first job, and she wasn't getting a salary to accommodate such a style.

Carefully, I pulled into the condo parking area and stopped in a corner. I waited for her to enter the building before following. I watched as she got into the elevator and took it up to the fourth floor. Not wanting to take a chance to lose her, I sprinted up the stairs.

As I rounded the corner, stepping into the hallway, I heard the elevator doors opening. Moving back, I peeked around the wall to see if it was her. Yes, there she was, heading in the opposite direction.

She stopped before a door close to the end, searched her bag, and produced a set of keys. I waited for her to enter and close the door behind her. Rubbing my chin, I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed. This was her place, not someone else's.

Walking closer, I scanned the hall. Everything was quiet. I wondered if a man was paying for it or another company as I approached the door. Who could she be dating with the crazy hours we worked? Heck, she wouldn't have time, and no man I knew would stand for such shit.

Before I realized it, I was standing outside her door, banging on it. My breathing was heavy. I felt irritated, with a slight hint of anger building. The door swung open as I was about to hammer again. Stopping my fist mid-air, our eyes met. I could see the utter surprise and shock filling her as her brows lifted.

My eyes strayed as I scanned her standing there in a robe. Was she on her way to shower, or had she already stepped out? I wondered. Maybe she was halfway through as her hair appeared damp. They were hanging in clusters over her shoulders.

The robe wasn't tied. I caught a glimpse of the white towel hugging her body. Her legs looked smooth as silk and smelled fresh, like a spring breeze. Clenching my fists at my sides, I fought the urge to reach out and touch her.

I was shaken back to reality as she spoke. "Akim, what are you doing here? How did you know where I lived?" I could hear a hint of irritation and something else, maybe fear, in her tone.

"Is this really yours?" I asked, astounded as I looked past her inside.

Looking back at her, I saw the frown as she replied. "Yes, this is my home. Why? Is something wrong?"

Still shaken from the realization, I spoke in an elevated tone. There is no way you can afford this place on your salary!"

Zhen rolled her eyes as she folded her arms across her chest. "What are you

implying?" she questioned. Taking a deep breath, she seemed to steady herself. "I'm going to ask you again. What are you doing at my place? Did I forget to do something? How did you know where I live? If this is not work-related, please leave."

She took a step back and started closing the door. Stretching out, I blocked the door. "No, it's not work-related..., but tell me whose place is this or how you can afford to live in such..., " I said, my words trailing off at the end before I said the wrong thing. There was a harshness in my tone I couldn't prevent.

Her glare was more than words could ever describe. I felt like she was trying to burn me from the inside out. Pulling the door back with force, Zhen stepped out into the hall. She stopped practically on top of me. I could feel her hot breath on my lips.

"Not every woman needs a man to provide for her! Where I stay or get money to afford things has nothing to do with you!" she spat at me. "I can provide for myself!" Zhen was almost screaming at me.

She pushed me back before turning and heading for the door. Zhen turned to face me as she reached the door, placing her hands on her hips. "This property belongs to my family, so I can stay in such a beautiful place. Who are you to judge me?" she spat at me.

"I'm so sorry, Zhen, I didn't think of that," I mumbled, glancing down at my feet. I had been so obnoxious and presumptuous. I felt guilty, not only for being rude but also for the way I acted. "Please forgive my intrusion," I added, extending my hand to her.

For a moment, she just stood staring at my hand. I could see her defenses dropping as she lowered her hands to her sides. Our eyes met as she took my hand. I felt an intense pull towards her. It was so strong that I lost all control. Before I knew what

was happening, I leaned in and stole a kiss.

Sparks appeared to be flying around us as our lips met. Hers were soft, warm, and tasted like cherries. Moving closer, I placed one hand on her cheek. Zhen didn't pull back or stop me. She was kissing me back.

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She moved closer as our lips danced in harmony. Pushing both my hands into her hair, I slid my tongue softly into her mouth. I was scared she might push me back, but she didn't. She seemed to enjoy the moment as much as I was.

I felt her hands moving to my chest, and my heart stopped for a brief moment. Her touch was igniting my senses. I lowered my hands to her ass, gripping them tightly. Zhen breathed out hard into my mouth.

She was very tense and felt stiff in my arms. This was strange, as most women didn't tense up when I touched them. Yet, most women didn't work for me. I wondered if that had an impact on her. Pushing her back against the door, I carefully pushed her legs apart so I could move in closer.

My heart was beating rapidly. I could feel my dick waking up as it stirred in my pants. I slowly moved down her neck, leaving tender kisses as I went. Moving the fabric of her robe down her shoulder, I realized where we were heading. This wasn't right. She is an employee.

Pulling back speedily, I looked at her. I could see the confusion in her eyes. Hell, I was baffled as well. This was going to make things super awkward between us. But what was done was done.

Clearing my throat, I stepped back as I spoke. "Uhm..., so sorry. Good night." I turned swiftly and left before she could say anything.

As I headed for my truck, I lightly touched my lips. I could still taste the lingering sweetness of hers. My body was screaming, aching, in fact, for me to turn back and

take her. I have never wanted anyone as badly as I wanted her at that moment.

Shaking my head, I unlocked the door. I had to get this idea out. I had to get her out of my mind. Trying to think of having some fun, going to bars, and finding some release was harder now. Every time I tried, she popped into my head.

Getting back into my truck, I slammed my head into the steering wheel. What the hell had come over me? What was I doing? Sitting back, I inhaled deeply as I ran my fingers over my lips again. I couldn't let this complicate things. I had to get a grip on the feelings surging through me.

I started my truck, but for some reason, I couldn't get myself to move. Staring up at the condos, I noticed her lights going out. I just sat there staring, wondering if she was going to bed, had she gotten dressed yet, or was she sleeping in the nude?

Slapping myself, I reprimanded myself. "No," I said out loud. "Get a grip, man!"

I started my truck and drove off, knowing I had to get away. Pulling up to my house, I felt agitated. Getting out, I slammed the door so hard it made a hollow metal sound. Taking hold of my head, I leaned forward against the truck.

I took several deep breaths and knew I had to calm down. If I couldn't get a handle on these emotions, I was likely to break myself or someone else. Zhen was an employee. She was my PA, for fuck's sake. Heading inside, I had a stiff drink, but even that didn't seem to ease my thoughts.

I rolled around in my bed until dawn. Sleep was as elusive as the sun during a storm. Getting up, I took a cold shower and headed to the office.

Chapter 6 - Zhenya

I sat in my car for a bit as I tried to calm my mood. I felt like a hurricane this morning and couldn't stop thinking about our kiss last night. Akim pulled away, though, I thought as I headed to the elevators.

That had to imply that he knew and agreed it was a bad decision, right? I glanced up at the elevator roof as the doors closed. Yes, he knew it was the worst idea ever, so he pulled back. I had to concentrate on my goals. Getting involved with him was the worst thing I could do if I wanted to build a career.

Stepping out onto the top floor, I grabbed the messages from the receptionist. I was angry at myself. How could I have given in so easily, forgetting my goal in the process?

Kissing him wouldn't get me to my goal of turning things around and becoming his boss. It may well have the opposite effect and leave me the subordinate. Shaking my head as I entered the office, I knew I couldn't afford to make any more mistakes.

Akim wasn't in the office as we had an early meeting; he was waiting in the boardroom. I placed down my bag and grabbed the notes for the presentation before heading to the boardroom. Most of the members had already arrived.

I had some tea and spoke to a couple of them as we waited for the last ones to arrive. The last two members came in together. I waited for them to be seated before starting. Akim and I gave the presentation together, as usual.

We also had two back-to-back meetings following the presentation. Which I felt ended well, as we got two new projects lined up.

As soon as the meeting that followed the presentation was over, Akim headed back to his office. I walked with the investors and saw them out. Once I knew everyone had left and there would be no interruptions, I marched back to his office.

I was determined to clear up the mistaken kiss. Placing my hands on my hips, I stormed in. Stopping before his desk, I spoke in as calm a tone as I could muster. “Can you give me a minute?”

Akim rose from his desk, walked around to the filing cabinet, opened the drawer, and placed the paper he was holding in a file. I turned to watch him move. “Can’t you see I’m a little busy? Don’t you also have work to do?” he replied without even turning or looking at me.

“I have also been busy, overly busy. I have not even had time for a break. So, I am asking you to give me a minute of your time. Just listen to me!” I spat at him angrily.

He closed the drawer, turned slowly, and leaned back against the cabinet. Folding his arms across his chest, Akim sighed. “Okay, go ahead then,” he uttered.

Standing with my hands still on my hips, I spoke in a slow, clear tone. “I have been waiting to tell you that what happened between us meant nothing. It was a mistake that would not be repeated ever! Do you understand?”

Akim grinned, rubbed his chin, and shook his head lightly. “What happened? What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Oh, you know full well what I am talking about! Don’t come playing innocent or forgetful!” I huffed as he started walking towards me. His strides were slow but long. His eyes appeared to sparkle, and his grin made my stomach turn.

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Softly, Akim shook his head as he spoke. “I don’t seem to recall,” he said.

“The kiss!” I spat at him, moving back. “The kiss was a mistake. It didn’t mean anything and would never happen again. There is nothing between us, and it can never be! Do you understand me?” I asked loudly, moving back some more.

I felt something behind me preventing me from getting farther away. Glancing back, I noticed I was up against his table. As I looked back at Akim, he was merely inches away. My gaze landed on his broad chest. My heart jumped into my throat, and my lungs felt like they were collapsing on me.

Breathing in slowly, trying to calm my nerves. He was too close for comfort. I was unable to form a single word or move. I felt frozen. The air around me was suddenly filled with a strong, musky odor. It overwhelmed my senses, filling my mind with images I would rather not have seen.

Slowly, I lifted my head, and my gaze moved from his chest to his chin. Looking up at him, our eyes met. A wild, intense sensation spread through my body. I felt paralyzed, my legs wouldn’t move, and finding my breath seemed impossible.

My body craved his touch. My lips burned, remembering his tender kiss. As my mind wandered, I felt all control leaving me as Akim pressed up against me. My pussy started throbbing. It was a sensation I had never felt before as heat rose within me.

Akim placed his hands on the desk beside me. His face was so close, I dared not move. I feared that our lips would brush against each other if I did. His strong, muscular odor invaded my mind. “I will leave you alone if this is not something you

want,” he whispered.

I could feel his hot breath on my skin. It made me tingle inside. “We can’t do this. We work together,” I whispered back, trying my best to keep control of my emotions. “Isn’t it against company policies? Besides, I am sure it’s not a good idea...” Before I could continue, his lips were on mine.

Closing my eyes, I felt all my worries and fears melting away. Without stopping, I felt his hands closing on my hips. Akim lifted me and placed me on his desk. Gently, he pushed my legs apart and moved in closer.

I knew it was a bad idea, but I couldn’t stop. I wanted his touch and his kiss. His hands moved to my knees and then up my thighs. My skin felt like it was on fire, but cold at the same time. It tingled under his soft touch.

There was no explanation for the feelings rushing through me as his hands moved higher and higher. Placing my hands behind me on the desk, I breathed in hard. Akim kissed my neck, and I felt my body shaking lightly.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I kissed him harder. I wanted more of him, as much as I could absorb. As we seemingly tried devouring each other, I felt his hands closing behind me. In one swift move, he pulled me to the edge of the desk.

I could feel him pumping against my pussy. I shook lightly as my body reacted of its own accord. My pussy was warm and wet. Our lips parted as he lifted my leg to his shoulder. Breathing out hard, I stared deep into his eyes.

His hand moved slowly to my panties. Breathing in sharply, I felt my heart stop for a second. Suddenly, the phone rang. For a moment, it felt like it was ringing inside my head. Akim lowered my leg and let go as he moved around to answer his phone.

Standing, I straightened my skirt and rushed out of his office. I headed down the hall to the bathroom. Entering, I closed the door and leaned back against it, trying to catch my breath.

Grabbing hold of my chest, I felt the fire raging through my body. Desire burned through me like wildfire. What was he doing to me? Why did I have this intense lust driving me mad every time I got close to him?

Closing my eyes, I leaned my head back against the door as I gently caressed my lips. He tasted so good, like an ocean of honey flowing over my lips. I craved more, but knew this wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't why I came here. I had to stay focused on my mission.

Sinking to the floor, I shook my head lightly. What was happening to me? Why couldn't I get a handle on these feelings? I knew I had to, but didn't know how.

Getting up, I rinsed my face and looked in the mirror. "No!" I said to the woman, looking back at me. "Enough, you must get a grip on these feelings, or they will bring you down."

I rinsed my face again and decided to head home. Our meetings were done, and I could catch up on the projects, plans, and other things from home. I didn't need to be here right now, I told myself as I headed back to the office.

Entering the office, I was relieved to see Akim was still on the phone. I quickly gathered what I would need and headed out. Stopping at the receptionist, I glanced back before speaking. "Let him know I'm not feeling well. I'll work from home. He can send me an email if he needs something specific, okay?"

She nodded as she wrote down what I said. Satisfied with the message that I left, I went home. I needed a relaxing bath and a warm meal. I felt sure it would calm all

these crazy emotions I was experiencing. Plus, it would give me time to refocus my mind.

Chapter 7 - Akim

“Okay,” I said, closing the door as I got in. Glancing at Zhen, I smiled. “I think we have everything we need.”

She nodded, smiled, and turned her head away as she replied. “I think so.”

The drive to the airport was quiet and felt longer than usual. She’s my PA; that was the reason I was taking her with me, I told myself. This out-of-town project could lead to more work.

The Morozov jet was waiting on the tarmac as we arrived. I wanted to book two first-class tickets, but Sergei Morozov insisted I take their jet. Their investment in the company was important, and the Morozov family took business seriously. Everything had to be done correctly.

I was glad for the assistance and wanted this project to be flawless. Yes, I thought as we boarded, that was the main reason I had invited her along. She had a lot of insight and could be great on this project.

“Have you ever been on a private jet?” I asked as we strapped in.

“Sure,” she replied without looking at me.

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Once again, my mind went swirling through a ton of questions. How could she afford a flight on a private jet? This plane belonged to the Morozovs and was only used for business trips. Who was she mixing with that had that kind of money? Who was she?

Once the plane was in the air and stable, we could unstrap ourselves. The flight attendant brought us a bottle of wine and two snack plates. I watched her as she took a biscuit and cheese from the plate.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply, breathing through my nose. Maybe one of her family members owned a plane, just like her condo was family-owned. I should keep myself in line.

She sat staring out the window the entire time. I kept on finding myself staring at her, wondering what it was she was hiding.

“Are you scared of flying?” The words left my mouth before I could stop them.

“No, I’m not scared,” she replied as she glanced at me.

“May I then ask why you’re so quiet?” I asked.

“I’m just not in the mood for talking or having any form of conversation,” she said, placing the headphones over her ears.

The flight went quicker than expected with no weather issues. As the pilot announced we were about to land, she looked at me again. Her eyes seemed cloudy, or rather darker than usual.

The plane touched down, and we could get off. There was a car waiting for us on the tarmac to take us to our hotel. I would then hire a car from the hotel services so we could get around town.

Zhen stared out the window again. "I've made a booking for us at the top hotel here. I'm sure you'll be pleased with their service as they are the best," I said, watching her. I was trying to get her attention.

"Thank you," she replied. Her tone was half cold.

"Once we're booked in, I was thinking we could go to the finest restaurant and, if you like, visit one of the top museums in the country."

"Please," she breathed out sarcastically. "We're here on business. It's not a vacation or social visit."

Flabbergasted by her response, I was at a loss for words for a second. "There is nothing wrong with having a decent meal and seeing relaxing art," I huffed. Feeling slightly annoyed, I turned and looked out the window.

The driver stopped at the main doors for us, and the bellboy collected our bags. I walked ahead of her to the front desk.

"Good day, sir," said the man standing on the other side.

"Good day, Akim Dubow," I replied, glancing back to see where Zhen was.

"Yes, I see your booking. Please wait just a moment. The porter will be with you in a second." He replied before ringing a small bell.

Turning to Zhen, I saw her waiting where the bellboy had placed our luggage a

couple of feet behind me. “The porter will be here now,” I said, joining her. “This place is stunning, don’t you think?”

She glanced around and nodded. Yet, she appeared to study the people more closely than the building.

“Excuse me, sir,” I heard someone saying behind me. Turning swiftly, I held my hand to my chest. I didn’t hear him approaching, and he scared the shit out of me for a second. But I was met with a wide smile from the young man, surely no older than twenty. “May I take your bags?”

Nodding, I glanced at Zhen. She was holding her hand over her mouth, trying to cover the grin. As we entered the elevator, I leaned closer and whispered to her. “You found that amusing?” She didn’t say a word and kept her eyes focused on the door.

Stepping out on the top floor, we followed the porter to one of the last doors. He slid the keycard through the slot, pushed the door open, and pushed our bags inside. I followed him in unsure why he was putting all the bags in one room, as I had booked two.

“Here’s your key, sir,” he said, holding out the card.

Looking around, I felt my mood change. Glancing at Zhen, I was met with a death stare. I was glad that she didn’t say anything at that moment. I paid the boy and waited for him to leave.

Before I could even open my mouth, she came at me. “What the hell is this?” she spat, holding her hands in the air. “This is a business trip! I will not be sharing a bed with you!”

She stormed towards the bed in the far corner. Swiping the roses to the floor, she

continued to rage. “What are these for? Did you think you were going to get laid while we were here? I’m not like other women, you know. This might work with your secretary or whoever else, but not me, pal. There is no way I am sleeping with you, not even to keep my job!”

Now this, this I found amusing, but I kept my smile inside. “Zhen!” I huffed, raising my voice slightly.

She instantly stopped talking. As she looked at me, I could see a hint of fear in her eyes. “Just calm down. This is not what I booked. I will go down and get it sorted. I’m sure it’s just a mix-up. Please, don’t fight with me about something I have not done.”

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I turned and left before she could get in another word. Wow, she nearly bit my head off in there. She surely had some extra strong fire in her bones.

The man behind the front desk was busy with another client, and I had to wait. Once he was done, he looked at me. I was sure he could see the confusion on my face. “Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “I want to know why we are booked into a room that looks like the honeymoon suite. I booked two rooms, and we are here on business, so this won’t do!”

“Oh,” he replied, his eyes widening. “I am terribly sorry about that. Please give me a moment to check the system again.”

He typed on his keyboard, looked at me, and typed again. I could hear him swallow before speaking again. “Sir, I’m terribly sorry, but the booking was made for one romantic evening.”

“That can’t be. My receptionist made the booking,” I huffed, slamming my fist on the counter.

The man jumped a little before he started rambling. “I am sorry, but that is the booking.”

“Is there any way I can get an extra room?” I asked, stepping closer. “Sorry, but one room will not do.”

The man typed and typed. After what felt like forever, he glanced at me. “I’m sorry, sir. We’re fully booked. There is no other room available.” His voice was shaky, and he took a step back.

Looking at him, I realized I might have been a bit too much. “Okay then,” I said, trying to sound calm. “Thank you.” I turned and headed back up. Stopping outside the room, I took a deep breath as I mentally prepared myself for the monster inside, about to devour me alive.

Entering, I found Zhen on the bed with her laptop open before her. She looked up at me as she spoke. “So, you got another room or one with two beds at least?”

Walking to the bottom of the bed, I smiled at her. “The man said that they are fully booked, so unfortunately not, sorry.” I waited for her to freak out again, but she didn’t.

She nodded, looked at the laptop screen, and started typing again. As I started turning away, she cleared her throat. Here it comes, I thought, turning back. “Okay, it’s fine, but you will sleep on the couch,” she said.

I nodded, picked up my bag, and carried it over to the couch. Sitting down, I took out my phone. There was still plenty of time before the meeting. I didn’t feel like staying cooped up, but I didn’t want to leave her alone.

Walking to the end of the bed, I waited a moment before speaking. “We have a lot of spare time. Would you like to do something, grab something to eat, or stay here and work?” I knew she had basically already answered it in the car, but I felt asking again couldn’t hurt.

Zhen looked at me, turned her head to the side, and smiled. Seeing her this calm suddenly made me nervous. “No thanks,” she replied calmly. “I must ensure this

proposal is perfect before the meeting.”

Nodding, I walked back to my couch and called room service. I ordered a meat platter for two. Collecting my papers, I went to sit down next to her. She looked at me, and I could see she was a little confused. “Well, you said this must be perfect,” I whispered. “So, let’s go through it and make sure.”

She smiled, moving her laptop between us. We went over the papers, files, and graphs, ensuring everything lined up. We were about halfway through when room service arrived.

We ate while we continued working. It was a strange breakfast for normal people, but we were far from normal. The grilled cheese salad included a couple of fruits and vegetables. It had a sweet and savory taste. It was nice working with her outside of the company. She was more relaxed, and before we knew it, we were done. Looking at my watch, I realized we had to get moving.

“It’s almost time,” I said, getting up.

“Okay,” she replied, sounding cheery. As she headed to the bathroom with her bag, she spoke. “I think we’ve nailed this one.”

“I’ll be glad if we do,” I replied, grabbing my jacket. I quickly called to confirm the car was ready while I waited for her.

Heading down, I collected the keys at reception before we could leave. Entering the basement parking, I pressed the alarm to see where the car was. I held the door open for her before getting in on my side.

The meeting was about ten blocks away, so the drive was short. Glancing at her as I stopped at the traffic light, I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so comfortable and

good around another person.

We arrived at our destination with some time to spare. Inside, I spoke to the man at the desk. “Good day, Morozov Estate, Akim Dubow here for the meeting.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, stepping out behind the desk. “They are waiting, please follow me.” We followed him down a short hallway. He stopped before the second-to-last room. Turning to us, he spoke, holding out his hand. “The meeting room, sir.”

I nodded my thanks, and he left. Looking at Zhen, I spoke again. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll even be,” she replied, smiling.

I opened the door and held it for her to enter. She walked in with her head held high. I followed her as she walked to the middle of the room. Everyone fell silent and looked at us. “Good morning,” Zhen said. “It’s a lovely day today.”

Everyone nodded and greeted her in return. Just like that, in one smooth move, she had grabbed the attention of the room.

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She set up the graphs on the sideboard and then started explaining the concept. I stood to the side, allowing her to take the lead. Watching her, I felt a warmth filling me. She was dripping with confidence, and her body language was one of passion.

She clearly loved what she was doing, and the clients could also see it. She was natural at this. About halfway through, I could see she had them all hooked. It was a done deal. The second part of the presentation was just for safety measures, but she didn't need it.

As she concluded, she handed out the documents we had prepared for them to sign. As she gave them their contracts, she ensured she made eye contact with each one. There were no questions, and the clients all signed eagerly.

Seeing her in her element, I understood why she would rather spend extra time working than exploring the city or going to fancy restaurants. We shook hands with each member as they left. Closing the door behind them, I looked at her as she collected her things.

I caught myself smiling at her. She appeared to have this shine about her. Once she was done, we headed out. "You did well," I complimented her as we got to the car. "Let's grab something to eat before heading back."

"Sure, that sounds nice," she replied. "What did you have in mind?"

"You'll have to wait and see. I have a place in mind that I think you will love," I responded, grinning at her.

I was in such a good, uplifted mood that I felt sure nothing could go wrong. Zhen looked at me, smiling. “It was a good meeting, don’t you think?” she said in her soft, sweet voice.

Smiling warmly at her, I nodded as I spoke. “Yes, I think it was.” Her smile lit up the car, and I was glad to be able to make her so happy. She seemed to need confirmation now and then. I wondered what had happened to her, causing this need for approval.

The drive wasn’t the shortest one ever, but I could see the park entrance as we rounded the last corner. Parking, Zhen looked at me, confused. “What are we doing here?” she asked as I got out. “I thought we were going for supper?” she added as I opened her door. “I don’t see any place around here.”

I laughed lightly as I replied. “Well, you will just have to wait and see then. I am confident you will like this.”

We entered the park gate and headed down the long, winding path. She kept glancing at me as if she were waiting for an answer. But I just smiled and kept on walking. It was a bit of a distance, but if she reacted the way I expected, it would be worth it.

Distracted by her inquisitive looks and vibrating smiles, I stumbled over a tree root sticking out of the ground. I waved my arms out to the sides as I tripped around, trying to get my footing. Zhen started laughing hysterically.

Once I found my balance, I glared at her. “Really?” I said lightly. “You think it was funny?”

She nodded as we started walking again. I bumped into her lightly as I spoke again. “I almost bought a piece of land here with my face, and you found it funny. You evil thing.”

She smiled at me and then bit down on her bottom lip before saying anything. “Sorry, but you looked like a bird trying to find some wind.”

Smirking, I nodded, seeing how funny that could have looked. “Here we are,” I said as we passed the last tree, and the place lit up before us.

Zhen looked around, her mouth hanging open. Glancing at me, I could see the sparkle in her eyes. “I have never seen anything so beautiful,” she said.

Before us, between the trees, was a path leading to a lookout over the city. On one side was a row of about six food trucks serving food, drinks, and desserts. On the other side, there was an opening with a couple of tables and chairs.

There were also four footpaths leading out to the lawns on the edge. On these were a couple of tables and chairs as well for those seeking some privacy. String lights hung from the trucks to the trees and down, lighting up each path. In the opening and from the edge, you could clearly see the sky. It was like a perfect picture from a dream.

“What do you feel like eating?” I asked, watching her. She seemed to transform before my eyes. Her excitement was contagious.

“Wow, I don’t know. Would it be fine if we first looked at all of them?” she asked in a childlike tone.

Grinning, I nodded. I had never seen this side of her. She was suddenly filled with energy and joy, I could only contribute to someone half her age. She was so cute. I wanted to pick her up.

We started at one end and slowly made our way toward the edge, reading every menu. I could barely make out the sign of the last truck when Zhen took my hand and rushed towards it. “This is what I want!” she huffed. She stood beside the truck with

her arms stretched out. One above the truck name and one below.

“I can’t even remember when I last had one.” She bounced towards me, smiling like a spoiled child.

Smiling back, I nodded as we stepped up to the opening. “You have to order the Special Supreme,” she whispered, hanging on my arm.

Looking at the guy inside the truck, I decided to go with her choice. “Can you please give us two of your Special Supreme wraps?” I said, holding out money to pay.

He nodded, took the cash, and started. I watched for a moment as he fried some steak, onions, and mushrooms. “Want to sit?” Zhen asked, squeezing my arm.

“Yes, sure,” I replied, turning to her. While waiting for our food, I went to get myself a beer and wine for her.

The man inside the truck rang a bell, and we went to collect our food. We found an empty bench closer to the lawn area. “I have to admit that I have never had one of these,” I said, opening my wrap.

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“You are going to love it,” she replied before taking a bite.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back as she moaned. “Oh, my, this is so good,” she mumbled before taking another bite.

“I’m glad you liked it. During the day, it occurred to me that you might prefer something like this over a fancy dinner in a stuck-up restaurant filled with the rich,” I said, winking at her.

She blushed. Glancing around, she spoke in a softer tone. “Thank you for doing this. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

Nodding, I felt proud of myself and relieved that it worked out.

We finished our food and sat looking up at the sky. It was going to be a clear night, and the stars would be visible. “Have you ever thought what life could have been like if we were all the same?” she asked out of the blue.

“No, I have not. But come to think of it now, I would say life would be boring as hell. If we all did the same things, ate the same things, and did everything like each other, there would be no excitement in life,” I responded.

“If you look at it that way, yes, I can see why it could be boring. But then, on the other hand, there would be less violence and fighting, don’t you agree?” she asked.

I moved closer to her as I replied. “Yes, I agree, there would be a lot less fighting. But I think a bit of fighting sometimes is a good thing. But I appreciate you sharing

your thoughts. It is good to share, and I believe we have a right to say what we think.”

I got up and headed towards the trucks.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” I replied, heading to the sweet things truck. I bought two bowls of ice cream and asked them to add loads of candy to hers. Walking back, I noticed she wasn’t looking towards me. Her attention was on something out there.

I sneaked up behind her and howled. Zhen screamed as she jumped up and turned.

“That’s not funny,” she grumbled.

“It was a little funny. You make a funny sound when you get frightened,” I replied, handing her a bowl of ice cream.

She bumped into me lightly as I sat down. “Thank you for the ice cream, but why is yours plain?” she inquired, raising her brows.

“Well,” I said confidently. “That answer is easy. You see, I’m already sweet enough.”

Her lower jaw dropped as she looked at me, shaking her head. She glanced at her ice cream and back at me, shaking her head.

Zhen leaned in closer. Using her spoon, she poured some of the candy into my bowl. “There you go. Believe me, you need them. You’re not as sweet as you may think,” she said teasingly.

Smiling at her, I considered her words. She looked over the city into the distance,

biting her lower lip. I loved seeing her like this.

She slowly swirled her spoon through her ice cream before licking at the spoon. I found it enthralling to watch her. Every time she licked the spoon, I couldn't help but wish it was me she was licking like that.

Getting up, we threw our ice cream containers in the garbage can before walking to the lawn area. Zhen lay down, and I joined her. We just lay in silence, looking at the stars in the sky for a while. Rolling to my side so I could face her, I spoke softly. "Sorry if I have come across as being overly harsh."

Zhen smiled as she turned towards me. We were merely inches away from each other. "I am the one who should apologize to you," she whispered. "I know I can be a little bitchy at times."

"Only a little?" I asked sarcastically.

Zhen slapped my chest as she made a clicking sound with her tongue. "Okay," she said, smiling. "Maybe I am a tad bitchier at times than usual."

"Maybe, maybe not," I replied, unable to pull my eyes from her.

We smiled as we stared into each other's eyes. Tenderly, I moved a strand of hair out of her face, pushing it behind her ear. I caressed her cheek, feeling the fireworks show within me ignite. She didn't pull back; I took it as a good sign. My entire body was reacting to her.

She closed her eyes as I leaned in to kiss her. But before our lips even touched, it started to pour down. Looking up, I couldn't believe my luck. It was clear mere seconds ago. Jumping to my feet, I held out my hand and pulled her up. Taking off my shirt, I held it over her head as we ran towards the car.

Her hand was around my waist, and her other was planted on my chest. My chest and middle felt like they were on fire from her touch. It wasn't a burning fire. It was more like a sensual one. Having her so close and her arm around me made my dick pay attention.

As we got to the car, I opened her door and waited for her to get in before running around. We laughed as I stumbled into the car, both of us breathing heavily from the exertion of running. Leaning back, I grabbed the spare shirt I had placed in my bag, glad I had. As I pulled it on, I saw her watching me, but she didn't say a word.

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Once I was again appropriately clothed, I smiled at her. “Ready to head back?” I asked in a light tone.

“Yes, that sounds good,” she replied, turning to face the window.

I wish I knew what she was thinking. It suddenly felt like there was nothing left to say. But, my mind and body wouldn’t settle down. A fierce war raged within me. I didn’t know what was happening, what had come over me. I wanted nothing more than to reach out and kiss her. I craved her lips like the air I needed to breathe.

My body craved her. I wanted to feel that warm sensation vibrating through me as our lips met. My body longed for her touch like flowers longed for the rain. Yet, my mind was putting up a fight. We worked together. For fuck’s sake, she is my PA. Plus, for all I knew, it wasn’t something she wanted.

But I had to put my thoughts aside as I noticed the car following close behind us. Something deep inside me sounded an alarm as a feeling of dread suddenly entered. Something wasn’t right. Looking around, I scanned our surroundings. I quickly analyzed the buildings, cars, and people.

Spotting two idling cars, I swallowed the lump intrusively growing in my throat. “Zhen,” I said, trying to keep my tone calm. “Don’t react, but I think we’re being followed. I’m going to take a turn up front and speed up slightly to confirm, okay?”

Glancing at her, I saw fear rising in her eyes as she pulled her brows up and looked back. She took a deep breath. But I could still hear the slight quivering in it as she spoke. “What? Are you sure?”

Turning down the next street, I pressed down on the gas. Looking in the rearview mirror, I saw the car speeding up. “Yes, I’m sure,” I breathed out. My mind raced through all possible scenarios. I wanted to keep her safe, but wasn’t sure how to do that.

I considered dropping her off at the hotel and then driving these people to a secluded spot to take care of business. But that wouldn’t work as they might attack her there to get to me.

Driving around the block, I also spotted a white van. The lights were off, but it was idling. “You see the van?” I asked as we passed the second time. “It is running but appears to be waiting with the lights off. That’s not normal.”

She turned in her seat as we passed it. I could hear her inhaling sharply. Turning up the next block, I decided to take this mess further away. I needed open roads with less traffic and fewer civilians. “Don’t worry, we’ll be fine,” I tried reassuring her as I sped up.

Looking in the mirror, I saw two identical cars following. “Another one joined the chase,” I said, glancing at her.

Zhen turned back and held her seatbelt as I tried getting out of the traffic. I had just turned onto another street when I saw the car coming out of a side street. It was going at full speed. Swerving, I managed to miss it and not be rammed.

Cursing under my breath, I knew we were in trouble. Up front, I saw two more cars waiting at the next intersection. They were surely going to try to block us in. As we neared them, they came out of the side streets, simultaneously closing up the road.

“Hold on,” I huffed as I climbed the curb and sped past them. Speeding up, I weaved through a couple of cars on the road. I knew this chase was an accident waiting to

happen. But with her in the car, I didn't dare take unnecessary risks.

Chapter 8 - Zhenya

For a moment, I shut my eyes as Akim swerved left and then right, hurrying past the cars on the road. I had never been in a car chase and felt anxious. But the fact that we were being chased by who knows, scared me.

Any and all thoughts flew out of my mind as I slammed up against the car door. Akim had taken a sharp turn, and the car spun in a circle for a moment. I moaned as I tried pushing myself off the door.

"Sorry, hold on," Akim huffed as he regained control and sped up. I didn't get a chance to respond as I started sliding towards him. Holding onto the door handle, I kept myself from joining him in the driver's seat.

Looking around, I noticed the scenery changing. The streetlights were fewer, and the couple that were there only dimly lit the area around them. I could make out a couple of cars next to the road and some people standing around. I swallowed hard, realizing we had entered a bad part of the city.

I saw similar places around our town. My brothers had always warned us of the kind of people living in such places. My heart beat faster as fear tried to take control. There was a loud pop, and then I felt the car sliding.

Glancing at Akim, I realized he was trying to get control of the car as he turned the steering wheel left and then right. We slid and began spinning again. As the car came to a complete stop, he looked at me. "Get out and stay low. But stay on your side of the car," he said demanding.

He was out of the car before I could protest or even form a reply. His door slammed

shut so hard, I could feel it vibrating through me. There were screeching sounds as more vehicles came to a stop behind us. Glancing back, I saw five men jumping out of the other cars.

Opening my door, I slid out and closed it softly. Sweat was running down my brows and stung my eyes. Wiping at them, I battled to breathe. I was overwhelmed with all that was going on. I wanted to call my brothers, but wasn't sure how that would help, except to get me into more trouble.

Carefully, I moved to the hood and peeked over it. I was shocked at the scene unfolding before me. One of the men was already on the ground. He was lying on his side, holding his stomach. I could see a dark liquid seeping through his hands. He was making the most horrid sounds.

Akim was running at full speed, curving left and right to miss the spray of bullets heading his way. I watched as he jumped and slid over the hood of the other car. The first shooter stood up, and before he could squeeze the trigger, Akim was behind him. He held him to his chest as the second man rose and started shooting at him.

I watched in horror as Akim slit the man's throat. Blood gushed out, and I felt my stomach turning. He let him go, and the man dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. I wanted to crouch and hide, but for some reason, I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Moving swiftly, he lunged at the other man. I held my breath. I didn't want Akim to get hurt or even killed because of me.

But he knocked the man off his feet. They were struggling on the ground behind the car. I couldn't see what was happening. Fearing for his life, I ran towards him, not thinking twice about my safety. As far as I could see, this had to be the last man, and I wanted to help if I could.

As I ran around the back of the car, I saw Akim sitting on the man. He was holding the man's head in his hands and slamming it into the floor. Seeing him like this made me realize just how used to the bratva life he was. I also concluded that I was far from accustomed to it.

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He made what he did seem effortless. It was like a part of his nature. I didn't know him as well as I thought. No, I had summed him up very wrong. Holding my hands over my mouth to keep from screaming, I walked backward slowly.

I watched as Akim started getting up. He glanced at me, but it appeared as if he was looking through me. His eyes looked like blazing balls of fire. I hadn't seen a look like that since I was a little girl. I remember my father's look after he had been in an altercation with some bad men. That was the look he had.

He appeared to notice me, and his eyes suddenly softened. "Are you okay? What are you doing here? I told you to stay hidden," he huffed. He started stepping over the man when something caught my eye.

I looked to my left and saw a man running at me. He was about to grab me when a deafening sound filled the air. I closed my eyes and ears as the ringing set my mind ablaze. I heard the man 'ufff' before feeling a hot liquid raining over me.

Opening my eyes, I looked at the man lying on the floor at my feet. Looking up, I saw Akim standing a couple of feet away with a gun in his hands. I didn't know where he got it, but I was glad he had one.

He took out his phone and made a call. I just stood there staring at the man bleeding out. Looking down, I noticed the blood on my dress. Akim came over after his call and draped his jacket over my shoulders.

It wasn't long until two other cars pulled up. Four men got out and came towards us. "Maybe you should wait in the car," Akim said, squeezing my shoulder.

For a moment, I just stood there. My legs felt cold and dead. Moving slowly, I walked to the side of the car. Turning and leaning against it, I saw Akim assisting the men in rearranging the bodies. They set them up to look like they had killed each other.

Another two men were hustling around the car. These had to be either his men or Morozov's men. One was changing a wheel, and the other was wiping it down. Akim walked to me, holding a damp cloth. "Can I wipe your face and arms?" he asked. His tone was soft and kind.

I held out my arms, watching his face as he tenderly wiped the blood from my arms. He stepped closer and wiped my cheeks and chin. "There, now you look better. Come on," he said hanging the cloth to the man who had changed out tire. "Let's get out of here."

I could only nod as he opened the door and assisted me into the car. I was shaken by what had just happened. He got into the driver's side and started the car. I felt his hand on my knee and jumped a little.

"How are you?" he asked tenderly.

"I would just like to leave," I replied. My voice was almost gone. I had to clear my throat before repeating myself.

Akim nodded and pulled away. We drove around for a while before pulling into one of the less famous hotels in town. He parked as close to the door as he could. Switching off the engine, he inhaled deeply before getting out.

I watched as he moved around and opened my door. I took his hand as he offered it. I felt my insides shaking and was glad that he didn't notice, as it felt like my entire being was shaking. Placing his arm around me, we headed inside.

As we entered, I noticed the four women standing in a little cluster behind the reception desk. They looked at us; two shook their heads, and then the oldest one appeared to be telling the youngest one what to do. As we stopped at the desk, three of them moved to the side.

The way they were googling me made me feel uncomfortable. Akim let go of me and stepped forward. I pulled the jacket tighter and hugged it to my body. “Can I get two adjoining rooms for the evening, please?” Akim said calmly.

She looked into his eyes, fluttering her lashes as she replied. “Let me check.”

I didn’t like her attitude, and if not for all we’d been through, I would have told her so. But for now, I just stood about a foot away, waiting for him.

The woman looked from Akim to the other three standing to the side. Looking back and smiling excessively, she spoke in a softer tone. “I am sorry, sir; we only have one room available at the moment.” She sounded truly apologetic, but something in her smile made me feel uneasy. She glanced at me as if she wanted to say something else, but she didn’t.

“Is there something wrong with the room you have available?” Akim asked a bit harshly.

We have been through a lot in such a short period. I felt sick to my stomach. I could only imagine how he was feeling. Irritation from him was the least of her worries if she didn’t accommodate us. I felt like a ticking time bomb.

“No, not at all. It’s just that the two of you seem... well, never mind, who am I to judge,” she huffed, looking me up and down. She took a deep breath before continuing. “It’s just that the room only has one bed.”

He glanced at me before replying. “We’ll take it, thanks.”

The woman nodded and took down his details. He used a fake name, so we couldn’t be tracked. He explained this to me in the car before we got here. Once she was done typing on the keyboard, she collected a set of keys from the wall behind her.

Akim held out the business card the Morozovs had issued him in case of emergencies. The woman swiped it and handed it back with the keys. “Enjoy your stay,” she said as he turned to me.

“We need to get clean clothes,” he whispered as he stepped up to me. “There,” he said, pointing to a gift shop.

I walked behind him as he grabbed two shirts and a pair of pants. Moving to the other side of the shop, he took a jacket, a gray tracksuit, and sneakers. Heading to the counter at the door, he stopped suddenly. Akim glanced at me and then collected some underwear from a different shelf.

As he paid, I wondered if anything he took would fit. But it wasn’t important at the moment. I just wanted to get upstairs and behind closed doors. I wanted to feel safe again. I scanned the people as we moved to the elevator. Everyone seemed to be busy with their own things. They didn’t even notice us.

Getting out of the elevator, I watched him as we moved to the door. He swiped the card and held the door open for me. I entered and glanced around. There was no couch in this room. It had a large double bed, side tables, and a dresser against the back wall.

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To the side was a wrought-iron table with two chairs. On top of it was a flower vase and a tray with two glasses. Next to it was a small bar fridge and what looked like an ice machine.

As I heard the door closing behind me, I felt a shiver running down my spine. Panic suddenly filled me as I realized I might have been the target of the attack. He might have been more prepared for something like this if I had just told him who I was.

Akim walked around me. He stood before me with the two bags in his hands. "I'm so sorry for all of this," he said. "I would have brought guards if there was any chatter about an attack. I never intended to expose you to something so..." He glanced at the floor as his words dried up.

I was shocked. How could he think this was his fault? Watching him shift, I realized he thought the attack was targeted at him. However, I couldn't see how that was possible, no, it had to be me they were after.

It was some of the Chernykh's enemies coming after me to get to my family, I felt sure of it. Could I be the reason he was in danger? Glancing at him as he placed the bags down by the door, I knew I couldn't tell him.

The guilt ripped through my core, shooting my emotions into overdrive. Holding my head in my hands, I started pacing up and down. I had to find out, I had to make sense of this mess. But most of all, I had to know if I was the reason for the attack.

But how was I to do so without letting my family know what was going on? I swallowed hard as a lump pushed up in my throat. I felt my eyes stinging as tears

started running down my cheeks. I was out of answers and didn't know who to turn to for advice.

"Hey, you," Akim said lightly, pulling on my arm.

I stopped and looked at him. His eyes were filled with a softness I could only describe as care. He pulled me closer and hugged me. "It's okay, you're safe now," he breathed out over my head.

His muscular arms felt like ribbons of power. His chest was like a soft pillow as I relaxed into his hold. He rubbed my back, and I could feel my fear slowly dissipating. "I will keep you safe," Akim whispered into my hair as he kissed my forehead.

If he only knew, he would not be so kind and caring. Or would he, I wondered as he held me tightly.

Breathing in his rich, earthy scent and feeling his chest muscles against my face made me hug him a little tighter. I knew I had to fight this attraction for him. But for a moment, I allowed my body to absorb his essence. He made me feel safe.

Taking a slow and deep breath, I tried stepping back. Akim held my shoulders. Glancing at him, I smiled weakly. "I'm going to get cleaned. I feel a little drained.

He stared at me for a moment, holding me at arm's length. "Okay," he finally said after what felt like an eternity. "But are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," I replied softly. "I think a hot shower and sleep is all I need now."

He nodded as he let go. I picked up the bag from the gift shop and headed to the bathroom. Placing the bag on the bathroom cupboard next to the basin, I stared in the mirror. Who was this woman looking back at me?

It looked like a child had styled the messy bun on my head. Lifting my arm to remove the clips, I felt weak. My arms were sore as if I had visited the gym. I felt sure it had to be from the tension of the earlier situation.

Removing the hair bands, I noticed red specks between my dark blond hair. No wonder the women at the front desk had looked at me so strangely. However, I wondered if they had even noticed. They were so enthralled with Akim, I was sure my looks were the furthest thing from their minds.

As I removed the jacket, he so kindly wrapped me in it, and I saw the blood splatter down the front of my dress. It was ruined and belonged in the furnace. Once I was completely naked, I quickly checked myself for any injuries. I was relieved that I had none. All the blood on me was from the man Akim killed as he wanted to grab me.

I took the body wash from the gift shop bag and got into the shower. Opening the tap, I set it a tinge hotter than usual. I wanted to burn the blood off of me as I scrubbed. After washing myself three times, I started feeling a little cleaner.

Closing my eyes, I lifted my face. I didn't want to get out. The warm water was soothing, and I could feel the tension in my muscles easing up. But I knew I couldn't stay there forever. Reluctantly, I closed the water and got out.

Once I was dry and dressed in a tracksuit, I opened the door and stepped into the room. Akim was crouched in the corner, digging through his bag. Even though I felt slightly calmer, my nerves hadn't settled yet. I got into bed, turned on my side, and pulled my legs up. Laying in a small bundle, I tried to find sleep as I heard him closing the bathroom door.

I lay still as a mouse, listening to all the sounds around me. The wind was softly playing with the leaves on the large tree outside. I could hear the shower running through the closed door. Below in the street were cars moving up and down as people

went about their evening.

The water stopped running, and I could hear him moving around in the bathroom. The door opened, and Akim came out. I closed my eyes and pretended to be sleeping. I listened as he made a call asking someone to collect our luggage from the other hotel and deliver it here in the morning.

I felt the bed dip as he got in beside me. To my surprise, I felt his arm wrapping around me as he moved closer. His warmth felt good, and before I knew it, I was asleep.

Chapter 9 - Akim

Waking up, I stretched out, breathing in deeply. Glancing to the side, I was relieved to find Zhen sleeping peacefully. Staring at her face, I felt my anger rising. How could anyone want to harm such an angel?

Thinking back to the guy who almost got to her, my fury continued to rise. We will find out who sent their goons after me. I will destroy them, I swore to myself. Her life was in danger, and it was all my doing.

But this would never happen again. They will not get a second chance, even for attempting it. I couldn't help but wonder if she was okay. Was she scared when the guy stormed her, or did I frighten her?

I had so many questions, but wasn't sure how to approach them. Before my mind could take another trip out the window, she shifted. Zhen moved back, rubbing her ass against my groin. Even though I knew it wasn't on purpose, I couldn't prevent the reaction.

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My body was waking up and soon my dick would be stiff as a post. I tried shifting back a little, but Zhen also moved back. As she rubbed against me, I couldn't help but want her touch. Looking over her body, I could imagine all the things we could do.

Shaking my head, I tried to remind myself that she was one of my staff and sleeping with her would be unprofessional. This was a business trip, not one for pleasure. Even with everything that had gone down, I had to keep it professional.

I only held her last night to comfort her after what she had witnessed. I reminded myself that having a relationship with an employee could only lead to trouble as she shifted again.

The next moment she moved back with force, pressing her ass tightly into me. All my resolve to keep things professional blew out the window as I came alive, taking over control of my mind.

Caressing her arm, I spoke softly. "Zhen, are you awake?"

She slowly rolled over onto her back. I waited as she rubbed her eyes. Zhen looked at me, and I felt my breath catch. For a moment, I had no words. The soft smile on her lips made her look too cute for words.

Pulling her into my arms, I held her tight for a moment. "Are you okay?" I asked softly. "I know yesterday was a lot, but I am here if you want to talk."

She lifted her hand and touched my cheek. I felt an electric shock run from my cheek through my body. "I'm okay, you worry too much," she replied. Her tone was so

sweet and filled with care that I had to bite down on my lips to prevent myself from kissing her.

“Are you okay?” she added, smiling.

I nodded, entranced by her beauty. I was lost in her eyes, floating on clouds. Zhen licked her lips. That was my breaking point. I could no longer control my body. Leaning in, I claimed her lips. There was so much force in our kiss that we were both breathless as I pulled back.

My body ached for her, and the sparkle in her eyes told me she felt the same. Listening to her gasping softly, I felt my lust going into overdrive. She ran her fingers across my chest before softly tugging at my shirt. Catching her whim, I quickly removed it and tossed it to the floor.

Zhen played with her index finger in her mouth, watching me intently. “Are you sure this is what you want?” I asked, looking at her reaction.

“Yes, ” she whispered as she ran her fingers down my chest again. This time, it felt like electricity was running through me. Leaning in, I took her lips in another fiery kiss. Our tongues battled for dominance.

Coming up for air, I pulled at her shirt, and she lifted her arms, allowing me to remove it. For a moment, I just stared at her. Looking down at her, I spoke in a tender tone. “You are stunning.”

Her cheeks turned a deeper shade, adding to her allure. She shifted as I let my hands glide across her skin. I reveled in her softness. I kissed her again, moving from her lips down her cheek into her neck.

I moved slowly as I lay kisses down her body, tasting her for the first time. I took my

time as I didn't want it to end. She had a sweet, flowery scent but tasted like cherries. I couldn't get enough of her.

Moving down, I cupped one breast as I kissed the other one. Sucking her nipple gently into my mouth, I heard her breathing out sharply. As I tenderly nibbled, she started squirming. I was pleased to discover she had sensitive breasts. It made foreplay so much more fun.

Her fingers pushed through my hair. Her soft touch was enthralling. Shifting, I moved to play with her other breast. I wanted to taste both, but also wanted to give them equal attention. Absorbed in the moment, I left a small hickey on her one breast. Zhen moaned as I played with them.

Moving down between her breasts, I glanced up. Her eyes were closed, and she was biting her lower lip. I was sure she was trying to keep quiet, but I didn't mind the moaning. I actually loved it.

Seeing her this way sent my senses soaring. I felt ten years younger as energy filled every part of my body. Pushing myself up on my arms, I moved back up. Zhen opened her eyes, looking into mine. "You don't have to keep it in," I whispered, kissing her nose.

She smiled and breathed out heavily. She pulled me in for another sensual kiss, her hands moving up and down my shoulders. My body needed no extra attention as it was geared up enough.

Moving back down, I kissed between her breasts before proceeding down her stomach. As I reached her belly button, she let out a small scream of pleasure. It was music to my ears. I wanted her to enjoy it.

Pushing up from the bed, I stared at her as she opened her eyes. "No," she whispered,

waving at me to come to her.

“Slowly,” I replied, grinning. “Don’t worry, I’m going to devour you.”

I grabbed the legs of her tracksuit pants and pulled them down as I stepped out of my own. Pushing her feet to the sides, I opened her legs. She was a goddess lying there naked before me. I felt my dick pumping, wanting to be freed from the underwear still holding him back.

Kneeling on the bed between her legs, I slowly pulled down her panties, revealing her wonderous pussy. Zhen laughed nervously as she pulled her legs up slightly, pushing her thighs together.

Placing my hands on her knees, I spoke kindly. “You sure you want to continue?”

She swung her legs from side to side, biting her finger as she nodded.

“Then relax, hun. It’s going to be fun, I promise. I don’t bite unless asked to,” I said as I pushed her knees to the sides.

Zhen laughed as I lowered my head between her legs. She closed her eyes, pushing her head back into the pillows. Once in position, I first kissed one knee, moving up her thigh, and then did the same with the other leg. With each kiss, she breathed heavily.

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Placing my hands on her hips, I lowered my body to the bed. I tenderly kissed each hip and left tiny love bites on them. Her breathing was heavy and irregular. She started to pant softly. Her fingers glided into my hair, and I felt her pulling lightly.

I loved this as it only made me want her more. Kissing just above her pussy, Zhen lifted her body and moaned loudly. She was so different than any other woman I had been with. Her body appeared to be in a heightened state of touch, which I found very satisfying.

Moving down, I dipped my tongue into her. She let out a cry of pleasure. Lifting my head, I looked up at her. Her eyes were filled with fire as she pulled my head back down. I was hers to command, I thought as I gave in and lowered my head again.

I licked slowly up and down between her pussy lips. She arched into my mouth as she took a couple of quick breaths. Sucking her pleasure spot into my mouth, I had to use my hands to keep her legs apart as they vice-gripped my head. Her moans grew louder and louder as I continued to suck.

Her nails dug into my shoulders as I dipped my tongue into her again. I loved her taste; she was so sweet. I sucked on her and then dipped my tongue back in a couple of times absorbing her moans of pleasure.

Feeling my dick exploding, I knew it was time to prepare. Looking up at her as I shifted a bit higher, I was pleased with the smile on her lips. Pushing one hand in under her ass, I started playing with my finger around the rim of her opening.

Inserting my finger slowly, I played in the opening of her pussy. Zhen moaned

between hard and fast breaths. Pushing my finger in deeper turned her moaning into a cry of pain. I pulled my finger out and looked at it. There was a tiny speck of blood on the tip.

Shocked, I looked into her eyes searching for an explanation. She smiled shyly, turning her head to the side. Then it hit me like a bullet: she was still a virgin. But I needed confirmation. Placing my hand on her leg, I spoke softly. “Have you ever been with someone before?”

Zhen’s cheeks lit up instantly. They were glowing red like warning lights. She met my gaze and shook her head. Looking into her eyes, I felt so many emotions rush through me. I fought with the anger in me at the fact that I went so hard on her. I had regrets, yet I wanted her.

How could I have handled someone so innocent so hard? I knew it wasn’t good, but I wanted her even more. My desire for her was unbearable. But I was a man and would step back. My emotions raged, and I felt unsure of my actions for the first time in my life.

Chapter 10 - Zhenya

I could feel my face heating as I blushed. I felt slightly ashamed for not telling him before we started. Yet, I craved him and wanted him to be my first. Staring into his eyes, my desire and need for him intensified. I let my gaze drift over his body.

Looking straight at him again, I replied softly. “I am, but it’s not an issue.” The look on his face was one of horror. Akim pulled back. He sat up, turning his back on me. I took hold of his arm, fearing he might run for the hills.

I knew he wanted me. I could see the desire in his eyes every time we kissed. The bulge in his pants hadn’t gone down either, so he still wanted this. I couldn’t

understand why being a virgin was such an issue.

He sighed deeply, glancing back at me. "I'm sorry for being so rough."

"No, Akim," I said, getting onto my knees and moving closer. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Yes, I did," he huffed, turning to me. "I was hard on you and that wasn't right. Your first time should be special. You must save yourself for the person you love."

"But what if I want it to be you?" I replied, placing my hand on his shoulder.

He shifted back. "No, it shouldn't just be anyone who has turned you on. It's an important part of a woman."

Frowning at him, I couldn't help but wonder what his problem was. Glancing down, I could see he was still turned on. Not wanting him to leave, I got up and sat on his lap, closing my legs around his waist.

Akim tried to protest, but I held tightly. "Akim," I said softly. "It's mine to give, isn't it, so it is my choice, right?"

He pulled my legs, trying to push me off. He was breathing slowly and deeply. I felt sure he was trying to calm himself. But I didn't want him to calm down. I wanted him all worked up for me.

"Zhen," he said, breathing out hard. "This isn't a decision you should be making hastily or halfheartedly."

He let go of my legs, placing his hands next to him. I could see he was frustrated as he clenched and released his hand. He was trying very hard to calm down.

I didn't want to hear him speaking this way when he clearly wanted me as much as I wanted him. Knowing he was putting up such a fight made me crave him even more. Looking at the strain on his face, I realized I wanted him completely out of control.

Shifting on his lap, I wrapped my arms around his neck. Leaning in, I pulled him towards me. I could feel him pulling back, resisting me. I stopped pulling and fell towards him. He fell back onto the bed, and our lips met.

I moved quickly before he could change his mind. I slipped my hand down his chest to the treasure trove I actually wanted. My fingers wrapped around his still-hard cock. "Oh, baby," I whispered, moving my hand in slow circles.

It was warm and heavy in my hand. I had never felt one before, but it felt good. I could see he was stunned and struggling to keep his focus. Leaning in, I kissed him again. But this time, I stuck my tongue into his mouth.

He tasted slightly like musk candy, which was intriguing. He was breathing heavily but had not moved. Moving my hand up a tad, I felt the tip and closed my fingers over it.

Akim sat up sharply as if someone had pushed a stick up his ass. I wanted to laugh, but there wasn't any time as he stood up, holding me in his arms. He turned to the bed and gently flung me onto it.

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The small groan that escaped his lips drove my desire deeper. Smiling at him, I spoke seductively as I licked my lips. “I want you to be my first. Take my virginity, I give it to you.”

I watched him fighting his demons as he bent over and gripped the bed sheets. I wiggled myself down towards him. Pushing my legs in below him, I slithered until I was looking up into his eyes. I was in an awkward position, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

My ass was barely on the bed as my feet touched the ground. I balanced myself so I wouldn't plop down on the floor, as that would just be embarrassing. My arms were hooked around his hands. Reaching up, I placed my hands on his shoulders.

I felt the muscles tense and release. He was still fighting with himself. “It's okay, you can let go,” I whispered, playing with his ear. I knew his self-control was slipping as I felt his thumbs moving on my arms.

“I want this,” I said, placing my hands around his neck and pulling him towards me.

Our lips were inches apart when he spoke. “We shouldn't.”

Feeling his hot breath touching my lips, I wanted to scream at him. “But I want to, I want you,” I said instead.

Before I knew what was happening, he had given in. He picked me up and carefully moved me higher. He moved with me and pinned me to the bed. My arms were stretched out to the sides, and he held my wrists.

He came down hard as he kissed me. I closed my eyes as our tongues fought for control. Lying down on top of me, I felt him thrusting into me. I breathed out hard into his mouth. As I opened my eyes, I met his. I could see the frustration in them as he pulled up, propping himself on one arm.

He traced a line down my cheek into my neck with his fingers. Then he moved down over my breasts, and my body ached. My breathing was heavy as he moved his fingers between my legs.

I opened them so he could have unrestricted access. Akim made small circles around my pleasure spot as he leaned in, sucking on my breast. I felt my body shake as pleasure ran through all my senses. "Oh, baby," I moaned, wanting him to take me.

He lowered his head between my legs. As he sucked on my pleasure spot, he pinched my nipples. I felt electrified as my body shook from the pleasure filling me. My moans became louder, and I bit down on my lower lip.

Akim sat up and moved his hands up and down my body. "You are an amazing woman," he huffed between deep breaths. I loved the fact that he worshiped my body. He kissed me all over, nipping my skin every now and then. I let out soft screams of pleasure as he did it.

He went down on me again. This time he fucked me with his tongue. I couldn't keep my hips nailed to the bed as I felt my body vibrating. After a while, he pulled back and smiled at me. I felt his fingers playing in the opening. I was soaking wet down there.

Feeling his fingers sliding into me, I closed my eyes and bit my lip. There was a slight pinching feeling, and then it was over. As he moved in and out of me slowly, I felt my pussy tightening.

He shifted so he could suck on my nipple as he moved faster. I placed my hand on his back, caressing him. I felt my body starting to shudder. Akim pulled his finger out and moved it between my legs.

He kissed me and then whispered in my ear. "Just relax. If it hurts, tell me, and we can stop." His breath smelled of coffee and whiskey, and I loved it. He lifted his middle, and when he lowered himself, I could feel his throbbing head pressing against my opening. I placed my hands around his neck.

"I'm going to move in," he whispered into my mouth as he kissed me. Akim pushed into me very slowly. Once he was fully in, I let out a moan. "Oh, beautiful," he breathed out in a husky tone as he pushed his upper body up on his arms. "You're so tight, so magical."

He moved his hips slowly. Closing my eyes, I absorbed every movement. My body had never felt so heightened, so alive. My breathing had become jagged. I lifted my legs and wrapped them around him. I wanted to ask him to give me more, but all I could get out was, "more."

Akim smiled tenderly at me as he started increasing the pace. I felt him hitting the sweet spot and moaned louder. As he moved faster, my mind went blank as pleasure took over. I loved the feeling of having him fully emerge into me.

My moaning took on a life of its own as desire drove my body. With every thrust, I felt a shiver run down my body. I felt like I was floating as I orgasmed. My pussy was pumping like a watermill. I screamed out with pleasure. Breathing was hard as my lungs felt empty.

He grunted as he released. He felt his hot liquid filling me up. I smiled as another moan escaped my lips. Akim rolled off and lay down next to me. He was breathing hard. Turning on my side, I placed a hand on his chest. He pulled me closer and

wrapped his arms around me.

We lay there like that without saying a word. As I felt sleep calling, I cuddled closer to him, loving the feel of his hot body against mine. I no longer desired to take over and become his boss. I now wanted to work with him in harmony. He accepted me, even praised me for what I had accomplished. I loved it.

Chapter 11 - Akim

I stood staring out the window as I listened to the ticket agent. It was a beautiful place, but I was glad to be returning home. “I have two seats available on the eleven o’clock flight. Would it be suitable?”

I responded without hesitation. “Yes, that would be perfect. Thank you.” I read out the card number for payment, and he confirmed the booking. Placing my cell phone back in my pocket, I turned to Zhen.

Staring at her, I let my eyes drift over her, trying to absorb as much of her as I could. I noticed a small hickey I had seemingly left on the side of her breast. A visible sign of what had transpired between us.

I felt a cocky smile crossing my lips. I loved that I was her first and was the reason for her peaceful smile. Shaking my head, I poured a cup of tea and walked to her side of the bed.

“Zhen,” I said softly, caressing her arm.

She stirred, blinked, and glanced at me. “Is it time to go?” she asked in a groggy tone.

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Smiling at her, I shook my head lightly as I replied. “No, not yet, but it’s time to get up. I brought you some tea.”

I stepped back and waited for her to sit up before handing her the cup. “Thank you,” she said, taking it from me.

“You want me to fill the tub for you?” I asked, heading towards the bathroom.

“Yes, thanks,” she replied.

I opened the taps and added some bubble bath so she could soak and relax for a bit. Once the tub was full, I returned to the room. “Okay,” I said, watching her collect some clothes from her bags. “You want anything specific for breakfast?”

She walked to the bathroom door. Stopping, she glanced back at me, smiling. “Pan-fried dumpling, I think,” she said, raising her shoulders.

Grinning, I just nodded as she went in and closed the door. I placed a call to room service and ordered her dumplings and a piece of steak for me.

While she soaked and I waited for room service, I ensured everything was packed and at the door. I wanted to be ready to leave once we were done. The doorbell rang as Zhen came out of the bathroom with the towel wrapped around her hair.

I looked through the peephole to make sure there was room service before opening the door. We sat in silence as we ate. I watched her trying to figure out how she felt after everything that happened.

She appeared to be fine, but it was hard to tell as she was like a closed book. I was also distracted. I hoped the drive to the airport would be smooth. But I feared we might have another run-in.

As we left the hotel, I kept my eyes open for any sign of danger. The drive went quicker than I thought, and turned out to be quiet. We were about an hour early and went for a drink in the lounge.

After we boarded the plane, I could relax slightly. She lowered her seat and lay staring out the window. Watching her, I realized that having sex with her might not have been one of my best ideas. I had hoped to quiet the intense desire for her, to ease my obsession with her.

But it seemed I had made it worse. My desire to protect her had increased tenfold. Closing my eyes, I sighed softly. I had to find a way to keep her safe and out of harm's way.

Once we landed, I drove her home. The entire drive to her place, she stared out the window. After carrying her bags inside, I just had to ask before leaving. "Are you sure you're fine?"

She rose to her toes and kissed my cheek. "All good," she replied. But I couldn't shake this feeling that something was wrong. "Thank you."

"I'll see you in the morning then," I said as I left.

Heading home, I dialed Alexandr. The phone rang for a while. I knew he could be busy and was about to hang up when his commanding voice came blaring through. "Akim, is everything okay? There's been some chatter." I could hear a hint of concern coming through.

“I’m fine, but yes, something happened. I need your help to get to the bottom of it, though,” I replied. There was a pause of silence as I waited for his response.

“Okay, you have my full attention. Let’s hear it,” he said calmly.

“There was an attempted ambush, but I managed to get out. We need to look into it, though. We must find out who is gunning for us,” I said briefly. I purposely left Zhen’s name out as I didn’t want to drag her further into it.

I heard him take a deep breath before speaking. “I will have Tasha do a deep dive and put Anton on it as well. You want me to send some guards to the agency or your home?”

Laughing, I responded lightly. “No, I’ve got my end, and the Chernykh men are protecting the estate. We just have to get to the bottom of this soon.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know what we find. Please stay safe,” Alexandr added before hanging up.

Pulling into my driveway, I surveyed the surroundings. I couldn’t see anything out of place and went inside. I dropped my bag on the floor beside my bed and collapsed onto it. Sleep came quicker than I had anticipated.

I felt refreshed after a good night's sleep without worrying about being attacked. But I forced myself to get up. I wanted to sleep longer, but it was back to work. There was no time to waste if I intended to catch the enemies.

Walking into the office, I couldn’t wait to see Zhen. She was on the phone as I came in, so I just nodded and went to my desk. Once I was done with my emails, I glanced up, hoping to have a moment to talk to Zhen, but she wasn’t at her desk.

Shaking my head, I tried to clear the images of her from my mind. I had to focus. I soon realized that it was an impossible task. My mind kept drifting to our time together. I had really hoped that having sex with her would have cleared the obsession and cobwebs. But it was like she was now imprinted on my mind.

Over the next two days, I realized my obsession had grown to a concerning level as I couldn't help but notice everything she did. I found myself watching her like a hawk. Hanging on her every word and interaction.

I had also started to notice her interaction with the men in the building. I felt like a wolf stalking its prey. I watched as the men flirted with her, and my jealousy slowly climbed up the never-ending mountain.

By the fourth day since our return, I struggled to keep my anger in check. Even though she kept things very professional with all of them, it didn't help that she was seemingly avoiding me. It felt like everyone in the office with a penis was after her. It wasn't only the Chernykh men, but now also the Morozov men.

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My day went by slowly. I walked around brooding and didn't get much of anything done. Every time I sat down to work, my mind flew out the window.

After work, I tried to catch up with her to offer her a ride home. But as I pulled up to the front of the building, I saw her getting into a cab. Since we returned, she hasn't been coming in her own car.

All I could think was that she was still shaken from the ambush. I wanted to talk to her about it, but couldn't do it at work. Heading home, I decided to talk to her early in the morning.

I awoke with fierce anger this morning. I was losing my mind. Heading into the office, I knew something had to be done about this silence between us. I was in before anyone else and hoped she would be early as well.

Making a fresh pot of coffee, my mind drifted back to our day spent in bed. I was pulled from my thoughts as the staff started arriving. Walking through the office, I didn't see Zhen.

After the morning briefing, I spotted her talking to a client in reception. The day is still young, I told myself as I went back to my office. I will find a time to talk to her.

It's day five since we returned, and I've had about as much as I could take of being ignored. I felt frustrated and annoyed that she had been avoiding me. Yesterday, she only brought me one coffee, and today, I haven't even had one.

Everywhere I went, she seemed to leave as soon as I entered. We have been

communicating via email and messages. She wouldn't even sit with me for a morning meeting. Deep down, I knew the reason for it. This was exactly the reason I never got involved with my staff. It always ended up making things harder.

Needing to speak with her and clear the air between us, I went looking. She wasn't in the front part of the office, and I had barely seen her all day. This wasn't working. Stopping at the front desk, I spoke as the receptionist looked up. "You see my PA?"

"I think she's getting something from the pantry," she replied, smiling.

"She's getting what from where?" I huffed. I could feel the smoke coming out of my ears.

"Oh no," the receptionist said, getting up. "I'm so sorry, that wasn't what I meant." I could see the shock even on her face at her own words. "I meant the pantry, sir."

Nodding my thanks, I walked to the kitchen. The pantry door was open. I could see Zhen. The picture before me instantly lit a fire inside. One of the Chernykh men was chatting her up. He was smiling and gesturing with his hands.

As he lightly leaned forward and seemingly accidentally touched her hand, I knew I had to move in. Taking a slow, deep breath, I tried staying calm as I entered the pantry.

"Didn't I assign you enough work?" I asked him calmly. He nodded but didn't seem to be in a rush to leave. Stepping closer, I spoke more softly so Zhen wouldn't hear me. "The work I sent needs to be done by morning, do you understand?"

He nodded, and I could see he understood me. "Excuse me," he said, glancing at Zhen. "I forgot about something I had to get done. Have a nice day."

She was reaching for something from one of the higher shelves. Glancing back, she replied spontaneously. "Okay, see you later."

Turning my attention back to Zhen, I stepped closer, cornering her. I spoke in a seductive tone as she turned to face me. "So, tell me why you have been avoiding me?"

She turned her head to the side. I could see her swallowing hard as her throat tightened and released. Walking closer, I tried getting her attention, but she was avoiding my gaze.

Taking hold of her chin, I forced her to look at me as I continued. "Are you going to give me an answer?"

"I have nothing to say," she replied blandly.

Stepping closer, I held onto her chin and leaned in. Our lips were inches apart as I spoke. "There is always something to be said. So don't tell me you have nothing to say."

Looking into her eyes, I could see the desire in her growing. I knew she wanted to kiss me. But she wouldn't say it. Letting go of her chin, I moved in more. She stepped back until she was up against the back wall.

There was no more room and nowhere to go. Placing my hands on the wall beside her head, I studied her. Her chest was moving rapidly as her breathing became heavier.

"So, are you going to say something? Or are you going to be a scared little puppy tucking its tail between its legs before running off?" I asked in a low tone.

She opened her mouth to speak, but I stopped her by placing my finger over her lips.

Leaning in, I whispered in her ear. “Shhh..., I do not think you have enough backbone to talk to me, little girl.”

Stepping back, I turned and started walking away. I had barely taken three steps when she spoke behind me. “You’re right, but I don’t have to tell a goody two-shoes what to do, do I?”

I smiled, hearing her tone rising. Turning slowly, I looked at her for a bit. “Me, a goody two-shoes? You clearly know nothing about me,” I said, walking back to her.

Zhen stepped back again, retreating to the wall. Stopping before her, I straightened myself out to tower over her. “Now,” I said, breathing in hard. “Tell me again, but do it to my face.”

She straightened out as well, pushing her chest against mine as she replied. “I have to say, you’ve done a nice job of building your body, considering that everything you consume is fed to you on a silver spoon.”

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I had to bite back the laughter. I had no idea where she was coming up with this stuff. Smiling, I shook my head. “That’s quite a mouthful coming from a pedestal princess,” I shot back at her.

She lifted her finger to my mouth. I felt a tingling sensation run through me as she proceeded to move lightly over my lips. She kept her eyes locked on mine as she moved down my neck. Once she got to the middle of my chest, I felt her nails lightly digging in.

Swallowing hard, I tried to calm my throbbing dick, but there was no hope as she started dragging her nails down my body. She stopped just above the top of my pants. As she grabbed hold of the top, I gasped.

Zhen gently pushed me back against one of the shelves. My mind was running at the speed of light as wild thoughts came and went. It felt like she had me by the balls, and I would follow any command she gave. I had lost all control, and she had become my master.

“This pedestal princess knows how to take care of herself,” she breathed out over my lips. Her sassiness could clearly be heard in her tone. Letting go of my pants, she lightly tapped my nose before walking past me. Turning, I watched as her hips swayed.

“Stop,” I managed to get out before she left.

Zhen turned, glaring at me.

“Come with me to an estate party, most of our clients will be there. But before you say no, just think about it, as you were the brains behind most of our latest projects,” I said in a begging tone.

“I don’t know about that,” Zhen breathed out. “I don’t think I’ll be any good at such events.”

Her answer wasn’t the one I wanted or expected. I wanted to get to know her better. I had to. Sighing, I shook my head as I decided to guilt her into going.

“Nope,” I said, stepping closer. “That won’t work. I want to show off the brilliant mind behind the latest projects. So, you kind of have to be present. Besides, you worked so hard. You deserve a break.”

Zhen groaned lightly before nodding in agreement. “Great,” I said, heading past her to the door. I’ll send a driver to pick you up around seven.”

Stopping at the door, I turned back. She was almost standing on top of me. “Oh, and wear something red. It brings out your eyes,” I added before leaving.

I was still smiling as I got to my truck. I had a good feeling about tonight. The drive home wasn’t long, as my mind was occupied with thoughts of Zhen. I analyzed my emotions, realizing I cared about her. But more than that, I wanted her.

Thinking back to all our interactions, I could see it more clearly. But the fear of pulling her into my life, the bratva life, was holding me back. It was the thing that kept me from pushing or actively pursuing her, even though I felt the attraction from the moment I laid eyes on her.

Parking my truck, I raced inside and took a quick shower. Standing in front of my closet, I scanned my array of suits. I couldn’t decide which color would be best to

enhance her magical look. I had to compliment her beauty, and I knew a red dress would contrast perfectly with her skin.

Deciding on a light grey suit, I got dressed. Looking in the mirror, I was satisfied. This would surely make her appearance stand out more. I wanted her to look at me with that intense hunger in her eyes once more. Grey wasn't my color, but I knew she liked the subtle colors.

I had coffee and waited for the time to pass. I could barely contain my eagerness to see her and introduce her to the world. Staring out the window, I realized my feelings for her were growing. I wondered how far I could go with it.

Glancing at my watch, I saw it was time to go. I had to ensure the caterers were on time and the venue was ready for the first guests.

Chapter 12 - Zhenya

I stopped as I walked through the door at the party, feeling slightly nervous. Glancing around, I confirmed there were no Chernykhs present. I mean, really, did I think any of my family would attend a real estate function?

They had better things to do with their time. In all my years, none of them had ever shown any interest in real estate. I was the only one. This event was hosted by the Dubow and Morozov alliance. Plus, the project I worked on was more of a Dubow one.

I was ecstatic about being allowed to take the lead on this one. I enjoyed every moment, and if Akim felt I had to meet these people and clients, so be it. Searching the room, I saw him standing at a table to the side of the bar, talking to an elderly couple.

He noticed me as I moved through the crowd, trying to get to him. Akim smiled as he came towards me. “You look stunning,” he said, kissing my cheek.

“Thank you,” I replied, glancing at the floor. My cheeks felt slightly warm.

“Come, let me introduce you to some of our clients before we get a drink,” he said, holding out his arm.

I placed my hand on his forearm. We walked back to the table where the couple was waiting. “This is Zhen, our dream project planner with fabulous ideas,” Akim said.

“Well, then,” the man replied, extending his hand. “I’m sure glad you joined the team. I love the changes you suggested. It seemed to bring the project together seamlessly.”

“Well, thank you,” I replied, blushing slightly. It felt strangely satisfying to be seen in such a high-valued light. I wasn’t sure what else to say as I had never received compliments like these.

“Excuse us,” Akim said to the man. “I have to introduce her to a couple of people.”

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The man lowered his head, touching the rim of his hat. We stepped back and walked to the bar. Akim got us each a glass of champagne. “I think this evening calls for a celebration, don’t you?” he said, handing me the glass.

I took a sip and scanned the room. There were so many people. Then Akim took my hand and led me through the crowd to three men standing by an exit door. “Guys,” he huffed as we got closer. “Meet Zhen. She is the one who made the last changes that added that exquisite garden to your complex.”

The men turned to us, smiling. They took turns shaking my hand and thanked me for the suggestions. Before we could discuss anything else, a big guard drew Akim’s attention. He listened to the guard before turning to me. “Sorry, I must deal with something. I’ll meet you at the bar?”

I nodded and watched as he disappeared through the crowd. Heading to the bar, I walked in a wide circle, greeting some of the staff I had met before. There were people from all walks of life. I could clearly see the elite as they had a composure unlike any of the other people. I felt sure many of the people there had some form of bratva connection.

Before I reached the bar, I saw Akim returning. Coming to me, he held out his hand as he spoke. “Let me introduce you to some of the other people,” he said, grinning.

Taking his arm, I could smell his cologne as we squeezed through some of the people. It was a light odor with a hint of musk and ocean. I wondered if he had changed brands. It was an alluring scent, and I found myself smiling for no reason.

After another couple of introductions, I was surprised to find myself having fun. I never enjoyed the parties I attended with my family. Yet, this was different. I was the hot topic.

We approached an older man with a pretty young brunette on his arm. Gesturing to the man, Akim introduced me. “This is the owner of the renovation company that handles our upgrades.”

After saying this, he turned to the man as he continued to speak. “This is Zhen. The woman is in charge of the last three projects.”

The older man looked at me, his eyes roaming just for a second before settling on my face. I was glad he could look me in the eye as he spoke. It made me feel less like an ornament or side piece. “Pleased to meet you. I have to say, your work on the last project was just above amazing. The suggestions you made added improvements beyond expectations.”

I smiled, replying pleasantly. “Thank you, and I have to say that your company's work is formidable.” Everyone we spoke to was overly impressed by my work. I was happy and felt light on my feet.

He returned my smile, nodded, and then headed off. We walked around the room, chatting to the guests. Most of the ones we spoke to were either investors or developers. Yet, there were also some cattle farmers, and a couple of people just looking to expand on their land.

As we spoke to some of our satisfied clients, I realized what it felt like to be appreciated and valued for your effort. These people, these strangers, respected me and saw my abilities. I was walking around on clouds, and it was all thanks to Akim. He made me part of his company and believed in me from the first presentation.

It felt good being seen, and soon, I would be able to step out from under my family's shadow. Akim followed me around like a love-sick puppy, hovering over me like a concerned mother. Each time our eyes met, I felt a light firing up. He made me feel alive, and I valued it. I loved that he was aware of my every move and that I could watch him in his element.

His hand slid down my back, coming to rest just above my ass as we moved away from the people. Once we were at a reasonable distance, he leaned in, capturing my lips in a passionate kiss.

Pulling back, he rested his forehead against mine as he spoke. "I have to tell you that I am so proud of you. You've done a beyond amazing job so far, and all the people love you."

I couldn't stop the smile of joy spreading across my face, and felt my cheeks heating up. He first kissed one cheek and then the other, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"You're amazing tonight, perfectly holding yourself," Akim whispered.

Meeting his eyes, I swallowed the sudden onslaught of saliva accumulating in my mouth. His happiness even shone through his eyes. He took a step back and looked at the crowd of people.

My stomach made a big turn. My chest tightened as my guilt seemed to be trying to strangle me. Yet, I smiled. I had to ensure he didn't notice the change in me. An elderly man with a big hat came up behind him.

I watched as the man leaned in and spoke to him. Akim grinned at me, nodded, and walked off with the man. My pile of guilt was ever-growing, and I thought this was just one more item to add as I watched him disappear in the crowd.

How could I let him know he didn't need to hover, as I knew this part of bratva life all too well? Plus, I had no idea how he would react to finding out I was part of this life. Or worse, that I was, in fact, a Chernykh. He believed I worked for them, but if he knew the truth...

Turning around, I felt my skin turning to ice as I saw my brother across the room. What was Timofey doing here? He was talking to two girls, seemingly drooling over him. I couldn't take a chance that he would see me.

"I have to go," I said to the women, still asking about the amenities of the development. "Sorry, we'll set up a meeting to talk about all your concerns."

I didn't wait for her reply before moving away. I still had too much to accomplish. A lot was riding on me being successful. If he found me, he would want to know what I was doing here.

My family all knows I have never been one for this side of the bratva life. I had never had an interest in a glamorous lifestyle, even though my father always dragged me along.

Sliding in behind two large men chatting at one of the tables, I tried to peek through the gap between them. I waited for Timofey to turn before heading down the side wall of the room.

Moving slowly, I desperately searched for Akim. I saw the man he was talking to earlier, but Akim was no longer with him. I couldn't find him and started to panic. Where could he have disappeared to?

Walking through the doors of the private bar at the back, I froze. There he was with a tall, skinny bimbo about to straddle him by the looks of it.

Akim was sitting on a bar stool with her practically on top of him. Her arms were wrapped around his neck as she seemed to whisper in his ear. His smile stretched from ear to ear. Whatever she was saying had surely made him happy.

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Even from here, I could see her beauty. Her sleek body, perfectly sized breasts, and ass were prominently on display in the dress she wore. She was the kind of woman I was sure most men fantasized about.

My emotions were on a rollercoaster ride as I stood there watching. I could be sure if what I was feeling was anger, jealousy, or disappointment. Maybe it was a little of all mixed in one.

Suddenly feeling sick and unable to breathe, I knew I had to get out. I needed to leave. Seeing him with her was only making me doubt myself. I didn't need this kind of drama in my life.

Glancing around as I headed for the door, I tried to see if my brother was still there. I didn't see him and assumed he had gone to the bar, bathroom, or maybe he had left. I was sad but felt relieved that he didn't see me. If it were one of my other overprotective brothers, there would have been hell to pay if they saw me.

Stepping out into the cool evening air, I inhaled deeply. My anger was boiling. How could I have been so careless and stupid? What was I thinking? He wasn't a one-woman kind of man. I should have known better.

Walking toward my condo, the wind rustled the leaves on the top of the trees. Looking up, I wondered if it might rain. The air was surely cool enough, and it had an earthy smell.

My heels clicked as I stomped down the street. My mind was distracted by images of Akim and that beautiful blonde. Reflections of them in shady situations blew around

inside my head. Clenching and releasing my fists, I tried to calm the emotional turmoil inside.

After several blocks, I felt my rage starting to calm. Feelings of disgust and disappointment replaced it. I walked from the bustling business area and entered my residential area. Looking back to see if Akim had maybe noticed and come after me, I spotted a man not far behind.

He stopped and looked up into the sky. Something about his actions felt off. I swallowed hard as I turned back and continued to walk. Mentally, I reminded myself to keep an eye on him.

After the recent events, and not knowing who the target was, I couldn't be too careful. Plus, I was still a bit shaken by everything. The light turned green. I started walking again. I glanced in some of the store windows now and then, checking if he was still there.

As I got closer to home, the traffic and the people lessened. There were some stores in my neighborhood, but most closed around eight.

As I ran, I noticed all the shops were closed, and the street was deserted. I hadn't seen another person for the last two blocks except for the stranger a little distance behind me. Looking into one of the store windows, I caught a glimpse of his reflection.

I had to look again as I could swear he was carrying a gun. On my second look, I knew for sure. My head felt like it was suddenly swelling as the realization of the situation hit home. Without thinking, I took off running. I heard the man cursing before the soft whistling sound came past my head.

Did he really just shoot at me? I was glad he missed, but I felt the bullet graze my ear. A thin line of blood ran down my neck. It was hot yet felt cold at the same time. I let

out a shout as I ran faster than I had ever before in my life. I was slightly amazed that I could run like this in heels.

My heart jumped into my throat. I knew my life depended on the distance I could place between us. There was no time to think. I had to allow my body to react.

Turning on the next corner, I ran into a group of young men and women exiting a bar. As I struggled through them, I heard their protests and grunts, but there was no time to waste. I had just gotten through them when I saw the opening of a dark alley. I quickly considered my options. Enter the bar, ask for help, or run to my condo.

Glancing back at the group, I decided they seemed drunk and distracted. Looking at the bar, I saw the sign in the window had just changed and now read 'Closed'.

My building couldn't be far. So, I decided to make a run for it. Ducking into the alley, I stayed against the dark wall, going a tad slower so I would make less noise. Exiting the alley, I saw the condos looming up front.

Glancing back, I realized that I had lost him. But I had no intention of stopping. My calves were on fire, and my lungs were battling to keep up. As I turned the corner, I saw my building coming into clear view.

Stopping, I stood for a second on the corner, hiding in the shadows. I had to ensure no strangers were lurking or suspicious cars waiting. Not seeing anything out of place, I rushed over the street and entered on the side. I skipped the elevator and took the stairs.

Slipping off my heels, I ran up the stairs to my condo. My hands were trembling so badly that I had difficulty entering the correct pin. The door clipped open on the third try.

I practically fell into the apartment. Scrambling to my feet, I shoved the door closed and bolted it. Turning, I exhaled deeply as I slid down the door.

Shivering and scared, I wrapped my arms around my knees as I sat against the door. What was happening? The attacks kept on coming. I had to tell someone, but who?

My brothers would be furious with me. They will surely lock me up and throw away the keys. They just see me as a subordinate. So, calling them wasn't an option. I let out a small scream as my phone rang.

Throwing out the contents of my purse, I searched for my phone. Staring at the name on the screen, I felt my throat closing. Tears stung my eyes as it felt like the world was closing in on me.

Chapter 13 - Akim

It felt like I was losing my mind as I scanned the room, but couldn't see Zhen. How could she have just left without a word? I walked through the people in disbelief. Heading to a quiet corner, I pulled out my phone and dialed her number.

It rang and rang. After a minute or so, the call ended. I tried again and again several times. But she didn't answer. Cursing under my breath, I tried once more. I didn't want to give up. She had to understand that this wasn't how professionals behaved.

If there had been an emergency, she should have told me. My anger had almost risen to a point of rage. I wanted to smash something. Not answering was worse than leaving without a goodbye.

As I was about to hang up, she answered. There was a second of silence before her voice came through. My anger instantly turned to worry as I heard her shaky tone.

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“Yes..., what..., what do you want?”

She was breathing in and out fast and hard. For a brief moment, I felt suspended in fear. Everything I had planned to say, to preach to her, flew out the window.

“What’s wrong? What happened? Where are you? Are you okay?” I asked hurriedly.

My mind was flooded with all kinds of questions and images after all we’d been through not long ago. I heard her whimpering, which made me realize she was on the verge of tears. Something was very wrong.

She didn’t respond, so I asked again.” Zhen, are you okay?”

I listened as she mumbled, but I couldn’t make out what she was saying. “Zhen!” I huffed as fear crept into my mind. What had happened to her? Why was she in such a state? If they hurt her, I would go on a killing spree until I found the person responsible, I told myself.

“I’m...,” she started saying, then breathed in hard. “I’m not sure.”

This answer wasn’t comforting. It only made me more agitated. “Where are you? Let me come to you,” I asked half pleadingly.

“Home,” I heard her saying through her sobs. “I’m... home.”

I was glad I could hear her even though she was crying frantically. “I’m coming, stay put, I’ll be right there,” I replied, hoping she heard me through her crying. “Stay on

the line, don't hang up, okay?"

Heading out to my truck, I listened as there was a loud thump noise. "Zhen?" I called out as I placed the phone in the dash bracket. Pulling out, I floored the gas. I had to get to her quickly. "Zhen, hang on, I'm coming." I could still hear her sobbing, but it sounded further away.

I sped through red lights and skipped stop signs. The city view passed by me in a solid blur. Pulling into the condo parking, I barely stopped before jumping out. I had to ensure she was safe. My heart was pounding in my chest. It felt like it was going to crush my lungs, but I kept going.

Taking the steps two at a time, I quickly got to her door. Raising my hand to bang on the door, I stopped mid-air. Glancing around, I took a deep breath. I knocked twice. The sound echoed through the hallway. I hoped no one had heard.

I heard a shuffling on the other side of the door, and then the lock turned. The door opened, and Zhen stood there with a bat in her hands, held up high. She was ready to swing. Raising my hands in a gesture of surrender, I spoke softly. "Hey, it's me."

She looked like hell. Her hair was hanging in messy strands down the sides of her face. Her face was white as a sheet, but her cheeks glowed red, and her breathing was shallow. Brown streaks ran down the middle of it from all the crying. I noticed her eyes were bloodshot as they once again filled with tears.

Zhen let out a small whimper as she barreled forward into me. I heard the bat clanking as it hit the ground and wrapped my arms around her. She was clutching at the material of my shirt on my chest, letting out soft sobs. I could feel her body trembling.

Stepping inside with her, I closed the door behind us and exhaled loudly. I have never

been so relieved to see someone as safe as I was at that moment. I tried to pull her head back so I could look into her eyes, but she forcefully buried it back into my chest.

“Thank you,” I heard her breathing out against my chest. Zhen took a couple of deep breaths, calming her tears slightly. I had so many questions about what had happened, but I wanted her to be calm first.

I had never been inside her place. The last time I was here, I only got as far as the door. The entrance was small, but on one side was a small table and a coat stand. Before me, the place opened to the condo through an archway. I could see half of the kitchen and half of the lounge from where we were standing.

“Come on now,” I said, pulling her back gently. “You’re safe now, I’m here.”

Zhen looked up, giving me a tired smile before nodding. I picked up the bat and placed it on the small table. “Let’s have some tea,” I added, placing my arm around her middle.

We walked through the archway. I could now see the entire place. There were two closed doors to the left on the other side of the lounge. To our right was the kitchen and breakfast nook.

Zhen walked around the counter and filled the kettle. I was burning to know what happened, but I waited for her to be ready to tell me. I wasn’t going to push. I wanted her to open up to me on her own time.

She opened a cupboard above the kettle and took out two cups. As she placed them on the counter, her tears started again. Zhen covered her face with her hands as her body started shaking again from sobbing.

Moving around the counter, I pulled her back into my arms. “It's okay, I'm here,” I whispered, rubbing her back. Trying to stay calm, I decided to ask. “Can you tell me what happened? Why did you leave the party?”

I waited as she took another couple of deep breaths. Her breathing was more irregular, though. “Zhen,” I said softly. “Whatever it is, you can tell me. I'm here for you.”

Holding her tightly, I could feel her body starting to relax as her sobs faded. She took my hand and led me to the lounge. She flopped down on the couch, wiping her eyes before tapping the seat next to her.

I sat down and took her hands in mine. Squeezing them tenderly, I prompted her again. “You know you can tell me anything. I care for you and will do what I can to keep you safe.”

She looked up, and our eyes met. There was something there, but I couldn't figure out what. “At the party,” she started saying, then took another deep breath. “I was looking for you. Then I saw you with that woman...”

“Zhen,” I said, feeling guilty as I realized where she was going with this.

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“No, wait,” she huffed. “Let me finish before you say anything.”

Nodding, I waited as she inhaled slowly. “I think I was jealous and a little angry, so I left. I decided to walk home as it wasn’t that far. But about halfway, I noticed a man following me.”

As her words sank in, I felt my blood starting to boil. Not again, I thought. They were my enemies. Why were they harassing her? I was unknowingly placing her in danger. I had to make this stop!

I got up quickly as I wanted to call Alexandr and let him know we needed to act. But Zhen grabbed my hand and pulled me back down. Snapping out of my anger fit, I looked at her, realizing she wasn’t done. “Sorry,” I mumbled as I settled back in and held her hands again.

“Luckily, I noticed the gun in his hands and started running. He shot at me but missed, and now here we are,” she lightly touched her ear as she spoke. And then I saw the mark the bullet had left.

“He shot you?” I asked, hearing my tone rising. Reaching out, I softly touched the dried blood on the rim of her ear. My heart was pounding like a raging bull, and my chest felt tight. Pulling her into my arms, I spoke softly. “I’m glad you’re alive. I will take care of this.”

Guilt and anger flooded every inch of me. I wondered which of our enemies was so cowardly to come at her instead of directly at me. The only ones I could think of that would maybe do things this way were the Aslanovs. They must have realized I was

the one that screwed with their alliance.

They must have been following me and watching. Realizing I cared for Zhen, they most likely decided to get back at me. But even so, this wasn't the way we handled business. This complicated things slightly, but I would find a way to ensure her safety.

Pushing these thoughts to the side for now, I focused on what she needed. "Zhen," I said, lifting her head. "I can assure you that the woman means nothing to me. I have no interest in her. She is a college, nothing more." I hoped my tone conveyed the sincerity I felt, and I hoped it would reassure her.

But I saw the flicker of doubt in her eyes as she looked at me skeptically. Grinning, I continued. "I promise you I haven't been with anyone else since meeting you. You have something special."

Zhen glanced away, but I saw the blush spreading across her cheeks. Her luscious lips pulled up as she smiled. I was pleased to see her relaxing.

Glancing at me, she spoke in a soft tone. "Will you stay the night?"

I nodded without having to think twice. "Yes, I will stay with you," I replied.

Getting up, she smiled at me. "I'll be right back," she said as she walked to one of the closed doors. I watched her as she went into what looked like a bathroom. She came out looking refreshed.

"A movie and hot cocoa?" she asked as she came past me, heading to the kitchen.

"That sounds nice," I replied, getting up.

Looking around, I saw several photos of her and two other women arranged on the bookshelf. I wondered if it was her sisters. I realized I didn't know much about her. There were a variety of books, but most appeared to be about business and marketing. There were one or two crime books and a couple of suspense fantasies as well.

These weren't the kind of books I would have imagined her reading. I found it alluring. Zhen cleared her throat as she came back with two hot cups of cocoa. Taking the cups, I placed them on the small table before the couch.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked as we sat down.

She smiled at me as she picked up the remote and cuddled into my arm. "Yes, I am," she replied. "What would you like to watch?"

"Surprise me," I replied, hugging her.

She scrolled through a list of movies for a bit before selecting one and pressing play. I felt her relaxing towards me as we started watching. My attention was so focused on her that I didn't even notice what movies she had put on. I didn't care much about movies, but I would watch anything with her.

Glancing at the screen, I saw that she had put on a cartoon movie. I smiled as I spoke, "You know," Zhen looked up at me. "You are weird, but so cute. You're like this crazy little package of jumping beans."

She frowned, looking slightly confused. Using my thumb, I softly rubbed her frown, wanting her to relax her face. Pulling back, she spoke softly. "What do you mean I'm cute but weird? I can only be the one or the other, not both!"

Placing my hand on her cheek, I smiled at her as I responded. "You can be both silly. I called you weird as you selected a cartoon out of millions of movies..."

Zhen opened her mouth to speak, but before she could get a syllable out, I placed my hand over her mouth. “I’m not done,” I said. “The reason I think you’re cute is because you know we are adults, and yet, you chose to watch a cartoon.”

She kissed my fingers, making me pull my hand back. “It’s soothing,” she huffed, settling back into my shoulder.

The movie was about halfway through when I felt her getting heavier. I was glad that she would be able to sleep. “Hey,” I whispered, lifting her head. “Lay on my lap. It will be more comfortable.”

By the time the movie was finished, she was fast asleep. Sliding out from under her, I used one of the couch pillows to prop under her head. I pulled the blanket over the back of the couch to cover her.

I stood for a moment, looking at her sleeping. Moving to the kitchen, I called Alexandr. “Akim, it’s late. What’s wrong?” I heard him say as soon as he picked up.

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At first, I didn't know what to say. I stood staring at her. She looked so peaceful. I wasn't sure what to do. I had to do something, but couldn't get them involved yet.

"Akim?" I heard Aleksandr saying again. This time, his voice boomed through the phone.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "Sorry, brother, I'm not sure why I called. I think I'm just overworked and tired. Sorry, good night." I hung up before he could reply.

What was I thinking? I have no details about the people after us. And knowing my brother, he will be pissed knowing my instincts were blocked by feeling. He always preached that we needed a clear mind to get things done. With these feelings, I was sure to do things half-assed. I would cause more trouble than I would solve.

Walking back to the couch, I sat down on the floor before her. As I spoke, I placed my arm over her, caressing her hair with the other. "I promise I will ensure no one ever lays a hand on you." Leaning forward, I kissed her forehead. I lowered my head to my hands, staring at her. "I will stay with you as long as you need me," I whispered.

Chapter 14 - Zhenya

It had been two days since the party and the horrid running for my life. My legs had recovered, but my nerves were on edge. I couldn't help glancing around everywhere I went. It still felt like someone was watching me.

Akim spent the night and offered to do so every day, but I couldn't allow that. It was

a sure way for my brothers to find out about us and what I was doing. Both Akim and I kept our heads down and focused on work.

No one could know about our relationship. We didn't want to get reported for workplace liaisons. We could get into a lot of trouble with the Dubow and Morozov families. But that wasn't the biggest problem. Mixing with a Dubow was forbidden, according to Iosif. If he found out, he would surely lock me up and throw away the keys.

We had to keep it under wraps at work and outside. If either of us wanted to live. I felt bad that Akim didn't know what he was getting himself into, but I had to keep up appearances until I had proven myself.

My sisters and brother Lukyan pitched up uninvited last night. If Akim had been there, we would have had an issue. My sisters actually only came to try and convince me to move back in with them. But I couldn't, not anymore. Lukyan usually came along with them. He kept an eye on them. Protecting them was part of his duties.

Iosif wanted to assign Timofey to me and some guards, but I refused. I didn't want or need protection. Although these last couple of weeks, I wasn't so sure anymore.

As the day progressed, I felt less stressed. Everything had been smooth sailing, and Timofey hadn't called or pitched up yet. So, I felt sure he hadn't seen me. Maybe I will get my way after all.

I packed up my files and switched off the computer. It was almost lunchtime. I ordered Chinese and headed to the kitchen. Once I got our drinks, I would wait for the food and meet Akim in his office, just like yesterday.

As I reached reception, the elevator doors opened, and Timofey stepped out. Our eyes met, and I could see he was on a mission. Shit. He had seen me.

Moving swiftly, I walked towards him. I grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him along into the little kitchen. “What are you doing here, Timofey?” I asked. I was feeling a bit flabbergasted.

He had that smug grin on his face, that, I know your secret look. I hated it when he got like this. He made me feel like a naughty child as he looked me up and down.

Leaning forward, he looked into my eyes as he spoke. “Well, I saw you at the party. So, either you’re hanging with someone here, or something else is going on.”

“No, nothing, nothing, I promise,” I replied quickly. I was shocked. I felt so sure he hadn’t seen me. Turning away, I took two cups out of the cupboard and put the kettle on. “Do you want some coffee?” I asked, smiling.

“Tell me what’s going on here!” he insisted.

“Nothing’s going on. I do not know what you mean,” I said, smiling innocently at him.

Timofey lightly tapped my shoulder as he spoke. “I know what you’re doing!”

Turning back, I stared at my brother, trying to look confused. “What do you mean you know what I’m doing?” I asked.

“You know Iosif won’t agree with this. He is going to be very upset when he finds out,” Timofey huffed.

“Timofey,” I said, taking his hands. “Please, please, I’m begging you. Don’t tell anyone I’m here. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me. Besides, I’ve taken all precautions. Nobody here knows who I am, except for a handful of our own people.”

I swallowed hard as Timofey pulled his hands from mine. “No,” he replied harshly. “I cannot do this. I can’t be colluding with you on something so big. What if Iosif finds out, or Avgust? Our brothers will not be happy that you have tricked them and so many others.”

“I know,” I pleaded. “But, please, I have to prove myself. Nobody will ever believe that I am capable of more than being a pretty face and running errands. Yet, I am, and I can prove it. I promise you things will work out. Please keep my secret just a little longer?”

“I don’t know about this,” he replied.

I pleaded with Timofey, begging him with my eyes as I looked up into his. “Brother, please. I need you to be on my side for once.”

He shook his head, glanced around, and then spoke. “This isn’t going to work out well for you, Zhenya.”

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“It will,” I insisted, taking his hand. “Please just give it time.”

“I’ll have to think about it,” he said, sighing and pulling away. “But when this backfires, remember these words, it will. It’s going to be a bigger explosion than you bargained for. There will be hell to pay.”

I gave him a sincere look as I spoke. “I promise, it’s just work. There’s nothing shady going on here. No bratva involvement. It’s a legit business. Plus, I was responsible for the success of the latest projects. I handled the management and did the presentation.”

“Well,” he said, raising his brows. “I must then congratulate you, as we were all impressed by that one. But know this, if there is anything reckless going on, I will tell. And that means I’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

Feeling somewhat better, I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Thank you for the vote of confidence. You will not regret this,” I said, stepping up to him and hugging him. “And that’s fine,” I added as relief washed over me. “It won’t be an issue.”

The door swung open, and Akim stormed in. I could see the tenseness in his shoulders as he scanned my brother. I looked at Timofey, pleading with my eyes that he would keep his mouth shut. I couldn’t let him mess with my plans.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” Akim spat. His tone was slightly elevated, and I could hear the anger coming through.

My brother extended his hand as he introduced himself. “I’m Timofey Chernykh. I

came by to check on operations.”

Akim did not shake his hand. He looked him up and down before speaking. “Well, now, I’m sure she told you operations is one floor down,” Akim huffed, rubbing his chin. “So, what exactly are you then doing in the kitchen with Zhen?”

“Zhen? Oh, yes, well, I know her from previous projects we worked on that she was involved in. She offered me a cup of coffee, so I walked with her,” he said, glancing at me. I could see the questions he had, but he bit them back.

“Okay,” Akim said. I could hear the irritation in his voice. “I take it you then got what you actually came for or needed? Or is there something I can assist you with?”

Timofey glanced at me. He nodded and then answered Akim as he moved past him. “No, I’m fine, thank you. I’ll be in touch.”

Looking down at the floor, I felt terrible. The way Akim treated my brother wasn’t nice, but then my brother wasn’t nice either. But he did keep my secret even though he wasn’t pleased with me. For that, I was grateful.

Chapter 15 - Akim

This morning had been meeting after meeting, taking up most of my time. I couldn’t wait for it to end. Things had been a little stiff between Zhen and me since the run-in with Timofey yesterday.

Even though I hadn’t personally worked with any of the research done on the Chernykhs or the internal politics around the alliance, I had heard his name more than once. This wasn’t only through my siblings or the Morozovs, but he was also well-known in the bars.

As I understood from multiple sources, he was a notorious playboy. This didn't sit well with me where Zhen was concerned. I wasn't obsessed with researching the Chernykhs and learning all there was to learn about them. But I knew who the siblings were. Iosif was the man in charge, his second was Avgust, and then there was Timofey and Lukyan.

I had nothing against his lifestyle choices. Hell, I was one at a time, too. But seeing him with Zhen ate at me. It was like a growing cancer trying to take control. I couldn't just let this go. I had to know.

As my last meeting finished, and the people cleared out, I took a deep breath. I sat down and started to file the paperwork. Suddenly, the images of Zhen and Timofey flooded my mind.

The more I tried to push the thoughts from my mind, the more they came back. It was driving my anger to new heights. Standing sharply, I sent my chair rolling back. Clenching my fists to my sides, I stormed towards her.

She rose from her chair as I got to her desk. "Can I do something for you?" she asked. I stood frozen in time for a moment. Looking into her eyes, I wasn't sure if I should ask. "Akim?" she said louder.

Shaking my head, I asked the question that was burning in the back of my head. "Are you into flirty guys then?"

Her cute smile instantly turned into a frown. She folded her arms across her chest as she spoke. "What?" I could hear the astonishment coming through.

"Do you like guys that go around flirting with every other woman?" I spat back at her, folding my arms across my chest.

She grabbed the papers from her desk. Clutching them to her, she stormed past me into my office. She didn't say a word, but I followed on her heels. When she turned after placing the files in the cabinet, I stood in her way.

We were inches apart. She looked up, searching my eyes as she spoke. "Where did you get that idea?"

I could not pull my eyes from her lips. I was so angry. But at the same time, I only wanted to kiss her.

She lightly smacked my chest with both hands. Stepping back, I looked at my chest and then back at her. "What did you do that for?" I asked.

"Well, why are you asking me ridiculous questions that are rude, in my opinion?" She huffed.

"There's nothing rude about it. I asked because it appears you like hanging around flirty guys. That one, he flirts with anything that has a skirt." As the words left my mouth, I could hear the harshness in my tone.

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She turned her head slightly to the side, looking confused.

“That Timofey guy is bad news. If you’re not into flirty guys, you do not know what you are getting yourself into with him.” I said in a lighter tone as I moved around my desk and sat down.

“How can you say such a thing? You do not even know him,” she huffed, moving closer.

“Oh, I know him, and guys like him better than you think,” I spat back. “He’s a notorious playboy.” The atmosphere was changing. It was light and playful between us.

She gasped as she stepped closer. She was now standing just before me. She lifted her hand, waving a finger at me as she spoke. “He’s not. You have no right to judge others. Especially people you do not know.”

I smiled at her as she spoke. “Why are you smiling? There’s nothing funny about this.” She was still waving her finger in my face. Moving swiftly, I bit at it, only catching the point.

She stopped and held her hand to her chest. Her mouth hung open as she stared at me. This made me laugh even more. She punched me softly on the shoulder. I stood sharply, grabbing her by the shoulders, pulling her closer. Her eyes went wide. Our eyes were locked, but I could feel her breathing was heavy as her shoulders moved.

Lowering my head to her face, she didn’t move. But I could see she was waiting for

me to kiss her. I stuck out my tongue and licked her nose. Zhen giggled as she moved her head to one side. This was perfect, I thought as I moved in and licked her neck and ear.

She pulled her shoulders up, covering her neck and ears while she laughed. She placed her hands on my chest and started pushing me away. But I held her so she couldn't get away. She wiggled in my arms as I lightly pinched her sides. I could feel her legs getting weaker as she wobbled a little. I turned her around in my arms and walked her backward.

Once I knew she was pinned against my desk, I moved both hands to her side. I started tickling her again. As she squirmed, I softly bit her neck. She was trying to say something between the fits of hysterical laughter. But I couldn't make out what it was.

"Please, stop, please. I'm going to wet myself," she finally managed to get out.

I stopped, allowing her to take a deep breath. Holding her hips, I lowered my head to her chest. Her breathing was heavy from all the laughing. But she was smiling from ear to ear.

She tapped my chest. I lifted my head and placed my hands on her cheeks. Zhen did the same, staring at me. Her eyes were hypnotic, and I felt enthralled. It was like she was sucking my soul out just by looking at me.

No longer being able to control my body, I leaned forward and kissed her. She kissed me back as her hands moved over my chest. I stepped closer, pushing her against my table. Taking hold of her neck, I kissed harder. She parted her lips, allowing my tongue to explore her mouth. She tasted sweeter than any honey I have ever had.

Pulling back an inch, I stared into her eyes as I spoke. "You look amazing. Every

curve is perfect.”

I noticed the blush spreading across her cheeks as she smiled. She placed her hand on the back of my neck, pulling me back in for another kiss. Pulling back, I kissed her neck before whispering in her ear. “You always look so juicy; I could simply take a bite. I want to eat you up.”

Zhen didn’t say anything, but I noticed the blush spreading wider. Reaching around her, I swiped the paper from my desk. With them out of the way, I could proceed. She glanced at them as they scattered across the floor. Taking hold of her chin, I turned her attention back to me.

I lightly took her bottom lip between my teeth and pulled softly. Zhen moaned as she placed her hands behind my neck. Picking her up, I lowered her onto my desk. I kissed her hard before standing up. Placing my hands on her cheeks, I slowly moved down her neck, over her shoulders, and onto her breasts. As I squeezed them, she moaned again.

She looked at me, keeping eye contact as I grabbed her shirt with both hands. Ripping it open, I sent the buttons flying through the air. She had a slightly shocked look but said nothing. I could see the desire in her burning like flames in her eyes. Lowering my head, I placed my tongue below her belly button. I dragged a line up her body to her bra.

I moved my hands firmly up her sides. As I reached her bra, I took hold of it and ripped it open. Her breathing had become jagged, and her chest rose and fell in quick session. Leaning over, I nibbled at one nipple and then the other. Zhen moaned louder, arching into my mouth.

Moving up, I kissed both sides of her neck before heading down her body. I kissed her sides, and her stomach, stopping just above her pussy. She still had her skirt and

panties on. It was in the way.

I looked into her eyes as I moved my hands up her thighs. Moving in under her dress, I took hold of her panties and pulled them down over her legs. I held it up in the air before letting it drop. Zhen smiled.

Lowering myself between her legs, I lifted her skirt. I licked her sweet pussy from the bottom up. Zhen arched her back as she moaned. Using my tongue to separate her folds, I teased her as I moved it up and down slowly. Zhen pushed her fingers through my hair as I pushed my tongue into her.

Her grip tightened in my hair as I devoured her. She was moaning loudly, lifting and lowering her hips as pleasure overtook her. I felt her pussy tightening and stopped. It was time. I rose to my feet and stood for a moment, admiring her breathtaking beauty.

She opened her eyes and stared at me. I could see she was wondering why I had stopped. I undid my pants and dropped them to the floor. My dick sprung up hungry for her. Stepping closer, I gave it a little taste as I moved it up and down her folds.

“Stop teasing me,” Zhen breathed out softly.

I wanted her to explode from the passion, but the more I worked her up, the more my body reacted. My desire for her was unbearable. I slowly pushed my dick into her overflowing well of pleasure.

Lifting my face to the ceiling, I howled as pleasure vibrated through me. She felt so good. Warm, tight, and soft all at the same time. As I moved in and out, I knew that I wasn't going to last, as I was almost past the point of no return.

We were a perfect fit. It felt like I was melting into her every time we made love. Grabbing her hips, I held tight as I thrust into her. I wanted to fill her up and become

one with her. Zhen placed her hands over mine as I moved.

Our synchronous moans filled the air around us. Zhen arched back, moving her head from side to side, shaking her hair loose. I stopped and flipped her around, pushing her down onto my table.

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Spreading her legs, I bent down and licked her sweet pussy. Smacking her ass, I penetrated her from behind. Her nails dug into my desk as she scratched it. Seeing it and hearing the screeching sound drove my lust to new heights. I increased my thrust as she lifted her head and let loose her loud moans.

As I felt my desire reaching the bursting point, I grabbed hold of her hair and softly pulled her head back. I wrapped my other arm around her waist, holding her steady.

I increased my speed a little more and felt her closing around my dick. Pushing into her hard, I felt her release as I spat. Turning my head up, I tried to calm my breathing.

Turning to me, she inhaled hard as she tried to catch her breath. I took her face in my hands as she started speaking. “What am I going to wear now?”

Smiling at her, I stepped back. Walking away, I replied over my shoulder. “I have an extra shirt you can borrow.”

As I turned back, she was behind me. She took it from me and put it on. Turning to me, I couldn’t help but smile. “Wow, that shirt looks good on you,” I said jokingly. Her breasts were loose under the fabric, which made her look more delicious. I licked my lips as I continued. “I can eat you up.”

Zhen lowered her head, but I saw the blush spread across it.

Chapter 16 - Zhenya

A smile tugged at my lips as I thought back on the last couple of days. Glancing at

Akim, I felt the rush of happiness flow through me. I tried to memorize every perfect little detail of his face in the light of the movie reflecting over us.

He smiled at me, and my heartbeat increased. My stomach filled with butterflies, and I couldn't get enough of him. He had booked the entire movie house for one evening to give us more privacy.

The blood rushed to my cheeks as memories of this last week played on repeat in my mind. The images were so vivid that it was like living it all over again. Akim softly tapped my hand. Looking at him, he smiled. "Give me some of the popcorn your hogging," he asked.

Blushing, I looked down at the popcorn in my hands. I was holding it to my chest without even knowing. As I held it out, our fingers brushed once again, and the butterflies in my stomach took flight again. Every time he took something that would happen, I was sure he was doing it deliberately.

The way I sometimes caught him staring at me when I explained something or was giving a presentation always took my breath away. He made a point of buying lunch every day. We would sit together on the small deck he added to his office, staring out at the park.

It felt strange to have someone care for me in such a way. But I felt honored knowing I was the only one he had eyes for. My attention was drawn back to the movie as someone screamed. I wrapped my arm around his, resting on my thigh.

That move earned me one of his gorgeous smiles. "What do you think of the movie?" he asked. His voice was almost a whisper. He searched my eyes as if he could see into my soul. Those emeralds of his had a glistering to them.

"It's good," I replied, looking back at the screen. It wasn't my kind of movie, but we

each gave up something to share other things. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught him leaning in.

“We should do this more often. But next time, we could go for a walk, have a picnic, or see a show,” he whispered into my ear. His lips brushed against me, sending a chill down my spine.

“We do when you have time, but lately, you’ve been busy,” I said, glancing at him. I felt like a love-sick puppy. I was willing to do just about anything for him.

“I can make time,” he stated matter-of-factly.

I laughed as I responded. “You’re joking, right? I know what you do for a living.”

“You deserve nothing but the best,” he added, brushing a strand of hair out of my face. Turning to him, I searched his eyes for a moment before shaking my head.

“Lucky for me, I already have the best,” I replied softly. If it wasn’t for the smile pulling across his face, I would have been sure if I said it. The pulsing sound coming from behind my ears was working overtime. My breathing was louder than normal, and my heart was racing.

Akim placed his arm around my shoulders. “Would you like to get a milkshake or something after the movie?” he asked, kissing my head.

“Yeah, that sounds nice,” I replied, leaning into his arm. I tried watching the last part of the movie, but I wouldn’t focus. It kept returning to our dates, our touches, and stolen kisses.

This wasn’t our first night at the movies. I know he didn’t like it and only did it for me. However, the previous two movies were action movies full of violence. Yes,

growing up in a bratva family, I was used to it. But I didn't enjoy it. Especially after seeing him kill those men before me.

But he treated me. We were watching a romance tonight. I would have preferred a cartoon. But he hated those.

"You want to tell me what's on your mind?" he suddenly asked. It was almost like he could sense my attention wasn't there.

Tilting my head back, I smiled at him. "I was just thinking how lucky I am," I replied before pressing my lips to his in a deliberately slow kiss. Sparks flew between us. I found my thoughts wandering again. I could spend the rest of my days with my lips glued to his perfectly lush ones.

"Let's go for a walk," I added, laughing as I pulled him up. He came willingly. We exited the theater and headed to his truck. "No," I said, pulling him back.

"I thought you wanted to go for a walk?" he asked, turning his head from side to side.

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“Yes, I do,” I added. “But we can walk from here. The city has no lookout point, so we’ll just walk a bit.”

Akim took my hand and walked with me down the street. On the corner was an ice cream shop. As we entered, he pulled me closer. His grip was firm but didn’t hurt. He ordered two ice creams with sweet goodies on mine.

As we walked out, he leaned closer, whispering. “You know, you’re even more beautiful under the moonlight.”

My stomach did a somersault. For a moment, I was speechless. “I’m considering walking you home every night, just so I can see your skin glow under the moonlight,” he confessed. He wrapped his free arm around my waist and pulled me closer.

“You’re crazy, Akim,” I managed to say between laughs. Shaking my head, I repeated myself. “You’re crazy.”

“Nope,” he replied. “I’m just crazy about you.”

Despite my best efforts, the heat rushed to my cheeks. “Stop,” I begged, trying to catch my breath. His grip on my waist tightened as we started back to his truck. The night air was cool, but with him so close, warmth spread through me like a quiet fire.

As we reached the truck, he stopped. “I mean it,” he mumbles, pulling me impossibly close. “You’re breathtakingly beautiful, especially when you’re flustered.”

Pulling away, I lightly smacked his shoulder. Turning away, I buried my face in my

hands as I mumbled. “You really don’t know when to stop, do you?”

“Not when it comes to you,” he said teasingly. But there was something deeper in his tone. I shudder.

“You cold?” he asked, wrapping his arms around me. I nodded. “Come, let me take you home,” he said, walking to my side of the truck. The drive home was quiet as my mind kept playing over every interaction.

He stopped and jumped out. He pulled me into his arms as we walked to my door. “I’ll walk you home every night if you let me,” he said. His tone was softer, and there was no teasing; it was just sincerity.

I swallowed hard as my pulse quickened. “You really are crazy,” I replied, looking at him.

His lips twitched into a smirk. But instead of replying, he leaned in. He pressed his lips to my forehead before kissing me. As she pulled back, his thumb brushed my cheek. His eyes searched mine as he spoke. “Sweet dreams, beautiful.”

I watched as he stepped back, hands in his pockets. He gave me one last smile before turning and leaving. I took a warm shower, and before I could jump into bed, the doorbell rang. I thought it was him returning and opened the door without looking.

“Forgot something?” I asked, then inhaled sharply as I saw Misha and Lukyan standing before me.

Misha turned her head to the side, smiling. “No, but apparently someone did.” She huffed as she invited herself inside. “So, tell me more?”

“Misha,” I replied, turning to face her. “I have my own life, you know. What are you

doing here?”

“Elisse and I are going to a show next weekend and wanted to know if you would like to join us. But I guess not, seeing as you have someone you appear to be doing things with?” she asked suspiciously.

“I have work. It is all the company I need. Thanks for the invitation, but no, I am busy next weekend,” I huffed, waving her out the door.

Misha grinned, walked out, and turned before speaking again. “Okay, we’ll leave. But you must come around sometime and tell us all about this work keeping you so busy.”

“Yes, yes,” I replied, nodding as I closed the door. “Good night,” I called through the closed door.

Getting into bed, I smiled up at the ceiling. Sleep stepped in and carried me away almost instantly.

I was in the office before Akim. Last night was magical once again, and I was walking on clouds. He barely greeted me as he entered. Making his coffee, I wanted an excuse to go to his office. Not that I had ever needed one.

Walking in, I held my head high. I placed the cup before him and smiled. The low hum of the city barely reached his office. But this morning, it sounded loud. I moved to the door leading to the small deck and closed it.

Walking back to his desk, I shifted some papers around, pretending to organize them. My focus was entirely on the man in the leather chair before me.

His fingers tapped idly on the armrest. His other hand held a pen that I was sure he

didn't even notice as he was watching me.

I felt the weight of his gaze. It dragged over me like a physical touch, slow and unhurried. I didn't look up right away. I kept my eyes on the documents. I knew what I would find in those eyes when they met mine. A possessiveness, amusement, something dark, yet known.

"You've been staring at me for the last five minutes," I murmured, flipping the page I was pretending to read. "Don't you have work, boss?" I glanced at him, grinning.

A deep chuckle rumbled from him. The next moment, his hand was wrapped around my wrist. He tugged gently, pulling me towards him. I gasped as I stumbled forward. His grip was firm but soft. His thumb grazed the inside of my wrist, moving in slow, circular motions.

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“I’m a busy man, Zhen,” he mumbled. His voice was thick with amusement. “But I’m never too busy for you!”

I rolled my eyes at him. But my pulse betrayed me as it quickened. I’ve come to know him this way. Possessive, playful, and constantly pushing boundaries. Not that I minded. I liked his way.

Tugging my wrist free, I straightened myself, forcing a professional expression. “You have a meeting in twenty minutes,” I said.

He leaned back in his chair as he replied. “And?”

“And,” I said, stepping in behind him. “You need to focus.”

Resting my hands on the back of his chair, I leaned down, speaking close to his ear. “Behave, and maybe I’ll reward you later.”

Before I could move, he had swung around. He curled his fingers around my hips. His grip was once again firm. The smirk playing on his lips was downright dangerous. “You’re playing a risky game,” he said under his breath. “A promise is a promise and must be fulfilled.”

“Am I?” I asked, raising my brows.

His hands slid up my sides and over the silk of my blouse. He squeezed my breast just enough to make my breath catch. Before he could continue, there was a knock on the outer door.

I stepped back just in time as my office door opened. I held my face composed. Akim merely sighed. He rubbed his jaw as if debating whether to ignore the guard.

Waving at the guard, I motioned for him to come in. I grabbed a file off Akim's desk and pretended to be reading it.

Akim barely acknowledged him. His attention was still half-focused on me. I kept my posture professional, flipping through the file. But I could feel his eyes burning my skin.

"Yes, what is it?" I asked, realizing Akim wouldn't answer.

"The new CCTV system is up and functioning," he said, grinning at me.

"Thank you," I replied, waving him away.

The man nodded and left. I barely got a moment to react before Akim was on top of me. He stood behind me, his hands sliding down my back to my waist. I could feel him pressing against me. "I don't like it when other men look at you," he murmured. His lips grazed my ear.

I smiled, shaking my head as I replied. "He wasn't looking at me."

He hummed unconvinced before whispering in my ear. "You wouldn't know, would you?" His fingers tightened slightly on my hips, grounding me. "Too busy pretending not to be affected by me."

I turned in his arms. Tilting my head up to meet his gaze, I spoke softly. "Who said I'm pretending?"

A shadow of something dark flickered in his eyes as he leaned in. His lips brushed

mine in a slow, teasing kiss. It's brief, barely enough. But I knew what he was doing. He was punishing me for playing with him earlier.

"Zhen," he uttered, pulling back just an inch. Resting his forehead against mine, I felt his fingers digging into my waist. "You drive me insane, you know that?"

"I grinned as I slid my hands up his chest. "Good," I said. "Someone has to keep you on your toes."

He groaned, dropping his hands to his sides. He inhaled deeply again, calming himself. His lips grazed my skin. Not quite a kiss, just a whisper of warmth. "If we weren't in the office right now," he breathed out.

There was a second knock at the door. Lifting his head, he glanced over my shoulder. Akim swore under his breath.

Laughing lightly, I stepped out of his grasp before he could pull me back. "Duty calls," I teased.

Akim exhaled sharply. He was clenching his jaw as he watched me pulling my clothing straight. "Tonight," he whispered, his voice filled with promise of pleasure. "No distraction, no interruptions. Just you and me."

I nodded, biting my lower lip to prevent my smile from stretching across my face. "Looking forward to it, boss," I huffed.

As I moved towards the door, I felt his gaze following me. Just before I stepped out, I heard him speaking. "You're mine, beautiful. Don't forget it."

I glanced over my shoulder, meeting his intense stare. "Never," I replied, smiling. With that, I stepped out of his office with a bounce. I was already counting down the

hours, minutes, and seconds.

I had barely organized the new clients when he came out. Stopping next to my desk, he spoke softly. “I have to leave, but I’ll see you tonight.”

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“Can’t wait,” I replied, smiling up at him. I watched as he walked out and down the hallway.

My phone rang. Picking it up, I saw it was Iosif. I jumped up from my table. I walked at an increasing speed to the bathrooms. As I entered, I answered. “Yes, brother, how can I assist today?”

I heard him grumbling under his breath before he spoke. “Family meeting tonight, don’t be late.”

Before I could reply, the line went dead. Walking to the basin, I felt my heart drop to my feet. How can he do this, I thought, staring at my reflection. Walking back to my desk, I played my responses over and over in my head. If I only had the opportunity, I told myself, knowing I would never say no to Iosif.

I flopped down into my chair. I was relieved Akim had left for the day. I wouldn’t have been able to cancel with him if I had to look him in the eyes.

Sighing, I picked up the phone and dialed Akim. I tried to keep my tone normal as I spoke to him. “Hey, Akim. I’m sorry, but I have to cancel our dinner. Something has come up that cannot wait. Can I get a rain check?”

“Oh, ok,” he replied, sounding distant. “I guess that’s fine. Is everything okay? Can I help with something?”

“Yes, no, I mean no. Everything is fine. I’ll call you when it’s done. Maybe we can still have that dinner or meet up for drinks?” I asked.

“That sounds nice. Let’s do that then. I’ll be waiting for your call,” he replied before hanging up.

I felt bad that I had ditched him, but I had no other options. Finishing up, I headed to the Chernykh mansion.

Upon my arrival at our family home, I found all my siblings already gathered. I entered the lounge, nodded in greeting, and sat on one of the couches furthest away. I never had much to say and wasn't interested in hearing about things where, according to them, I didn't have a place.

As the youngest, I wasn't given any responsibilities. So, I mostly sat in silence, getting bored to death. I was only there because my father used to insist we all attend. Should something happen to the men, we knew what was going on.

I sat back, kicked off my shoes, and placed my feet on the coffee table. I tried to look interested as I listened to my brothers discussing packaging warehouses, gun orders, drug development, and delivery schedules. They had so many aspects to talk about. Then, they also talked about the projects for the Vasselievs.

Iosif glanced at me, giving me his usual disapproving look. I pulled my feet off the table. Sitting up straight, I felt bored. I wanted to leave. I had better things I could be doing. Like going out with Akim on a date. But I knew I had to be here.

We only held family meetings once a month, and I was sure the three of us women were invited only so we wouldn't feel left out. It wasn't like they needed us or even wanted us there. Plus, I had to ensure that Timofey kept his mouth shut.

Then I heard Avgust mentioning something about the Dubow Morozov real estate project.

“Yes,” Iosif said. “I’ve seen some of the work. The Dubow Morozov Alliance with that real estate company has been making a splash. Some of those appear precisely planned and executed. I wonder who their secret weapon is. I see a great future for them if they keep it up.”

“Yes,” Avgust agreed. “I second that. Maybe we should take a closer look at the projects. See if there is anything we could assist with.”

Hearing this made me very happy. I was thrilled as I was in charge. Yet, I couldn’t share this knowledge with them. Not yet.

I sat on the edge of my chair, intently listening to them. They were praising one after the other estate project. Complimenting one’s design, one’s appearance, and then something else on another. Every time, something else amazed them.

It was so nice listening to them. I couldn’t help but smile as I knew I had a hand in all of those.

Once the meeting was concluded, Iosif looked at us. “Right, how about we grab a nightcap before heading in our separate directions?” Grinning, I got up and followed them into the kitchen. On the table were bottles of alcohol, wine, a coffee pot, and some juices for people like me who didn’t drink.

Each of us poured our own drink. Then they split up into their little clusters, chatting away about whatever interested them. Timofey came waltzing up to me. Lightly taking hold of my arm, he dragged me to the corner.

“Why haven’t you spoken up?” he asked, looking confused. “Aren’t you proud of everything you’ve done? I mean, look at how pleased they are with the estate projects.”

Shaking my head softly, I replied confidently. “No, Timofey. Please, the time is not right. This stays our little secret. If Iosif finds out, he will pull me out of this. You know I need it. I need to prove what I can do before we tell anyone.”

He pulled me into a light hug. “I understand,” he said, glancing around. “But I must say, well, compliment you rather on the great job you’re doing.”

Grinning, I gave his hand a soft squeeze as I replied. Thank you.”

Turning, I looked at my sisters. They were standing on the other side of the table. I listened as they discussed fashion, beauty products, and changes they planned to make to the house.

I was the only one staying in a condo. Iosif, Avgust, Lukyan, and Timofey all live in our parents' home. Misha and Elisse, my two sisters, stayed in a townhouse. They still seemed to be taking care of each other.

Being the youngest, I’ve always been a little left out of the group. My two sisters were like twins. They did everything together as they got along the best out of all of us. They didn’t want places of their own; they insisted on living together.

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I, on the other hand. I wanted to be alone, to have my independence. I wanted the chance to prove what I could do.

Once we finished our drinks, we shared some hugs and goodbyes. Then, I returned to my condo.

As I got home, I took a quick shower. I was tired from spending the whole day with my family. I loved them, but sometimes they could be a little too much. As I came out of the bathroom, I heard my phone ringing.

“Hi there,” I breathed out into the phone. “How has your day been?” We talked for a while. Hanging up, I smiled as I got into bed. He was such a wonderful man.

Chapter 17 - Akim

The last two days had been more than amazing. As I entered the main office building of my family, I struggled to calm my mind. I couldn't stop thinking about Zhen and our date. Every day, I wanted more of her. I always felt like I wasn't getting enough.

I had something special planned for tonight. This date would sweep her off her feet. But first, I had to get through the boring family meeting. I knew a lot was going on for all of us.

Everyone just wanted to ensure that all the endeavors ran according to schedule. We had to update the Morozov and Chernykh families as well. But I felt it was something we could have done in emails.

Stepping off the elevator on the top floor, I glided into the boardroom on cloud nine. I was high on life, and my mind was in another place.

“Well, good to see you are still alive and looking mighty well,” Anton breathed out as I entered.

I smiled at him and scanned the room. Everyone was already there and seated. “Am I late?” I inquired, glancing at my watch. They all looked so expectantly at me. I stopped and shifted my tie.

“No, no,” Alexandr replied, standing up. “We were all early. But I have to say you look good compared to the way you seemed when we came to see you that first week. Tell us what’s changed. How’s business going?”

Pulling out a chair, I flopped down into it as I spoke. “Business is fine, nothing new to report. We’ve made a couple of good, solid deals in the last two weeks. Everything is on schedule and progressing nicely. Is there something specific you wanted to know about?”

“Not at the moment,” Alexandr replied. He turned his attention to Abram, and I felt relieved. I could continue my daydreaming as they discussed other matters.

I only heard half of all the discussions as my mind drifted to Zhen. I wondered what she was doing. I knew a couple of presentations needed to be sent before we could go out. I hoped she would get them done on time. If not, I would go back to the office and assist her.

“I must say, the office park complex blueprints look amazing. Did you do those by yourself?” Shaking my head lightly, I looked at Anton as he lightly touched my shoulder. I hadn’t even noticed he had come around to my side. “So, did you?” he asked.

“Yes, and no,” I replied, grinning.

“Now, that is a peculiar answer,” Anton said. “So, tell us more?”

“We were wondering because it seems you are excelling tremendously. When you started, you said it couldn’t be done. But look at it, you are thriving,” Abram added.

My grin changed into a large smile as I thought about Zhen taking the lead on many projects, including this one. I was snapped back to reality as Anton slapped me on the back while talking loudly. “Well, there you have it, boys. Something has changed. Just look at him. To what can we attribute this marvelous change?”

Looking up at him, I knew what the grin on his face meant. Anton would not stop until he got the truth from me. They all wanted an explanation for the sudden success.

“Well, now that you mention it,” I said, rubbing my chin. Glancing at their eager faces, I smiled. Pointing at Alexandr, I continued. “You see, I took your advice and hired a PA.”

“Well, congrats,” Alexandr interrupted.

“Thanks, but you don’t see the whole picture yet,” I huffed, sitting forward. “This woman strolled in and has been doing a lot of the work by herself. I was hesitant to hire her as she...”

“She what?” Anton asked. Everyone was smiling and waiting eagerly for me to continue.

“I thought she might be a spy. That she was sent to report back. To make my life a living hell as she works for the Chernykhs.”

“What?” Abram asked. He got up quickly and came closer. “You think hiring her was then a good idea?”

“Yeah, but no more. She is straight out of the best. She does fabulous work, and I must say, she loves it. It is her passion. So, no, I no longer think she is a spy for them,” I concluded.

“In that case,” Alexandr said, tapping Anton on the shoulder. “I think we must definitely make a point of meeting her. This is curious, though. Let’s remember to set a meeting, okay?”

“Okay,” Abram interrupted. “Back to business then.” He looked at Anton as he continued. “We need confirmation that the weapons cache has come in and the delivery schedule is going as planned?”

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Anton gave me a smirk and then turned his attention to Abram. “It’s on schedule and going as planned. There have been no issues of late. So, I think we can proceed with business as usual.”

“Excellent,” Alexandr added. “Tasha, is there anything on your front we need to know about?”

“Well,” Tasha said. “It appears the Chernykhs are letting up on the Vasilievs a little. Their workload has come down, for which all of us are grateful. Vadik is currently busy with operations for the Morozovs. I am working with Evelina, searching for the company circulating the new street drug. Other than that, all is good.”

“Okay, sounds good. Keep me updated on the new drug, please,” Alexandr replied.

Tasha smiled and nodded as she responded. “No problem, will do so. But as I said, everything is running smoothly.”

Anton suddenly cleared his throat. He shifted in his chair and added his voice. “Yes, everything on our side is also going well. I have sorted the trucks. The warehouses are secure, and we’ve added new guards to our homes.”

“Excellent, well then, I guess the meeting is done,” Alexandr said, getting up. He stood in the door as we got up and started heading out.

Taking my hand and shaking it hard as I got to him, he leaned closer as she spoke. “Akim, please set up the meeting. I think the sooner we get it done, the quicker we can all rest. Plus, I want to meet the woman who placed that smile on your face.”

Grinning at him, I nodded. "Sure, bro, no issue. I will find out when she is available and send you a message. Then you can check your schedule and let us know."

He nodded in reply and let go of my hand. This meeting went better than I could have imagined. I felt happy and excited. The new meeting would also be the perfect time to introduce her as my girlfriend.

I intended to officially ask her out at dinner. This way, we could do things right. I knew my family would love her as much as I did. Stopping halfway across the driveway, I glanced back at the house. "Had I just thought that?" I asked myself.

Well, this evening is just full of surprises. I was happy with how things went and decided to call Zhen. I wanted to tell her how much my family loved her work. Besides, I couldn't miss an opportunity to tease her a bit.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I dialed her number. I listened to it ringing as I walked to my truck. It stopped as I got there. Unlocking the door, I tried again. It wasn't like her not to answer me.

Then I remembered she had scheduled overtime as she wanted to complete a project. Looking at my watch, I realized she could very well still be at the office. I took a deep breath, feeling a slight nagging concern creep in. "No need to panic," I told myself.

Hopping into my truck, I pulled out a bit too fast. I looked in my mirror as the pebbles and sand filled the air behind me. If Alexandr saw this, he would have a field day with me.

Placing my phone in the dash bracket, I redialed her number. Was she so busy, she didn't even hear it ringing? Something felt off. Ending the call, I pressed a bit harder on the gas. I didn't want to attract unwanted attention, but I had to get to the office.

I had barely gone five blocks when the alarm bells went off on my phone. It vibrated so badly that I couldn't see which alarm it was. I knew it was one from the office building. As I took the next turn, I saw it was the fire alarm. Looking up, I saw smoke rising in the distance.

"No," I shouted as I floored the gas. I no longer cared if the cops picked up on me. I had to get to the office. I hoped she wasn't inside, that she had made it out. I drove like a bat out of hell, swerving left and right through the traffic, swallowing the trepidation building up.

Chapter 18 - Zhenya

Zoning in on my work, I tried to finish it as quickly as possible. I wanted to get out. I wanted nothing more than to join Akim on our special dinner date. We've been planning it all week, and I wasn't going to miss it.

There was the opening of a new fancy restaurant that he wanted to try. I have never liked the glamour of life, but for him, I could go. He also sacrificed for me, so it was the least I could do. Besides, people have said the food was divine and a must-try. I knew there was one in the capital, on the coast, and somewhere else, but I've never been.

It was hard to contain my excitement. Just being with him made life worth it. I had just filed the last of the paperwork and could almost leave. I heard a blaring alarm as I decided to get a last cup before finishing the projections.

I jumped as I had never heard it before. I closed my ears with my hands. It was deafening. Scanning the hall and office, I saw no reason for the alarm. I wondered if it was a break-in. I took a deep breath, trying to calm the growing fear. I had no idea what was happening, and it made me uneasy.

Looking around, I tried to decide what weapon I could use. I finally decided on the standing lamp. Unplugging it, I turned out the bulb. Taking it by the top, I swung it as if it were a baseball bat. This might work, but it was a bit heavy.

Deciding I needed something better, I left my office. I crouched as I moved towards reception. Looking around, I found nothing better to use. Then it dawned on me, the kitchen.

I slowly made my way there. If it were a break-in, that would be the best place to hide. Plus, it had lots of weapons. However, if it was another attempt on my life, I was probably not safe anywhere. The best I could do was prepare myself.

Entering the kitchen, I gently closed the door before looking through the drawers. The biggest knife I could find was a bread knife. Staring at it, I whispered. "I guess you'll have to do." Besides, I didn't have any other options.

The alarm stopped ringing. Opening the door just a smidge, I peeked out. I didn't hear or see anything out of place. Then, the alarm started up again. Closing the door, I sank down in the corner. "I have to call someone," I said aloud, realizing my phone was in the office.

Opening the door slowly, I considered running back to get my phone. But as I looked through the place, I noticed it was quickly filling with smoke. A fire? I could now also smell it. I saw red flames licking the walls towards the stairs and elevator.

There was no way out. I slammed the door shut and looked around frantically. The window was too small to fit through. I placed some towels on the floor by the door, trying to keep the smoke out.

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Biting my nails, I tried to think. I had to find a way out. At the last door down the corridor, I was sure I had seen a board that said, 'Fire Escape.' Pulling away the dish towels, I opened the door. Staying on the floor, I crawled towards the hallway. As I started moving into it, the flames blew over my head, consuming the ceiling.

"No," I shouted, moving backward as quickly as I could. Moving back to the kitchen, hoping to find safety, I felt my lungs start to burn. By the time I entered the kitchen again, I was coughing wildly.

I moved through the kitchen door and slammed it shut. The place was already engulfed by smoke, but I hoped it would clear with the door closed. I noticed tiny red tails through the smoke, trying to get through the pantry door. I knew this wasn't a good sign.

The fire alarm was still blaring in full force above me. My head ached as I struggled to formulate an idea. Looking back at the pantry door, it looked like the flames were fighting the door for freedom.

Trying to see through the smoke, I hoped to find the kitchen door. Maybe it would be better in the big open space of the reception area, I thought. I coughed, and my throat burned. I was struggling to catch my breath. The air was thick, and it felt like I was swallowing tar.

Feeling frustrated, I knew I wouldn't find the door in this. I lay down on the floor, placing one of the dish towels over my mouth. I tried not to breathe in too heavily. The air was thick. It was hard as my lungs needed air. I felt panic slowly taking control.

Tears slowly escaped as I tried not to panic. I knew I had to conserve the little air I still had. “Akim will come. He will find me,” I mumbled as I pulled myself into a ball. But the heat within the room was rising sharply.

I knew the door had to be against the wall somewhere. Getting up, I stumbled around like a blind man, feeling every nook and cranny. My head spun, and I felt faint. I knew I had to make haste, or I was going to die in the kitchen.

Taking another step forward, I felt the hot steel of the handle. Relief washed over me for a second. As I opened it, a gust of wind blew me forward, and I fell to the floor. My head hit something on my way down. Rolling to my back, I tried to see, but I couldn’t.

As a coughing fit took over, I rolled to my side. The strength of the couch shook me as I was breathing in black air. I tried to look for a window, but the flames were now everywhere. I tried getting onto my knees so I could move away, but I had no strength to lift my head.

Closing my eyes, I was about to give in to the heat and smoke. Suddenly, I felt large hands pulling me up. I tried to fight back, but my swings were weak. Before I knew it, I was hanging over someone’s shoulder. Then, like an angel, I heard his voice. “Relax, Zhen, I’ve got you.”

My body relaxed at the sound of his sweet voice. “We need to get out. Hold on, I’ve got you.”

I felt him moving down the hallway and then up some stairs. I bounced like a rag doll up and down as he moved. As he stepped out and the fresh air hit me, I became frighteningly aware of what was happening.

“Put me down,” I mumbled. “We need to go back. We must save the documents.”

Akim kept moving as he replied. "You are safe. That is all that matters."

Turning in his arms, I protested. "No, no, we must save what we can. Please, let's go back in." My mind was racing as I thought of all our hard work being turned into black dust. So, I insisted. "The company can't take such a loss as this, please, Akim, the documents. Put me down, we must save what we can."

He finally stopped moving. Lowering me into his arms, he held me tight as I coughed some more. "Please," I begged.

He frowned and then growled at me. Yet, I could see the concern and care in his eyes. "I don't care if we lose it all. Your life is more important than any document or building."

For a moment, a shock ran through me as his words sank in. I smiled weakly and hugged him. I could hear the crackling sound of the fire behind me. My head still ached, and the dizziness wasn't gone.

Closing my eyes, I coughed again, but this time, it felt like something was stuck in my throat. I could vaguely hear the fire engines as they approached. Knowing he was bratva, I knew he had to leave. The cops would look at this in another light if they saw him.

"You can go," I whispered, feeling faint.

"No, I'm not leaving your side," he said, keeping me up.

I was touched by his words. He was prepared to take on anything just to be with me. He walked back some more as fire trucks started pulling in. With every step, I felt weaker and weaker. I was grateful he was holding me up.

As he took another step back, I felt a strong arm pulling me out of his embrace. Looking up, I saw my brother glaring at Akim. I was glad it was Timofey and not one of the others.

I could feel Akim pulling softly as he swung around to look at us. I felt the fear of this confrontation shake my core. “Let go of her, what the fuck do you think you’re doing with Zhen?” Akim blew at Timofey.

Realizing that the truth would now be exposed, I felt my mind shutting down. Timofey pulled me up as I sank to the ground. “I’m here to protect her!” Timofey spat back.

Akim’s possessive streak kicked into high gear. I could see it in the deadly cold stare he directed at Timofey. His voice sounded more like a roar. “What the fuck do you mean you’re protecting her? What the hell gives you the right to just pull her out of my arms?”

The dread of all that was happening filled me, making me nauseated. Every time I coughed, it felt like my head might explode. The dizziness wasn’t clearing, and I felt weak. I wanted to stop Timofey, but couldn’t. I was sure that if he let go of me, I would drop to the ground.

I knew the words he was about to utter would shatter my world. “As her brother, I have all the right I need to take her to safety and away from you. Who do you think you are?”

Fading in and out, I heard my brother slowly breathe before speaking again. “You should never have been around her.”

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Blinking rapidly, I saw Akim's face fall as realizations started sinking in. I wanted to say something, but except for being weak, I knew the look on Timofey's face. It was one warning to hold my tongue.

Akim stepped closer, but Timofey held out his hand while he spoke. "No, I'm warning you, I will take you down."

Suddenly, everything around me turned black, and I felt my body sinking.

Chapter 19 - Akim

The knot in my stomach grew quickly. My chest tightened as I struggled to catch my breath. Sweat suddenly ran down my face. I felt sick. This couldn't be true, could it? Was Timofey telling the truth?

Zhen went limp in his arms, and he held her tighter. I wanted to pull her from him and rush to get help. But I also knew I had to have all the facts.

My mind whirled as I tried to make sense of his words. Was this who she was? Was she his sister, meaning she was a Chernykh? Had she been lying to me, deceiving me the whole time? If so, this was low even for them.

No, it couldn't be. This couldn't be true! Holding my head, I bit back the scream. Zhen couldn't be Timofey Chernykh's sister; it couldn't be true. He was lying. It just wouldn't add up in my mind.

I couldn't just accept his words for it. I had to hear it from her. Looking at Timofey

with Zhen slumped in his arms, I knew I couldn't just leave her with him. Wouldn't there have been signs if she were who he claimed she was?

No one in the office spoke of it, and surely they must have known if this was true. Why would they not have told me?

"No, Timofey," I argued. "It isn't true. She works for the Chernykhs, you said so yourself. How can she then also be your sister?"

Timofey smiled smugly. "Really? You want to come and tell me that I don't know my own sister? What reason could I have for lying to you now? Zhenya is our youngest sister. So, there is no way on earth I would leave her with you or anyone else," he huffed.

"I agree with having to get her out of here. But I'm taking her to our hideout. Our house doctor can call on her there, and she will be safe," he added as he started turning.

"Then I'm coming with you! I'm not leaving her alone with you," I said insistingly.

"Suit yourself. It's your funeral, buddy," Timofey said as he placed her in his car. Jumping into my truck, I drove behind him all the way. I wasn't going to let him get away with her.

My mind was racing a hundred miles an hour in all directions. I was unable to comprehend what was going on. He couldn't be telling the truth. I dialed Anton's number as I followed Timofey down a small, winding gravel road.

"Hey, brother, what's up?" Anton asked as he answered.

I felt light-headed and nauseated as my stomach made a tight turn. I tried to keep my

tone as normal as possible as I spoke to him. I couldn't have him jumping off the deep end, not knowing what was happening.

"The office building is on fire. I have something to do, so can I ask you to handle it? If I could, you know I would be there, but this is important," I said, hoping he wouldn't ask any questions.

"What?" Anton huffed. "Sure, sure, but are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," I replied shortly. I heard him mumbling something. "Thank you, brother," I added before hanging up. I didn't have time to play a hundred questions.

My head still felt light, and my stomach was as tight as a dog's ass. Nothing made any sense. I was still following Timofey as he pulled into a darkened plot of land. He pulled up to a housesitting in the middle of the property. There were no trees around it, only open flat land.

This was the ideal place, I thought, as I stopped behind him. You could see an ambush coming from miles away. Getting out, I walked closer as he picked Zhen or Zhenya, as he called her, up into his arms and headed for the cabin door.

"Open the door for me," he said as we walked up the steps. Stepping around him, I opened the door and followed him inside. Everything was upside down; it was all so confusing.

Any man in his right mind would have walked away by now, but I couldn't. I needed to know the truth, her truth, not his. "There's a switch by the door," he mumbled.

I flipped the switch as Timofey laid her down on the double couch. He moved past me to the kitchen. I heard a tap running, and then he came back with a bucket of water and a towel.

Bending down next to her, I took her hand in mine. “Zhen,” I said softly, feeling a growing mountain forming in my throat. “Zhen, please wake up. Please tell me it’s not true.”

“Move, you’re in my way,” Timofey grumbled, pushing me to the side. I watched in horror as he started wiping her arms and face with the wet cloth. I could see he clearly cared deeply for her.

“You have to leave now. Get out of here. She’s too weak to deal with this shit right now. You can talk to her once she’s recuperated,” Timofey blew at me.

I stood back, watching as her eyes flickered a little, then closed again. Timofey suddenly stood up, rising like a giant before me. “I said leave!” he insisted.

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“No,” I replied firmly, standing my ground.

“Akim, I said, leave now. My brothers are on their way. You do not want to be here when they arrive. If Iosif finds out, you’re as good as dead. I will step back. It’s not my problem any longer, should that happen,” he added before returning to Zhen’s side.

I walked to the door and then stopped. Turning back, I looked at Timofey. Awe flooded me as I watched him tenderly wiping her down. He removed her shoes and wiped her feet. He was so gentle with her, so familiar.

Thinking back to the day I saw them in the office. I realized her body language was different around him; she trusted him. What I saw as flirtation was a family quarrel. It had to be true. Her luxury condo, the attacks whenever she was around, could she have been the target all along?

Stepping back, I leaned against the door as I felt the life draining from me. Could she really be one of them? Was Zhen or Zhenya a Chernykh? My heart sank to my feet. This wasn’t the kind of predicament I had thought I would ever find myself in.

Pushing myself up from the wall, I walked back. I sat down on the couch next to her. “No,” I huffed. “I need to hear it from her, not from you. I must have the truth.”

Timofey wiped her face again. I noticed her lashes moving lightly. Then her eyes slowly opened.

“Zhen,” I said, breathing out hard. I was relieved that she was alive.

“Akim,” she whispered. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I was stunned to my core. I had no words as shock vibrated through my bones. She didn’t need to say it, but she did. However, I could see in her eyes that it was all true. She had betrayed me. Holding my chest, I knew I had to get out. I have never felt a pain like this.

“Please, you need to understand,” she added. “Please, let me explain.”

Getting up, I shook my head, and my heart sank further. It felt like she had just walked over it. I couldn’t take it anymore. “No,” I replied, waving my hand. “Sorry, no more,” I huffed as I turned and left.

Chapter 20 - Zhenya

I felt my heart shattering into a million pieces as I watched Akim walk out the door. Confusion set in, accompanied by the dizziness I still felt. I coughed as I tried to take a deep breath. This couldn’t be happening.

The smoke inhalation was messing up my thought process and my ability to focus. “Akim,” I called out between coughs.

“Lay back and relax,” I heard Timofey say.

I wanted to get up and run after Akim, but I had to explain to him. But before I could protest, the door swung open. I watched in shock as my brothers and sisters piled in.

Iosif was in the lead, coming to my side. “Are you okay?” he asked, glancing angrily at Timofey. I could hear the concern in his tone, but knew that look all too well. He was hiding his anger behind his care.

“Yes,” I mumbled, still feeling weak.

Iosif took the moist cloth from Timofey as he crouched next to the couch. “What happened?” he enquired as he wiped my forehead.

“Nothing, it was, it...,” I stumbled on my words through a couple of quick breaths.

“You know what,” Iosif spat, glancing angrily at Timofey again. “We’ll get to the bottom of this tomorrow.”

Timofey rose and made space for Misha to sit. She carefully took the cloth from Iosif. “We’ll take care of her tonight. She’ll be safe with Elisse and me,” she spoke softly to Iosif.

“Okay,” Iosif breathed out. “But first thing tomorrow, we’ll talk,” he added, squeezing my hand. I watched as he got up and turned to my brothers. “Find out who did this! I need to know by morning.” He glanced back at me before continuing. “They will pay!”

Avgust, Lukyan, and Timofey nodded. Timofey and Lukyan stepped closer and assisted me up. We moved out to the cars. I was placed in the back of Misha’s car. I could see their love and care, and was grateful to my family. But my heart was bleeding.

I wanted to see Akim. The look in his eyes would haunt me until I could explain everything to him. I had to tell him why I did what I did. I never intended to hurt him. But I knew, for his sake, I had to keep quiet. I needed to hide my heartbreak and pain.

If Iosif or any of my family found out what was happening between us. Clenching my eyes, I bit back the sobs threatening to expose us. There was no telling what my brothers would do if they knew.

We arrived at Misha and Elisse's place with all the family in tow. Lukyan and Timofey assisted me inside. I still felt weak, but most of the dizziness subsided. "Thank you, guys," Misha said. "We've got her from here."

Elisse drew me a bath while Misha made some tea. I felt better but tired once I was clean and had a soothing cup. "I think I'll just lie down for a bit," I said as we walked to the spare room.

"I'll check in on you in a bit," Misha replied as she tucked me in. "Sleep tight," she added, kissing my forehead. We were a tight-knit family, and I loved it. But my mind kept returning to the look in Akim's eyes. I felt the tears silently rolling down my cheeks as I finally fell asleep.

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The smell of onions and garlic infiltrated my nostrils. Fluttering my eyes, I opened them and breathed in deeply. Breakfast smelled divine. Rolling to my back, I closed my eyes again and took another breath.

Images of our mother came swirling in. Seeing her in the kitchen cooking beef in onions and garlic with eggs and beans. I smiled as I remembered running to her. She would turn, pick me up, and place me on the counter as she cooked.

For a moment, all my fears and worries streamed out the door. Then I heard Misha speaking next to me. “Hey, are you awake?”

Slowly, I swallowed the lump forming as reality came flooding back. “Yes,” I replied, sitting up. Misha held out the tray with my breakfast. “Thank you,” I added softly. I loved my sisters. They took care of me after our mother passed. They had always been kind and understanding.

I had always suspected it was because I was the youngest. Misha sat down on the couch by the door, waiting for me to eat. She had a curious look but didn’t say a word. Her eyes were slightly larger than usual, and her brows raised.

With her hair pinned back, she reminded me of our mother. “Thank you, Misha,” I said once I had eaten enough to satisfy her.

She took the tray and headed to the door. “Iosif will be here shortly. Get dressed and come to the lounge, okay?” she added before leaving.

I quickly dressed in the clothes she had left on the dresser for me and headed to the

lounge. Elisse brought out a fresh pot of tea and cups. She had barely placed them down when the doorbell chimed.

Iosif and Avgust came storming in. Iosif looked like he was foaming at the mouth as he came to stand before me. I had never seen him so angry. “What’s going on, Zhenya? What happened at that office fire? And what the hell were you doing there?” he huffed. His tone was so pitched that I felt it vibrating in my soul.

Pulling my legs onto the couch, I hugged them against my chest. “What do you mean?” I enquired softly, looking at the floor.

Iosif lowered himself so he could look me in the face. “What were you doing at the real estate offices? That’s where the fire was, right? That’s where you were?” he spat at me.

It looked like Iosif was foaming at the mouth. If this were a cartoon, the steam would be blowing out of his ears. I have never in my life seen him this angry. He was a calm, levelheaded guy. But this, this was a monster.

“Iosif,” I whispered, swallowing back the tears. “I wanted to prove to you that I could also do things. That I was good at business.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he spat. His forehead bulged as the veins looked like they were about to burst. “Are you telling me you’re working for a Dubow?”

I watched as he paced up and down like a pendulum about to drop. “How did you even get in without us knowing?” he added, stopping before me.

Swallowing hard, I cleared my throat before speaking. “I tricked the employees into believing it was what you ordered so I could pose as a worker. “I’m really good at it,

though. Please, Iosif, you have to see what I've done. I can also contribute to this family."

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Avgust and Lukyan came storming in. "We managed to get it!" Avgust pronounced proudly, holding up a small drive. "We salvaged the CCTV camera footage from the real estate offices."

"You have?" I asked, feeling the blood draining from my face.

"Yes," Lukyan said. "We've seen where the fire started. We could finally identify the men. Most of them are part of the Aslanov crew. They are responsible for all of this!"

I breathed out heavily. If they knew who, they didn't need to look any further. But just as I felt my nerves calming, Avgust spoke again. "We've got a lot of footage. There's about a month's worth."

"Let's see it, maybe we can figure out if they were surveying the place. If so, they knew she was in there and it was a hit on us!" Iosif said, glancing at me.

My heart skipped a beat as I listened to them. No, this can't be happening. If they had so much footage, they would see our stolen moments. The intimate ones between Akim and me. This was going to cause so many issues.

"But, if you know who it was, you don't need more, do you?" I asked, hoping to get them to let it go.

Avgust opened the laptop and popped the drive in. "We need to see if they were following you. If you were the target or the alliance," he huffed back. Closing my eyes, I leaned my head back as they played the footage.

I wish I could simply jump up and get them to stop. But I knew doing that would just

cause a bigger fight than the one coming. I sat in silence. I pulled my legs up to my chest and hugged them, preparing for the reprimand.

Iosif looked at me so sharply that he almost ripped his neck. “What is this?” he shouted. I could see the fire in him burning deeper. This wasn’t his normal way. I couldn’t understand what was happening to my brother.

“I will not stand for this kind of behavior,” he huffed as Timofey entered.

Timofey glanced at the screen and then at me. I knew he knew, but he would never stand up to Iosif. There was an order, and I wasn’t part of it.

“He will pay for what he has done!” Iosif screamed. He slammed his fist into the laptop, shattering it. I let out a small scream as I bounced on the chair. Before I could even try saying something, he stormed out. Avgust, Lukyan, and Timofey stormed after him.

I heard the door slam shut and the cars start up. This wasn't good, no, it was worse than any bad I could even think of. They were going for Akim. Iosif has lost his shit and this was a war.

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For a moment, I sat frozen in fear, paralyzed. Shaking my head, I tried to clear the images. I couldn't believe this was happening. Akim's life was in danger. My brothers were out for revenge, and they would go through anyone who tried to stop them.

Opening my mouth, I screamed at the top of my lungs. I had to get it out so I could think. Misha and Elisse came running in. "What's wrong, what happened?" Misha asked.

"Are you okay?" Elisse added, kneeling next to the chair.

I was breathing in and out rapidly. My lungs felt crushed, and my chest ached like never before.

"Do you need a bag, water, or some juice?" Misha questioned as she started rubbing my back.

"No, no, no," I screamed. "He's in danger."

"Who, dear? Who's in danger?" Misha asked softly.

"Please, sit down. I have something to tell you," I managed to get out between breaths.

Misha sat down on the edge of the table before me. Elisse was on the floor next to me, holding my hand. I spilled it all, emptied the bag, and explained to them how I got in and how the relationship between Akim and me had started. I gave them all the

details, the whole truth.

“I just wanted to prove that I could bring my part into this family,” I added, taking a deep breath. “I wanted you all to be proud of me, and see what I was worth. I never intended to fall in love.”

“Honey,” Misha said, taking my hand and squeezing it. “You’re young and confused. You don’t know what love is. Plus, these men are not like us. They are a violent family. You don’t want part of that.”

“They’re not,” I protested lightly. “We’ve been dating for some time now, and I think I love him.”

“You’re just confused. They’re ruthless. The stories I’ve heard will give you nightmares,” Misha added.

“I’ve also heard many stories,” Elisse chipped in.

“I don’t care,” I breathed out. “You don’t know him like I do. Believe me, he has a brilliant heart. He is a soft teddy bear. He’s one amazing man.”

Misha shook her head softly. She looked down into her lap and replied, “I don’t know. Really? It’s just that it doesn’t make sense.”

“Please, please, believe me,” I begged, holding her hand tightly. “I love him. I want to be with him.”

Elisse patted the hand she was holding as she spoke. “Ok, so, say we believe you. What do you want us to do? You know we can’t stand up to Iosif.”

Glancing at her, I thought for a second before replying. “Our brothers are out for

revenge. They are looking for Akim. I'm afraid for his life. If we can find him first, we can warn him. Please, please help me find him."

I could see Misha was still in doubt. But Elisse seemed halfway convinced. "Well, let's see what we can do. Where will we be able to find out where he went?"

"The office," I said, jumping up and pulling them into a hug.

Misha brought her car around, and we headed to the office. The building was in ruins. But the stairs survived. Carefully, we went up to what was left of the office.

Walking down the hall, stepping over rubble, I had to convey my gratitude. "Thank you both," I said. "Thank you for trusting and believing in me. And for helping me against Iosif's wishes."

Elisse squeezed my hand softly as we entered the office. We were looking for anything that could indicate his whereabouts. Heading into Akim's office, I saw his schedule book on the desk. It hadn't been destroyed. I ran over and flipped through it to today.

"He had a meeting at his brother's place," I said, looking at my sisters. I tore out the page with the address on and headed back down. We got back into Misha's car and headed there.

Chapter 21 - Akim

Sitting in my brother's office at his house, I stared at Alexandr, Anton, and Abram. They all looked so patient as we waited for a reply from the Morozov family. Yet, inside, I felt a wildfire wreaking havoc. I had to know what they had found out.

We had Roman, Sergei, Evelina, and Leo gathered on their side. They were on the

screen before us, but I could see they were looking for something in a stack of files before them. Everyone had a part in the search. Evelina and Leo Morozov were computer whizzes.

They had agreed to recover the burnt camera footage so we could find out who was behind this attack. Glancing up at us, Evelina spoke. “We have gathered a great deal of detail from the footage.”

“A great deal?” I enquired and suddenly remembered some of the intimate moments I shared with Zhenya. I didn’t know who she was at that stage. Should the topic arise, I felt sure everyone would understand. But I didn’t intend to offer up the revelation unless they asked.

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Evelina smiled. “Yes, we have,” she added. It felt like she was looking straight at me.

Glancing at my brothers, I wondered if they had noticed the sweat on my brow. But they seemed to be focused on her and not me. This was a relief. I would tell them everything once this was over. But for now, it was a need-to-know thing.

I had to talk to Zhenya and find out her intentions before making any assumptions. I had developed strong feelings for her and wanted to clear the air.

“We have screened the footage and discovered some of the Aslanov men sneaking in minutes before the fire started. We are confident that it was their doing,” Evelina said, pulling me from my thoughts.

“The Aslanovs?” Alexandr asked loudly as he slammed his fist on the table. I could hear the disgust in his tone and his anger coming through.

“Yes,” Roman Morozov responded. “We are grateful that Akim persuaded us not to ally with them.”

Anton smirked as he glanced at me. “Well, it appears that for once in your life, you were right, little brother,” he said. Turning his attention back to the screen, he continued to speak. “So, what now? What do we do?”

Relief washed over me as I realized it was outside forces, not an inside job. I was momentarily worried that some of the Chernykh men had turned on them. Knowing now that Zhenya was a Chernykh, I considered it could have been an act of retaliation from Timofey.

I smiled as I considered my earlier thoughts. He didn't even know we were seeing each other, so how could I have made such an assumption? The thought now seemed futile.

"Are we going to hit back? This was an open attack on all of us, was it not?" I heard Aleksandr ask.

The Morozovs glanced at each other before Roman spoke. "Yes, it was, and we have to act. But we need a solid plan. We are doing some more digging on them so we can coordinate an attack on all their estates in one go. We will also contact the Chernykh to discuss their contribution to the fight."

"They will pay for what they did," Leo chimed in.

"I must say that we are glad that there was no loss of life," Abram added.

"Yes, so are we," Sergei replied. "But more importantly, is our next move."

The discussion around me faded into the background as my mind went to Zhenya. I almost had a heart attack on my way to the office, knowing she was inside. But I got her out safely. I don't know what I would have done if she had been injured.

She suddenly occupied every corner of my mind. I battled, focusing on the conversation. I couldn't get my mind to return to the room. Even though my heart felt like it had been ripped to shreds and she had made a fool of me, I wanted her.

I couldn't accept that she had been playing me the whole time, and I had fallen for it. I believed what we had was real, but now there were traces of doubt. I knew I had to find a way to meet her in private. We had to talk about this.

Yet, just thinking of seeing her and not being able to pull her into my arms made

breathing difficult. Somehow, I had to get a handle on the pain breaking me.

A loud screeching noise came from outside as a couple of cars pulled up to the house. “I’ll go see who it is,” Anton offered as he headed out the door.

“I’ll go with,” I added, following him out. Abram also moved out with Anton. Before I was properly in the foyer, I heard the raised voices. I could hear Anton talking, but couldn’t quite make out what he was on about.

As I turned the corner, I saw it. In the doorway, Anton and Abram held Iosif and Avgust tightly. I suddenly stopped trying to figure out what was going on. Iosif was screaming something, but it sounded more like ramblings than any language.

“I want his head on a stick. No, I want it on a plate!” Iosif yelled, shoving Anton with force.

“Calm down, let’s talk,” Anton replied. I could hear his aggression coming through slowly.

Then Iosif saw me. Our eyes locked, and it was like looking into the heart of a volcano. “You!” Iosif screamed. His voice pierced the air around us. “You fucking did this! I will kill you with my bare hands. I will rip your head off and spit down your throat!”

Alexandr’s guards had also come to see what the commotion was about. Four men stood outside trying to pull Iosif and Avgust back out the door. Yet, they also had the other two Chernykh brothers to contend with.

Aleksandr’s tone was calm as he spoke. “Why don’t you calm down and tell me what happened? What is the reason for this sudden hatred towards Akim?”

Iosif scoffed, trying to pull free from Anton's hold. I knew this was it; my brothers were about to find out what had transpired between Zhenya and me. Iosif's anger and hatred came through clearly in his tone as he responded. "Your dearest baby brother took my little sister's innocence!"

Silence filled the room as his words echoed through my mind. They turned and looked at me. I knew there was no reason to defend myself as the truth would set you free. I met Alexandr's gaze. Giving him a slight nod, I confirmed it.

I was guilty of this; I had broken the rules of the alliance. Iosif had made it very clear that no romantic alliance would ever be formed between the families. Yet here we were. On top of that, I also took her virginity, and we had an office romance. These were inappropriate.

Then, putting her life in danger over and over again. Well, I had to conclude that it seemed I have fucked up. Alexandr nodded and turned back to Iosif. I didn't have to say anything. He knew me all too well.

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“So,” Alexandr started. “They slept together. I’m positive it was a mutual interaction. She is not a young child anymore, and I’m sure she can and did give consent.”

Iosif pushed and swung at Anton. He almost broke through my brother’s grasp. As our eyes met, he huffed. “You took advantage of my weak and soft sister. She is a child, a helpless one, and you used that against her to get into her pants. You are a disgrace and a scum bag of a man.”

I could take him insulting me, by all means. But the way he spoke of Zhenya, I couldn’t let that stand. I was shocked, realizing how much they looked down on her. They had no respect for her and couldn’t see her capabilities.

I couldn’t take it if he spat out another inaccurate lie about her. I would lose my mind. Stepping closer, I spoke up on her behalf. No man had the right to paint such an awful picture of who she was. “Your sister is an amazing woman. She can look after herself and is one of the hardest-working people I have ever met! She is dedicated and has a brilliant mind.”

It looked like I had smacked Iosif in the face. The room went silent as everyone stared at me. I could see the anger Iosif was holding back. His fists were tightly clenched at his sides. Our eyes were locked, and I would give him what was coming if he dared talk ill of her again.

Alexandr was the first to snap out of the apparent trans my words had brought over the room. He stepped up to my side, facing Iosif. “The ball’s in your court,” he said calmly.

Iosif pulled free and stepped closer. His brothers also appeared to have gotten through the door as they lined up next to him. The tension in the room had skyrocketed. Both sides were gearing up to defend their stance.

“You had no right!” Iosif screamed at me.

“No, you’re wrong,” I spat back. “You’ve got no right!”

As things were really heating up, Zhenya strolled through the open door. She looked like an angel coming to save us. She wore a white dress that had a slit up the one side exposing her leg. It hugged her figure perfectly, and with the sun behind her back, she appeared to be shining.

I felt my heart fluttering, and my anger instantly blissed. She was the image of perfection. I wasn’t going to allow anyone to bring her down. Just seeing her reminded me of how much I still wanted her.

Despite everything she had put me through, I wanted to be with Zhenya. Her silky-smooth voice rang through the air as she spoke. “Stop this nonsense! All of this and everything else is my fault. I was the mastermind, and Akim had nothing to do with it! Hell, he didn’t even know.”

A deadly silence filled the air. It was so quiet we could hear each other breathing. Yosif and Avgust glared at her as if battling to process her words. I was stunned and didn’t know what to say. It took me a second or two to adjust.

Chapter 22 - Zhenya

All eyes were on me. I had burst in and declared that I was the mastermind. Now, I had to confess my sins before so many strangers. What was I thinking? Oh, yes, I know, I wasn’t thinking. All I knew at the moment was that I had to prevent them

from killing each other.

I swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the ball of peanut butter stuck in my throat. I felt guilty, and my heart was still bleeding. Turning my gaze to the floor, I spoke softly. “I had not meant for things to get so completely out of hand. I am truly sorry.”

Glancing from Iosif to Akim, I continued. “I am sorry for all that I have done. I lied to my family and tricked Akim and all the employees involved in this. I did all of it to get what I wanted without considering others. To prove my worth.”

Wiping the single tear that ran down my cheek, I looked at Iosif. His intense stare felt like it was penetrating every inch of me, even down to the bone. For the first time in my life, I felt scared of him.

“Iosif,” I said. I knew my voice had dropped a couple of notes and was barely audible. But fear had gripped me, and it felt like it was strangling me. “I truly didn’t mean for things to go so wrong. I only wanted to prove I was also part of the family. That I could do something. That I was worth more than merely running errands.”

Looking back at Akim, I felt my heart sinking to my feet. My skin felt cold as sweat accumulated on my brow. “I’m so very sorry for hurting you. I am responsible for the affair we started and would understand if you want nothing more to do with me.”

As the words left my mouth, I glanced at his brothers and then back at mine. I could feel the tears stinging behind my eyes. I was on the verge of exploding. But I knew I had to keep it in. They were angry, all of them, and knowing my brothers, someone had to be punished.

“Akim had nothing to do with any of this. He shouldn’t be punished for something he did without knowing all the facts.” I swallowed hard. “He didn’t know who I was. But I can’t keep quiet any longer. I am glad for everything we shared. I will not fight

my feelings for him.”

I braced myself for my brother's wrath and scolding. Especially Iosif's. I pulled my shoulders up, lowering my head as I closed my eyes. This had to happen, I told myself. “There is nothing more I can say than sorry for everything,” I added, wishing the earth would swallow me.

The room was silent for a moment. Opening my eyes slowly, I wondered why Iosif wasn't saying anything. Looking at him, my breath was caught in my throat. He was staring at me, his head slightly tilted. Something in him changed. He looked at me like he didn't know who I was. This was even more disturbing than having him yell at me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Akim stepping up to my side. “No,” he spat. “I will not allow Zhenya to take all the blame by herself. What happened between us was as much my responsibility as hers. Let it now be known that I'll be damned if anyone calls what we had a fling”

I looked at Akim in awe as he defended me. I had never seen anyone stand up to Iosif. “Look,” Akim continued. “Zhenya has had a big impact on the company. She has achieved so much. She handled most of the projects we did with exceptional grace. Plus, she was the lead on them. She possesses a quality that makes her uniquely qualified for this business.”

Akim looked at me and smiled. I felt my legs wobble and my heart skip. “She's the opposite of weak or helpless. She has amazing marketing and management skills. She has a way with clients that none of you would ever understand.”

I could see the shock in Iosif's eyes. No one has ever stood up to Iosif like Akim had, especially not on my behalf. The heaps of praise overwhelmed me. I bit my lower lip, holding back the waterfall of tears.

Akim wasn't even going to allow my brothers to put me down. He was sharing the blame with me. Butterflies fluttered around in my stomach, and my heart swelled as I realized that this was love.

There was no more doubt. I loved this man. He was so different from any other I had ever met. Even my brothers couldn't compare. Staring at him, I knew my sisters' stories about the Dubow men couldn't be true.

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Iosif cleared his throat, pulled his shoulders back, and stood proud as he spoke. “Yes, but even so, there are proper ways of doing things.”

“No, no, no,” Akim huffed. He also pulled his shoulders back, puffing out his chest as he stepped in before me. “I understand there are certain ways we do things. But has she not proven her worth? In my eyes, she has done so over and over. I will not allow you or anyone to take her achievements from her.”

Iosif glanced at Avgust, who was a couple of feet behind him. I had never seen confusion on his face. But it was there now. It was dripping from him like honey from a comb. He was stunned into silence and appeared unsure how to reply.

I’ve never heard anyone ever calling him out like that. He was usually right, and people couldn’t do what Akim just did. The two men stared at each other. The atmosphere in the room was thick.

Aleksandr, Akim’s oldest brother, cleared his throat. Even though he came in late, I was confident he had heard everything. I watched as he stepped to Akim’s side.

“Iosif,” he said calmly. “Technically, this isn’t a romantic alliance since neither party arranged it. Neither you nor we planned any part of it. I mean, heck, we didn’t even know the full truth when things happened. Neither did they.”

Iosif looked at the two men at me. I could see frustration replacing anger in his eyes. Glancing at his hands, I noticed the tight fists at his side. Iosif wasn’t convinced. He still wanted to make someone pay for what had happened.

“Look, man,” Akim said in a calmer tone. “The thing is, things happened. It wasn’t planned like my brother said. It was spontaneous. Let’s talk about it.”

“Okay, you want to talk,” Iosif spat back. “Tell me then, what are your plans moving forward?” I could clearly hear the demand in his tone.

As I opened my mouth to try and defend Akim, Akim spat back at my brother. “I’ll marry her!”

A deadening silence filled the room. Iosif’s eyes were wide in surprise, and I could see even Akim’s brothers were dumbstruck. I had no words. My heart filled so quickly with joy that I had to grab my chest, hoping it wouldn’t explode.

Then I heard a small whispering in the back of my mind. “After everything you put him through, could this be true? Was he not only getting you back for what you did to him?”

Before the ideas could manifest themselves, Akim looked back at me. His smile was warm and gentle, melting any doubt I had. Yet, I couldn’t be sure if he was doing this as he felt he had to or because he wanted to. I knew I wanted to. Yet, I didn’t want him to feel obliged to do it because of my brothers.

“Now, just hang on a minute,” Avgust finally added his voice to the conversation. “I think the two of you should sit down and talk about this. Let’s not rush into things.”

I kept quiet as I watched Aleksandr turn to Akim. He squeezed Akim’s shoulder as he spoke. “I agree. The two of you should first talk it out.”

Aleksandr turned to Iosif as he continued. “Come on, let’s give them a minute or two so they can talk about what’s going on here. I don’t know about you, but I can see both of them are worried and shocked. Let’s give them space.”

Iosif nodded at Aleksandr. He looked like he had met a ghost. Avgust took his shoulder, turned him, and ushered him out gently. We stood like statues until everyone was out, and the door closed behind them.

Akim turned to me, smiling. His entire being appeared to be glowing, and not only his eyes. Stepping back, I felt the seat of the chair behind me and sat down. I didn't know what to say or do as he started coming closer.

I was thrilled and scared shitless at the same time.

Chapter 23 - Akim

This day was not what I expected. I was shattered after the fire and found out the truth about Zhenya. Then, her brothers showed up. They brought their A-game but also proved everything she had ever mentioned about what they thought of her. Yet, she was so much more.

Slowly, I approached Zhenya, where she sat. I could see she was shocked at my sudden revelation and felt sure she had doubts. But I was prepared to convince her. I had to make her see, make her believe in me. I wanted her to be mine forever, to spend the rest of our days together.

I stopped before her and went down on my knees. Taking her hands in mine, I smiled as I spoke tenderly. "Zhenya....,"

Before I could continue, she started rambling. "Akim, I am so very sorry. Please, you don't need to keep covering for me or my mistakes. I know I have hurt you deeply. No words could ever make right what I did and all I've put you through. You don't have to do something you don't want to just for the sake of peace or whatever reason you have."

Carefully lifting her hand, I kissed her fingers before speaking. “No, dear Zhenya, let me correct you. What we shared wasn’t a mistake. Meeting you wasn’t a mistake, and what you have achieved wasn’t either.”

Letting her hand go, I caressed her cheek as I continued. “What we have together is something special. I have fallen in love with you. My proposal has nothing to do with you being a Chernykh or your brothers. I want to marry you because of who you are. I fell in love with the real Zhenya.”

I could feel tears pushing at the back of my eyes, and I looked down for a moment. As I defended her earlier, I concluded that I was in love with her. I couldn’t allow anyone to speak to her or about her inappropriately, not even her. The sheer need to protect her overwhelmed me.

All I wanted to do was make her happy, make her smile. Looking into her eyes, I spoke softly. “I fell in love with you, stripped of all your powers and connections. The woman sitting here before me is the one I want to marry.”

She just sat there staring at me. Swallowing hard, I wondered if I had said something wrong. Maybe she didn’t want to marry me. I would give her time to think and decided I should apologize.

I opened my mouth to let her know that I never intended to put words in her mouth or push her into something she didn’t want. Then, she stunned me as she spoke. “I love you.”

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“What?” I asked. My mouth hung open. It wasn’t that I didn’t hear her, but my mind was having a hard time grasping it.

“I love you, and I will marry you, Akim Dubow,” she said, grinning. Zhenya jumped up out of the chair and lunged into my arms.

I stumbled backward but found my footing. I wasn’t about to go tumbling with her in my arms. I held her tight. I never wanted to let her go ever again, as a tremendous happiness came over me. I wanted to absorb all she was, her warmth, love, even her sweet odor.

She pulled back slightly. Placing her hands on my cheeks, she started speaking. “I’m so sorry for...”

I stopped her from saying any more as I took her lips with mine. It was one of our longest kisses. I wish we could stay that way forever. Her luscious lips glued to mine.

As we came up for air, I spoke before she could continue. “You must now stop apologizing. You have done nothing wrong. You are perfect in every way, just the way you are.”

Taking her face into my hands, I kissed her forehead. Zhenya jumped and wrapped her legs around me. Bending mine, I sat down with her on my lap. “I’m the luckiest woman on earth,” she whispered.

“Who could have ever predicted such a thing as this?” I replied.

“Well, not me. I came there wanting to bring you down,” she admitted, laughing. “I would never have thought feeling so strong could be possible.”

“I couldn’t be happier that you came, even with the wrong intentions. Look at us now. My body wanted you as soon as you caught my attention on that first day. I’m truly delighted that things turned out this way. It seems my body knew you were the one from the start. My perfect piece of the puzzle,” I said, getting up.

Holding out my hand, I helped her up from the floor. Pulling her into my arms, I kissed her softly.

Zhenya flopped down into the chair as I pulled back. “What about the Aslanovs?”

“What about them?” I asked.

“With everything that happened, how are we going to deal with this?” Zhenya asked. She looked worried.

Bending down, I took her hands in mine, laying tender kisses on her fingers. “Don’t worry your pretty face about it. We will have a plan to get all this sorted,” I said.

Zhenya smiled weakly at me before turning her head away. Placing my hand under her chin, I lifted her head tenderly. I wanted her to look into my eyes as I spoke. “I promise you everything will work out just fine. I will do so if I have to handle it all myself.”

Kissing her soft lips, I smiled. “I have something in mind that I hope will also appease Iosif,” I said with certainty.

“What if it doesn’t work?” she asked, raising her brows. A light furrow appeared on her forehead. They were the perfect little wrinkles and made her look adorable.

“Then we’ll sit and work through it. I’m sure together we can come up with a brilliant plan, just like in the office,” I reassured her. “As long as I have you, I can handle anything thrown my way.” I kissed her forehead hard, trying to smooth over the wrinkles and showing her how much she meant to me.

Pulling back, I looked at her. Our eyes locked as I spoke. “You have no idea what I’m prepared to do to keep you. I’ll give up everything.” I could hear my heart pounding. Glancing down, I made sure my chest wasn’t exploding as my heart swelled with love for her.

She rose as I stood up. Placing her hands on my chest, she leaned in as she whispered into my ear. “I feel exactly the same way. But what if?” Her fingers clutched at my shirt as we stood face to face.

I searched her face as I spoke. “Angel, baby, I will make it happen. I love you, and there’s nothing and no one who will stand in our way. Please don’t doubt us. What we share, no one will ever have or understand. It is ours.”

“Well, then,” she said, turning out of my arms. She walked away and then turned back to stand before me. “I love you too.”

As our lips met, the world outside disappeared. All I needed was my future wife in my arms. I will spend the rest of my life proving to her just how important she is. How special and unique.

Taking hold of her hips, I pulled her into me. Our lips moved in sync as our hunger for each other grew. “You’re more than perfect,” I said under my breath.

“I’m nothing compared to you,” she replied shyly. “And I have to tell you a secret.”

“Yes?” I asked, leaning closer.

“I don’t know how, but I have become the luckiest woman on earth,” she breathed out heavily over my shoulder.

Feeling the sea monster coming to life, I smiled at her. “No, dear, you’re wrong,” I huffed. “There are no words to describe my luck.”

She took hold of my face and kissed me passionately.

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Pulling back, I stared into her eyes as I spoke softly. “We have to stop this kissing now. The things you are doing to me. I have to warn you. There’s no stopping the beast.

Zhenya pulled out of my arms, laughing. “I’m sorry.” She said, walking to the door. “You want me to leave? I can, you know.”

Licking my lips, I could still taste her. “No,” I replied. “But I have to know if we are good now?”

“Yes, we are,” she said, swaying.

“Fine, then just one last word,” I added. She stood watching me as I walked closer. “I love you.”

“I have an idea,” she said suddenly.

I looked at her as I spoke. “Okay, let’s hear it.”

She quickly went through the plan with me. Once she was done, I leaned in and kissed her. “It is perfect,” I huffed. “Let’s go see what the rest think.”

As I started moving, she pulled back. I stopped and looked at her. “No,” she whispered. “My brother would never agree, knowing it was my idea, even if he likes it.”

“Okay, I’ll tell them it was my idea,” I replied, hugging her.

She nodded and took her hand and led her downstairs, where the family was standing in little groups. All eyes turned to us as we entered. “We have to take care of the Aslanovs. We have to send a message that we are not to be rivaled with,” I said as we came to stand in the middle of them.

“Yes,” Aleksandr agreed, stepping closer. “We have been racking our brains trying to come up with a plan. But these people are unpredictable.”

“Yes, we know, that’s why we have to act quickly. There’s no time to waste,” I added. Pulling Zhenya into my arms, I continued. “We have a plan.”

Iosif took two steps forward as he blared at me. “You have too few brain cells to come up with a decent plan. Go back to your playpen and play with your toys.”

Zhenya stepped out of my grip. I could see she had had enough of her brother as she defended me. “That was uncalled for! We are all on the same side here. Please do yourself a favor and listen to what Akim is saying. If you don’t want to be a part of this, you’re welcome to leave.”

Avgust walked to his side and spoke softly. “Give him a chance to explain.”

Iosif took a deep breath. He waved his hand at me, showing me to continue.

“Seeing that they are so unpredictable, we have to use their timeframes and actions against them. We have an idea of how that would work,” I said, looking at her as I finished. I nodded at her, showing her to continue.

As she went through the process, I saw the woman who had captivated me. She shone as she spoke. I hoped Iosif would see it, too, but I knew my family would. Glancing at him, I saw he was looking at her and actually listening.

Then it was like he could read my mind as he turned his gaze on me. He lifted his head but didn't say anything. I wondered if he knew it was all her plan. As she finished, the others started chipping in, adding their thoughts.

I saw hope for us all; we could actually work together on this, and we would make it work. Family is everything to us all. If everyone could just see it.

Chapter 24 - Zhenya

Opening my eyes, I stared at the ceiling for a moment. Today was the day we would see if my plan worked. It was still dark out, but we had to act before the sun warmed the world.

We washed, dressed, and had our morning drinks in under thirty minutes. It was just after four when we arrived at Alexandr's house. All the lights were on, and the driveway was lined with cars.

We were hitting the Aslanovs in three locations. Akim was leading one team and Avgust another. I didn't know the other team leader as he was part of the Morozov family. There were big, gun-carrying men all over the yard.

Entering the house, I clung to Akim's arm as we moved through another army up the stairs and to the office. My nerves were shot to hell. Tasha had set up the office as a control room with computers, scanners, radios, and more.

She was sitting in the corner, typing away. Alexandr was standing beside her. "You ready to move?" he asked, looking at Akim.

"Yes," Akim replied shortly. He kissed me and gave me a long hug before leaving. The office and house suddenly emptied as everyone headed out.

I nervously walked up and down the room as Tasha worked. Iosif appeared in the doorway. He didn't say anything. He just stood there. I knew he was just there to see if my plan worked. If it didn't, he would never stop blaming me. He still believed I was his silly little sister.

"Right, we're ready to infiltrate," I hear Akim's voice coming over the radio. Tasha opened about a dozen screens, each with a different place on them. I saw three with our men at the entrances to their targets.

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Walking to the bookshelf against the opposite wall, I studied the book, trying to calm my mind. Most of them were business-related. In the bottom corner were a couple of fantasy books, which I found interesting.

Chewing my nails, I flopped down in the chair next to Tasha. If I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that I was shit scared my plan would backfire and get someone killed.

I sighed, turning my attention to the monitors. I listened as the teams started asking for entry codes. Tasha's fingers moved over the keyboard as if she were a robot or something. She had an abnormal speed.

While we worked together to find these locations, I learned she was a fabulous hacker. But I had never seen something like this. I was brought out of my thoughts as I heard Akim's voice over the radio. "We're in place."

Tasha handed me an earpiece. "Here, put this in. We are changing to a secure line."

I moved my hair and wiggled the small black plastic pea-like shaped earpiece into my ear. Tasha's hands flew across the keys again as the other teams confirmed their readiness.

She spoke as soon as she hit the Enter button. "The door should be open, guys."

Looking up at the monitors, I saw the men entering the buildings. She had created distractions in other parts of the building to pull the men from their guarding posts. Sitting back, my mind traveled back to the mission plans.

It was a sabotage mission only. One team would take out their transport, one their storage, and Akim's team was to handle the docks. Knowing it was my plan, my brothers wouldn't have agreed. So Akim decided to pitch it to the families. Once everyone agreed, he told them it was my idea.

Iosif then tried to diss the plan, but it was too late. Now, everything was in Akim's hands. We just had to wait and see how it went. Getting up, I started pacing again. This was going to drive me up the walls, I thought as I battled, keeping a clear head.

Tasha motioned for me to join her again. As I sat down, she spoke. "Listen to the scanner and let us know if there is any movement."

I nodded and picked up the earphones plugged into the scanner. I held it to my other ear, listening as our missions progressed. It was exceptionally quiet, as if they were waiting for us.

I listened to Akim's voice as he reported their status. "We've set the charges and are moving out now." I breathed out hard as relief settled back in me. Then, I swallowed hard as a series of explosions went off. "Akim, Akim," I asked over the radio.

"We're good," he replied shortly. I was glad no one got caught in it, and the operation seemed to have worked. But it was nothing compared to the excitement I felt as the police scanner went off.

"10-79 reported. Send all available units to the docks!" I heard someone blaring over the scanner.

I felt like laughing as this was what we hoped would happen. With the cops involved, the Aslanovs wouldn't be able to return to their places on the docks. But at the same time, I feared for Akim and the rest. My feelings were all over the place, and I couldn't figure out what I was actually feeling.

Turning to Tasha, I spoke quickly. I could hear the distress in my voice. “The cops are on their way. This means everything went as planned?”

“Yes, it does,” she replied, grinning.

Speaking into the radio, I knew I had to warn the men. “You need to get out. The plan worked, the cops are on their way.”

“We’ll be back soon, see you then,” Akim said before the line went dead. Tasha got up. Pulling me to my feet, she did a small victory dance. I tried to follow, but didn’t know all the moves yet. We laughed as we sat back down. “You will learn it,” she said.

“Thanks, I’m going to stretch my legs,” I said as I got up. Tasha nodded and continued to type away at the keyboard. Stepping past Iosif, I headed towards the elevator. I wanted to wait for Akim. Hearing footsteps behind me, I looked around. Iosif had followed me. He stopped about a foot away.

Looking at him, I couldn’t help but fiddle with the sides of my dress. He had his usual angry look, and I wondered what had ticked him off. Glancing around, I didn’t know if I should run or stay. The only side he had was one of anger. I had never seen a soft side, even though he was generally the calmest one of us all.

He met my look, then sighed before speaking. “I owe you an apology. I can now see that all that the brat said was true. I can also see how much he cares. A man who stands up for a woman like he did for you. Protecting her honor and insisting on your place in business and life. Well, he probably does love you.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. A silence filled my mind, removing any and all thoughts. His words were so deep. Never in my life had I heard him say something like it.

Grabbing him around the waist, I hugged him with all my strength. “I understand why you didn’t want to see me growing up. But we all have to fly eventually,” I said softly. He sighed as he patted me on the back before lightly pushing me away.

I felt the smile pulling at my lips as he continued. “I care for you, you know that.” I have never known him to show any form of emotion or affection. I was stumped. “I realize now that I can’t keep you locked in a cage to preserve your beauty. The world needs to know you.” He leaned in and kissed my forehead before turning and walking off.

Looking at him as he walked away, I struggled to wrap my mind around his words. I had never thought I would ever get to hear them. But all my thoughts disappeared. My mind went blank as Akim and the others walked through the doors.

I felt my tears welling up as I saw him in one piece and safe. Not caring about my behavior, I ran to him and jumped into his arms. He wrapped his muscular arms around me as he tried to stay on his feet. I hadn’t intended to cry, but the feelings rushed me, and my tears came anyway.

I whispered in his ear as he made a slow circle holding me up. “I’m so glad you are safe.”

He placed me back down on my feet. “Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked

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“I don’t know, but I worried about you,” I said, smiling as he pulled me back into a tight hug. Breathing heavily over my shoulder, he whispered in my ear. “You want to get out of here and go celebrate our victory?”

Licking my lips, I could only imagine what he had in mind. “Yes,” I replied eagerly. He didn’t know that I had already planned how it would go. I felt good as everything seemed to be finally falling into place.

I had hoped that we would be going home soon. Grinning, I thought about my plan as we headed home. Akim unlocked and opened the door. Then he turned to me and carried me inside. Lowering me to my feet, he kissed me before speaking. “Would you like a bottle of wine?”

“Yes, you get that while I take a quick shower,” I said, sprinting upstairs. We were like high school kids. But it felt good. I showered and put on the new outfit I had bought. Hearing him coming up the stairs, I pulled on my robe.

He came in and placed the tray on the small table by the door. “And that?” he asked, looking at me curiously. I walked up to him and threw my arms around him. “I’ve missed you,” I mumbled between kisses, covering his face in lipstick. “And I have something amazing for you.”

“You do?” he replied, picking me up again. “So, where is it?”

“You will have to put me down to find out,” I said, laughing.

Akim turned his head to the side, staring into my eyes for a moment. As he placed me

down, I took his hands and kissed them. “Come with me,” I whispered, leading him out of the bedroom.

He followed without a word. I led him into the lounge and showed him where to sit.

I grabbed the stool I hid behind the door and placed it in the middle of the room. “I’ll be right back,” I said, walking to the side of the room to his back. “Don’t peek.”

I dropped my gown to the floor and slipped into my heels. I pressed play on the stereo system, adding soft romantic music to the room. Heading to the door, I saw him trying to turn. “Uhm, no, no, no,” I said in a soft tone.

Akim laughed but stayed in his position. I lowered the light in the room and walked to the stool. I swayed my hips as I went, ensuring they matched the rhythm of the music. I walked around the stool and stopped at the front. Bending over I took hold of it as I wiggled my ass.

Flipping my hair back, I glanced at him over my shoulder, arching my back. Akim had his hands in his lap and a smile that stretched for miles. Going down on my haunches, I moved my knees apart and back together.

“Oh, man,” Akim huffed, shifting on the couch.

Slowly lifting my ass into the air, I swayed my hips. My legs were straight but wide apart as I leaned over the stool and twerked my ass for him. Coming up straight, I moved to stand beside the chair.

I lowered my back to the stool, laying down on it. I moved my hand from my neck down my chest to my pussy. As I did this, I lifted one leg and lowered it again. I could hear his breathing becoming louder as he watched me.

Carefully, I turned around, so my front was on the chair, and I was facing the floor. Steading myself with one hand, I used the other one to smack my ass. I looked at him softly, biting my finger before slapping my ass again but harder.

“Ouch,” Akim breathed out as he moved to the edge of the couch.

Sliding off the chair, I went on my hands and knees. Turning, I slowly approached him, making soft growling sounds. As I got to him, I snapped at him like I was going to bite him.

Akim laughed nervously as he sat back. Rising to my knees, I placed my hands on his. Using my nails, I dragged them up to the bulge in his pants. Using my palm, I rubbed in circular motions over it.

I could feel his dick inside throbbing as it wanted to break out of its constraints. Moving my hands up over his chest to his neck, I rose slightly. Firmly gripping him around the neck, I pulled him to me, claiming his lips in a hot kiss.

As we kissed, my hands moved over his face, his head, and his shoulders. Placing my hands back on his chest, I shoved him lightly. Our lips parted, and we both gasped for air. Taking hold of his shirt at the bottom, I ripped it upward. The buttons went flying as it opened for me.

Leaning forward, I kissed his chest. His breathing had become rough, and I could feel mine was headed there quickly. I moved both my hands down his chest. Akim leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and exhaled hard.

He smelled of coconuts, and I could almost taste them as I licked his nipples. I rose, pushed him back again, and walked to the stool, swaying my hips. I turned and sat down with my legs closed, looking into his eyes.

I placed my hands on my knees. Leaning back slightly, I opened my legs as wide as I could. Slowly, I slid my hands up the inside of my thighs. As I reached my pussy, I only moved one hand further up to cup my breast.

As I massaged my breast with one hand, I rubbed my pussy with the other. Shifting slightly lower on the stool, I bent my legs, opening them wider. I placed a finger in my mouth and bit down softly as I lifted my other one and lightly slapped my pussy.

Akim rose to his feet and came rushing over. I stood quickly. Holding one hand out before me, I stopped him. Waving a finger in the air, I showed him no. I turned him around and lightly pushed forward. As he reached the chair, he sat back down.

His eyes were sparkling as he watched me. I could hear him breathing from across the room. Walking up to him, I placed one heel in his lap. Bending forward, I slowly pushed down my stocking. As I got to my foot, he lifted my leg and removed it. I placed my other leg in his lap and allowed him to pull the stocking down and take it off.

He licked his lips as I turned and walked back to the stool. Standing with my ass turned to him again, I smacked it hard. Pushing my thumbs into the sides of my panties, I slowly pushed them down while swaying my hips. Keeping my legs straight, I pushed them to the floor and stepped out.

As I came back up, I dragged my fingers up over the back of my legs. Once I reached my ass cheeks, I gripped them hard, pulling them to the sides ever so slightly. Letting go, I rose slowly as my nails dragged a line up to my hips.

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Turning to him, I placed my left hand on my right arm. I moved it up my arm and slipped off the strap of the top I was wearing. I did the same on the other side. I then pushed the top down my body to the floor.

Stepping out of the top, I walked towards him. Bending over, I undid his belt and pants. His dick instantly sprung up as it was released from its prison. I gave it a couple of quick strokes. It was rock-hard. Akim breathed out slowly.

Pulling on his legs, he lowered himself onto the couch. I licked his dick a couple of times, leaving some spit on it. Coming up, I stepped over his legs onto his lap. I rubbed his dick up and down my pussy before lowering myself onto him.

I exhaled loudly as he filled me up. He also moaned as I sat down. It felt so good to have him inside me. Akim took hold of my ass as I started riding him. My movements were slow at first. I shook my head and moved my hands up and down my body as I started increasing the speed.

He gently pulled on me as he lifted his head from the couch. I placed one hand behind his head as he sucked my breast. Moving my other hand down my body, I played with my sweet spot. As I rode him.

My body started shaking as my orgasm approached. Akim tenderly bit down on my nipple as I exploded over him. I dug my nails into his back, pulling him closer. He held onto me tightly as he slowed down until my body stopped shaking.

I breathed in and out rapidly, trying to catch my breath.

He raised himself and stood up, holding me in his arms and grinning at me. “Did you enjoy that?” he asked. His tone was huskier than usual.

I simply nodded as I tried to catch my breath. Akim turned, placing me on the couch. Sitting on his knees before me, he pushed my legs apart. Lowering his head, he licked up the overspill of juices. My body was still in ecstasy, and I shook lightly. Then he came up and stuck his tongue in my mouth as he kissed me hard.

Using his monster, he played at the mouth of my pussy. Once the lips were parted, he gently pushed into me. Breathing in sharply as he filled me, I smiled at him. He moved in and out slowly as his hands explored my body. My skin tingled as his hands glided over me.

He leaned in and sucked each nipple. “Oh, yes,” I moaned, feeling my senses going into overdrive. I could smell the soap in his hair. It prickled me more as a sweet coconut essence filled my mind with visions of a private beach. Each stroke of his fingers drove my lust.

Biting my lower lip between moans, I kept my cries of pleasure in. He lifted my legs to his chest as he started increasing the pace. Holding my thighs, I lifted and lowered with each stroke. Letting go of the couch, I grabbed his sides.

Pleasure surged through me as he moved. Aching my back, I felt his hand taking hold of my hips. He lifted me slightly as he pounded my pussy. I could feel it tightening, and I let out a long moan as I soared. My second orgasm was nearing quickly.

“Oh, baby,” Akim groaned as I felt my juices flowing. Biting my lower lip so I didn’t scream, I dug my nails into his sides.

He finished along with me. Akim lowered my legs to his sides. Shifting up, he lay next to me with his head on my chest. I placed my hands on his head and tenderly

played with his hair. I listened as our breathing went from short, fast pulses to smooth, regular strokes.

“I just love listening to your heart beating. It is the music of life that feeds my soul and keeps me going,” he whispered, lifting his head and laying back.

I kissed his hand and squeezed it tightly. “Your voice is my music. It fills my soul with joy. You enchant me with your rustic tones,” I responded, grinning widely.

He chuckled softly as he pulled me into his warm embrace and held me tight.

Chapter 25 - Akim

Pulling up to the Chernykh mansion, my heart felt heavy. Our honeymoon hadn’t been long enough. If it were up to me, we would never have come back. But we had a business to run, so running away wasn’t an option.

I sighed, staring at the mansion. Zhenya laughed softly as she lightly tapped my shoulder. “Come on,” she said. “Get out of the car. This whole party is being held for us. The least we can do is attend.”

“Okay,” I replied, grinning at her. “I’ll go, but please don’t make me stay too long.” I knew this wasn’t entirely an option as it was the alliance party as well, and not just for us.

Glancing over at Zhenya, my wife, I knew what she was going to say even before the words came out. She shook her head, her silky locks flowing over her shoulders. “No,” she said. “We will stay as long as needed and then go home.” Her tone was stern but filled with a tenderness that drove me wild.

Nodding, I jumped out and headed around to open her door. She sat staring at me, her

brows raised. I knew she wanted confirmation that I had heard her. She wanted me to put her at ease. “Yes, I will stay as long as you want,” I said, giving her a slight bow.

Zhenya laughed and took my hand as I offered it. We headed inside. I was surprised to find everyone there already. Iosif, Avgust, Anton, and Alexsandr were all there to welcome us home.

As I shook Alexsandr’s hand, I pulled him closer. “Are we late?” I inquired.

“No, we’re all early for a change,” he replied.

Looking at Iosif, I could see he wasn’t as pleased to see me. But I couldn’t blame him after everything. I wasn’t pleased to see him either. But for the sake of the alliance, we would keep it civil. We nodded at each other and then walked through to the back of the house, where everyone else was gathered.

Vadik and Tasha were the first to greet us out of the crowd of people. It was a quick greeting, as many people wanted to talk to us. Her sister Misha waved at us from the side. Zhenya took my hand and headed in her direction. I nodded and swiftly greeted those we passed. Before we could get to Misha, Anton grabbed my arm and pulled us into the bar.

“So,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Tell me all about your honeymoon and the white beaches, was the island as they advertise?”

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Joyce, his wife, smacked him lightly, and we all laughed. “Why so eager, brother?” I asked, grinning.

He glanced at Joyce as he replied. “I was just curious.”

“There are many people who want to know. We’ll catch up later, okay?” I said, tapping his shoulder. We haven’t even greeted everyone.”

Stepping out of the bar, we walked into Abram and his wife. After quick greetings, we moved towards Misha again. I felt exhausted, and we hadn’t even greeted everyone. I leaned against a table, listening as Zhenya spoke to her sister. Then, Elisse also joined them.

Turning, I gazed at the people gathered here. I met Iosif’s cold stare. I couldn’t help but wonder if he was still angry at me for Zhenya, or everything else. This also made me wonder how long he would hold a grudge. What kind of leader was he?

Looking back, I saw Zhenya was still being held captive by her sisters. It was the perfect opportunity for me to slip away and get some fresh air. I hugged her from behind and placed a kiss on her cheek, whispering into her ear. “I’ll just be to the side if you need me.”

She glanced at me, smiling. This was her it’s fine smile. I moved to the side, walking out of the clusters of family, when I noticed Tasha approaching me. I smiled and spoke in a hushed tone as she came closer. “Hi there, little sis. How are you doing?”

Tasha shook her head as she bumped into me softly. “Little sister?” she asked with a

hint of teasing in her tone. “No, I wanted to check and see how my little brother was doing.”

“Oh, I am no longer the little one,” I shot back, laughing as I pulled her into my arms and hugged her. Glancing at Zhenya, I spoke with sincerity and pride. “I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.”

Her smile stretched across her face as she replied. “I’m so happy for you. I knew one day you would find your lid.”

“Thanks,” I said, glancing at the floor. Lifting my head and looking at Alexandr, I continued. “So, how are the businesses going?”

“Well, Alexandr scheduled a meeting for Monday morning to catch you up. But I can say the estate building restorations have been done. It looks better than new. The Morozovs have added security, and what happened will never happen again.”

“I am overjoyed to hear that. Thank you,” I huffed, noticing Zhenya coming closer. We had a drink, ate something light, and mingled for about an hour or so. As we were walking toward Timofey, Zhenya squeezed my hand. “After this, we can go,” she whispered.

“Finally,” I whispered, breathing out. She lightly hit my shoulder with her tiny fist, smiling at me.

“Sorry about everything,” Timofey said as we shook hands. “I’m just glad everything worked out.”

“Thank you,” I replied with sincerity. He was clearly a bigger man than his brothers.

We quickly made our way around, greeting everyone and thanking them for being

there for us. Iosif walked with us to the door. Shaking my hand, I could feel him squeezing harder than needed. He smirked as he greeted me. I knew he still had hard feelings. But I wasn't going to allow him to intimidate me or spoil my evening.

"Thank you for the hospitality," I said as we stepped out.

Once in the truck, Zhenya put on some music and started singing along. I loved seeing her so happy. We stopped at her condo to collect the last of her boxes and headed home. My house was where we were going to stay, as it held the potential to be a family home.

She had already started planning for extra rooms and other modifications. I wanted her to do it so she would also feel it was hers. I was confident that once she was done, it would be the perfect home for raising kids.

Once we got home, I placed her boxes in the garage. And we took a long shower. She lay on the bed watching her favorite show while I ordered a pizza. I caught up on my emails and confirmed the appointment with Aleksandr before returning to our room.

Zhenya was half asleep by the time I entered. Putting off the television, I snuggled in next to her. She shifted back into my arms and fell asleep instantly.

The weekend just flew past in a breeze, and Monday morning came quicker than I wanted. I still felt tired. I loved holding her with our limbs entangled. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed. I could still smell the sweetness of the island soap on her. She insisted on buying a whole box to bring home.

I lay still until I felt her stirring. Leaning over, I kissed her cheek. "Morning, beautiful," I whispered. "We have a lot to do today."

She turned onto her back, smiled at me, and nodded. She caressed my cheek before

getting out and heading to the bathroom. Stretching out, I smiled at the ceiling. Life was good.

Once I washed and dressed, I headed downstairs to make breakfast. Zhenya was still in the bathroom as her morning routine took a bit longer.

I smiled as I heard Zhenya speaking behind me. “Darling, baby, that smells divine. The entire house has caught it, and I had to rush to come see what you’re making.” She wrapped her arms around me and tried to peek over my shoulder.

I loved feeling her body against mine. She hugged me tightly as I tried to reply. My voice was slightly shaky as my body reacted to her touch. “It’s only cheese waffles with bacon and egg. But I’m glad you love the smell.”

She hugged me tighter. It felt like she was trying to squeeze my life out of me. Then she stepped back and set the table. As I dished up, she made me coffee and poured a glass of juice for herself.

We ate in silence, staring and smiling at each other. My mind was still on the island, and I felt sure hers was too. Once we were done, she rinsed the plates, and we headed to work. I dropped her at the office before heading to Aleksandr’s office.

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Aleksandr caught me up on all the things that happened and the plans ahead. The meeting was shorter than I thought. I was glad to get back to my office with Zhenya waiting. We were now equal partners in the business, and she had her own office next to mine.

She was fantastic at her job and kept me on my toes. I learned a lot from her and loved it when she showed me new ways to look at things. Being equals made every day special, not only at work but at home as well. We were like two peas in a pod, like Yin and Yang. We belonged together.

Sitting in my office, checking the calendar, I was astounded as I realized another week had passed. Then, it struck me like a bolt of lightning. Zhenya had invited Tasha and Vadik over for supper. Looking out the window, I noticed it was getting dark out.

I quickly packed up my work and shut off the computer. Getting up, I knew she wasn't going to be happy to leave. The new project that came in, along with the house modifications, had been keeping her busy. She wanted to get it done as quickly as possible.

I walked to her office door and stood for a moment watching her. I loved how her forehead crinkled when she was busy. Ahd, the way she sucked in her bottom lip, playing with it. I could watch her for hours. Snapping out of my head as I heard her swearing at the computer, I walked in.

It had died on her. It took all my restraint not to laugh as I knew she had forgotten to charge it once again. She was rummaging through her drawers. "Where is it?" she

huffed. “Where is the fucking charging cable?”

Walking around her desk, I placed my hand on her shoulder as I spoke. Hey, beautiful, it’s time to go home.”She glared at me, her frustration showing clearly. “Hey, what’s wrong, sweetheart?”

She shook her head as she replied. “It’s almost as if you and my laptop conspired against me!”

I could no longer keep it in and started laughing. “As cool as that sounds, I have to admit, it’s not one of my abilities. I have many, but damn, I can’t do that,” I said.

Zhenya gave me another glare, warning me not to push her. She lowered her head, took a deep breath, and started packing up.

The drive home was quiet. I didn’t dare say anything as I could see her mind was working overtime. Pulling up to the house, I turned to her. “If you would rather cancel, I can call Tasha,” I said softly.

She looked at me with shock. “No, no, I want this dinner,” she professed.

We headed inside and got ready. We had barely finished setting the table when the doorbell rang. Zhenya put on her best smile and let them in. After quick greetings, we sat down.

“So, you’re all caught up on business?” Tasha asked.

Swallowing the piece of meat I had placed in my mouth, I nodded. “Yes, Aleksandr filled me in on everything.”

Tasha seemed pleased with my answer. We talked a little about our honeymoon and

the exciting things we did on the island.

“You must really do yourself a favor and go there sometime,” I said, winking at my sister.

“Oh, okay,” she replied, smiling.

“How have you been, Zhenya?” Tasha asked, turning her attention away from me. “A little birdy told me you were taking on a new project?”

Zhenya glanced at me, smiling as she responded. “Yes, it’s been hectic since we got back. I’ve been busy with the extension of the house, which is my new project.

“Oh, wow...,” Tasha replied, sounding excited.

I stopped listening to their conversation as Vadik cleared his throat.

“So,” Vadik asked. “Any signs of the enemy as of recent?”

I shook my head as I responded. “No, nothing yet. But I’m sure they will poke their heads out again soon. There is no way they have given up.”

He nodded in agreement before speaking again. “We will just have to keep an eye on them. If anything in their routine or behavior changes, we must strike first.”

“You mean I will be keeping an eye on them,” Tasha replied, grinning. I couldn’t help but agree. We all knew Tasha was the one tasked with keeping tabs on them. But this meant Vadik would be checking in every step of the way.

The meal and company were good, but I was itching for them to leave. However, I would never be rude to my sister and ask her to go. It’s been a while since we’ve

spent quality time together. It felt good being able to catch up on things.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, as if she could read my mind, Tasha leaned over to Vadik as she spoke. “I think it’s time to go home.

“Thank you so much for having us,” Vadik added as they rose from the table. “We must do this again soon.”

We walked them to the door and stood just inside the door, waving at Tasha and Vadik as they drove off. I felt excited. I loved my sister, but seeing her go tonight was the best thing, as I had something special planned for Zhenya. If it wasn’t for her inviting them to dinner, we would already have started.

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Walking back in, I kicked the door closed as I wrapped my arms around her from behind. As I pulled her closer, she glanced back at me, smiling. Kissing her cheek, I whispered in her ear. “I have something for you upstairs.”

She turned in my arms, looking puzzled. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she replied softly. “You know you don’t need to get me anything.”

“Yes,” I replied. ‘But I wanted to. So, you go ahead so long, and I’ll be with you shortly. I kissed her forehead and let go of her.

Zhenya squeezed my hand before letting go and heading up. Once she was out of sight, I quickly made my way to the back room. I collected the gift and headed up. I stopped at the door, watching her admire the flowers and chocolates I had scattered across the bed.

She turned, noticing me at the door. Her gaze dropped to the large box I was holding. “The flowers and chocolates were more than enough surprise for me,” she mumbled, walking towards me.

“You are worth the world to me. Nothing would ever be enough. I want to show you how much you mean to me,” I replied, keeping eye contact.

Her smile lit up the room, and her eyes glistened. She opened her mouth to say something when the box suddenly shook in my hands. A loud barking noise filled the air. She looked at the box and then back at me as she placed her hands over her mouth.

I could see the surprise and excitement in her face as tears filled her eyes. Placing a hand on the lid, she whispered. “Is this really what I think it is?”

Smiling at her, I kept my mouth shut and shrugged. She quickly pulled off the lid and looked inside. The small Pomeranian puppy sat looking up at her. “Oh, my soul,” she whispered, reaching in and pulling her out.

Zhenya hugged her to her body and kissed her head. Looking at me, I saw the tears flowing down her cheeks.

“Are you okay? If you don’t like her, we can get another one, or take her back?” I said, placing my hand on her shoulder.

She lightly slapped my arm as she spoke. “No, silly, these are tears of joy. I love her. You will never take her from me.”

Standing closer, I rubbed her back as I spoke. “Okay, what would you like to name her then?”

Zhenya stared at me blankly for a second. “I’m not sure,” she said. “I think we must wait a couple of days to see her personality, to see what she’s like before naming her.”

“Okay,” I replied, walking over to the closet. I opened the door and pulled out a dog bed, a bag of toys, a bowl, and a bag of food.

“Aww, you even got accessories. You knew I would keep her?” she asked, sounding surprised.

“Yes, I did,” I responded with confidence. I placed the bed down on her side of our bed and watched as she put the puppy down. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Zhenya came to stand between my legs. We stared at the puppy as she moved in a

circle before lying down.

“Thank you, baby,” she said, taking my face in her hands. “I love her already, and I love you.”

As she leaned in kissing me, I squeezed her ass cheeks. Looking up at her, I spoke softly. “Zhenya Dubow, you are my world. You light up every corner of my soul. I know I am the luckiest man alive to have you at my side.”

Her tears flowed once again. This time, as she came in for a kiss, I lay back, pulling her with me. She squirmed a little as I started tickling her. She laughed and tried to get up. Wrapping my arms around her, I held her, and we stared into each other's eyes.

“I could lay like this forever, staring into your magnificent eyes. You are enchanting,” I whispered. She smiled, biting her bottom lip. “Your smile is so sweet, but when you bite your lip like that. It makes my body tingle, and I just want to make you happy.”

She kissed my neck and my cheek before capturing my lips. Pulling up, she gently bit my lower lip and pulled on it. This was more than I bargained for. Sitting up with her on my lap, I pulled her top over her head before removing mine.

I buried my face between her breasts as I reached around to unclasp her bra. Taking a deep breath, I stood up, turned, and let her drop to the bed. Zhenya laughed as I lifted her legs and pulled her pants down. Dropping them to the floor, I growled at her and then barked.

This made her laugh even harder. Bending forward, I proceeded to pull her panties off. I bent down, licking her pussy as I got rid of my pants. I got onto the bed with my hands and knees, slowly making my way up to her.

I lowered myself between her legs and kissed her passionately. Zhenya wrapped her legs around me as I pulled up. Placing her hands around my neck, she smiled and whispered back.

“Akim Dubow, I’m all yours.”

THE END