







# Bound By the Bratva

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** He left me pregnant. Now he wants everything.

Six years ago, I made an unthinkable sacrifice.

One weekend with the Bratva prince.

My father's life—in exchange for my body.

I left with more than scars.

I left carrying his child.

I ran. I hid. I raised his son in silence.

But secrets don't stay buried in Moscow.

Now I'm back—broke, desperate, hunted.

Working at his racetrack. Under his gaze.

He knows.

About Nikolai. About me. About everything.

"You have something that belongs to me."

He kidnaps my son.

Forces me into a marriage made of chains.

Lust. Power. Vengeance.

I came to get my boy back.

But now I'm drowning—

In memories of his mouth on mine.

The way he made me beg for pain.

The way I still crave his brutal touch.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

1

ANYA

Nikolai curls into the blanket with his knees tucked close. His cheeks are still sticky from the last bite of his banana. He smiles when I lift the book from the floor. The Very Hungry Caterpillar has its spine taped and retaped. We've read it so many times, the pages barely hold.

"In the light of the moon, a little egg lay on a leaf," I murmur. I settle beside him and he leans into my arm.

The apartment is quiet now. The TV is off. Batya's spacing has stopped. In the next room, I hear the clink of his mug. He's pretending to clean up after dinner since I did the cooking, but he's probably rinsing out whatever he drank before I woke up from my nap. He promised he wouldn't drink, but he always does. It's something I've come to rely on.

Nikolai's breathing slows by the time the caterpillar makes it to the plum. I close the book and rest my hand on his back. I count each rise and fall. He's grown since last winter. His legs stretch longer across the bed, and his body presses heavier against mine when he's asleep in my arms.

I don't kiss his forehead because I know he stirs too easily, but I do cover him with the thin blanket as I slip out of bed and set the book on his nightstand. When I crawl into bed around four a.m., he will wrap his arms around me again, and by the time I wake, Batya will have him off to school already.

My father stands at the kitchen counter when I step out. He's shaved, and the sink is clean. It's not much, but I notice it, and I'm grateful that he at least tries to take care of the place for me. Still, I'd settle for a messy home if he could stay away from the bottle longer than five hours.

"Batya, please... no drinking tonight." I reach for my sweater, slip it on over my shoulders, and watch him with hopeful eyes.

"I'll stay sober tonight," he says. He doesn't look up. "You've got my word."

"It's not me you owe that to," I remind him, the way I always do when I leave for work.

He flinches, but not because of what I said. He knows I've stopped believing him, and it's been that way for years. His bodily reaction is because of his guilt over things that happened years ago.

The rent notice is still pinned to the fridge, its red ink now dull. I don't ask about the landlord because I already know he hasn't called. What would he say, anyway? That his daughter—who came home from Tula to work and pay off his debt—doesn't make enough money to pay for rent, groceries, and his alcohol. Let's not even bring up his gambling addiction.

"You'll keep an eye on him?" I ask, flicking a glance at him as I pick up my apron and name tag. My feet already hurt and I haven't started my shift at the track yet, but I can't manage to scrape enough together to buy better shoes when I'm constantly chasing my tail with Batya's debts.

He nods and says, "I swear it, Anya. Nothing will happen to him. I'm his grandfather. I will protect him." I want to believe him, but with our history, I'm not so sure. The things he's done still haunt me, despite my being a willing party to it all.

Besides, the words "I'm his grandfather" stopped meaning something the night I came home and found Nikolai alone on the porch. He was barefoot in October. Still, I nod.

The racetrack doesn't care what kind of man raised me. They don't care that my son still wakes up crying, that my rent is past due or that my savings are gone. And Batya owes men who don't forgive. They don't forget time lost, family betrayed, or money left unpaid.

I press a kiss to his cheek as he squeezes my elbow, and before the door is shut behind me, I know he's already moving toward the vodka. I have no other choice but to leave Nikolai with him. Paying someone to watch him would take every spare cent I have, and I'm not even able to support us as it is.

I walk to the racetrack alone with my head down. The streetlights give off a weak yellow glow that barely reaches the sidewalk. My boots are thin and the wind cuts through my coat. I pass the rusted metal gate and turn at the side entrance marked STAFF ONLY. A man twice my size stands outside with a cigarette in one hand and a radio clipped to his belt. He lifts his chin in greeting and opens the door without a word.

Inside, I change in the locker room—black skirt, tight top, hair brushed back, and red lipstick applied from a cracked compact. The uniform doesn't fit right, but I can't ask for a new one. This job came through a friend of a friend. Waitressing and cigar service for the gamblers who drink too much and spend too fast isn't my favorite thing, but I was told the tips are decent if you don't flinch.

There's no racing tonight, but the lounge is full of raucous and stale air. Smoke hangs above the crowd, and glasses clink steadily behind the bar. I keep my head down and move between tables. I take orders, fetch whiskey, and carry cigars on a polished tray that shifts if I don't hold it steady. No one looks at my name tag or asks who I am. In a place like this, it's better to be invisible. The ones who blend in are the ones who

last.

A hand closes around my waist as I pass a booth near the back wall. It's a man who's roughly the size of a moose. His fingers dig in with the casual pressure of someone used to taking what he wants. I don't look at him. I reach down, take his wrist, and move his hand away like I've done it a hundred times. Because I have. This place is full of sleaze balls and lowlifes.

"Oh, now, sweetheart," he says, laughing like we're in on some joke. "Didn't mean anything by it."

"Need a refill?" I ask, but he grunts and shakes his head.

I adjust the tray on my palm and keep walking. In this place, pretending not to notice is the only way to keep the work. These men take what they want. Someone too busy or too indifferent to push back just gets snowplowed, but I'm neither of those things.

I also understand that if I make a scene or cause the patrons to be upset, I'll be fired, which is something I can't afford.

As I walk away, his friend snorts and mutters something under his breath, but I don't stop to hear it. I take the next order, write it down without lifting my eyes, and head to the bar. Nothing happened here—at least nothing that anyone will admit. The bouncers didn't see it. The manager didn't see it. The other girls? They've seen worse.

On my second round, the doors shift open behind me. There's a break in the noise, just enough for the change in air to catch my attention. A man steps inside, and though he doesn't see me right away, I feel the shift like someone dropped ice down my spine.

I know exactly who he is—Rolan Vetrov. His name was never spoken in my house, but it lived there all the same. The other men notice him, but none approach. The ones with any sense keep their eyes down.

He's taller than I remember, and somehow broader. The suit he wears is dark and sleek, fitted to a body that never softened with age. His build is cut from concrete, shoulders like armor, neck thick from years of holding up a head that never bows. That jaw—square and stubborn—rested against my collarbone while I tried to stay numb.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

His hair is black, cropped close to his skull with a widow's peak that splits his forehead with deliberate precision. His cheekbones are flat and sharp beneath pale gray eyes that turn silver when the light shifts.

And I know what's under that suit. I know what covers his chest, his shoulders, both arms. I remember the ink—the Bratva symbols, the saints and crosses etched in black. The corded muscles that are so powerful, he could take a dozen men at once.

I let him touch me. I let him inside me. For three days, I was his, my father's debt paid in full for one unspoken deal. I should've run. I should've said no. But when the man who holds your father's life in his hand offers you mercy in the form of a bed, you take it. And then you hate yourself afterward.

I never cried—not once—not even when it was over.

Now he's here, and if he sees me, I won't get to pretend it never happened.

He stands near the entrance, scanning the room slowly like he owns it, and maybe he does. I can't breathe. My throat tightens, but I force my legs to keep moving. I walk a loop past the bar, tray still balanced on one hand. I need to disappear, the same way I have every night since I took this job.

I remember the first time I saw him in person like it was yesterday. It was six years ago, in an office colder than winter and quieter than death. I signed away a weekend I would never get back. He never forced me—not physically—but he didn't have to. My father's life was on the line, and I was the price.

I avoid him now, weave around the lounge like he isn't here. I keep my chin low and my pace steady, but every time I cross into his line of sight, I feel the heat prickling the back of my neck. He hasn't looked at me yet, but he will.

When I stop at the bar to pick up another tray, Mitzy leans over and nudges my elbow. She's been here longer than me, knows everyone and everything. Her lipstick is always perfect, and she never blinks twice at the drunkest men in the room. She has ice running through her veins and I'm sure if Rolan Vetrov would've beckoned her to his cock, she'd be the first woman to run in his direction.

"You see him?" she says, nodding toward the entrance. "That's one of the new owners. The Vetrovs bought the track. Whole thing changed hands a few months back."

The blood drains from my face so fast, I grip the bar to steady myself. "Are you sure?"

She pops her gum without concern as she says, "Dead sure. That's the oldest one. He's Bratva. You can tell by the way the others move when he walks in... And holy fuck, the abs on that one." The stupid grin on her face sickens my stomach. She has no idea.

I keep my face blank and don't let her read anything into my expression, but my gut twists. My hands are slick with sweat. Rolan Vetrov isn't just a man I knew once. He's the reason I left Moscow with nothing but my son and the weight of every decision I'd ever made.

He cannot find out. No one can. This secret I've carried every day since I walked out of that hotel six years ago has to stay quiet. I got pregnant that weekend. The timing left no space for doubt—no one else it could've been. He left something behind that never faded, a truth buried so deep, I pretended it wasn't there. But I see it every day

in Nikolai's face. And if Rolan ever sees it too, everything I've built will fall apart.

If he finds out, I'm as good as dead. Not just me—my son too. Because men like Rolan don't neglect what's theirs in the world. They claim it. They own it. They pull it in tight and crush everything around it.

I press the tray flat against my stomach and step away from the bar. My legs are shaking. My breathing is too fast. I want to get to the back hallway and splash cold water on my face, but I don't. I head back into the crowd to do my job and get my tips, but I keep my head down to protect myself and pray that this is the first and only visit Mr. Vetrov makes to his newly acquired racetrack.

Because I don't think I can find a different job on short notice, and once again, it seems I'm trading myself for my father's debt. And if Rolan finds out, it's only a matter of time before he makes that a reality.

2

## ROLAN

From behind the tinted glass, I watch the floor as dealers count chips, girls pour liquor, and men with too much arrogance laugh over hands they don't understand. I hear some of it through the door behind me, where my guards are half-drunk and entertained by the game. I didn't come for them. I didn't come to survey just what sort of shit my father got me into.

The track has been barely breaking even. Every quarter shows reports with red flags—sloppy cash flow, inconsistent employee rosters, unexplained dips in revenue. The last man in charge had a history of skimming. He disappeared seven weeks ago—the day we assumed ownership—with a broken jaw and both hands shattered. I told the new one he had a month. It's been three weeks, and I still see rot.

This place either earns or gets gutted.

I take a slow walk through the lounge, weaving between the tables and observing each station closely. Every corner of this place tells me more than a spreadsheet ever could. I count the guards, watch how the floor managers move, note which staff avoid my eyes and which ones look for approval. When I've seen enough, I climb the side stairwell and enter one of the old press boxes above the floor. From here, I have the angle I need to observe without distraction, every face and movement clear under the lights.

As I walked the floor, a scent I remember vaguely piques my curiosity and lingers through my sweep. Now, standing over the floor watching the movement, it starts to trouble me.

It doesn't belong here—sharp citrus beneath something warmer, slightly sweet but not floral. It takes a moment to register. I've only smelled it once before. I don't forget anything I breathe in under pressure. That weekend still sits clear in my memory, not because of her but because of what it cost to keep her father alive. She wore that scent on her skin when she said nothing and undressed without looking me in the eye.

I peer through the tinted pane and track the crowd again. Most of the women on shift tonight are new. I had the manager swap out half the floor team after a string of petty thefts the first week we were operational under my supervision. I should recognize none of them. But one of them walks past the bar with her head turned just enough to trigger something in me.

Her hair is pinned back, darker than it used to be, but her posture isn't new. I recognize the way her shoulders tighten when a man leans too close. I know the way her fingers tense around a glass that's too full. When she steps around a table, she moves like someone trained to avoid attention.

She walks faster when she passes beneath my window. Not fast enough to run, but just enough to make it obvious that she hopes I'm not watching her. She never looks up, but I know she saw me.

Anya Morozova—a weekend for her father's life. Not a bad deal at the time, but the way she vanished into thin air when it was over always had me curious. Pyotr never ran, however, and that only made the situation stranger.

I watch her for a while, every step she takes, the curve of her hips and tits—fuller than they used to be, but not unpleasantly so. She was too thin. Now she's a siren calling for my attention with perfectly pouty lips and toned legs I'd love to have wrapped around my head. I have to force myself to back away just to prove I'm not dreaming this up.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

The private room beyond the wine cellar is soundproofed and unwatched. I close the door behind me and tap the call button on the secured panel. A guard answers quickly, ready to heed whatever orders I dish out.

“Pull the full employee schedule for tonight’s rotation,” I say, keeping my tone even. “Cross-reference the name Anya Morozova. If she used an alias, I want the original application. Forward it to me immediately.”

"Yes, sir," he grunts, and the line clicks as he leaves to follow orders.

I could have any woman I want, though some would come at my beckon more easily than others, and here is Anya, once again thrust into my line of sight. So pure, so innocent, so naive, and everything a man like me loves about a woman, with a bit of bite that makes it fun to play with her.

I sit on the edge of the low leather couch and open the surveillance system linked to my tablet. Most feeds from the main lounge aren’t archived past a week, but tonight’s stream is still live. I rewind it manually, ignoring the time stamps until I find the exact moment she walks onto the floor.

There’s no hesitation in her stride, only restraint. She knows how to do her job well, avoid unwanted attention, and my God, is she fucking incredible. Her hips sway just enough to catch notice, and her waist curves into long, athletic legs that move with quiet confidence. Her lips are full, unsmiling, and her eyes flicker once toward a loud voice. Everything about her demands attention without asking for it. But I notice her eyes—flat and alert beneath lowered lashes. She's afraid.

The door opens behind me. My guard enters and hands me a file. He stands with his hands folded in front of himself as he speaks. “She used a different last name at hiring,” he explains. “But her ID was flagged in the background system this week. It updated automatically.”

I read the sheet in full.

Morozova, Anya

Hire Date: October 4

Role: Floor Service / Lounge Rotation

Current Address: Mytishchi, Karamzin Street, Apartment 21B

Background Check: No flags. No convictions.

This part of town looks the same as it did six years ago—bleak concrete, old Soviet bones, and heat that barely holds through winter. Cheap rent draws people with problems, the kind of places someone like Anya would return to when every other option closed. Which tells me she's struggling and hints at financial problems outside of her responsibility. It makes me think of why she landed in my bed to begin with.

“She work steady hours?” I ask, glancing up at him.

“Five shifts a week, almost all nights. Rotates floors.” He shifts his weight from one foot to the other and clears his throat.

“Did anyone refer her?” My eyes trace back to the paperwork, but there is so little to go on here. An application doesn't tell a story of why the applicant needs the job.

“No reference listed. Applied through the general portal, sir.”

“Get me the roster of everyone hired the last three months. I want names, addresses, ties to her or her family. If she’s not alone, I want to know who brought her in.” It’s like some sick twist of fate dangling a carrot in front of me like this. I could pull it up by the roots, enjoy the savory flavor of my labor, but then it wouldn’t be her choice, and I’d much prefer that she beg me this time.

He nods and steps out again, and I return to the screen. She hasn’t stopped working. Two men at the table try to flirt with her, but she doesn’t respond. One of them slides her a chip meant as a tip. She doesn’t touch it. Instead, she steps around the table, refills his drink, and walks away without blinking.

She hasn’t looked up toward the glass once, and I wonder if she thinks I left or if she knows I’m still here watching her. She knows I saw her, but she’s pretending I didn’t. She wants to finish the night without being called out. She has no idea that I already have everything I need.

I watch her the rest of the night, turning two different waitresses away who come to bring me drinks. They’d suck me empty if I let them, which after seeing Anya, I might enjoy, but I’m not interested in any lips being wrapped around my cock but hers right now.

When her shift ends, she clocks out and takes the back hallway. Her sweater is the same one she wore the last time I saw her—pilled at the sleeves, stretched at the hem, and too thin for the season. Her bag is slung across her shoulder, and she disappears through the rear door into the staff lot without checking behind her.

As much as I want to, I don’t follow. I stay where I am, watching the screen while I think. Anya never planned on running into me again. She probably didn’t realize that my family had purchased the track. My father insisted it was a good investment, but



in his old age, I'm the one running things for the most part, which is the only reason I'm here where I could see her instead of out doing business elsewhere while my father checked out the scene.

With the one fascinating thing about this track gone for the night, I decide it's time to leave. By the time I reach the car, the engine is already running, my driver pulling up to the back door to meet me.

We leave the lot slowly, the headlights off until we're out on the service road. I sit with one arm braced on the window frame, watching the overhead blur past in streaks of gray. But my mind is lost on her and why she's at my track running tables and scraping by.

I unlock my phone and call Arman, the one man in Moscow I trust to keep eyes on someone without making a mess. It rings three times before he answers.

"Vetrov," a voice answers on the other end.

"I have a surveillance order," I say. "Put light pressure on Pyotr Morozov and dig into where he's getting his money. I want confirmation if he's gambling again and a full picture if he's involved in anything new. If he's clean, then I want every reason that explains why his daughter came back."

"Understood," Arman says. "I'll look into it and report back."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

“Don't take forever. I want to know what she's doing and I want to know why.” I disconnect and black the phone, slide it into my pocket. If anyone can sniff out details, it's Arman.

The highway curves south. Snow hasn't stuck yet, but the air outside is heavy enough to promise it soon. I didn't think much of her before—just another girl doing what she had to do. But watching her again turns something over in my mind that's hard to ignore. She's a question that was never answered. Not about what she wanted, but about why I gave a damn at all. She got under my skin, and I told myself it didn't mean anything. Now she's back, and I'm thinking about what it would take to make her stay.

The car is silent, but I hear her voice in the back of my mind, telling me I'm a vile creature whom she hates, but the pleasure I drew from her lips said otherwise.

Most women don't leave me thinking. Anya fucking Morozova did.

And now that she's back, I finally have the chance to find out why.

3

ANYA

The apartment door creaks when I push it open. I slide the chain into place and turn the deadbolt hard. It won't stop someone determined to get in, but the habit is carved into me now, and after last night, I can't risk leaving anything open.

The smell hits me as soon as I cross the threshold. It's a mix of old cigarettes, cheap vodka, and the sour mildew that settles into old cushions no matter how many times you scrub them. The couch sags under my father's weight. He's passed out, slouched halfway off the cushions. His shirt has ridden up over his belly. One sock hangs loose, the heel twisted around. A bottle lies on its side at his feet, not empty but far from full.

My gaze shifts to the other end where Nikolai is curled up. He's bundled under the blanket from our bed, the thin one I usually keep folded in the linen drawer, but I gave it to him last night. His knees are pulled tight to his chest. His arms are wrapped around the stuffed bear missing one eye. He's small enough that he doesn't touch my father, and I frown at the bedraggled sight.

One very broken man and one boy who deserved more than this.

I stand there a little longer, my fingers still wrapped around my arms in a tight hug, before I make myself move. I head to the bathroom, stepping carefully to avoid the loose floorboard near the hallway. I want to wash the feeling of shame from my body, though the water never truly does that. I carry it like a cloak, the fact that I spread my legs for that man to protect my father, and now look at me.

The water heater takes ten minutes to heat properly, and the shower barely manages to be lukewarm. I undress while I wait, then once in the water, I scrub quickly and with force, dragging the cloth over every inch of my skin until it stings from the friction. I don't feel clean, but I don't feel the ghost sensations of Rolan's callused hands on my body anymore, at least.

I towel off, braid my hair back, and avoid the mirror above the sink. I already know what I'll see there. I don't need the confirmation of my shame or the fatigue under my eyes to remind me what a mess I'm in right now.

In the kitchen, I stir the last of the instant coffee into a chipped mug of tepid tap water. I drink it black because there's no milk left. Then I tear the crusts off three slices of stale bread and eat them with a smear of tomato paste. The fridge hums unevenly, its door swollen from a broken seal. I keep one eye on the hall clock. I'll need to wake Nikolai if we're going to make it before the first bell for school.

When I kneel beside him, he stirs with a soft grunt. His eyes open slowly, still sticky with sleep, then sharpen as he sees me. He sits up and yawns. He rubs his face with the back of one hand.

"Is Deda sleeping?" he whispers.

I nod and lower my voice. "Let's be quiet so we don't wake him, okay?" Tousling his hair, I smile at him, though inside, anger forms a pit in my stomach. Batya's promises mean nothing anymore, just like six years ago when he promised he could handle that debt, until they had a gun to his head and I was trembling, offering myself to a beast of a man in exchange for his safety.

Nikolai gives a small nod of his own, then slides off the couch. I walk him to the bathroom, hand him his toothbrush, and press my palm lightly to his back as he brushes. I pull his uniform from the hanger in the hallway and he heads to our room to change.

Once he's dressed, I zip up his backpack and hand him the sandwich container from the fridge that I prepared before going to work, knowing my father, who hasn't moved since I came in, would forget Nikolai's lunch and he'd go hungry. All of this that I'm doing, and he can't even care for my son properly.

Outside, the air is cold enough that our breath fogs. I wrap Nikolai's scarf tighter around his neck, then we walk toward the bakery on the corner before school. He chatters the whole way—about a dream he had where he was flying, about a

classmate who lost a tooth, and about how he hopes they get to play outside today. I nod, hum, and smile where I can, but I don't say much. My chest still feels like it's braced for impact.

At the bakery, I buy him a warm pirozhki filled with cabbage and potato and hand it to him wrapped in a napkin. He grins up at me and says, "Thank you, Mamochka," and licks a smear of filling off his thumb.

We reach the school steps by the fence and he turns toward me saying, "Will you pick me up today?"

I nod and give him a smile I don't feel. "Don't I always?"

"But sometimes Deda does, and you're sleeping." His nose scrunches up as he hands me what's left of his pastry. "And Deda smells funny too. But you smell nice, like flowers."

"I'll be here, Niko. Now go on, you'll be late." I wave my hand at him and he hurries off.

That's enough for him. He climbs the stairs without looking back. I wait until the doors close behind him before I let my posture sink. Then I walk.

I take the long way to give myself more time to think. I cut around the park, avoiding the main road, and follow a side street where I pass the pharmacy tucked beside a vape kiosk and a pawn shop. The street looks empty, but my nerves don't settle. My feet move, but my thoughts keep turning back to the lounge. Back to him.

Was he watching me? Did he recognize me and choose to say nothing? Or is this all in my head?

I change direction without thinking. I take a longer, unfamiliar route with fewer windows and fewer eyes. Every noise behind me tingles my spine. Every footstep that doesn't belong to me becomes another possibility I don't want to face.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

What if my father went back to them? What if the debt he swore was buried is still bleeding us dry? What if Rolan showed up last night because Batya dragged us back into it again?

My fingers tighten inside my sleeves. I can't afford for this to start again. Not with Nikolai old enough to see everything I've tried to protect him from. And if Rolan takes one look at my son, he will know it's his child. I never told Batya, but I didn't really have to. He knew what that weekend meant for me and he apologized a million times, and I know he sees it every time he looks at my son.

I keep walking where the streets are quieter now. A tram squeals down a distant track. A girl in a fast-food uniform leans against the wall outside a café, blowing smoke into her sleeve. I keep moving. My feet carry me forward while my stomach knots tighter. I want to clear my head, but the thoughts won't stop cycling.

Rolan was there. I saw him. I didn't imagine it. I wasn't drunk, and I wasn't confused.

For a moment, I think of how I got into that mess to begin with, the way Batya would come home with his shirt soaked in blood, his ribs cracked, his eyes blackened and swollen shut. He told me they'd warned him that next time, they wouldn't stop at broken bones, and he was right. They didn't stop.

I begged him to go to the police. He laughed and told me they'd kill him before he got past the front desk. Then Rolan Vetrov made his offer. I had only one choice—to give him one weekend. No questions were allowed, but I understood exactly what that meant, and I still said no.

Three days later, my father vanished without warning. He made no calls, left no signs, and gave no explanation for where he went or why, and I got so scared I called the number, went to the hotel, and did what I had to do. When it ended, I went home and scoured my skin until it bled. I didn't tell my father what I'd done. He didn't ask. We both chose silence.

And now I'm paying for it.

When I open the door back home, my father is sitting at the kitchen table. He's showered and changed. The bathroom still smells like his aftershave, and the mess from last night has been cleaned up. He looks up from his cup of coffee which no doubt holds the remainder of his vodka—hair of the dog—and smiles warmly.

"You working tonight?" he asks, nodding at the chair across from him, but I don't care to sit with him and talk. I'm exhausted. I need to sleep so I can be at the school to pick up Nikolai.

"Yeah," I grunt, peeling off my sweater and toeing off my shoes.

He stirs his black coffee, only further confirming that he's added something to it, before he sips slowly. I linger in the doorway, looking down at the stained, dirty linoleum, chipped and cracked in several places. There are burn marks on it too, and a few of the cupboard doors hang at odd angles, but at least it's a roof over our heads.

"Did you talk to the landlord?" I ask as I push my shoes toward the wall with one stockinged foot.

"No." He looks up, his eyes bloodshot but focused. No, of course he didn't. Why would he do that?

"Rent's due. I can pick up a shift or two..." I straighten my posture and hug my arms



over myself, fighting back a yawn. I'm upset with him but shouting has grown tiring. It does nothing but make him spiral more in guilt and chase more false hope at the casino and track.

"Yuri said?—"

"I can handle it,Batya," I say, cutting him off, and he frowns at me, pushing his coffee back from where he sits. I know in his heart he wants to help, but he never will. He never has. It only does more harm.

"You don't have to carry all of this alone,dochka." His eyebrows dip in the center as his expression softens to remorse, and I shrug and sigh.

He always says that but it's not the truth. I walk to the sink, choosing not to respond to that, and set my sweater on the counter. He doesn't push the statement, but I know he wants to. I think deep down, he gets it. He's a drunk addict who gambles away our money, and I'm the only reason he's alive.

"You look tired," he says.

I rinse out a glass, fill it with water, and sip. "We all are."

The edge of the panic I've been feeling is beginning to fade slightly. He watches me for a second longer, then gets up and moves to the couch without saying much more. I stand there staring into the sink and trying not to let my hands shake.

If Rolan recognized me last night, he would've acted already. Right? He wouldn't wait. He isn't the kind of man who lets things go. He takes what he wants and doesn't play games. I try to reassure myself that it was a non-thing, that I imagined it all after all.

But the way he watched the crowd?—

I swallow hard.

I don't think I'm going to sleep again for a very long time. Maybe ever.

4

ROLAN

I start the morning at my desk, eyes on the split-screen feed pulling live footage from the racetrack. The bottom left quadrant shows last night's staff clock-out, timestamped and logged. I see Anya disappearing through the side entrance with a disposable cup in one hand and that same threadbare sweater pulled tight across her frame. I rewind the clip and watch it again.

It's been one week since I happened upon her and I can't get her out of my fucking mind. Everything I do, she's there, wandering around in my thoughts, stirring up more questions I'd love to ask. So I get transfixed on this goddamn surveillance feed from the track and I can't pull myself away.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

She left at the same time as everyone else and I see nothing suspicious on the surface. Still, I flag her personnel file and attach a note for extended monitoring. If she thinks she can waltz into one of my businesses and disappear again, she's underestimated how long my memory runs. Tasting her once should've been enough. Six years ago, a weekend bought with blood and desperation... I told myself I didn't need more. I lied.

I lean back, rotate to the second monitor, and scroll through last week's activity logs. Pyotr Morozov's name came up twice. Low-stakes poker games in basements where men don't always leave with all their fingers. Both times, he lost. Both times, he walked away deeper in debt to nobodies with big mouths. I don't give a fuck about the money. I want to know why Anya's here. Why she came back now, after hiding all this time. Why she walked straight into a Vetrov operation, face uncovered.

I hit a button on the desk phone. The line clicks, then the familiar voice of my fixer picks up on the first ring.

"Vetrov," Derrick says, casual, like we spoke yesterday. "What's the word? Been quiet since that warehouse job."

"It's good... real good." I smile at nothing as I think of how many times this man has bailed me out of shit I never should've been walking through. "How's the family?"

"Oh, you know... Kids and shit... Wife is good too. What can I do for you?" I already hear his fingers typing away on his keyboard and know he's pulling up his backdoor methods for searching the internet.

"Run a quiet background sweep. The name is Anya Morozova. I want school records, clinic visits, any passports issued, burner phones—whatever she's touched since she disappeared from existence six years ago. I don't care how small it looks. Find it for me?"

The light from the window cuts across my desk in narrow bands. The fixer's voice crackles faintly over the speaker. "How far back?" If Derrick's speed at finding answers that suit me is as fast as the speed at which he types, we'll continue to get along just fine.

I watch the cursor blink on my computer screen as I answer. "Six years... And send it to me as soon as you get it."

"Sure thing, Rolan. Expect it by the end of the day. If she's keeping secrets, I'll find them."

I hang up and grab my coat, then tap in Pyotr's number from memory. The line rings twice before he answers, and I can almost smell the liquor on his breath through the line.

"Da?" he slurs, barely audible over whatever dive bar hums in the background.

"It's Rolan... You have twenty minutes to sober the fuck up. I'm sending a car. We're meeting."

He coughs, then stammers something useless which gets swallowed by the sound around him.

"Where are you?" I'm already headed toward my car. Stepan will ensure Pyotr shows the fuck up.

"The Blaaack Keg," he slurs, and I'm already finding myself fed up with his shit.

"Don't talk, just listen. You're going to sit your drunk ass down and wait. Don't try to vanish on me. I want answers, and you're going to give them. And if you don't stay put, I'll hunt you and that piece of ass you call a daughter down." I don't wait for confirmation. I end the call, text the address of the bar to my driver, and step out into the chill. Pyotr will come because of his guilt over what Anya did for him.

I can count on it.

He's already shaking when I walk in. It's midday, and the warehouse is one of the only places I know is perfectly secret and no one will interrupt us. Concrete floors stained with grease and age stretch beneath a single line of flickering overhead lights. He's perched on a broken crate near the wall, looking like he wants to bolt.

Pyotr stands when I enter through the steel side door, but I wave him down before he can move another inch. "Sit," I bark, crossing the room slowly, the soles of my shoes scuffing across sticky concrete.

He drops hard back onto the crate but his hands don't stop twitching. Smells like liquor and piss, like he wet himself from shaking so badly.

"You know why I'm here," I say. I step closer and drag over an overturned crate, setting it down across from him with a loud scrape against the concrete. The chill in the air sinks into my coat as I sit, eyes fixed on him like a blade pressed to skin.

"I—I didn't mean anything by it, Rolan. I swear. She just showed up. Said she wanted to help." He scratches at the side of his neck, eyes darting toward the window where sunlight hits the smeared glass.

"She did more than help. She signed on to one of my crews." I plant both boots on the

concrete and lean forward slowly, letting my arms hang over my knees. The air between us turns colder as I lock my eyes on his and drop my voice to a low warning. The way he jerks back tells me I've hit my mark.

He nods rapidly, eyes everywhere but my face. "I told her not to. Told her she didn't have to." His voice drops to a whisper, barely audible beneath the distant whine of an overhead light straining to stay lit in the cold warehouse air.

"Then why did she?"

He hesitates a beat too long. I lunge across the space between us and slam his wrist against the crate. It sounds like something snaps, but I don't let go. The echo bounces off the concrete walls as he yelps, curling in on himself like a kicked dog.

"Why did she come back?" Somewhere outside the warehouse, a metal door slams shut and a dog barks once before going quiet. Inside, no one is watching, and no one will interrupt.

"Debt!" he blurts. "I got in too deep. With some guys from Vladikavkaz. Real bastards, Rolan. They said they'd cut me open if I didn't pay."

I let him go. He cradles his arm like a wounded child.

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"She's repaying it for you?" I glance toward the stack of broken shelving shoved in the corner, where rusted cans and shattered glass litter the floor like remnants of some long-forgotten business.

"She didn't know at first," he mumbles. "But then they found her. Said if she didn't work it off, they'd come after her too."

"So she took the job." My voice stays even, but the air in the warehouse feels heavier now, the narrow space between us shrinking under what he's just confessed.

He nods again but he doesn't speak again. He's whimpering and looking around frantically.

"Anything else you want to tell me? Now's your chance." The space between us stays tense and motionless, then he goes still. His lips press together and his fingers twist into the hem of his coat. The tremor in his hand spreads up his arm, and his gaze finally lifts. It's hollow and resigned. That's when I see the exact moment he breaks.

"She's got a kid," he whispers.

"Say that again." A gust of wind rattles the warped windowpane beside us.

"A son—he's five."

My heart slows. Everything else drops away. "His name." The gravel and grime slide slightly beneath my boots as I shift my weight. Pyotr doesn't look up.

"Nikolai. But I swear I was gonna say something, but I didn't know what else to do. She'll hate me."

I lean back, blood humming. "You're going to bring me a lock of that boy's hair," I tell him. "Tomorrow. Don't make me ask twice."

He nods frantically, shoulders hunched and eyes darting like a cornered rat's.

I stand slowly, the legs of the crate scratching across the concrete with a long, scraping grind. The air inside the warehouse holds its breath as I adjust my coat and fix him with one last glare.

"If you try to run, Pyotr, I'll know."

I turn and walk the length of the warehouse, each footstep echoing against the steel bones of the place. The cold follows me, wrapping around my ankles and crawling up my spine. Behind me, he stays frozen on the crate, too afraid to move. I push open the side door and step out into the wind, the sky already darkening over the rooftops of Mytishchi. I light a cigarette as I descend the stairs, each drag sharp in my lungs.

This changes everything.

5

ANYA

The lounge is packed tonight—wall-to-wall bodies, stale smoke clinging to red velvet drapes, and a low roar of voices that never fully fades. There's no race scheduled, but the high-stakes tables hum with excited tension, and the private booths are full of men who speak softly and tip badly.



I snake through the crowd with a tray balanced on one palm, careful not to jostle anyone's shoulder. The drinks wobble with every uneven step my heels make, but I've done this long enough to make it look smooth.

Table seven is full of regulars—four middle-aged men in cheap suits pretending they belong here. They play slow, order cheap, and tip worse. One of them, the balding one with a ring of sweat around his collar, winks at me every time I set a glass down. I ignore it. I always do.

“Another round?” I ask.

He hands me a wrinkled bill without breaking eye contact. “As long as you bring it.”

The money smells like cigarettes and desperation, but I tuck it into the pocket of my apron and turn without answering.

At table eleven, the crowd is younger, brasher. They tip better, mostly because they know it buys them a second longer of eye contact. I give them just enough to feel noticed without inviting anything more.

One guy, leather jacket, sunglasses indoors, waves me down as I pass. “Two whiskeys, neat. And whatever you want.”

“I'm not drinking tonight,” I say, voice flat.

He grins, widely and stupidly. “Then just sit with us.”

I don't answer. I pivot, tray angled to my hip, and make my way back to the bar. Mitzy's there already, lipstick smudged on her glass, rolling her eyes at something one of the bartenders said. She spots me and cocks a brow.

“Table eleven?” she guesses.

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I nod. “Leather jacket.”

“They never learn.” She raises her glass to me and turns back to her tray.

Tips tonight are decent. Nothing spectacular, but better than average. Enough to make me pretend I’m not dead on my feet, enough to get Nikolai another week of lunches and maybe pay down the gas bill before it’s cut off.

I make another round—booths first, then the rail. The guys at the bar ignore me. The ones in the booths don’t.

A man grabs my wrist when I set down a tumbler of bourbon. His fingers are thick, swollen, scarred. I don’t flinch. I just lift his hand off mine, set it on the table, and give him a look that warns him not to try again.

He laughs, shrugs. “No harm in asking.”

I move on. That’s the job. Pretend it didn’t happen, don’t make waves, don’t get fired.

Halfway through the next circuit, a staff runner cuts across the lounge. He’s young, maybe nineteen, fresh enough that he still apologizes when he bumps into people.

“You’re needed down the service hallway,” he says, eyes darting past me. “Now.”

I nod, set the tray on the back bar, and wipe my palms on my skirt. My first thought is a delivery. My second is a scheduling mix-up. My third?—

My third never comes.

Because when I turn the corner, I freeze.

Rolan stands in the shadowed hallway, framed by dim lighting as though he's been waiting forever. He doesn't speak. Not a single word.

I try to swallow the sudden tightness in my throat, but my mouth feels dry. He's staring at me, his expression unreadable, as if he's waiting for something—an answer, an explanation, anything. But I don't know what to say.

I attempt to move past him, but my feet are glued to the floor, caught under the weight of his gaze. Finally, I force myself to speak, breaking the suffocating silence.

"I'm working," I say, my voice rougher than intended. "I don't have time to stand around."

His lips twitch into something resembling a smile, but there's no humor in it. "You'll make time," he says, his voice low, commanding.

I try again to walk around him, but he steps directly into my path.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I snap, even as my stomach knots tightly. I know exactly what he means. My mind races through countless disastrous outcomes, but I'm trapped. I've never been able to outrun him.

He doesn't flinch, merely stares at me, his eyes slicing through the tension between us like a blade.

"You don't know what I'm talking about?" he repeats, and for the first time, I sense something truly cold in his voice—something worse than anger. "I spoke to Pyotr. I

know about the boy.”

My blood turns to ice. My heart stops.

The boy. My son. Nikolai.

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out at first. “What about him?”

Rolan steps closer, his presence overwhelming, suffocating. “He’s five, Anya. Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” His eyes darken, possessive and dangerous.

I remain silent, mind spinning. I need a way out, fast.

“You kept him from me,” he says. His tone isn't angry, just calculated and deliberate. “Why?”

The silence between us grows thick with everything unspoken. I want to scream at him to leave, but I can’t. Not with this revelation hanging between us, pressing down with every breath.

“I didn’t want him to be part of this,” I finally say, my voice quiet, defeated. “I didn’t want him to be a part of you.”

Rolan inches even closer, his breath brushing my skin, sending a shiver through me. “It’s too late for that,” he whispers. “He’s mine, Anya. And so are you.”

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I try to pull away, but my body won't respond. My heart pounds in my chest, deafening. I feel trapped, ensnared in the web he wove years ago, and escape feels impossible.

My head dips again as images of his face hovering over me flash through my memory. The way he took me the first time, quietly like a thief in the night. He was far from gentle, but he was at least generous. I remember having his dick inside me as he told me once I fucked him, I would never be satisfied by another man. The thought makes me shudder. There is some truth to that, and in other ways, it's a complete lie.

He studies me, his eyes searching for something—perhaps an answer, or the truth I've desperately hidden.

"You'll have to tell him the truth." Rolan runs the back of his knuckles up and down the bare skin on my arm, causing goosebumps to rise everywhere. Those hands and what they've done to me make my body explode in reactions that seem to contradict how I feel. Warmth pools in my groin while my head tells me to run away screaming.

I swallow hard, my throat painfully dry. "I have nothing left to say to you, Mr. Vetrov," I manage. "Now, I have to get back to work. I have bills to pay."

He steps back slightly, as if dismissing me, but his gaze never wavers. There's a dangerous satisfaction in his eyes, the look of a man who's already claimed victory.

"We'll talk again soon," he says simply, and then he turns away, vanishing back into the darkness.

I stand rooted, heart racing, breaths shallow. My mind floods with all the consequences I tried to avoid for six years. The moment I saw him, I knew the thin fabric of the life I stitched together would tear. But hearing him speak about Nikolai... it split me open.

I want to scream, to throw something, but I can't even move. My legs are frozen mid-step from the thousand calculations trying to process at once. My lungs tighten. Each breath feels short and scraped raw inside my chest, like I've been sucker-punched.

My feet refuse to obey because running now means abandoning the last of the control I still have. There's no plan for this, no backup. No lie that will cover what he now knows. Everything I've done—every sacrifice, every decision—was meant to keep my son safe. And now the man I swore would never touch him has laid claim to both of us.

Every step toward the door feels impossibly heavy, as though I'm moving through quicksand. I don't know what's next, only that nothing will ever be the same again.

6

ROLAN

I return to the estate just before sunset, the car pulling through the heavy iron gates as the guards wave me in. I spent the last two days in Kazan sorting out a weapons shipment, and it feels good to be home. My driver doesn't speak, and I don't invite conversation. The moment we roll to a stop, I step out and inside to see how my men are doing with the surveillance tasks I've given them.

Inside, the halls are quiet. Staff clear out of my path. I pass the second-floor landing where the newer recruits train on monitors and encrypted relays, then push through the secured door to the main surveillance room. Stepan's already there, standing

beside the playback console, eyes locked on the screen.

“She cracked, Ro,” he says as I enter. “I pulled that video up and watched it a dozen times. You'll want to see this bitch's face.” His stupid smirk is going to be smacked off his face if he talks about Anya like that again. I may not own rights to her yet, but she's the mother of my child.

“How about you keep your trap shut and play the footage?” My eyes flick anger at him and he sobers, ducking his head as he sits down.

He cues up the feed—the back hallway camera, timestamped four days ago. The footage is from right after I left her standing there. I'd walked away without a word, and now I want to see what she did afterward. The camera's angle isn't perfect, but it shows enough. The hallway where I left her standing—empty, silent, stark under the buzzing fluorescent light.

She doesn't move or speak. She stands there frozen, like the air got knocked out of her lungs. Her hands hang limply at her sides. Her eyes stay fixed forward, unblinking. That's the moment she broke. Not with a scream or with tears. Just with stillness. Anya stands at the edge of the screen, her posture rigid.

Her face stays perfectly still for one long, suspended moment. Then—barely perceptible—her throat tightens. Her hands start to shake as she retreats into the back kitchen entrance and moments later, she's seen walking out the back of the lounge into the night.

“She's holding it together,” I say quietly.

“Wait,” Stepan replies. “Keep watching.”

I keep my eyes on the screen as I watch her exit and the door shuts. Then a few



seconds later, it opens again and she steps inside, leaning against the wall. Her back slides slowly downward until she is a crumpled mess on the ground, sobbing so hard her shoulders jerk.

Stepan exhales slowly. “She’s scared.”

“She should be.”

I let the footage run a few seconds longer before waving him off. He stops the video and the screen goes black. I feel no satisfaction or vindication in watching her fall apart, only confirmation. She thought she could hide him from me and now she knows better.

“Tell me about the school,” I say.

Stepan nods once and turns to the tablet on the desk. “We pulled her address last week. Ran the crosscheck with enrollment records in the district. There’s only one kid with her last name who matches the age and general description. Name’s Nikolai Morozov. Attends a local primary school about six blocks from their apartment. He’s in kindergarten.”

I already know the answer, but I ask anyway. “Is it him?”

“We’re ninety-five percent sure. Facial recognition on the school gate cameras gave us a partial. It’s not great—too grainy—but enough for a match. And he has facial markers that mirror your bone structure. I’m saying that kid is yours, Ro.” Stepan has a smug expression on his face.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

He taps the screen and rotates it toward me. A low-resolution photo appears. A boy in a navy jacket, one hand clutching the strap of a cartoon-printed backpack, the other rubbing sleep from his eye. He has dark brown hair and pale skin, with oversized eyes that match my own bone-deep gaze. My jaw locks.

I don't need a lab to tell me the truth.

"That's my son."

Stepan doesn't answer me. He sets the tablet down and returns to whatever it was he was doing on his computer before I walked in.

I look down at the screen again and study the image until every pixel is burned into memory. The fact that Anya and Pyotr thought they could hide him from me is ridiculous. "I want eyes on him. Round the clock. I don't care what it costs." Knowing my blood is out there vulnerable to the things my enemies could do to him makes me instantly guarded. I will protect him at all costs, even if Anya prefers I keep my distance.

"You want contact?"

"No," I mutter, "not yet. But our enemies aren't going to go easy if they learn of his existence." My finger touches the screen, closing the image, but I still see him in my mind. I have a son—five years old, thick, dark locks. I wonder if he's a happy boylike I was before my father's world crashed in on me or if Pyotr's drinking and gambling have made his life hard.

I bet Anya is a good mother. She's kind and soft—much softer than I would ever be on him. I'll have to teach him the way of the Vetrov legacy at some point, but right now, he's where he belongs. At least until I figure this thing out.

“You want him followed to school?”

“Yes, but I don't want interaction, threats, or intimidation. I want him to live his life. I want to see the life she gave him without me.” Locking the tablet, I pull on the lapels of my coat then straighten my tie.

“Understood,” he says, and he picks up the tablet, tucking it under his arm. He stands and walks over toward the wall of monitors where he busies himself looking at some small movement seen on the back lawn, a tiny white fox with a few kits.

When I finally step into my bedroom, the sky over Moscow has gone black. The city lights bleed against the horizon, casting a haze over the estate. I don't bother turning on the main lights—just the desk lamp in the corner. I pour vodka into a lowball glass, sit down on the edge of the couch, and stare at nothing.

The room is silent except for the occasional crack of the heating system and the faint hum of the security monitors. I should sleep, but I won't. I know I'll lie there restless and staring at the ceiling. My son is out there—real, alive, in a world I can't control.

And worse—others know it. I don't know how many or who they are, but I know it won't take any time at all for my enemies to figure it out if they haven't already. Especially if Pyotr is so generous with the information the way he was with me.

My phone vibrates deep in my pocket. I pull it out and check the screen and see Stepan's name. I answer without hesitation.

“Talk.”

Stepan gets right to the point. “We have a lead on where Pyotr Morozov is gambling. A crew out of Vladikavkaz runs a small craps game weekly.”

I straighten and stand, then walk toward the window that overlooks the back garden. “Who?”

“They’re calling themselves the Zharov Bratstvo. They’re a small group with an estimated ten to twelve active players, connected to remnants of the old Solntsevskaya cells. They operate with a newer structure, a younger crew, and a sharper appetite for expansion.”

“And Pyotr has debts with them? What kind of racket are they running?” The tension in my shoulders seems to never quite fade away. Tonight it's worse than normal, and every word Stepan utters makes my muscles tighter.

Stepan’s voice stays flat over the line. “They’ve been asking around the district—specifically about a woman with a kid. They described her as dark-haired and slim. They said she came back to the city recently, lives in the same neighborhood, and matches the timing exactly. Everything about their description points to Morozova.”

“Why? What are they looking at her for?” My jaw tightens as my mind races ahead before he can say it, but I know the truth.

Stepan hesitates. “Apparently, Pyotr’s been running his mouth. He told someone the kid’s connected to a powerful name. Didn’t say yours, but he didn’t really need to. One of Zharov’s guys used to run messages through the tracks back when we first bought it. Took them about two hours to guess.”

I glower at my reflection in the window pane, glass forgotten on the table. “So they know...”

“They’re not sure. But they think they’ve found something valuable.” He sounds like he wants to reassure me, but I’m not a man to take false hope. If my enemies know I have a son, they will stop at nothing to destroy him just to get at me.

My hand curls into a fist. “Double the watch. I want full coverage, no gaps. Pull from my personal detail if that’s what it takes. Assign two men to the school grounds, one stationed discreetly inside the building and one tailing the mother at all times. They rotate shifts every eight hours and operate without being seen.”

“And if the Zharovs try to make contact?” Stepan’s voice stays flat, but there’s an edge beneath it.

“Shut it down. Quietly.” I cross the room and stop at the edge of the desk, one hand braced on its corner as I pick up my glass of whiskey and down it in one gulp.

“Copy that.”

I lower the phone slowly after Stepan hangs up and let my arm drop to my side. The line goes dead, but the threat still rings in my ears. I stare at the wall, jaw locked, thoughts spiraling in every direction.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

So Pyotr couldn't keep his mouth shut. He tried to leverage my son and his relationship to me for safety. Anya may be doing her best to protect the boy, but her father just painted a target on his back. And now the wolves are circling.

I reach for the landline and press the button for my assistant's direct line. It rings once before she picks up.

Her voice is crisp, professional. "Yes, sir?"

"Cancel everything tomorrow," I say, pacing toward the window. I'm already thinking ten steps ahead. I have to be fluid, not locked into a schedule, and I need to think about how to make my son safe if his own fucking grandfather won't.

"All of it?" she asks, already typing in the background. Her tone sounds doubtful and I feel angry that I have to explain.

"Yes. Meetings, inspections, the luncheon. Push it all back," I reply. My tone leaves no room for argument.

"Understood. Do you want me to?—"

"No," I say and end the call before she can finish.

There's nothing else to say. That boy is no longer safe and neither is Anya. And if I want to keep them breathing, I'm going to have to do something I haven't done in years.

Get personal.

I go to the safe behind the panel in the wall. The keypad lights up as I type in the code. Inside, neatly arranged, is a row of compact weapons, cash stacks, and a hard drive labeled with a piece of black tape. I pull the drive out and toss it on the desk, then take the pistol and holster it under my jacket.

The surveillance footage replays in my head—Anya's hands trembling, her sobbing form. Even she knows how dangerous it is to be connected to me like this. Then I remember the boy's face in grainy stills. I imagine Pyotr's voice, braying empty threats into the void, dragging my blood into his shitstorm. I should have killed him years ago when I had the chance... but then my son would not exist.

I pour another drink and carry it back to the couch, but I don't sit. Instead, I open the laptop perched on the coffee table and plug in the drive. A black screen flashes to life, then a list of archived files appears. I open a folder labeled Track Intel – Asset Movements. Inside is a detailed layout of routes, known associates, and digital surveillance reports from when Pyotr first spiraled. I set a shadow on him a week ago, hoping to catch who he owed now, but nothing suggested he'd break like this, sell a child's bloodline to settle his own tab.

I shake my head and sink onto the couch as I down the second drink hoping it stops the pulse of adrenaline through my veins. I scroll through the archive and select a much older file—one I haven't listened to in years. It's dated six years ago, labeled with Pyotr's name and a timestamp from the week he sold out his daughter for a chance to stay alive.

His voice crackles through the speakers. "Please. You don't need her. She's just a girl. I'll pay. I'll find another way. Just... don't make her do this."

There's silence on the other end, and then my own voice is cold and unbending. "You

have three hours to pay me or she becomes my property, Pyotr. You know what that means."

Pyotr's breathing turns ragged. "She's all I've got. Please, Rolan, don't do this."

The recording ends there.

I sit in the dark and listen to it twice because it reminds me of the choices he made. He begged for her life and promised he would find another way. He lied through his teeth, and when it came time to choose, he handed her over without hesitation.

That was enough. In this world, even a hint of weakness gets attention. And now his creditors know of the existence of a way to bring me to my knees and they are going to use it. And Pyotr handed them the first breadcrumb.

I pace the room. The vodka burns low in my gut, but it's not enough to settle the growing pressure behind my eyes. This should've never gone this far. Anya's silence bought her time, but Pyotr's mouth just sold them out.

7

ANYA

The tray in my hands rattles as I step off the service elevator, bottles clinking with each footfall. My fingers ache from gripping the metal all evening so far. I shift my hold, but it doesn't help much. I'm covering for Mitzi, who seems to have found some other entertainment for the evening, and of all nights, it's my first race night, and the crowd is louder and wilder than ever.

Thankfully, I've been summoned to the press boxes on the second floor to deliver a round of drinks to quieter, more mature clientele. At least, I hope they're more



mature. The hallway up here smells faintly of lemon polish and the familiar old cigar smoke I smell everywhere in this place, and the carpet beneath my shoes is thick enough to muffle most of the sounds behind the walls of these enclosed boxes.

I've never been on this floor before and I'm not sure where I'm going. A senior waitress passed the tray off to me downstairs without looking me in the eye. She said it was a special request and told me I needed the tip more than she did, which should've made me cringe, but I do need the tips.

"Straight down. Last door on the left," she told me.

She didn't wait for a reply either, already disappearing back through the double swinging doors into the kitchen as if she wanted no part in whatever this is. I stand there holding the tray, trying to pretend it isn't shaking in my hands, but I collect myself and manage to find my way up here.

I keep my eyes low as a barrel-chested man in a dark suit passes. The lighting is soft, almost muted, but not too dim to see the tattoos peeking out of his suit's neck. A strip of mirrored glass runs along the wall, and I catch a glimpse of myself in it—tired, pale, hair scraped back in a messy knot that does nothing for my appearance. I should've powdered my face. I didn't think I'd be serving high-rollers tonight. My apron still smells like the fried potatoes from the kitchen last night.

When I find the room I want, the door is closed. It's made of black wood with a brass handle, and there's no sound coming from inside like the other rooms where music and conversation thump through. I knock once with the edge of my knuckle, then push it open, already bracing for some entitled drunk waving rubles around.

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My first step into the room feels like any other night, any other table I'm waiting, but what I see makes me freeze in place, caught mid-step. My breath catches. The tray tilts slightly in my grip before I steady it, arms tense with instinct.

Rolan Vetrov leans back on a low leather couch, one leg stretched out, one hand draped along the backrest. His jacket is off, shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows. A tumbler of something dark sits untouched beside him on a table that probably costs more than my rent. The lights in here are dimmed low, blue shadows pooling at the edges of the room. One of the wall sconces flickers softly behind him, casting a dull glow that halos the back of his head in gold.

I don't move. My lungs squeeze tight with the pressure of panic I'm trying to swallow. The sound of the door clicking closed behind me hasn't even fully registered yet, but the instinct to turn and dart out of here does. Why does this man make me have this conflicted response? The urge to run and the desire to stay put, all in the same breath...

He doesn't speak. Instead, he sits motionless, watching me with that calculating stillness that makes it hard to breathe. He doesn't need to say anything to me to make me want to piss myself. The silence is deliberately drawn out like an invisible rope pulling me close. Everything about this moment is staged. I wonder how much he paid that other waitress to shift this shit to me. I wonder if he hurt Mitzi just so I could be called in...

I stand frozen just inside the doorway, pulse stuttering in my throat like a drum out of rhythm. He isn't a guest at this lounge and this isn't a mistake. He called for me, specifically.

"Lock the door," Rolan says. He watches me, waiting. The words curl out of his mouth with a stream of smoke from a cigarette tucked between two fingers on his left hand.

His voice scrapes down my spine like the edge of a blade. I don't move, so he stands. There's no rush to his movements, only smooth, deliberate motion. Every step he takes closes the distance between us until I feel his shadow stretch over mine. He reaches around me, takes the tray from my hands, and sets it on the table. Then he clicks the door lock behind me.

I step back. My heel hits the edge of the rug and nearly folds under me, but I catch myself before I fall.

"I don't work up here," I tell him. My throat is dry and each word catches. My eyes flick to the drinks—whiskey, vodka, a small bottle of mineral water. The crystal glasses are lined in a perfect row, pristine and waiting. There are no mixers to soften the taste, no garnish to distract from it. Everything on the tray is just what he likes—strong, simple, and undiluted.

I glance toward the door, calculating—not distance, but likelihood. If I reach for it, will he stop me with a word, a hand, or just a look? He doesn't need to chase anyone. He closes options without moving, and I can already feel mine slipping away. He probably has thirty men on speed dial. I'd never get through the back door to the club.

"You do now." Rolan turns and faces me fully. He takes his time, moving like a man who's in complete control and knows it. He's drawing out the moment, making sure I absorb every inch of it. Every inch of him.

"The track is mine, Anya," he says. "Which means you're mine too."

His eyes don't leave mine. He's daring me to challenge him or run away. This

sickening fucking game is cruel. He doesn't understand what it does to my mind.

I take another step back and feel the wall behind me. The room isn't big enough to put distance between us. The couch, the bar cart, the wide glass windows with the blinds half-drawn—it all feels too tight. Too controlled.

"Let me go," I say. My voice sounds thin in the air. "I have tables downstairs." I force myself to hold his gaze, even as the walls around me seem to close in.

He doesn't move. "I made you an offer once. You accepted. So..." His hands stay at his sides, but I can feel the memory pressing between us like a ghost.

"That was a long time ago," I mutter, "and I've changed." I straighten my spine, forcing myself to stand taller. I try to inject more confidence into my voice than I feel. The ache in my jaw reminds me of how long I've been clenching it, how long I've been holding everything in.

"You're here now. Working for me. Still trying to pay off your father's debt. Still pretending like you have a choice." The low rumble of his voice almost vibrates my chest as he steps toward me. My heart is pounding like the hooves of the horses outside on the track under glowing lights and I'd almost think those galloping thoroughbreds have the right idea if I didn't know better.

"I'm not working here for him." The lie rolls off my tongue, but I wince as I bite my lip.

"Anya, please..." The words spill from him with surgical precision. He tilts his head slightly, as if laying out facts no one can argue with. "I know your father is in a mess again. I know why you're here." His tone never rises but it still slices cleanly through the last of my resistance.

I keep my hands at my sides, even though they want to shake. Even when my knees threaten to buckle. I brace myself without looking like I'm bracing. I've learned to do that.

He steps closer. I don't flinch. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me shrink. My breath comes in shallow bursts, but I stay rooted in place.

"You want the truth?" he asks.

I don't answer. My lips press together in a tight line. If I speak, I'll crack open. So I focus on a spot over his shoulder where a neon beer sign flickers and dig my nails into my palms.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folded slip of paper. He unfolds it slowly, deliberately, and drops it onto the tray. I see it and know instantly it's a cashier's check, though I can't see to whom it's made out.

"After all the hours you put in, all the tips you scrape together, I know you'll never pay off what he owes."

He stands perfectly still after speaking. He watches me absorb the number on the paper without blinking. He wants to see the exact moment it sinks in. My chest tightens like a vise as I see that number—?15,000,000 is a fuck ton of money. Two fuck tons, exactly, and one third of what Batya owes those evil men. It's more than triple what I'd be able to pay in five years' time.

"I can clear some of it," Rolan says. "Tonight."

He lifts a glass from the tray but doesn't drink. He just holds it, waiting. The air between us grows warm under tension, a taut string he's pulling tighter with every second.

My stomach turns. Acid curls up the back of my throat. I take yet another small step back just to breathe and realize I'm pressed fully against the wall now. "What?" I mutter, but I can't look him in the eye now. I can't even take my eyes off that check.

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He waits. "I'll erase a third of the debt—fifteen million rubles—tonight," he says. "No paperwork or formal arrangement. Only one condition. You give me what I want, right here, right now." He's so certain, it makes me feel like the floor has tilted beneath me, like there is no world outside this room.

I breathe slowly through my nose. The silence grows thick. My heart pounds hard enough to echo behind my ribs. "And if I say no?" I know what he's asking me to do—the same sickening thing he asked of me six years ago, and I'm not sure I can say no. I feel like I may vomit on him. I manage to keep my tone even, but I can feel the panic clawing at the edge of my calm, waiting to rip through me.

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug, casual. "Then you keep waiting tables. Keep counting change. Keep watching your father drink himself closer to a bullet." He takes a slow step to the side as he downs his drink. I feel the air shift with each move. Every step he takes feels like another door closing behind me, locking me in.

I want to slap him or scream. I want to throw the tray across the room. But I do none of those things. I just look at that check, then him, and I hate that he looks exactly the same. The same eyes. The same calm. Time hasn't softened him—it's sharpened him.

He takes another step. It puts him just inches from me now, close enough that I can see the faint scar above his brow. "You walked in here because I asked. Not because you were forced. No one will know what happens in this room but us. And tomorrow, you go back downstairs... with one third of your father's debt paid off, Anya."

He sounds like he's laying out a business proposal, not tearing what's left of my heart to shreds. In his mind, he's doing me a favor.

My throat burns. Everything I've held back presses to the surface—fear, fury, the unbearable weight of every moment that brought me here.

"Don't pretend this is a choice," I say. I shift my weight and lock my jaw. The words drag out of me like broken glass.

Rolan leans in. "You're the one pretending."

His breath brushes against my cheek. His hand rises slowly and he plants his palm against the wall beside my head.

My breath catches in my chest. And still, I don't move. He's a sickening asshole with a superiority complex, but I'll never make that much money in my life. Batya's debt will always hang over us. The men who like to beat him just to make sure he keeps up on his payments—I could hold them off for weeks with this much money, even buy Nikolai new clothes and fresh food.

My eyes flick up to his and the sinister smirk on his lips makes me cringe. I fucked him before. I could do it again. It would be nothing, right? To sell my body for this measure of freedom. And who's to say I have to stay here? I could take the money and run.

"Fine," I mumble so quietly I don't even hear it, but his hand slides down the wall, across the side of my face and lower to my neck, where he grips me until I feel my pulse weaken.

"Fine?" he asks.

"Yes," I gargle, too breathless to push past his firm grip. "I'll do it."

Rolan's eyes slither across my face down to my chest where he tears the front of my



shirt open and admires my tits. When he leans closer, ready to claim my lips, I turn my head. His grip is so forceful I almost can't avoid him, but he doesn't stop me.

"Is it yes or no?" he growls, and I clench my jaw.

"Lips are for love, asshole. You can destroy my body, but you won't cross my lines doing it." Looking at him out of the corner of my eye, I notice a glimmer of satisfaction in his gaze before he lets go of my neck and uses both hands to tear my shirt the rest of the way open.

"Strip. Now," he orders.

My hands tremble as I fumble with the buttons on my waitress uniform, gaze still eyeing that check. Beads of sweat form on my brow and between my breasts. I can't believe I'm actually doing this—again. For money. For a debt that wasn't even mine to begin with. But what choice do I have? My father, my son... They depend on me. I can't let them down.

Rolan watches me intently, his eyes hungry as my clothes pool at my feet, leaving me standing before him in nothing but my underwear. He pulls me to the center of the room then circles me like a predator. His every step is purposeful and menacing. My skin crawls with revulsion, but I force myself to stand tall, chin up, and endure this humiliation.

He stops behind me and leans in close enough to smell my hair. "You've grown since the last time," he mutters, his breath a hot whisper on my bare skin. I grit my teeth and clench my fists at my sides, willing myself not to react. "On your knees, Anya."

I hesitate for a moment longer, but debt and responsibility crush down on me like an anchor. Slowly, I drop to my knees in front of him, my heart pounding in my ears. I avoid looking at him as I fumble with his belt, unbuckling it and tugging down his

pants. His cock springs free, hard and ready, and I swallow the bile that threatens to rise in my throat.

"That's better," he purrs, running his hand through my hair roughly. "You always were a natural at this."

The first touch of my mouth on him is like swallowing acid, but I force myself to continue. My hands shake as I grip his thighs for stability, trying not to think about who I'm really doing this for. I close my eyes, shutting out the room, the city, and the man in front of me. Instead, I picture my son's smile as he runs through a meadow of wildflowers in the country—a place far away from here.

Rolan moans softly, his grip tightening in my hair. I let out a muffled whimper as he forces himself deeper into my mouth. My stomach churns, but I push through the revulsion, focusing on the debt that's slowly being chipped away with each humiliating second. His cock is rock hard and slick with pre-cum, which I can't even admit to myself that I like, but when I let a groan vibrate up, he tightens his grip more and pulls my mouth away from his body.

"God, you suck like a vacuum, Anya." Rolan backs away, letting his dick stand proud. He struts to the tray of drinks, picks up a vodka and tonic, and downs it, then nods at the tray as he says, "Drink?"

"Fuck you," I spit, and it's the wrong thing to say. He sets the glass back down and marches over to me, grabbing me by the elbow and shoving me toward the couch.

"On your knees. Now."

I want to defy him, to spit in his face and walk out of there with my head held high, but I think of my father and the debt, so I do as he says. With shaking knees, I position myself on all fours on the leather couch, my ass in the air and my heart

pounding in my ears. I can feel Rolan's eyes on me, scanning every inch of my naked body, and it makes me feel even more degraded.

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Rolan circles me again, his footsteps echoing ominously in the quiet room. He stops behind me, and I brace myself for whatever humiliation he has in store next. Instead, he lightly traces his fingernails down my spine, sending a shiver through my core despite myself. I grit my teeth and grab hold of the back of the couch as his hand slaps hard on my ass.

“That pussy is going to rue the day your father decided to sit at that card table.”

Rolan's hand leaves a stinging heat on my ass, but I don't give him the satisfaction of a sound. Instead, I clench my jaw and try not to enjoy it too much as he slides his dick up and down my sopping entrance. I'm shocked he's gotten to me enough to make me this wet.

Rolan chuckles darkly behind me, as if he can read my mind. "I know what you're thinking," he says, his voice low and menacing. "But let me make one thing clear, Anya." His hands grip my hips, digging his nails into my skin hard enough to draw blood. He pulls me back onto him, so I can feel every inch of his cock against my entrance. "This isn't just about your father's debt anymore."

"What do you mean?" My voice is a whimper.

"This," he says, thrusting hard inside me with one swift motion, "is about power. And I always get what I want." He pulls out just as quickly, making me whine, and then slams into me again, harder this time. "And I've wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you."

I moan through gritted teeth as he sets a punishing pace, his hips slapping against my

ass in a rhythm that leaves me breathless and aching for more. My pussy clenches around him, betraying me by how wet and aroused I am. He grabs my hair and forces my head down onto the couch, grinding against me even harder.

"You like it, don't you?" he growls in my ear, his breath hot and heavy against my neck. "Tell me you like it, Anya."

I clench my jaw tighter, refusing to give him the satisfaction of hearing me beg for more. But my own fucking voice betrays me, slipping out in pants and soft moans of pleasure, even when he smacks my ass harder and makes me jump and clench on his dick.

I feel myself teetering on the edge of orgasm, fighting against it with every fiber of my being. I can't let him see me break. I won't give him that pleasure.

Rolan senses my inner struggle and chuckles darkly. "That's right, Anya. Fight it." He reaches around and finds my clitoris, rubbing it roughly in time with his thrusts. "But you'll beg me for more, just like you did that weekend."

The mention of the past is the final straw. I can't take it anymore. My orgasm crashes into me like a stampede, pulling me under its relentless pounding. I cry out, my body trembling as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me. I'm convulsing as Rolan groans in response, his grip on my hair tightening to the point of pain as he comes inside me.

Rolan's grip on my hair loosens, but he doesn't pull out right away. His hands smooth large circles over my hips and lower back. He pumps into me slowly while I twitch and feel the sticky sludge of his sex running down my leg.

Finally, he pulls out with a wet squelch and zips his pants up. I can feel the cool air on my abused entrance and the shame creeping in like icy tendrils. Rolan retrieves his

tumbler of whiskey from the table and takes a slow sip, savoring the moment as he watches me regain my composure and scramble to find my clothing. My skin burns with the touch of him still there, the weight of his body, the mark he left—not on my throat, but somewhere deeper I can't scrub clean.

"Bastard," I spit, my voice hoarse and breaking.

Rolan exhales slowly. He doesn't flinch or rise to meet the insult. "You already knew that," he says. His voice is quiet now, almost calm, but I can still feel the venom in it.

I gather myself quickly and dress as fast as I can. I swipe a shaking hand over my face. I don't ask for the check as I walk past and pick it up, slide it into my bra.

The door opens easier than I expect, and I slip out before he has the chance to speak again, before he can ask for more. My legs are unsteady but I move fast, down the corridor, into the elevator, anywhere that isn't that room. And I still feel his sex draining down my inner thigh with every step.

By the time I hit the ground floor, I'm still trembling. Fury coils in my chest, but not just at him. It's aimed at me too.

Because I didn't hate it.

And the fact that part of me wanted it—that sickens me more than anything else.

8

ROLAN

The leather sticks under my palm as I push open the doors to the upper study. Misha is already seated, collar loose, wrist draped over the back of a velvet chair he didn't

pay for. Stepan and Renat stand near the windows, murmuring about the expansion. None of them look surprised to see me.

“We have a problem,” I say. I cross the room slowly, not bothering to take off my gloves.

Stepan lifts his chin. “You mean the Vladikavkaz crew?” His tone is too casual, but his eyes stay sharp.

“They’re not just sniffing around anymore.” I take the center seat, resting my elbows on the arms. “They’ve moved three debt collectors into the southern districts. One of them threatened a man who owes me—a drunk, but he’s still mine.”

Misha frowns. “Pyotr Morozov.” He sits straighter, rubbing a thumb over the ring on his right hand. He’s already calculating the implications.

I don’t bother confirming. Every one of them already knows. I watch their expressions shift with the recognition. Each expression shows calculation and familiarity with how I work.

Renat crosses to the sideboard, pours himself a vodka, and offers me the bottle. I shake my head and he drinks. His hand doesn’t tremble, but the way he gulps it seems like he’s tempering his anger.

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“Small fish,” Stepan says. “So why care?” He folds his arms, squinting like he already regrets asking the question out loud.

I lean forward. “Because they’re using men like Pyotr to wedge their way in. They hit where we don’t look. Bookies, street enforcers, junkyards—places we treat like background noise. That’s where the rot begins. And when it festers, it spreads beyond control.”

Misha nods. “You want them cut off.” He taps a pen against the arm of his chair.

“I want them amputated. We find every crew they’ve flipped and burn them out with no warning, and no deals. I want nothing left standing.” I lace my fingers together, every word hard as bone. I’m not interested in strategy. I want obedience.

Renat whistles under his breath. “You don’t play this hard unless it’s personal.” He glances over the rim of his glass, watching me. Waiting to see if I crack or confess.

I glare at him and hold my firm expression. “It’s not,” I say, and the lie tastes clean on my tongue, practiced and cold.

There’s silence for a moment. Then Stepan nods and steps out to make calls. His footsteps echo in the hall, each one fading like the end of a countdown. I listen to them disappear.

Misha stays seated, waiting until the door closes. He doesn’t reach for a drink, though now I think I want one. Finding out I have a son has opened Pandora’s box, and it’s only a matter of time before I have to address it. Taking out the men who are



squeezing Pyotr is just the start of this thing. Who knows where it'll lead.

“You’re lying,” he says calmly. He leans back like he has all day. There’s no accusation in his tone, just a quiet acknowledgment of the obvious. Misha is my uncle—my father's brother—and older than me by six years, though he's wiser by decades. He's seen some real shit, and sometimes, I think he'd have been a better choice for leading this family as my father ages and grows sicker. But I didn't make that choice.

I rise, cross to the window, and watch a hawk circle over the track below. “A woman’s child was almost used to get to me. I don’t like my name in other men’s mouths. Especially not theirs.” The bird keeps circling, oblivious to the war happening below.

He lifts an eyebrow. “You mean the boy.” He says it slowly, like he’s testing the shape of the truth, and I feel his eyes burning holes in my back. This is my news to share when I'm ready, and I'm not beyond putting a bullet between his eyes if he fucks with me.

I don't respond to that comment, but I do think of how to play this out. The rumors are spreading so quickly that even my own men are speaking them now.

Misha comes to stand beside me. His voice lowers. “You want him protected?” His gaze shifts to my profile, waiting for the order he already knows is coming.

“I have Stepan and a few men already watching, but knowing Pyotr has his jaw flapping like the fucking flag in the breeze, I think we need to increase the body count.” I watch his reflection in the window as he nods agreement with me.

“And if they touch him?” He watches my reaction. He already knows what I’ll say, but he needs to hear it aloud.

I turn. My voice is colder than steel. "Then we burn Vladikavkaz to the fucking ground." I hold his stare, making sure he understands exactly what I mean. There will be no survivors.

An hour after the meeting with my men, Pyotr sits alone at a booth in the back of a bar that stinks of piss, hunched over a glass he hasn't touched. When I slide in across from him, he flinches like he expects a bullet through the skull.

"Relax," I say. "If I wanted you dead, you'd be rotting." I stretch my arm along the booth, claiming space.

His hand trembles as he pushes the glass aside. "I told them not to go near her. My daughter didn't ask for this. Neither did my grandson. They weren't part of the deal. I only meant to scare those men by how connected I am." His voice shakes with something halfway between guilt and panic. His eyes are red-rimmed and bloodshot.

"But they are." I rest both hands on the table. "They became part of this the minute you made me your fucking creditor. That door doesn't swing back." I shove the glass so hard it slams into the wall, spilling the drink and falling from the table onto the bench beside him. The Moscow mule trickles across the table and drips from the edges. "You did this by telling them how connected you are."

He swallows. "I was desperate." His eyes dart across my face, looking for mercy he won't find. The words come out dry and cracked.

"You were stupid." I don't blink. I let the insult hang in the air as he shrinks down and scoots away from the spreading liquid.

Pyotr looks sullen for a moment before he reaches into his coat and sets a small Ziplock bag on the table. A child's lock of hair, twisted and dark, coiled like a threat. He slides it forward with shaking fingers.

“You’ll leave them alone after this,” he says—a statement, not a question. His hand stays near the bag, like he’s reluctant to let it go. His posture folds in on itself, collapsing inward.

I pocket the bag. “Don’t tell me what to do. You gave up your rights to negotiate the day you walked into my world and asked for money.” I tuck the bag inside my coat, sealing the conversation and his fate. My tone leaves no room for reply.

Pyotr leans forward, voice cracking. “Please. He’s just a boy.” His knuckles go white on the table’s edge. His breathing is shallow and fast and laced with terror because he knows exactly who I am better than anyone I’ve ever done business with. Better even than Anya.

I rise. “He’s a Vetrov now.” I walk away without looking back. My steps echo across the tile, punctuating my retreat and confirming to Pyotr that I don’t fuck around.

I leave immediately, heading across town to the one place I know I can trust. The clinic is three blocks off the ring road. The building sits wedged between a pharmacy and a coffee shop with papered windows. There are no cars out front, and no lights shine through the windows. That was part of our agreement from the start.

Arman opens the side door without a word and steps back to let me in. The narrow hallway smells faintly of bleach. We pass dark exam rooms with blinds drawn. I hear the faint sounds of voices as he leads me toward the back, but he doesn’t speak until we’re in a back room. “You came alone?”

“Of course.” I pull the plastic bag from my coat and set it on the counter beside the microscope.

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Arman puts on one glove. "Is this what I think it is?" His eyes drop to the baggie then rise to my face as he takes it. I slip my jacket off and start unbuttoning one of my sleeves.

"A lock of hair. From the boy." I loosen my tie and walk over to a counter where he lays the bag. There's already a blood-drawkit lying on the counter under the light. Arman isn't wasting any time.

"The doc isn't happy about this." He picks up the rubber strip as I fold my sleeve up and bare my bicep.

"Does it look like I give a single fuck? Fuck him. Let's just get this done before someone else beats me to the punch and takes my kid." Anya is lucky I'm not the shoot-first-ask-questions-later type. That boy would be in my home where it's safe if I were.

Arman snaps on the other glove and tears open a sterile needle pack. He wraps the tourniquet around my upper arm, tight enough to make my fingers tingle. I curl my hand into a fist, watching the vein rise.

He finds the spot quickly, swabs it with alcohol, and inserts the needle with precision. Blood flows into the vial freely as he glances up at me. "You want this off the record?"

When it's done, he removes the needle and presses gauze against my arm. I hold it in place while he caps the vial and labels it. Then he turns toward the microscope and sets both the hair sample and blood vial under the light, side by side.

“You know better than to ask me something so stupid.” Waiting only a few seconds before tossing the bloody gauze, I roll my shirt back down and button the cuff.

“There won’t be a paper trail, and nothing goes on record. You’ll have results in forty-eight hours.” He begins labeling the samples as I reach for my coat. Having this confirmation is nothing but an insurance policy. When Anya refuses to believe me or listen to what I have to say, I will need it. I don’t want to kill her. I’d prefer she do things civilly, but if not, I can enforce my right to her son’s life more adequately with the proof that I’m his father.

I glance toward the covered window. “And if someone asks?”

“I never saw you.” Arman doesn’t even look up at me. He knows the cost of betrayal.

The air cuts against my face as I step back into the night. I walk the two blocks to my car without rushing, shoes grinding against the salted pavement. My hands are in my coat pockets, but my mind stays behind in that room, where blood and hair sit under sterile light like currency for a war I didn’t ask for.

My driver waits where I left him, engine idling, eyes forward. He doesn’t ask questions when I pull the door open and slide into the back seat. I don’t speak as we ease away from the curb, the city rolling past in blurred shadows. I already know the answer of the tests Arman and his team will perform. But once it’s official, nothing will ever be the same—not for me, not for her, and definitely not for the boy.

9

ANYA

I let myself in with the key tucked deep in my coat pocket. The hallway is still and silent, the sky outside barely tinted with gray. Not quite morning yet. I slip off my

shoes before the door even shuts behind me, then toe my way across the creaky floorboards.

The bathroom light stings. I shut the door behind me, lean against the counter, and press my palms flat to the cold porcelain sink. For a second I don't move. I just breathe. Then I slide the check into the medicine cabinet and peel off the clothes from last night like they're stained. Because they are—not with blood or liquor or even sweat—with him.

In the shower, I scrub my skin raw for the second time in as many weeks. My fingers tremble as I rinse off. The water runs hot but I still feel cold. When I dress, I do it quickly—sweatpants, hoodie, no makeup. I bury the other clothes in the hamper and bury my face in a towel. I think I'm crying but I'm not sure. My throat is too tight to sob and I feel hollow and numb.

The shaking starts in my shoulders and spreads down to my hands. I grip the edge of the counter and breathe, but it doesn't help. My body won't forget what happened. It won't let me pretend I hated that.

I don't tremble in fear. I tremble from the way my body remembered him. From the heat that won't leave. From the sick part of me that didn't want him to stop as my core tightened around him and pleasure rippled through every cell in my body. I should hate him, but even as I sit here thinking, I feel warmth in my belly again.

I force my breathing to slow, then slip out of the bathroom and down the hall. Nikolai's door is cracked open. He's asleep, one arm flung over his stuffed tiger, mouth slightly open. I tuck the blanket higher on his chest and stroke his hair once, careful not to rouse him yet. He is my heart, and there is nothing I won't do for him.

Behind me, I hear the scrape of a chair, and I turn and let myself out of the bedroom. Batya stands in the kitchen in his worn bathrobe, rubbing his face. I smell

the stench of alcohol on his breath and know he's been drinking all night again. The fact that he's awake and moving around is a miracle.

"Where were you?" he asks, his voice scratchy and low as he reaches for the chipped mug by the sink.

His face is rough from sleep, but there's suspicion. His eyes are bloodshot as he puts on a pot of coffee and takes the milk from the fridge.

I don't even blink as I lie to him easily. "Double shift. They were short," I say, shifting my weight from one foot to the other as I tug my sleeves down past my wrists. It wasn't technically a double, but I did more than enough to earn what I was paid tonight.

My voice doesn't shake or quaver. I speak with the ease of someone who's rehearsed the lie so many times it might as well be true. I stare directly at him, holding his gaze without blinking, daring him to challenge me. He doesn't press further, just exhales into his coffee knowing that's all he's getting.

"You just got home?" he asks, raising one brow as he glances toward the clock above the stove. For a Saturday this isn't so abnormal, especially if I worked a double, but something tells me he knows I didn't just work.

I nod, tugging my hoodie down over my hips. "Fifteen minutes ago," I reply, letting my voice carry the edge of exhaustion I don't have to fake.

Pyotr pours himself coffee. He doesn't look at me. "I'll take Kolya to the park. You should go sleep," he mutters as he turns away, cradling the mug in both hands like it's the only thing anchoring him. I watch him shuffle out and sigh. He loves Nikolai more than I could ever imagine, but he's a foolish man for putting me in this situation. He has no clue how vile and nasty these men are. I just want my family to be whole

and at peace.

I'm too tired to argue so I shrug and follow Batya to the room where he jostles Nikolai and picks him up. He reaches for me, but I press a kiss to his temple before my father whisks him away, and as I lie down to rest, I hear breakfast being made and Nikolai's happy chants at the announcement of a visit to the park.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

Sleep doesn't come easy. I toss. I turn. I clench my teeth until my jaw aches. When it does come, it brings him. Not Rolan now—Rolan then, six years ago. The weekend I sold myself to save my father's life.

At the time, I thought he was a pig. He was smug, forceful, and crude. But when I search the memory, it won't stay simple. He was clean in a way that didn't fit the stories I told myself about men like him. He was polished, from his cufflinks to the quiet way he moved through a room.

There was something strangely gentle in the way he placed his hands on me—not gentle in purpose, but in method. He didn't slam or bruise or shout. There was no violence, no overt cruelty. Only control and power, exercised without apology.

I wake to the sound of a spoon clinking softly against ceramic. My body is sore, stretched and aching in places I don't want to acknowledge. The sheets carry the smell of starch and expensive detergent, crisp against skin that feels used. He's not in the bed beside me, and for a brief, naive second, I think maybe he left. That maybe it's over. That I can dress and slip out before I have to see him again.

But then I hear his voice. He asks if I want coffee.

When I open the door, he's standing at the sideboard in front of a small French press, wearing nothing but his boxers that hug his tight ass. His shirt is gone, and his back is bare—broad, muscular, heavily tattooed. Bare feet planted on the tile. Steam curls from the spout as he pours. He doesn't glance over his shoulder when he speaks again. He finishes filling both cups like this is ordinary. Like it's not the aftermath of what he did to me.

"Milk? Sugar?" he says. The words are soft, almost gentle. There's no mockery in his tone, no smugness. Just that steady, disarming calm. He could be a hotel guest offering breakfast to a date instead of a man who paid to use my body.

I don't answer him. I cross the room and take the cup he hands me. My fingers shake so hard I nearly spill it, but I hold on. I sit across from him at the table and stare at the steam until it fades.

He doesn't touch me, doesn't reach for me. He simply drinks his own coffee without looking at me directly, his expression unreadable. For those ten minutes, he behaves like a gentleman. Not a monster. And that's what makes it worse.

I wake and I'm sweating, tangled in the sheets after wrestling that dream. My hands shake as I shove the blanket off. I press my fingers to my lips and curse myself.

That night should be something I forget. Something I bury under layers of shame and silence. But when I close my eyes, I still feel his mouth on my skin, his hands pinning me open, the sound of my own breath catching as pleasure coursed through me. My body still wants him. It remembers the rhythm, the pressure, the surrender. And my mind, weak and traitorous, keeps bringing it back in dreams and memories, like it meant something it shouldn't.

The track feels different tonight. The routine is the same—the buzz of lights, the rhythm of bets placed, the endless clinking of glasses—but everything beneath it feels off. My body moves through it, but my mind drags like it's walking underwater. I didn't sleep for more than an hour, maybe two. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw his face, heard the way he said my name, felt the ghost of his hands.

The noise feels deafening. The lights burn hotter. The faces I pass are the same regulars, the same drunks, the same women laughing too hard at things they don't think are funny. But each sound cuts through me. Each laugh feels like it's aimed

directly at the rawness under my skin.

I move through it all pretending I belong—balancing trays, smiling at men I don't trust, echoing rehearsed lines. But none of it lands right tonight. I feel detached from my own body, like I'm watching someone else perform the routine.

Every step I take reminds me of last night. The fabric of my uniform feels tighter against my skin. Every time someone brushes past me, I flinch before I catch myself. But I keep working and try to convince myself that nothing happened to me. That I didn't sell my soul to the devil and let him bind me to him even more tightly.

I can't want him at all—not after what I let him take from me.

I carry a tray past the bar, eyes forward. I know he's here. I can feel him before I see him. But he doesn't look at me once. He walks past with two men in dark suits, gives orders, checks receipts, and never breaks stride. After he's passed through, I suck in a breath of relief and hardly notice the way a customer pinches my ass.

"All in good fun" he grunts, but I refill his drink like the robot I am tonight.

I tell myself I'm relieved that Rolan is ignoring me. I lie to myself in my head, and that lie tastes bitter. But the first time I catch him watching me from the second-floor balcony, my knees lock. My heart leaps into my throat. I lose count of the drinks on my tray, and he turns away a second later.

I don't know what I feel. My chest tightens when I see him, my mouth goes dry, and still, something low in my stomach coils in recognition. It isn't just anger, though that's there. It's not just shame, even if it's thick and clinging. It's something more dangerous—an ache, a hunger I can't justify. The feelings twist together, knotted so tightly I can't tell them apart.

It would be easier if he summoned me, if he barked my name or gave another order, but he does nothing. Says nothing. I feel invisible.

And that scares me more than anything. Because if he doesn't want me now, I don't know where that leaves me or when—out of nowhere—he will summon me again. Rolan is unreadable, unpredictable, and unbearably, unimaginably uncontrollable.

Around midnight, I see him again near the stables, talking to one of the floor bosses. Mitzi stumbles as she rounds the corner, laughing too loudly, brushing Rolan's arm. He gently pushes her away, but her fingers dig in as she stumbles backward, eyes wide. She tries to steady herself as his glare lands on her right before her ass hits the ground.

He doesn't raise his voice at her but it's clear, even at a distance, that he is rejecting her openly. She stands, brushes off her skirt, then hugs herself and ducks her chin as she walks away quickly.

I stare after her, my hands curled into fists at my sides. She's not the first woman he's done that to and she won't be the last. I wish he'd have done that with me—well, part of me does, anyway. That he'd have taken one look at me and told me to fuck off entirely.

Of course, I wouldn't have Nikolai at all, and that little boy holds the key to my heart. My head dips in remorse as I even consider what that would mean for me, never having fucked Rolan and never having gotten pregnant... I shudder as I remember what Rolan is and who he's always been.

Not a savior. Not a man who made me feel something. Just a monster with manners. A devil who smiles.

My legs move on their own. I duck into the back stairwell and sit on the lowest step,

breathing through my nose. I pound my fists into my thighs, and the ache helps me focus as tears start to well up.

I need out. Not next month. Not next week. Now—before he comes to take my boy from me.

And I'm running out of time. Every shift, every night, he's closer to owning me completely.

10

ROLAN

Stepan calls just past dawn. I don't hear it at first. I'm in the gym, deep in the basement of the estate. The sun hasn't fully cracked the tree line yet. I'm already slick with sweat, my fists pounding the heavy bag. Each strike echoes off the concrete walls. My gloves creak with each hit of leather on leather. My breath comes sharp. This is the only thing that keeps the noise in my head under control.

The phone vibrates across the bench near the water cooler. It buzzes again, dancing close to the edge. I yank off the gloves, let them fall to the floor, and cross to it. Sweat drips from my jaw onto the tile.

Stepan's name lights up the screen as I lift it and swipe to answer, pressing it to my ear. "Speak," I say. My voice is hoarse from exertion and my shoulders rise and fall with each breath.

"It's Pyotr," he says with no hesitation. There's a hard edge under the words. I already know it won't be good. I stop pacing and narrow my eyes. The muscles in my arms still twitch from the workout.

"One of our street contacts saw him near Khovrino last night," Stepan continues. "He showed up at a backroom pokertable drunk. He was barely able to walk straight. He was bleeding—split lip. We think someone roughed him up before he got there."

I grab the water bottle and twist the cap as I listen. My pulse doesn't budge from the

heightened rhythm despite my body coming down from the workout. "Go on," I tell him with frustration lacing my tone.

"He told a couple Zharov goons he would call in favors from you to reduce his debt because the boy is yours. Said you'd never allow them to lay a finger on him."

I stare across the room, eyes fixed on the far wall. My jaw locks tight as my mind starts racing. "He used Nikolai's name?" I bite the words out. "He told them the boy is mine?"

"Used those words exactly. 'He won't let anything happen to that kid. He'd kill you first.'" Now even Stepan sounds annoyed and irritated by Pyotr's obtuse behavior. My jaw is sore from clenching. I massage it for a moment while I think.

"They laughed at him," he continues, "told him he was full of shit. But they passed it around anyway. You know how they operate."

I run a hand down my face, dragging sweat and frustration with it. My palm comes away damp. "Who heard? And are they moving?" My mind, as well as my feet, are already moving—formulating a plan and heading toward the stairs.

"Two reliable sources confirmed it. Zharov men have already started whispering that you've got a secret heir in Mytishchi. They're curious and starting to take an interest."

I flex my fingers and crack the knuckles one by one. I taste blood in my mouth. I must have bitten the inside of my cheek. Pyotr's despicable behavior is going to get the boy killed, and I won't stand back and watch it happen. "Where is the boy now?" I ask, taking the stairs two at a time.

"He's still at school. He was dropped off on time this morning. Nothing unusual has

happened. We've got eyes on him now, Boss." A horn honks in the background, and I believe him that he's parked at the school where he should be.

"Get him out of there without making noise. Do it today. I want him here before anyone else has the chance to act." I'm thinking five steps ahead now, to when Anya discovers Nikolai has been taken. She will be furious, but she will have no choice. I may not have the confirmation from my fixer yet, but I know that boy is mine. If I do nothing, far worse men than me will take him.

"Yes, Boss." Stepan's voice is clipped before he hangs up.

I end the call and keep climbing until I reach the second floor and head straight to the master suite. Inside, I strip off my damp shirt and toss it into the hamper, then head for the shower. The water hits me hard and hot. I scrub down fast, washing off sweat and blood from where my glove split my knuckles. Then I towel off and move to the walk-in closet.

I pull on a pair of tailored slacks and a black dress shirt, the fabric still crisp from the dry cleaner's. I leave the collar open, no tie. After fastening the last button, I glance at my watch. Stepan won't take long if he's already at the school now.

When I return to the hall, I alert the estate staff and have the north wing prepped. Mara will prepare a room for him and the rest of the staff will ensure he is welcomed and comfortable while Misha and Renat ensure security is put on high alert for the time being. This will draw unwanted attention to my home, but we'll be ready.

Stepan: 9:43 AM: I've got the kid. Everything went clean—no attention, no tail.

Rolan: 9:44 AM: Good. Send the school my number. She'll want it.

I wait by the second-floor balcony as the SUV pulls in past the main gate. I watch the



car roll to a stop by the front door where my view is obscured before I make my way down the stairs. The guards on rotation didn't ask questions, though the gate gets tightly locked once Nikolai is safely inside.

Standing by the front door, I watch as Stepan steps out first, gives me a short nod, then opens the rear passenger door as I step onto the stoop. Nikolai climbs out slowly. His backpack hangs off one shoulder. His shirt is rumpled. His shoelaces are uneven. His hair is flattened on one side. He looks worried—with large wide eyes and a trembling lower lip.

He raises his arm to block the sun and looks up at the mansion, unimpressed or too young to realize its importance. His face is pale and tense. He glances around quickly, lower lip trembling again. His eyes flick up to mine, wide and uncertain, waiting for someone to tell him whether this is safe or not.

I walk out to meet them and notice him cower slightly by Stepan's side. The gravel shifts under my shoes as I walk, but before I address my son, I turn to my right-hand man. "Everything smooth?" I ask Stepan while my eyes scan the tree line. I fully expect those assholes to try something.

"There were no problems. The school didn't raise any questions, and the boy assumed it was something arranged ahead of time." Stepan shrugs, still alert and watching the edges of the property like me, which means he believes they'll pull shit too.

Nikolai watches me and clutches his backpack strap, but he still looks intimidated and afraid—and just like me. I don't know how Anya ever thought she was going to keep this from me. I was content enough to let her leave Moscow and live her life, but once she set foot on my territory again, she had to know I'd find out.

Stepan crouches next to the boy and touches his hand softly. He'd be a good father, if he had a wife. "Your mommy will come after a while, okay? You're going to hang

out here until she comes." His voice softens to a paternal tone before Nikolai nods and brushes hair out of his face.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

"Is this a hotel?" he asks, glancing at my home. His fingers flex on the strap of his bag. When he looks up at me, still seeming in shock, I also crouch next to him.

"Something similar," I murmur. My God, this is my son, standing in the flesh in front of me. Five years old, so full of life and curiosity. I've missed so much of it, and she kept him from me. Not anymore.

He glances up again and straightens as he says, "Hi."

It catches me off guard. His voice is steady and clear, not the trembling sound I expected from a boy his age. He meets my eyes without flinching.

"Hello," I say. I watch how he lifts his chin and doesn't back down.

His eyes match mine—pale gray and unblinking. He studies my face as if trying to decide whether I'm the enemy or a friend.

"Is this your house?" he asks, tilting his head.

I stand and look up at the old place, my parents' former estate before my father handed it to me. He lives in a new home now, farther from the chaos of our world, and I hold the keys to the kingdom. "Yes," I tell him, turning back to him. "Do you like it?"

"It's like a castle," he says matter-of-factly. "Mamochka will like it." His nose scrunches up. "She's coming here?"

I nod at him and reach for his hand, and he takes it. "Yes, Nikolai, she's coming here

soon. Don't you worry." Giving Stepan a curt expression, I turn with the boy and we walk toward the doors. We enter together into the main hall which stretches wide with marble and brass. His sneakers squeak across the floor, and the sound echoes.

"Have you ever been to a castle?" My home is far from being worthy to be called a castle, but it's a term he understands.

Nikolai shakes his head no, and I lead him down the west corridor to the room I had my staff prepare for him. Mara is still here, flitting about with a duster, but everything else looks in place.

The suite is arranged carefully with his age in mind. A low bed sits against the wall, and a small reading chair rests beside it. Bins of toys are tucked neatly under the window, while one shelf holds picture books and another displays a row of brightly colored toy cars. A forest-themed rug spans most of the floor, with soft sunlight falling across it from tall, narrow windows on the far side of the room.

He steps inside cautiously, his shoes hesitating on the threshold. One hand skims the wall for balance as his eyes move across the floor. He stops in front of the rug and stares at the winding paths and tiny trees like he's trying to decode a map.

He moves toward the bed carefully. His fingers press into the blanket and stay there. His lips part, but whatever he wants to say doesn't make it out. He swallows it instead and keeps looking around.

"When will Mommy come?" he asks. He keeps his gaze down, but now his voice is calm.

"Soon," I say. I move into the room and take it all in. It's perfect for my son, the best, safest place for him to grow up, and now he's here. This was always inevitable from the moment I learned I had a son, though the circumstances Pyotr instigated moved it

up in my timeline.

"Will she stay too?" He turns toward me, and his voice drops to a whisper. I sense the uncertainty in his tone, and I want to reassure him. It's a strange sensation—one I've never felt. I'm a man of many, many things, but nurturing isn't one of them. Never have I been accused of being soft or parental in any way. And yet, I find myself stooping to his level once again.

I meet his gaze and see the fear there. "We'll see," I tell him, "but why don't you settle in and see if you like the toys and books I've picked for you?"

Nikolai climbs onto the bed and looks around. He's a quiet little fellow, seems a bit withdrawn, but that will change when he adjusts.

Standing, I smooth my suit and think of the next thing I have to do—deal with Anya's outburst, because there is not a single fucking doubt in my mind that she'll have one.

"Someone will bring you dinner," I say. "If you need anything, press the button by the bed." I point to the call button near the lamp, a small red button on a white switch there I had installed to make sure I was no more than a touch away from him.

"Okay." He nods and studies the button. He seems to understand.

I wait another moment, then I close the door and signal the guard to stand by this door. He does as I've told him to do and I head down the hall.

I barely make it back to my office before the call comes in. The fireplace still burns hot, casting uneven light across the floor, and her name lights up my phone before I've even sat down.

"Where the hell is he?" Anya's voice is frantic. I hear traffic behind her, horns

honking and someone shouting.

"He's safe," I say calmly as I stare at my reflection in the dark window.

"What the fuck does that mean? Where is my son? Where is Nikolai?" Her voice cracks and she chokes back a sob. "You can't do this, Rolan. He's a child."

I turn toward the garden where the sun glints off the carved stone sculptures. The shadows still cling to the bases of the trees, long and cool in the angled light. Nothing moves out in my line of sight besides a few birds flying past.

"He's here," I tell her, "at my home, where he's safe."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

"You... you bastard. You took him. You can't—" Her words fall apart about the same time she does. She doesn't even try to hold back the tears. It's not the raging anger I expected. It's worse. Tears, dramatics, emotion... She's a blubbing mess.

"I can and I did. You should thank me. Your father tried to trade him to the Zharovs in exchange for my protection." I grip the armchair, my fingers digging into the leather at the repeated idea that Pyotr Morozov would have such a fucking idiotic idea.

She doesn't answer right away. The line stays open, but no words come. Then her voice returns, choked and garbled. "Is he okay? Did they touch him?" She snuffles. I hear something brush past the mic of her phone, maybe her sleeve, and I begin to relax.

"He never saw them, but he's nervous. He ate his dinner, though, and asked for you by name," I say. I keep my voice firm and calm, steady enough to offer her reassurance without softening the truth.

She stays quiet for a long second. Then I hear her breathe in, a soft hitch in her throat that tells me she's trying to hold it together. "I want to see him."

"Then come," I say. My gaze stays on the window as I realize she will walk across the threshold of my home sooner than I ever imagined. By the time she steps through that door, she'll understand exactly how little control she ever had.

"Tell me where."

ANYA

The iron gates creak open under the gray glare of an early winter afternoon. The car I arrived in doesn't idle or wait for me to get my son and leave. It turns and disappears back down the long, slushy road, tires hissing across gravel and half-frozen mud.

I stand still, hugging my coat tighter around me. The air is wet with cold and silent with menace. The stone façade of the estate looms ahead, dark and high-windowed, brutal in its architecture. A fortress in the woods.

Two tall, armed guards emerge from behind the pillars flanking the entry path. They wear matching black coats and grim expressions. One gestures with the butt of his rifle.

"Come." The command is given with a gruff tone. He doesn't wait to see if I obey. His hand rests casually on his weapon, a reminder that this invitation to Rolan's estate is not a friendly one. I just want my son back and I'll do whatever it takes to make it happen.

My legs move, though my chest is burning. Every crunch of gravel beneath my boots reminds me that I'm walking into something I may not leave.

The guards leave me on the front stoop where the doors open without a knock. They're heavy, carved wood that gleams under the vestibule lights. Someone's polished them recently and perhaps winterized them now that the first snow has fallen.

Inside, the heat hits me first. Then the smells—pine cleaner, leather, and a hint of tobacco smoke. I blink at the grandeur of the foyer. Everything is cream and gold,



tasteful and expensive, meant to diminish anyone who doesn't belong in a place quite so grand. It works. I feel small and helpless.

"Rolan," I call as I walk past tall mirrors and a sweeping staircase. Two massive oil paintings dominate the far wall—portraits of men in heavy coats and war medals, ancestors carved from the same granite as Rolan.

My voice cracks the silence. "Where is my son?" I stop walking, fists clenched at my sides. My pulse thuds in my ears. There is no answer in the home, and I wonder if I'm alone here. It feels hollow, like a museum, not a home.

I approach the first open door off the main hallway. The room inside is large and decorated in high-end understatement. Velvet furniture sits perfectly arranged. A glass decanter glints in the lamplight. A tray of untouched food rests on a side table. The fireplace burns quietly, but the room holds no warmth.

I step across the threshold and walk in slowly, scanning the furnishings. The thick carpet muffles my footsteps. I move toward the center, uncertain whether I'm meant to wait or search for someone. My breath sounds too loud in the silence and hitches when the door clicks shut behind me.

My heart skips a beat as I reach for the handle and twist. The lock engages with a dull click, but I try again, wrenching it with both hands, but the door stays shut.

The mechanism doesn't budge. I'm sealed inside. I stare at the solid wood, stunned. I'm trapped again, locked in without notice or permission. There was no warning, and no one asked whether I agreed. The decision was made for me, and all I can do now is stand there and absorb the truth of it.

I press my forehead to the smooth wood and force myself to breathe slowly, though each inhale feels harder than the last. The room is sealed. The air feels heavy, thick

enough to choke. I glance around, searching for any point of egress, but there are no windows. One wall is covered by a long curtain, and when I pull it back, I find nothing but reinforced glass, tinted so dark I can't see through to the other side.

I turn in a slow circle, searching. A camera blinks red above the fireplace.

He's watching.

My breath grows ragged, and frustration boils over. I scream, the sound torn from my throat without thought. I slam my fists into the door until pain radiates through my hands. The untouched tray of food becomes the next casualty—I seize it and fling it against the wall. Porcelain shatters, fragments scattering across the carpet and wallpaper in a burst of fury.

"Give me my son!" I scream, returning to the door to pound, and then, without warning, the lock clicks. My entire body goes still. I straighten, forcing my shoulders back as if I can brace for what waits on the other side. I back away just as the door swings open.

Rolan steps in. He fills the door frame entirely and I shudder with fear. He doesn't even look at the broken plate but he steps over the shards, eyes locked on me.

"You look well," he says. His gaze runs over me without emotion, and I want to smack him so hard he can't chew tomorrow.

"Where is my son?" I demand, but I don't flinch.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

He unbuttons his coat, slides it off, and folds it over one arm. "Sleeping." He moves like a large predator across the room. "His nap time, I suppose. He was tired..." Rolan doesn't even look at me again, but now his eyes fall on the shattered porcelain. I could run. The door is open, but I would never find Nikolai and get away from here before he caught me.

"Let me see him." I step forward, chin erect. I want my son.

He crosses to the liquor tray and pours amber liquid into a crystal glass before draping his coat on the back of a chair. "You'll see him when I allow it." The calm in his voice is infuriating.

I rush toward the doorway, determined to get past him, but he steps into my path and blocks it without a word, his presence enough to stop me cold.

"Do you even know what your father did?" He tilts his head, narrowing his eyes.

"He would never hurt Nikolai." My hands curl into fists. Every muscle tenses.

"He didn't need to do it himself. He tried to use him." Rolan lifts the glass to his mouth and sips.

"You're lying." I backpedal as my voice falters. Batya loves his Koyla.

He leans in. "Am I?" His breath hits my cheek. I want to shove him, break away, but something tells me he's not lying and that maybe Nikolai really is safer here. Batya is always drunk, always gambling. What if he really did do that?

I stare at his jaw, not his eyes, and see his Adam's apple move as he speaks. He tells me Nikolai is safe because he's here and turns away like that's the end of it. My voice feels raw when I speak, telling him I want to see my son. He sets the glass down, unmoved.

"You don't give orders," he says.

He turns to face me again. The set of his jaw has changed and he appears colder than ever. "Your father was drunk and desperate. He wanted part of his debt forgiven. The Zharovs didn't bite, but they listened long enough to start spreading rumors. And now they know my son's name, Anya. Surely, you didn't expect me to stand back and do nothing." I could interpret that as him caring, but I don't. He doesn't have a heart. He's incapable of affection.

I stagger back a step. "No. He wouldn't—Batyawouldn't do that."

Rolan steps toward me. "He did. That's the reality. And it makes your position untenable."

I shake my head, my hands trembling. "I didn't know. I didn't ask for any of this, Rolan. I didn't know he was going to do that."

"Then make a choice. Stay here with your son, under my roof, under my terms. Or walk out that door alone." His arm rises and points at the door, and I feel my heart do a flip.

My voice catches as I say, "You can't be serious."

"Deadly."

The pressure in my chest snaps. "I'll go to the police. Someone has to care about

what you're doing."

He laughs under his breath. "You remember what happened last time you thought you had options? Do you, Anya? You think anyone out there's going to save you now?"

He walks to the door, opens it without another glance. "You're not a prisoner. You're a mother with one decision," he says and waits for me to step out first. The hallway beyond is quiet, hushed like the whole estate is terrified of the man in charge. I follow him without speaking.

He leads me up the stairs past paneled walls, guards with guns, and low-burning sconces to a room near the end. He opens the door without ceremony.

Nikolai lies on the bed, already asleep, his small chest rising and falling in steady rhythm. A stuffed bear is tucked against his side—a new one, not his ratty, one-eyed stuffy at home—and the blanket covers him up to his chin. I walk inside, the sight of him stealing the breath from my lungs.

I lower myself beside the bed and touch his hair, fingers gentle so I don't wake him. But the knot inside me won't untangle. My body wants to hold him, protect him, but he's sleeping soundly, and I know if I wake him, I'll cry too hard to stop.

I rise again and step back into the hall.

Rolan is waiting, arms folded, his back resting against the wall across from the door. The guards are gone. It's only him now.

"We shouldn't talk here," he says. "You'll wake him."

He gestures toward a nearby room, and I have no choice but to follow. This is his kingdom. The sight of those men with guns has me shaken. I have no way out, at least

not with my son.

He opens a door across the hall and waits for me to follow. I step inside slowly. His bedroom is large and dark, the fire low in the hearth. The heat rolls toward me in waves that, under any other circumstance, might feel comforting. Tonight, it only reminds me that I'm far from home, deep in a place where nothing belongs to me.

I turn to face him, keeping the bed in my peripheral vision. He closes the door behind us and says nothing for a long moment.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

I break the silence first. "Are you going to gloat now, or do you want something?"

He watches me with the same unreadable expression he always wears. "Do you want your freedom, Anya?"

The question lands hard, and for a moment, I stare at him, measuring the trap he's already baited. My throat is dry when I answer. "Yes."

He takes a step closer, his tone quiet but stripped of any softness. "Spend one more night in my bed. Tomorrow, you might walk out with the boy..." He's toying with me, manipulating me. He knows I will do anything for my son, which is why I fucked him last week—for the money. For Nikolai's future. It's what I tell myself, anyway.

My hand flies before I can stop it. The sound of the slap cracks through the room. Rolan doesn't move or react to the gesture. I don't even get a smirk of satisfaction. I know the only way to get Nikolai out of here is to do whatever he wants, but the thought enrages me. Trade my body for my son's life again?

He turns from me, starts to walk away. He's headed toward the door, hand almost on the knob when I clear my throat. I hate myself. I hate that I'm weak. I hate that my father put me in this position. But most of all, I hate that Rolan Vetrov has been between my legs and I liked it enough to do it again, and again.

"Fine," I snip, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Yeah?" he says, turning with dark eyes and a haunting gaze.

"I'm doing it for my son," I say.

He doesn't look back. "You're not as good at lying as you think."

Rolan's words sting, but I can't afford to let them get to me. I swallow my pride and turn around, stripping off my clothes. My heart pounds in my chest as I stand naked before him, the cool air of the room dancing over my heated skin. Slowly, I climb onto the bed, trying to push away my shame and disgust for myself. If it means freedom for Nikolai, it's a price I have to pay.

Rolan undresses leisurely, his eyes never leaving mine. His every movement exudes dominance and control, as if he's reminding me of his power over me. My stomach churns as he joins me on the bed, his body a wall of muscle against mine. He smells of expensive cologne and power, a scent that makes bile rise in my throat. And his body is chiseled from granite.

If I weren't so terrified that Nikolai may be forever trapped here, I would take a moment to admire his corded muscles, the warmth of his skin tone despite the time of year, and the way his tattoos wrap around his skin like hieroglyphics telling his life story.

Rolan's hands roam my body, his touch both foreign and familiar at the same time. I close my eyes, willing myself to think of Nikolai's face, his laughter, anything but the man currently invading my space. His lips brush against the column of my neck, and I shudder involuntarily. "Relax, Anya," he whispers in my ear, his voice barely a growl. "This will go easier if you stop fighting me."

I clench my jaw, determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much I want this to disgust me. Rolan's grip on my hip tightens as he positions himself above me. I stare at the ceiling, feeling every inch of him as he enters me. I tell myself it's just another transaction, another debt to be paid off. But each thrust reminds me of



how much I enjoy this—enjoy him.

Soon, I'm clinging to his sides, spreading myself wider to take him in. His stubbled chin scrapes my neck, teeth raking along my pulse point. "Shit," I hiss when he hits that sensitive spot inside me.

The room spins, my body aflame with pleasure and revulsion. I clench around him, trying to push him away while keeping him close, lost in the war raging within me. His breath fans across my neck, his hot touch branding me as his own.

"You like it," he growls, his accent thicker than before. "Don't lie to yourself anymore."

His words slice through me, but I can't deny the truth in them. He knows my body too well, knows exactly how to make my resolve crumble. I arch my back, meeting his thrusts, silently begging for more even as I curse myself for giving in so easily. This man is the enemy, the monster who took everything from me. Yet here I am in his bed again, letting him take from me.

His tempo increases, and the bed creaks under our combined weight. Sweat beads on my brow, my body on fire as Rolan's thrusts become more urgent. I'm so close—so close to that edge I don't want to cross but can't resist. His fingers dig into my hips, bruising me, but I don't care. All that matters is the release looming just out of reach.

His lips find mine, but I turn away defiantly. It's something I refuse to let him take from me.

"Ah." He clicks his tongue. "You little bitch, you..."

"Fuck me," I whimper, not deterred by his name calling.

“Say you want me,” he growls against my ear.

"Never," I gasp, clenching my teeth. I can feel the heat building inside me, the tension coiling in my core. I dig my nails into the sheets, trying desperately to hold on to something, anything, other than him.

"I will make you say it," he grunts, his voice hoarse with lust and determination.

His other hand slips between my legs, his callused fingers seeking out the sensitive bundle of nerves that I know will send me over the edge. He circles it expertly, matching the rhythm of his thrusts. "R–Rolan," I whimper, my defiance crumbling under his ministrations. "Stop... I can't..."

“Fucking say it!” His demand is met with a warmth flooding my core. My orgasm is so close, so fucking tantalizingly close.

“No,” I protest, and his thrusts slow, his fingers draw away from my clit. “What... no, don’t stop!”

“You don’t seem to understand how this works,malyshka.” I’m shuddering, trembling on the edge as he teases my folds and agonizingly glides in and out of me. “You’re not my guest here... Not a queen either. You’re mysuka, Anya. Now say it.” Rolan’s fingers return to my core, sliding through my moisture as his cock returns to its relentless pace, and I am done fighting.

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"Fuck," I gasp. "Yes... like that. Fuck me. I want you." The words I mutter can't be any more honest.

Rolan's grin turns predatory, his eyes darkening with victory. "Louder," he demands, his accent thick with lust. "Say it louder, so the walls of this entire estate can hear how much you want me." I hate him, I really do, but my body betrays me as I scream out my surrender.

"Yes, fuck me! God, Rolan, don't stop!" His answering growl is primal, animalistic as he pounds into me relentlessly. My orgasm looms closer by the second, and I know there's no going back now.

His fingers once again find their way to my clit, stroking me in time with his thrusts. "That's it, malyshka," he whispers in my ear, his voice a guttural moan. "Come for me." His words send me over the edge into oblivion. My core detonates and I convulse, unwittingly finding his sides under my fingers' touch. Rolling my hips, I meet his every thrust until I'm nothing but a jiggling ball of pleasure and ecstasy.

His release comes hard, heat flooding my insides. When he slows, his teeth sink into my shoulder, and his grip on my hips doesn't let up.

As my orgasmic haze begins to clear, I'm acutely aware of Rolan still inside me, his heavy breathing in my ear. I feel dirty and used, as if I've betrayed not just myself but also Nikolai. Screaming and clawing at the walls won't do anything to purge this humiliation from my very soul. But I can't help but think it would bring me some sort of relief from the war in my chest.

Rolan rolls off me, spent and panting, his chest heaving with exertion. His eyes, once dark with lust, now hold a flicker of something else—regret? No, it must be my imagination. He's a monster, I tell myself again, willing my heart to believe it. "There," he says eventually, wiping a hand down his face.

I lie there for a moment, letting the cool air kiss my sex-heated skin. The fire has died out in the hearth and my will to fight him is gone. He sits on the edge of the bed and picks up his pants.

"Why me?" I ask him, staring up at the ceiling. I don't expect a straight answer, but I expect something.

Rolan, however, slides his pants on, tugs them up, and glances over his shoulder at me. "Why not?" he says as he collects the rest of his clothing and shuts himself into his adjoining bathroom.

12

ROLAN

The test results don't surprise me. Dr. Isaev's handwriting loops cleanly across the page, the genetic markers boxed in red, underlined with clinical emphasis. The conclusion is printed in sterile, bureaucratic Russian. 99.98% probability of paternal relationship. Nikolai is biologically mine. I stare at it, motionless, letting the silence in the study settle around me.

A breeze rattles the windows and tugs at the heavy velvet curtain. Outside, the sky is still gray from the remnants of last night's storm. The smell of rain and scorched ozone clings to the glass. I take a slow sip of vodka and let the ice melt across my tongue.

I already knew from the moment I saw his face. Now the facts are on paper—he is my son, and no one can deny it.

A knock hits the door too sharply to be Anya coming for the third time this morning to ask if Nikolai will be going to school. And I haven't heard from that lying sack of shit, Pyotr, yet, but no one from the gate called to say he tried to get through.

"Come in," I say without looking up from the report. I can't take my eyes off the paper for some reason. Maybe it's the shock of it settling in. I'm a father. My father is adedushka. A new generation of Vetrovs began five years ago without my knowledge, and I feel I've missed so much.

Stepan steps in with hands clasped behind his back. He doesn't move farther than the threshold, gauging my mood before he speaks. "There's a disturbance at the front gate."

I arch an eyebrow but don't shift in my seat. My fingers tap once against the armrest. "Who?" I ask, but I feel like I already know. It's a shame it took him an extra fourteen hours to figure this out. If he were sober enough to walk to the boy's school at pick-up time, he'd have known then.

"Pyotr Morozov. He's drunk and aggressive... says he wants to see Anya."

I lean back and sigh, set my glass down, and run a hand down my face. "Are the guards holding him?"

"They are. You told us not to harm him unless instructed." Stepan's eyebrows rise skeptically, and I can see how much he'd really like to harm the bastard. I would too—but that would hurt my son. As much as I don't like it, Pyotr the fuck-wit Morozov is family and I won't lay a hand on him, though I'm not necessarily going to come between him and his enemies unless I have to.

I pause, then push back from the desk and rise. "Then this is their instruction. Let him in, let him come to me."

Stepan hesitates, brow furrowed. "Are you sure?"

I button my jacket. "Yes," I say. "I want to hear what a man sounds like when he begs for the family he nearly destroyed."

He nods and leaves, and I straighten the cuffs of my shirt and walk to the wide staircase. My shoes echo across the wood. By the time I reach the landing, I hear him coming. His shouting spills through the corridor, but it doesn't matter how loud he screams. Anya won't hear him. She's tucked away in the other wing of the house.

"Anya! Anya, where are you?!" His voice cracks with desperation.

The front doors slam open. Pyotr stumbles inside, flanked by two of my men. His coat hangs off one shoulder, soaked from the rain. He reeks of vodka, and his eyes burn with rage. They're red-rimmed from drunkenness and lack of sleep as he glares at me bravely. I have to give it to him—he has more balls on him than most of my men. He's stupid, but he's trying.

"Where is she? Where's my little girl? You bastard, you took her! And the boy too!" He throws an arm out and nearly slips. His voice frays at the edges, wild-eyed and foolish.

"Shut the doors," I call. My voice cuts through the noise. The guards obey without hesitation. They seal us in with the thud of the oak door, and I descend the stairs, stopping on the landing. My jaw tightens as I see just how drunk he is. He can't even stand without jerking and swaying.

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"You made a mistake coming here," I say, stepping forward.

"You think I care about your threats? I want my daughter. I want my grandson. You can't keep them this way. Holding them." He steps closer. "It's against the law."

I walk to him, fists clenched. Heat rises through my chest at the threat, but I won't strike him yet. He has no clue that I have Nikolai's paternity results and should any authorities come looking, I only have to show them. Anya won't say a word. She knows who I am and what my reach is. Even if they took Nikolai from me today, tomorrow, he would be right back here.

He snarls. "She never should have come back to you." He jabs a finger into my chest, and without thinking, my hand lashes out. My palm cracks across his face. He staggers into the piano. The bottle in his hand falls and rolls away.

"You will not raise your voice in my house," I bark, and he jolts out of his stupor momentarily before he glares. A red welt spreads across his cheek as he shakes his head in disbelief.

"She's not yours. Neither is that boy. You're a tyrant, a—a thief!" He grips his jaw where I hit him and his eyebrows dip in the center.

I grab his collar and shove him through two doors. They swing into the unlit parlor. The curtains are drawn, the air still. "Sit," I growl, forcing him into a chair.

He slumps forward, shoulders sagging under the strain of his breathing. Sweat soaks through his shirt, darkening the fabric across his chest and under his arms. I pace in

front of him, my eyes locked on the broken mess he's become.

"You don't get to play father. You don't get to pretend this is about love or duty. You dangled your grandson in front of men who would have carved him into pieces." Rage courses through every cell in my body, and this idiot is lucky he's family or his blood would be on my carpet.

"They'd never go that far." He still glares at me and jumps as I slam my hand on the table. He flinches and grabs the armrests of the chair to hold himself upright.

"Then you're a fool. The Zharovs punish weakness. They would've mailed me his body in pieces. They would've used him to send a message."

He groans. "I just needed time. I didn't mean?—"

"I'm fixing what you broke," I say, cutting him off. I circle him, stalking the room to keep from harming him. But the pressure builds in my chest until I almost can't take it. Smashing a lamp against the wall is the only way to vent without lashing out at him. Glass shatters and flies everywhere, but I feel better.

"You lied to them about your daughter and about my son, and when they pushed you to collect their due, you pretended to be the one who had the leverage." I shake my head yet again at his stupidity. "Youbolnoy ublyudok."

He tries to stand, but his legs wobble and he clings to the chair for support. "I want to see her. Let me talk to her. To the boy."

I grab the front of his coat and drive him backward into the wall. His spine connects with a sickening thud, and the portrait behind him tilts off its hook. He gasps, his breath catching as he struggles to remain upright.



"You come here again in that condition, mouthing off, and you'll vanish. Do you understand?" I press my arm to his throat and he freezes, wide-eyed.

"I said, do you understand?"

He chokes until his face begins to redden, eyes bulging, then his breath rasps as he forces a nod. The fight drains from his body.

I let go of him. His knees buckle, and he collapses to the rug in a heap, limbs heavy and useless. For a moment, he doesn't move at all.

I straighten my suit and stomp to the door calling, "Stepan, get him out. Drive him to the city. He's not to return."

Stepan arrives with two guards in tow, both men already moving to take hold of Pyotr before I need to say another word. They each grab an arm and begin dragging him across the floor. His shoes scrape against the carpet, and his voice slips into slurred nonsense, fragments of names and curses that fall apart in his mouth.

I turn without speaking and head for the west wing with long and steady strides. The echo of my footsteps rolls down the corridor, steady as a drumbeat. And considering how upsetting that moment just was, I feel good, better than I have in days.

I pass the stairwell where the banister curves in polished mahogany, the silent piano room beyond the threshold, and the servants' corridor that branches off into the kitchen. The deeper I go, the narrower the hall becomes, lined with gilt frames and old photographs.

Then I see Anya standing in the hall just outside her bedroom, her hand braced on the doorframe as if she heard every word. Her eyes are fixed on me, searching for truth in my face. The silk robe she wears clings to her form, cinched tight at the waist, and

her bare feet press into the cold floor. She doesn't move, but everything in her posture says she's waiting for something.

"Was that my father?" she asks. Her voice cuts through the stillness.

I stop and I meet her eyes. "He forced his way in. He was drunk. He accused me of keeping you here."

She crosses her arms. "What did you do to him?" I sense the worry in her tone and understand it. She cares for him even though he is detestable in my sight.

"I made sure he understood the danger he'd caused." My words seem to cause her grief.

She looks down. Her fingers tighten.

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I move closer to her, sensing that she wants something from me. This is not where I excel. I'm fight and grit and all things darkness. She needs something I don't know how to give. "He's gone. He won't come back."

She swallows. "You didn't hurt him." Her eyes trace up to meet my gaze. There's fear there.

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you mean." We stand locked in silence for a long moment without moving. Anya's lip trembles, and she leans against the wall, letting her head drop again. "You should go back to bed," I tell her. She's been exhausted and sleeping during the day, walking the halls at night.

"I heard everything."

I raise an eyebrow. "Through the walls?" It's not that I don't believe her, it's just that it seems impossible. Or maybe I really did shout that loud.

"Yes. The shouting. Your voice." Anya looks up at me again and pauses. "Did you hit him?"

"Yes."

She exhales. "He's a drunk. But he's still my father, Rolan." I can see the pleading look in her eyes. She will beg me to grant him mercy, which I already knew would happen. And I will give it, so long as he doesn't harm a hair on my son's head.

"And you are the mother of my son. I will protect you." My tone is gravelly and stern,

and I reach out and curl a hair around her ear.

She doesn't reply or move away from my touch. I think for a moment that she appreciates how fiercely I would protect her and Nikolai, but then she frowns and her head dips again.

Her robe rises with the rhythm of her breaths, quiet and shallow, and the hallway light spills across her face, catching the faint shimmer of moisture in her eyes. She doesn't speak, but in her expression I see every question she hasn't dared to ask.

I should turn away, should leave her standing there before I let this go further than it already has. But I don't. For the first time in years, I feel something pressing against the edges of what I've buried. It isn't control. It isn't power. It's her. And I can't walk away.

13

ANYA

When I wake, I find Nikolai on the floor of the sunroom, legs folded underneath him, a red car clutched in both hands. The room is flooded with golden light, the tall windows framing the manicured grounds beyond. The sheer curtains shift slightly from the central heating draft, pulled toward the glass where condensation has begun to gather at the corners. Nikolai's lips move with each engine sound he makes as he pushes the toy across the tile in smooth zigzags.

The floor is warm beneath my bare feet. I stop in the doorway and watch him play for a moment. The sun hits his curls, and for a second, I can almost forget where we are. The illusion is fragile, barely held together by his laughter, but it's sweet to see him happy. At home, I'd have awoken to Batyapassed out on the sofa and morning news streaming in on the television with threadbare towels to bathe my son and meager

food to feed him.

The toy is too new and clearly too expensive for someone like me to have given it. The lacquered paint hasn't even chipped, which means it was purchased recently and probably handled with care. There's no doubt Rolan spent a year's salary on the toys and furnishings here.

I step in slowly, crouching beside him as I fold my legs to sit on the cool tile. "That yours?" I ask, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. My voice is light but my stomach is twisting.

Nikolai looks up, beaming. His eyes are wide and proud. "The man gave it to me," he says, holding the car up so I can see.

I draw in a jagged breath as I think of Nikolai's interaction with Rolan. I run my hand over his back, anchoring myself with the soft, damp cotton of his shirt. He's on the warm side and sweating. But he's smiling like the world has always been safe. His cheeks are flushed from play, his clothes are fresh, and his eyes are bright.

I exhale slowly and rest my palm against Nikolai's back, watching him line up his toy car again. "Do you like it here?" I ask softly.

He nods, not looking up. "Yeah. It's big and warm and there's food."

I smile faintly and shift closer to him, brushing a hand along his shoulder. "What do you think about the man who gave you the toy?" I ask with a gentler tone now. I don't for a single second want my son to know how truly afraid he should be.

He pauses, thinking. "He's big. But he's not scary. He said I can ride the horses if I want. Can I, Mamochka?"

I hesitate. “We’ll talk about it.”

He lifts the car again, ramming it into the soldier. “He talks funny. Like you do when you’re mad.”

That makes me laugh a little more genuinely than I'd like to admit, but children are very honest if you're listening to them. “He’s not from the same place I am. His world is different.”

“Is that bad?” Nikolia's eyes meet mine as he pauses and takes in the sight of my face.

I don’t answer him right away. Instead, I sweep a hand through his curls and kiss the top of his head. “Not always. But different doesn’t mean safe.”

He shrugs curiously and returns to driving his car. “Are we staying here forever?”

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I wrap my arms around his small frame and pull him into a hug as I say, “No, sweetheart. We’re not.”

When I let him go, he scurries off to find another toy, and I reach into the pocket of my slacks. The burner phone still has battery. I power it on, glancing at the signal bar. There’s only one bar, but it’s enough. I open a message app and type the number. It’s not saved, but I know it by heart. Batya never let me forget it. He made me memorize it when I was fourteen, just in case his sins brought hell down on me.

And now I'm glad I did.

Anya: 11:27 AM: I need two clean passports. One for a woman in her late twenties and one for a five-year-old boy. We must be able to leave from Moscow with no questions asked.

The phone chimes when it sends and Nikolai glances up from his toys, his eyes flicking toward me with mild curiosity. I meet his gaze and manage a smile to keep him from asking questions. He watches me for another beat, then turns back to his game without a barrage of questions. When he's occupied, I send one more message.

Anya: 11:28 AM: I need them fast. No digital records, no names, and absolutely no connection to the Vetrov organization. I’ll pay in cash—whatever it takes to keep us off the radar.

There’s no reply, but I don’t expect one immediately, and maybe not at all. Batya's contacts aren't all on favorable terms and this person—whose name I don't even know—may be dead, for all I know. I tuck the phone back into my pocket, and

my hands shake slightly as I sit straighter and return my attention to the only thing that matters.

Nikolai has now lined up his cars with a horse figurine, as if they're racing down an invisible track. I lie down beside him, resting on one elbow. My other hand reaches forward and taps the toy.

"Who's winning?" I ask, trying to keep my tone playful and not full of fear.

He giggles, not looking up from the floor. "The car! The horse can't run that fast, Mama."

I laugh too, although the sound comes out thin and tired. My eyes stay on him while he plays, oblivious. I tell myself this is still just a normal afternoon, that we aren't slipping into something dangerous. But I know better. I know this is the first quiet step toward leaving. And once we take it, there's no turning around.

Lunch is served in one of the estate's side parlors, a room I haven't seen before today. We're led there by Mara, one of Rolan's maids who is nice enough to introduce herself in very broken English. White walls meet carved ceilings overhead. Glass chandeliers hang above us, refracting sunlight into prisms on the tablecloth. The long oak table is set for six, but only two of us are seated. Rolan is absent, and his absence makes the room feel colder.

The table is laid with bowls of solyanka, crusty black bread, and plates of roasted chicken still steaming from the kitchen. A pitcher of kompots sits near the center, its ruby liquid catching the fractured sunlight that filters through the windows. Nikolai digs into his soup like he hasn't eaten in days, his little fingers fumbling with the spoon.

"Mama, this has sausage in it," he says, delighted, lifting a chunk from the broth and



holding it up for me to see.

"Eat it before it gets cold," I tell him with a grin as I tear off a piece of bread and dip it without tasting it.

He continues between bites, barely pausing to chew. "The man said one of the horses liked me when we went to the stable. It bowed its head when I got close. Do you think that means I could feed it, Mamochka?" He's beaming, his cheeks flushed with energy.

I place my spoon down carefully. "We'll talk about it later," I say. I force a smile, tuck a napkin under his chin, and wipe the corner of his mouth. Rolan walking my son around this estate is going to cause problems. I'm going to have to address it.

He picks up a slice of cucumber from the edge of his plate and waves it. "He said it was a good horse, the one with the white legs. Like it understands people."

"Horses are smart," I tell him, keeping my voice light, but I am simmering with anger. "But they can be dangerous if you're not careful."

"He said I was brave." Nikolai speaks around a mouthful of bread. "He said I looked like him."

My stomach tightens. I sip from my glass to hide my reaction, but the sweet kompot tastes sour on my tongue now. Tears try to well up, but I blink them back. Nikolai likes Rolan way too much, too soon.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," I tell him.

He grins and swallows, then adds, "He talks funny. But he's nice."

I nod slowly, reaching across to brush a crumb from his sleeve. "Finish your soup."

He obeys without complaint, returning to his meal with the focus only children possess. I eat what I must, but it sours in my stomach as I sit and think about how desperately I want out of here. I should never have come back to Moscow to save Batya. He is a grown man. He made his bed in hell and he should have to sleep in it. I can't be his savior.

When lunch is over, I help him upstairs to the bathroom where Mara and another younger woman have drawn a bath for Nikolai. Bubbles pile up and almost spill out. Toys float on the surface, and Nikolai claps his hands enthusiastically at the sight.

The steam from the bathroom curls out into the hallway, and I test the water, adjust the tap, and help him climb in. He splashes and sings, toy sharks and plastic cups floating around him, and the tiled walls echo with his happiness.

"Mama, look, this one's diving to the bottom!" he cries, holding up a soaked blue cup.

"Careful," I say, catching the cup before it slips off the rim and dumps water onto the floor. "We don't want another flood."

He laughs again, louder this time, slapping the surface of the water until it hits my shirt. I pretend to scowl at him, and he squeals in delight when I tickle him. The younger woman covers her mouth in a snicker and Mara ducks out.

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"Watch him for a moment?" I ask, knowing I have a few minutes to myself now to look around. I've been hoping to learn the ins and outs of this place for the few days we've been here, to try and find a way out if the right time presents itself. The maid nods and takes my seat on the closed toilet, and I duck out.

I leave the bathroom door ajar and step into the hallway. The polished wood glints underfoot, the windows casting long strips of afternoon light across the floor. The rugs are perfectly aligned, the curtains pulled to precise angles, and again I think how museum-like it feels. Not a home for a child.

The west wing calls to me like a whisper, and I glance over my shoulder as I move in that direction. I've never been down this corridor before. One of the guards normally stands here—broad chest, impassive face, hand always near his belt. Today, it's empty, though, so I take the liberty to snoop a little.

I move quickly and quietly, shoes in hand to lessen the noise I make. The air is cooler here, like they don't burn fireplaces in this wing of the home, and the scent of lemon oil is stronger. The walls are hung with old oil paintings—portraits of men I don't recognize, all of them pale and solemn. Their eyes follow me as I pass, as if the house itself is watching.

I reach for the first door handle and turn it. It refuses to move, firmly locked. I try the second—also locked. When I reach the third, it shifts under my fingers. The mechanism clicks softly, and the door creaks open just enough to make my chest tighten with unease.

I slip inside and shut the door behind me, breath caught in my chest as I press my

back to the frame and listen.

It's a study, one clearly used by someone important. Leather chairs sit beside a marble fireplace. A Persian rug softens the floor, its edges slightly curled. The bar cart gleams, stocked with crystal decanters. Dust motes float in the sunlight slicing through the heavy curtains, and the air smells of old tobacco and pine polish.

I take it in fast, eyes moving over every detail, searching for anything useful. There's a door on the far wall, partially hidden by a tall bookshelf. I cross the room with careful steps and try the handle.

It opens into a narrow corridor with no windows, but at the end, only ten paces away, is a door that opens to the outside. My heart pauses for a second and hope flickers to life. There is no guard at the door, and foolishly, Rolan left the door to the small study unlocked. I could get Nikolai. I could leave. This could be my way out.

I retrace my steps, moving faster now. Mental notes stack in my mind like cards being counted. West hallway, third door on the right, double exit, no cameras in the corners, no guards during the bath hour. I don't know how long the opportunity will last. I need to be ready. I close everything the way I found it—door latch, hallway light, loose rug edge—but when I step back into the main hallway, Rolan stands over me with a glare on his face and a gun in his hand.

14

ROLAN

I get the call just before dawn. The sky is still black, the horizon a vague smear of deep blue beneath the city's distant haze. Inside my office, the windows are slick with condensation, and the frost that clings to the terrace railing just outside has turned crystalline in the light from the estate lamps. The silence is absolute until the burner

phone buzzes sharply on my desk.

I lift the phone to my ear and say, "Go," hearing the low shift of breath against the receiver before Stepan speaks. Calls this time of day are never good news.

"Someone hit the weapons shipment, Boss. We think it was the Zharovs," he clips, and I can tell he's had a shitty morning. "They hit the convoy outside Yaroslavl but they left something behind."

I wrap my palm against the coffee mug in front of me. The heat from it warms my cold fingers as I wait for the fire in the hearth to really get going. "What did they leave?" This sort of shit happens all the time and never rattles me much, but if Stepan is calling this early to report it, it has to be something worse than normal.

He waits a beat longer than I like. When he answers, it's quiet and laced with a violent tone. "A child's car seat. They set it on fire and it started melting, but it's obvious what it is."

I stare at the window, into the distorted reflection of my own expression. My face is cold and blank as I think of those sick bastards targeting my son—or any child that age, for that matter. My pulse doesn't spike and my breathing doesn't shift, but I feel anger rising in my chest.

My thoughts are racing ten steps ahead, but I stay on the line as Stepan starts rattling off options. He's already made contact with our sector heads. He's tracking Zharov movement across all known routes, comparing it against our last three weeks of flagged activity. We both know this wasn't just about product. It was personal.

"Get me updated schematics for everything in the northeast district near Altufyevo. I want drones in the air within the hour. I want eyes on every vehicle leaving Yaroslavl by road, rail, or foot," I tell him, and I stand up, realizing my coffee is going to go

cold.

“I’ll have Kostya pull the cell tower logs,” Stepan adds. “And we’ve got a warehouse light-up scheduled for this morning—old pattern. Looks like they’re still using it.”

That’s the opening we need. “Mobilize the off-book men,” I say. “I want everything mapped—where they live, where they store, where they rotate shifts. We don’t touch anything until we’ve got all three sites boxed.”

He confirms, then says, "Ten minutes. Get your coat."

I’m already walking, passing through the main floor and out the private exit near the courtyard, where Stepan pulls up in a nondescript black SUV. As I slide into the passenger seat, Stepan tosses a folder into my lap and starts talking before I have the door shut.

"There are three hits total. The first site is a safehouse outside Volokolamsk with two confirmed targets inside. The other two are storage locations. They’re inactive right now, but we know they’re stocked." He pulls out as I peek at the files.

"Any guards?" I ask, still flipping through the photos as we roll down the side road headed out of the city.

This isn’t about regaining a shipment—we can replace weapons. What I want is for the Zharovs to understand that targeting my son didn’t rattle me—it signed their death warrant. I want it clear—if they so much as say his name again, they don’t just lose territory. They lose blood.

“First one that comes out of the building, I want him alive,” I add, still flipping through the photos. “He’s going to deliver what’s left of his crew back to them face-to-face.”

He grunts his acknowledgement. "We've got men there at the first location but no visible heat at the other two. Doesn't mean they're empty, though."

"No warnings," I say. "No survivors."

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

By the time we hit the highway, the sky has lost its gray edge and gone to a flat white. Traffic is light. Most of the city is still dragging itself awake, and we're already working.

I open the folder and scan the printouts, flipping through each page while the road hums beneath us. The flat has a basic layout with two main points of entry, poor cover on the rear approach, and exposed sight lines from the upper stairwell. Their internal cameras are old—probably dummy units—and the back alley doesn't show movement after midnight.

They've gotten lazy because they're not used to being watched.

But they intercepted our weapons, left a message, and crossed a line I can't ignore. Threatening my son confirms they're out of their depth on this one. I don't want to outmaneuver them and I don't want a deal. I want them to know they made the mistake of naming the wrong child.

We pull up to the first safehouse a few blocks away, but I can see it in the distance.

Eight of us split into two vehicles. Every man wears black—hoods, gloves, and masks. Our boots are rubber-soled and our weapons are suppressed.

The first site is a crumbling flat half-hidden behind a liquor store and a graffiti-covered bus depot. The building sags inward, its foundation warped by snow and rot. Streetlights blink overhead, casting pools of orange and shadow that strobe across the cracked pavement.



We move fast and quiet, staying in the shadows.

The November air bites at my skin, seeping through every seam in my coat. I signal for the team to split—two on each side, two at the back. Misha stays close to my left. His breath clouds beside me, but his pace never falters.

The first sentry is posted under a leaning utility pole, a cigarette glowing faintly between his fingers. His shoulders are hunched and his jacket hangs open. He is lazy and overconfident. I give the signal with two fingers raised.

Renat flanks left while Vadim loops right in one silent motion. Wire strung between my uncle's hands tightens over the first man's windpipe. He slumps forward without a sound. The second sentry barely turns his head before Misha's gloved hand closes over his mouth and blood spills from his throat. The struggle is over in less than five seconds and no bullets are wasted.

I approach the rear door and test the lock. It's old, rusted, and flaking red around the keyhole. I pry the latch with the tip of my knife. It gives with a soft groan of metal.

Inside, the floor is scattered with empty cans, plastic wrappers, and the grease-slicked bones of some long-forgotten meal. A space heater glows weakly in the corner, casting a flickering orange halo over two men hunched at a folding card table. They're playing a lazy game of war, unaware that death has already stepped inside.

One of them looks up and squints at me as he slurs, "You back already?" His brows pull together in confusion as I step in farther and he doesn't have time to react.

Three muffled cracks ring out from my weapon. They are clean and cold and final.

The man on the left jerks backward, the card in his hand fluttering to the ground like a flag surrendering. The second stumbles to his feet, gasping, blood already pouring

from his side. A final shot plants him against the wall, eyes wide open, mouth still moving without sound.

We sweep the rooms carefully to ensure there are no innocent women or children present and find crates of storage. There are cases of ammunition. I find a notebook taped to the underside of a desk—supply lists and drop points. I hand it to Misha without a word.

He moves fast, carrying a can of gasoline, dousing everything in the downstairs, and I give the order as I step out the back door into the crisp air that will soon be singed with the stench of smoke and burning flesh. The bodies are left where they fall. The scene speaks louder that way. It's a message written in blood and silence, one they'll all understand.

The fire spreads up the wall in a bloom of blue-orange. Smoke rises in thick, oily columns, blackening the sky. A distant dog barks, then falls silent. We vanish before the first siren sounds.

From the expressway, the smoke trailing from the first fire is still visible when we hit the second and third sites. Both the second and third locations go just as quickly. Vadim lays down fuel, and I light the charges myself. Fire rips through drywalls, old wiring, and stacked crates of contraband. And by the time we're heading back toward the estate, two more Zharov properties are reduced to smoke and ash, leaving nothing they can salvage.

By the time we return to the estate just after lunch, the city has warmed but the smell of smoke still clings to my coat. Stepan drops me at the side entrance and I step inside. I catch a glimpse of movement and notice Anya in my office trying to slip out as if she wasn't there. Her footsteps are quiet. She's holding her shoes in her hand, which only proves she's trying to sneak around.

She freezes when she sees the weapon. Her hand tightens around her shoes, eyes wide, body rigid. For a second, she doesn't breathe.

I lurch forward, gripping her elbow, and drag her back into the office. She stumbles once, but I keep moving. The door slams shut behind us, and I lock it.

I press her back against the wall and grab her face, forcing her to look at me. Her breath comes sharply through her nose, but she doesn't pull away. "What the fuck are you doing in my office snooping?"

"I wasn't snooping," she says quickly. "I was looking for you. Nikolai's in the bath."

"For what?" I ask, not loosening my grip. Her eyes dart back and forth between mine and then drop to my lips. I expect some lame attempt at justifying her trespassing, but I get none.

Anya just leans up and kisses me roughly, clinging to my sides.

The kiss catches me off-guard, but I don't pull away. Instead, I crush my lips against hers, my anger and adrenaline from the day's events spilling over into it. My tongue forces its way into her mouth, tasting the sweetness of her lipstick and the lingering hint of fear. One hand tightens its grip in her hair, angling her head to deepen the kiss, while my other slides down her body, grabbing at her ass and lifting her up against the wall. Her legs wrap instinctively around my waist, pressing her core against mine, and we both moan into each other's mouth.

I break the kiss and growl into her ear, "You know better than to go through my things." My arousal is painful in my pants, straining against my zipper already. The things this woman does to me...

"I told you I was here for you..." She bites my jaw, presses wet kisses to my neck.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

"Slutty romance novel have you worked up?" I ask her, claiming her lips in another searing kiss while she tangles her hands in my hair and growls into it.

"Fuck smutty books," she gasps, grinding her hips against mine. "I'm here for you, Rolan. I want you." She tugs at my jacket to open it. Her nails rake down my chest until she finds the hem of my shirt and starts pulling upward.

I want to question it—how easily she admits she wants me—but my self-control snaps. I set her down and shove her toward my desk. Her gasp is a delicious mix of shock and desire as I yank down her slacks, baring her ass to me. I deliver a sharp smack to one cheek, then the other, eliciting a moan from her lips. "You know better than to snoop."

"I know," she pants, arching her back, presenting herself for more as I tear off my coat and yank my shirt off over my head with one hand. It's not every day a woman as alluring as Anya Morozova comes to my office to ask for sex, and better yet, I'm not having to force it this time.

I grab a fistful of Anya's hair, yanking her head back and growling in her ear, "You like it when I'm rough, don't you?" I trail my free hand down her spine, stopping just shy of her core, which isn't nearly as wet as it should be if she really came to fuck me. "Tell me you've been a good girl and maybe I'll give you what you came for."

Anya whimpers, her breaths uneven as she rocks her hips back against my hand. "Yes," she pants, "I've been a good girl... for you." Her nails dig into the edge of the desk as she struggles to keep herself upright. "Please..."

With one hand, I undo my belt, take out my hard cock, and stroke it. The other remains tangled in her hair, knotted hard enough to make it hard for her to breathe. She's too easy, too agreeable. This bitch was snooping for something, and my gut tells me it was a way to get out of here without being noticed. She's planning to try to run, and now she's shown her hand.

"You shouldn't lie to me, Anya," I warn as I slide my dick to her dry entrance. She gasps, squeezing the edge of the desk as I rub up and down her slit until she's whimpering.

"I'm not lying. I want you." Even the pleading way she whimpers those words is belying her real intention. But I can make her want me.

I tighten my grip on her hair, pulling her head back so far that her neck is taut. "Let me make it clear, Anya. You're here because I want you here, not the other way around. You will do as I say, when I say it. Understand?" She whimpers in response, but I don't release my grip. "I said, do you understand?"

"Y-Yes," she stutters out between gasps. "I'm here for you."

I let go of her hair and push her head down onto the desk roughly. She whimpers again but doesn't protest. My cock throbs with anticipation as I spread her ass cheeks apart and drop to my knees. Her pussy trembles when I blow on it, and when I bite her inner thigh, she gasps. The holes contract and pulse when I lick her, moistening her, and listen to her soft, whimpering moans.

I work her until she's soaked, a tantalizing prize for my persistence, but I know this is just the start. Standing, I push her down farther until her ass is in the air, her pussy bared to me. "You like that, don't you?" I ask, tracing her slick folds with my fingers. She whimpers, her hips jerking against my touch.

I position myself at her entrance and slam my cock inside her with one powerful thrust, drawing a muffled scream from her lips. "You're mine now," I growl in her ear as I start to move, withdrawing and plunging back in with rough, forceful strokes.

I thrust relentlessly into her tight pussy. Her moans and whimpers only spur me on, my anger and frustration from the Zharovs' betrayal pouring out into each savage thrust. Anya's pussy clenches around my cock, her wetness coating both of us as I drive myself deeper and deeper inside her. Her core is hot, wet, and tight—so fucking tight around my cock—and I know she's close.

"You're going to come for me," I growl in her ear, "because you came in here for this, right?"

"Right," she mutters, barely audible.

I grip her hips firmly, my nails digging into her skin as I use her body to work out my frustration. My other hand wraps around her throat, squeezing just enough to make it difficult for her to breathe. Her eyes widen and she claws at the desk, arching her back to meet my every thrust.

"You came here to see if you could handle me?" I squeeze tighter, a low groan escaping my own lips as she starts to tremble beneath me. "Who owns this pussy now?" I hiss between clenched teeth.

"Y–You," she gasps, her voice strained.

"That's right," I growl, my voice a low, guttural sound. "And who's going to make you come?"

"You," Anya pants, pushing back into me harder.

The orgasm rips through me, and I can feel her contracting around my cock. Her body shudders and trembles. She screams into the sleeve of her shirt, muffling her cries of ecstasy. I hold her there, buried deep inside her for a moment, both of us panting before I pull out and slap her ass hard again.

She gasps when I let go of her throat and step away, lies across my desk for a second as I tuck my dick away and zip up. "I did come for you," she mutters, slowly rising and pulling her pants up as shamefully as the moment demands.

"Get out, and don't come back here again," I grumble, turning away from her. I hear the door click shut, but when I turn, her shoes are still lying on the floor just inside the doorway.

I have a problem. I'm going to have to increase security to keep her out of here now.

15

ANYA

A week passes without threats or shouting and without further confrontation. It should feel like a reprieve, but the absence of conflict only tightens something inside me. Rolan has a governess come to teach Nikolai his studies so in his absence from school, he doesn't fall behind. I'm not given the choice about that, and I hate that he's not around other kids.

When I wake, the door to my room is ajar, and the stillness pressing around me makes me hesitate before I move. The house feels eerily quiet. I don't hear Nikolai talking yet.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

The early light slips through the sheer curtains, and my breath fogs slightly in the cool air. I sit up slowly, rubbing at my face with both hands. I wait for the rush of panic, for the spike of disorientation that usually comes first thing. It never arrives, and that absence alone unsettles me. I'm adjusting to this place and I shouldn't be.

There's a tray on the side table. The porridge is still warm, the tea steeped strong beside it. Bread and jam rest on a small plate, and half of an apple, peeled, sliced, and fanned out, crowns the corner. Everything is arranged neatly. I stare at the display as though it's a trick, something meant to disarm me. It looks domestic, even thoughtful. I wonder if it's Mara's doing or if Rolan had some say in it. He's been more civil this week.

I eat quickly and dress in the clothes laid out for me—jeans and a soft gray sweater that fits a little too well. When I step into the hallway, no guards flank the door. There is no one watching my every move. Somewhere below, I hear laughter echo up through the stillness.

It's Nikolai's voice, high and bright, full of joy that does not match the walls he is surrounded by. The sound pulls me downstairs, tracking his voice through the ornate halls. Every echo of his voice bounces against marble and stone like a memory trying to escape.

He's in the sitting room with one of Rolan's guards, a young one I don't recognize. They are building something with wooden blocks, an elaborate fortress balanced carefully near the edge of the carpet. Cushions have been pulled off the couch to form makeshift barricades. The room, all polished wood and velvet curtains, feels unexpectedly soft with my son in it.



Nikolai's cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright with focus. He laughs so hard he nearly topples the entire structure. The guard catches the top layer before it falls, his large hand moving with surprising care as he steadies the tower.

"Try it again, malysh," the man says, handing Nikolai another block with a gentle smile. His movements are careful, respectful. Not the kind of callousness I expected from someone under Rolan's command.

Nikolai grins up at him with eyes full of mischief and pride. "I want to make a jail next. For bad guys."

The guard nods as he holds a new block. "We'll need strong walls for that, maybe even two layers."

I stand leaning against the door frame as I watch them. My son is happy. There is no sign of fear or trauma on his face, no shadow in his eyes. He looks safe in a place that should never feel safe. I should be grateful for his peace. I should feel relief that he is unharmed. But all I feel is dread blooming in my chest. Dread that I'm letting this place slowly redefine what normal looks like for us.

But just around the corner, I hear voices and I don't like what I'm hearing. I slip out, moving that way, and stop just around the corner, frozen by the low, gritty timbre of their voices. They're not whispering. They're not even trying to lower their tones.

"They dragged him out of the safehouse while it was still burning," one of the men says, his voice rough, maybe mid-thirties, with a regional accent. "Didn't even wait for it to cool. Hands melted to the steel. Had to pry them off."

The other lets out a low grunt. "Rolan told them to make it an example. You torch our shipment, we torch your men." They chuckle in low, sinister tones. There's a sharp knock against the ground that makes me jolt, but I stay there listening.

"Should've burned the building with the whole crew inside. Would've sent a better message."

"Don't think he wanted a large body count. He just wanted to make them sweat."

The first one snorts. "Fear's a leash. You gotta tighten it before they chew through."

The second adds, "Still, I wouldn't have wasted bullets. They were begging to be drowned."

I feel the bile rise in my throat. I glance back at Nikolai. He's only a few feet from them. Well within earshot. He's not paying attention—yet—but it only takes a second for a phrase to stick.

I storm back into the room and the shift in energy is instant. Nikolai looks up in surprise, and the guard seems confused. I walk straight to Nikolai, who stares at me with wide eyes.

"Come on, kotyonok," I say, keeping my voice steady as I take his hand. "Let's go find breakfast."

He blinks, surprised but agreeable, standing quickly and clutching my fingers. But he glances back a few times at his tower and I see the disappointment in his expression.

As I pass the guards, I don't stop walking, but I speak just loud enough to be heard.

"If I ever hear you talking about burning men alive where my son can hear it again, I'll make sure you get to test the fire yourselves." Neither of them says a word to me, but I hear their chuckling as I leave earshot.

In the dining room, I help Nikolai into one of the high-backed chairs and settle into

the one beside him. The scents of warm bread and citrus tea rise from the tray laid out for him. I butter his toast and slice his eggs while he chatters about the tower he was building. I nod and murmur encouragement, but my hands tremble slightly when I lift my own cup.

He finishes quickly, wiping his mouth on the cloth napkin, and hops down from his chair. "I'm going to finish my fortress," he says, already turning toward the hallway, but before I can protest, he is gone, zipping toward the parlor while I sigh in defeat.

I sip my drink, but the instant he disappears beyond the archway, I set the cup down and stand. My chest tightens with dread as I think of how this place threatens to pervert his innocence. Batya was a bad enough example for my son. Rolan's crew takes "bad example" to an entirely different dimension.

I push away from the table and rise, heading down the hall with quickening steps. The hallway is quiet now. The guards are gone, but as I near the sitting room, I hear a voice again—but this time, just one. It's deep and warm and I recognize it as I round the corner and freeze in place.

Nikolai is perched on Rolan's knee, tiny fingers toying with the edge of Rolan's sleeve. Rolan sits comfortably in one of the armchairs by the fire, one hand resting lightly on Nikolai's back, the other gesturing as he speaks. His voice is comforting and friendly as if he wants every word to sink in.

"Do you know why I brought you here, Nikolai?" Rolan asks. His tone is almost fatherly.

My son looks up at him with wide eyes. "Because Mama said we were going on a trip."

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Rolan chuckles softly. "That wasn't the real reason. You're here because I'm your papa."

Nikolai blinks, confusion flickering over his face, but then it shifts—to surprise, then wonder, then outright joy. "You're really my papa?"

"Yes," Rolan says. "I always have been."

Nikolai breaks into a grin so bright it hurts to look at. He wraps his arms around Rolan's neck, holding tight. "I have a papa."

Something cracks inside my chest. My stomach turns. The bile from earlier climbs back up like acid. I step fully into the room.

"Off his lap. Now," I say, my voice cutting through the moment in such a harsh way that Nikolai stiffens and instantly looks contrite.

Both of them turn. Rolan meets my eyes, impassive, and Nikolai slides off Rolan's knee but frowns, glancing between us.

"He said he's my papa," Nikolai says, searching my face for confirmation, for permission to be happy about it.

My mouth opens, but no words come out. My chest tightens, and I feel the sting of tears that refuse to fall. The air is dense, pressing in around me, full of something sour I can't breathe through. I stare at Rolan, trying to understand what he's just done—what it means for the little boy now standing between us.

Rolan doesn't gloat. There is no smugness in his eyes, only silence. He holds my gaze like he expected this to happen and planned for it all along. I force a swallow, but it does nothing to ease the nausea curling in my stomach. My legs feel unsteady, like they could give out if I take a step. Nikolai stands frozen, still caught between his new joy and my silence.

I open my arms to him, my voice soft but steady. "Come here, kotyonok."

He doesn't hesitate. He rushes into my arms and clings to my waist, his face pressing into my side. I smooth my hand over his hair and keep him there for a moment as I breathe through the ache in my throat.

"What kind of man brings a child into a war zone?" I hiss.

He doesn't even look up from the fire, which is his new fascination without Nikolai on his knee. "The kind of man who's done letting other people make his choices for him."

I move closer. "He's five, Rolan. He's a little boy. He's not a soldier you're training. He needs safety and stability."

Rolan lifts his gaze slowly. "He's my son. You don't get to decide what's safe anymore. You lost that right the moment you lied to me."

I turn and storm out before he can say another word, dragging Nikolai a little too quickly behind me. The hallway blurs at the edges as I move fast, almost tripping over my own feet as I reach Nikolai's bedroom and slam the door behind me.

I lock it, though I know it won't stop him. It's a useless gesture to claim some small piece of control. I dig into my pocket and pull out the burner phone as Nikolai runs over to his bed with a book and climbs onto it.

My fingers tremble as I dial the number of my father's contact. He hasn't responded to my message, but I need to know if I have a way out. It connects on the first ring to a gruff, gravelly voice I'm not expecting.

"You ready?" the voice on the other end asks.

"Tell me what you have," I say. I'm not sure how conversations like this normally go, but I'm less afraid of this man than I am of being trapped by Rolan Vetrov for the rest of my life.

"Identities are clean—Canadian, you and the boy. The identities come with new names and completely fabricated records. They've even backdated school enrollment and created medical files to support the story. Everything you requested is ready. All that remains is for you to arrive and collect the documents."

I close my eyes. My voice barely holds steady. "The address?"

"I'll text you the location," the man says. "Watch for a number you don't recognize. It won't come twice."

"Thank you," I whisper, cradling the phone as if someone walking past might hear me and come take it.

"Don't wait too long. The city's shifting fast."

The line goes dead. I set the phone down slowly and walk to the wardrobe to lean for stability. The cash is still in my apartment back in Mytishchi, stashed behind the loose panel under the kitchen sink. I haven't touched it in weeks. The night Rolan paid me, I took the envelope home and hid it before Batya could smell it out and gamble it away. He never saw a ruble of it. In fact, I didn't even count it. I just shoved it deep where no one would look. I'll have to stop there before we run. It's

enough to get us started.

Feeling a little more in control now, I sit down on the edge of Nikolai's bed and watch him. His innocence is a fragile, breakable thing, and I know I've already failed to protect it.

He looks up at me with a smile. "Mama, look. This one's the fastest." He points in his book at a cheetah racing a rabbit. The way he shifts from tension to happiness is enviable.

"I see," I say softly.

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My heart aches, splintering apart piece by piece as I watch him play. I know I'm leaving. I know I have to, but part of me fears Nikolai will only be upset. He hasn't seen the real stakes of this circumstance. He only sees Papa Rolan as a good man, not the monster he is.

To him, when I yank him away in the middle of the night, I will seem the monster.

I hope he can forgive me.

16

ROLAN

The hallway outside my office is quiet, muffled by heavy rugs and thick walls that have kept secrets longer than I've been alive. Morning light bleeds through the tall windows, but it's not enough to aid the overhead lights. Thick clouds blanket Moscow, holding the chill down to the earth. The cold outside seeps into the corners of the house despite the radiators cracking to life. It suits the moment.

Father Gavril stands near the study door, adjusting the cuffs of his black wool coat, and he keeps his expression guarded. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other and glances toward the folio tucked under his arm.

"She won't fight you?" he asks, keeping his voice low. His brows draw together slightly in a way that hints at unease without crossing into judgment.

"She already has," I answer. "Now she chooses—my name or she loses her son." I



see my statement take root behind his eyes and he turns away, unable to hold my gaze.

His shoulders square as he feels me stare at him, and from inside the leather folio, he removes the marriage certificate and lays it on the table. Every line is filled in except Anya's. I let my eyes drift over the paper for a moment before turning over my shoulder toward the door where my guard waits.

“Stepan,” I say, not raising my voice, and he’s already in motion, straightening and readying himself for my orders. “Bring her to the parlor.” He heads off to collect her and I gesture at Father Gavril to follow me, and he snatches up his paperwork, seeing the folly of getting too comfortable too quickly. At least he understands his job.

I enter the main parlor with the priest and notice the fireplace is cold. We won't be here long, so I leave it that way. A single oil lamp near the bookshelf throws light across the carved edges of the coffee table and the worn velvet chairs that frame it in. A tray with two glasses rests on the sideboard untouched, and Father Gavril hovers near the writing table on the far side of the room.

Time passes before footsteps approach, echoing down the hallway. Anya enters first, her sweater loose around her shoulders, the fabric hanging unevenly from the tension in her frame. Her arms are folded, her mouth set in a line. Her eyes are locked on mine. She stops a few paces inside the room with Stepan behind her in the doorway. I nod once, and he closes the door behind her, leaving us to our privacy.

“Sit,” I tell her, watching her closely.

She remains standing. Her chin lifts a fraction higher in quiet resistance to my order, tension laced into every line of her posture. I move closer to her and her grip tightens on her sleeves, but she doesn't move.

"What's this about, Rolan?" Her eyes flick toward Father Gavril and back to me. "What is going on?" I read the anxiety all over her face. She doesn't even try to hide it anymore the way she did working at the track.

"Things have changed," I tell her. "I no longer trust you to stay put here, and I won't let my son be taken and hidden from me again." I stop in front of her and meet her stare, letting the words drop on her like an anvil.

Her lips press together. "So, you're done pretending?" Her eyes narrow on me as the tight hug she has on her middle strengthens. "You're done playing house with me and now this is a real prison?"

"I'm done letting you gamble with him." My voice stays stern as I hold her gaze, which grows darker by the second. She's a mama bear wanting to defend her child, but he's my child too, and I'm far more powerful than her.

"Then what?" she asks. "Lock me up? Put a gun to my head and call it safety?" The bite in her voice is sharp as a knife, and the expression on her face matches it pound for pound.

"No," I say. "I'm offering you permanence. A legal, binding marriage." I give her no space to misinterpret it, no room to breathe false hope.

She shakes her head as she scoffs and a humorless smile flashes across her face. "Absolutely not." Her weight shifts subtly, a flicker of indecision at her edges. Instead of withdrawing, she stiffens and drops her arms to her sides with fists dangling. "I'm not marrying you."

I don't respond. I turn to Father Gavril, who takes out the folio and a small velvet box. He sets them both on the table between us, then steps back without a word.

Anya doesn't move. Her body is still, her face frozen in place, her stare locked on the table.

"You can't be serious," she mutters.

"You want to leave?" I ask. "Go ahead. But you go alone. Nikolai stays here. He is my blood, and I'll protect him—with or without you." My words only darken her eyes further until they're black as midnight and laced with hatred. It makes me pause for a moment to consider her, but I know what's best. This has to happen.

"This is blackmail," she hisses in quiet fury as her shoulders square, bracing for a fight she knows she can't win. Anya isn't used to being ordered around. Living wherever the hell she was for the past five years has made her noncompliant, and I'm showing her how things are going to work.

"No. This is protection. You can't keep him safe. I can." I take a step forward, shortening the distance between us, and she winces as she takes a step backward.

She looks down at the ring box and her fingers twitch. Her jaw flexes once, then stills. I wonder what's going through her mind. It isn't like she hasn't come to me to have her fill of my body at times, and I provide everything she could need, along with the best private education our son could ever ask for.

"You think forcing me into this gives you more power?" Her voice falters under the strain of fear, barely able to hold itself upright.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

“No, but it shows me as the one willing to do what’s necessary.” I hold her gaze, letting the silence hang between us like a sealed verdict. "I will have the full backing of the law, Anya. My enemies don't care whether you want to be here or not. The moment you are not here, they will come for him and they will kill him to cripple me."

Her hands flail out as her defiance erupts into something explosive. She scoffs loudly and tries to turn, but I snatch her arm at the elbow. “You bastard,” she mutters, her voice cracking at the edges with emotion. She's refusing to let herself cry, but it doesn't matter to me what emotion she feels. She will leave my home alone or she will stay and be my wife, ensuring my claim to my own son.

I reach for the ring without looking away from her. She watches every movement, the way one watches a weapon being drawn. I hold it out, steady, forcing no words between us, and her face is stone cold. I can't break down that wall she erected between us.

“You want to leave?” I say again. “Go.” Anya's eyes flick up to meet mine again, but I can see the tide turning in my favor. There is no way she will leave her precious "Koyla" here with me, and there's no way I'm letting her sneak out with him under cover of darkness. This is just the first step in my plan of assuring his permanent safety, even if she refuses to see it that way.

She doesn't budge. I press the ring into her hand and her fingers curl on reflex, holding it as if the decision has already been made. She lowers her head slightly, and after a moment, she slides the ring onto her finger without ceremony.

Father Gavril clears his throat and adjusts the collar of his cassock. He opens the folio with both hands, flattening the pages like he's performed this act a thousand times before. He doesn't look at either of us as he begins to speak.

"By the authority of the church and the state of Russia, we gather for the solemn binding of man and wife," he starts. The rhythm of his words is slow and measured and his eyes glance up at me several times, testing the water to see if this is his job.

Anya flinches as the first phrase falls into the space between us. She doesn't lift her head. Her gaze stays anchored to the grain of the table, as if looking at anything else would trigger an explosion again. Her hands remain clasped in front of her body.

I watch the priest and let her feel my silence beside her as I take her hand firmly and pry it away from its mate. Her resistance is futile, though she does fight me until I clear my throat and the priest goes on.

"This union is recognized before God and witnessed here today. Do you, Rolan Vetrov, enter into this marriage freely and without coercion?"

"Yes," I say. My voice doesn't quaver one bit because I'm certain this is the course of action to take.

He pauses as Anya swallows hard and sighs. The annoyance on her face isn't what I hoped to see from her, but it doesn't deter me.

"And do you, Anya Morozova, enter into this marriage freely and without coercion?"

Her body locks tight. She doesn't speak. The silence goes on too long. Her shoulders rise and fall once, as if she's forcing air into her lungs.

"Anya," I snarl. It makes her jolt and tighten further, and then she speaks.

"Yes," she whispers. The word barely forms, but it's there.

Father Gavril doesn't ask again. He turns the page to the certificate and gestures for me to sign, and I do. The pen scratches against the paper, leaving my signature. Then he hands it to her, and she takes it with a hand that shakes just slightly and signs her name in tight, rigid strokes.

He folds the papers and murmurs a final blessing, signing the cross in the air above us both.

"The marriage is now sealed," he says. "By law, and by God."

There are no speeches or cake, no vows of monogamy, faithfulness, or lasting love, just names exchanged in a room that feels more like a business negotiation than a union.

Anya's posture is rigid, the silence clinging to her like armor. She refuses to meet my gaze, her eyes fixed somewhere beyond the desk, detached from everything that just happened. Since the moment she slid the ring onto her finger, she hasn't moved an inch.

I don't really need her approval or her blessing to do this, and having her here to sign this of her own accord was really just an act of kindness to her. I could've signed the damn name myself, but I hoped...

"I hate you," she mutters when Father Gavril turns his back to tuck his files away.

"Next week," I say with a steady voice, "we file for Nikolai's adoption." The words sever any last thread of hope I have that she will be civil with me. I watch her wilt like a desert flower and shrink away from me. Again, I pause and watch this strange reaction from her, and I wonder how she can't see I'm doing this for his wellbeing.

She doesn't answer, but her eyes drift slightly around the room before they finally settle on mine. What stares back at me isn't confusion or submission—it's pure, unfiltered contempt.

Behind her gaze, I see it all, stolid grief pressed flat beneath fury, and something colder than either—hatred, maybe, or the hard edge of survival. I meet it without blinking and hold her glare, anchored in place by the brutal clarity of what we've just become. Man and wife—father and mother. And now, anyone who comes for her will have to go through me first. And they won't win.

17

ANYA

The garden behind the estate is quiet this afternoon, but not peaceful. It smells like damp earth and frostbitten soil, a bit on the cold side for outdoor play, but Nikolai is too rambunctious to stay indoors all winter. The stone benches are wet from last night's sleet, but I sit on one anyway. The cold seeps through my jeans, but I don't move. I've been numb since yesterday.

The hedge maze rises in the distance, brown and half-bare in the early winter light. A wrought-iron fence encircles the grounds, its black bars wet with condensation, but large Christmas wreaths now adorn them. The sky hangs low and gray, and the trees stand stiff and stripped of their color, except a few scraggly pines along the northern wall. The whole place feels suspended, waiting for some rescuer to free it from oppression.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

Those papers were real. The fucking ceremony was real. It makes my stomach turn. My name is no longer Morozova. It's Vetrov now. That change is a shackle I can't remove. I keep waiting for panic to settle in, for rage to rise, but all I feel is stillness. Nothing moves in me. I could've refused to sign, but how? He would've turned me out, sent me away without my son. I am not leaving here without Nikolai.

Nikolai presses his small hand into mine. He swings our joined arms and tilts his head.

"Are you sad, Mamochka?" he asks, his voice curious but cautious, as if he already knows the answer. He's a smart boy, and I won't lie to him normally, but this is too heavy for a child his age.

I force a smile and squeeze his fingers. "No, baby. We're fine." I keep my tone light, but my chest aches from the lie I swallow down like poison.

He studies my face for a second longer and shrugs. Then he takes off running toward the stone path that loops between the hedges, his feet crunching softly over the gravel and ice. "Careful!" I shout after him, and he giggles in response. He loves it out here, and I love it anywhere he's smiling like that.

A breeze picks up, carrying the scent of woodsmoke from somewhere over the fence line, probably one of Rolan's close neighbors or maybe someone near the stables. The sound of a gate latch clicks faintly in the distance, probably a groundskeeper or a patrolling guard. Somewhere inside, the faint hum of vacuuming rises, barely audible above the wind. Everything about this is perfectly normal except the ring on my finger and the fact that I'm sitting in his fucking garden as his wife.



I wait until Nikolai is out of earshot before pulling Batya's burner phone from my pocket. His contact is still waiting for me to come and pick up the new identities, and up until yesterday morning, I thought I had a plan. Even after Rolan caught me in his office and tried to teach me a lesson about snooping, I knew the way out. Now it doesn't matter. I can't get away from him at all. I can leave, but even the law will bring me back.

There's a message on the phone, and it makes goosebumps rise on my arms. The name is blank, but the message is clear. It's Batya.

Unknown: 3:17 PM: I'm working something out. Horse race. If I win, I'll have enough money to get Rolan to let you both go. Just hang on. I can fix this.

I stare at the words until they blur. Batya means well, but he never fixes anything. He breaks things—people, promises, hearts...

My heart knows my father so well, I can't even latch onto those words as hope. Besides, Rolan's iron grip holds me fast now. He will force me to sign adoption papers, keep me locked here against my will. He'll have extra guards on me so that if I even try to leave with Nikolai, I'll be stopped, and he will justify it, rationalize it away like I'm the fool.

Part of me wonders if it's so bad being here. He's not such a good man, but he gives me everything I need. He really has provided for us, and Nikolai's governess is very smart. He'll be fully educated by the time he's fourteen if he keeps learning at the rate he is now. I'll never have love, but my son won't ever lack for anything. Still... Rolan's life isn't what I want for Nikolai. The violence of it all...

"Mama!" Nikolai calls to me from across the yard, his voice rising with excitement about something I can't see. I tuck the phone into my sweater pocket before he notices. He's crouched by a patch of brittle grass, poking it with a stick like he's

digging for treasure.

“I’m watching you,” I say, raising my voice enough for him to hear.

He turns and grins, then waves. I lift my hand in return, trying to hold the smile a little longer for him.

The gravel beneath my boots shifts as I adjust my position. A pair of pigeons flutter down near the edge of the fountain, pecking at something on the ground. The water isn’t running and the basin is half-drained, a rim of ice clinging to the stone lip, but they’re interested in it anyway.

One of the maids crosses the path behind me carrying a tray. She stops in front of me and lowers her head.

“Tea, Madam,” she says with her light, practiced tone.

I nod gratefully and take the cup with both hands. “Thank you.” My voice sounds distant even to me, but the tea is hot, and the warmth seeps into my palms, waking me up. She wanders off back toward the house and I sweep my eyes back toward where Nikolai was, but he’s gone. Another quick scan reveals nothing, so I rise slowly. “Koyla!” I call to him, only to receive no answer.

And then a sound cuts through the stillness—shouting. A man’s loud, angry voice, then a thud and another shout. My eyes finally catch Nikolai standing by a row of hedges. He turns his head toward the noise with a startled expression.

I drop the cup. It shatters against the gravel as I shoot toward him, shards spreading beneath my boots. “Nikolai!” I shout, my voice breaking as I start to run. He stands stock still, eyes wide, staring at something out of sight as my heart hammers against my ribs.

I sprint across the yard, and my breath scrapes the back of my throat. He moves closer to the sound and out of sight. I follow the noises, cutting around the back of the garage and toward the old brick wall that borders the rear courtyard.

The grass is slick beneath my steps, and the packed soil near the fence gives slightly with each stride. I find him near the corner. He stands still, his body rigid, his gaze locked through a break in the hedges.

When I reach him, I grab his shoulders and pull him back with both hands.

“What are you doing? What did you see?” I kneel slightly to meet his eyes, but he doesn’t respond. In fear, I look through the gap and freeze.

One of Rolan’s men—tall, broad-shouldered, with bloody fists—is kneeling over another man slumped against the stone. Blood smears the concrete and puddles under the man on the ground who’s coughing and spitting. His hands are tied. His eye is swollen shut.

The enforcer draws back and punches him again. The sound lands with a dull crack and the sickening squish of moist flesh being tenderized under pressure. The stone wall behind them is splashed with something darker than mud. One of the windows nearby is cracked open. A radio plays softly from inside, some old warbling chanson in Russian.

I turn Nikolai around and shield his face with my arms. He jerks slightly, trying to look again, but I hug him to my chest frantically.

“No,” I say. “Don’t look at that.” I speak firmly, holding him close with one hand on his back. “Please.”

He doesn’t respond, but he stops resisting. I pull him close and walk quickly toward

the house. His small fingers stay wrapped around my wrist. And every few steps, he glances back at the hedge row with the same saucer-eyed expression of fright plastered to his face.

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The damage is done. I can tell by the way he walks beside me. Something inside him has shifted, and I can't take it back.

And I'm going to kill Rolan Vetrov for letting it happen.

18

ROLAN

The map of the grounds lies flat across the table, corners held in place by a pistol, an ashtray, a small crystal paperweight, and the thick leather-bound ledger I keep updated by hand. Misha leans forward, one palm braced on the edge, squinting down at the southern tree line.

"They won't wait long," I say, circling a bend near the back fence with a grease pencil. I straighten, watching the route I've drawn. "Maybe a week—two if they're only posturing right now. But retaliation is coming. I want this entire area doubled, reinforcements every six hours."

Stepan nods from his post at the end of the table. He flips the page on his notepad and continues his notes without looking up.

Misha glances up, folding his arms over his chest as he studies the map. "And the north perimeter?" he asks, keeping his tone neutral.

"Already covered," I reply, tossing the pencil aside. I press my knuckles into the table. "They won't strike that side because they're not stupid. I have cameras

everywhere." I lean back and cross my arms, staring them both down.

Across the room, Renat draws the curtain shut and checks the lock on the French doors. The hinges creak faintly as he pulls them closed. Outside, the gray sky hangs low over the estate, and it's all being captured on the new cameras I've had installed there too. Not a chance Anya is taking the boy out these doors without being seen.

"What about the family?" Misha asks, shifting his stance and resting one hand on his hip. His voice lacks urgency, but the question is valid. My enemies don't just want me out of the picture or stressed. The game behind their action is to wipe the Vetrov legacy off the map and build where I once reigned as king.

"None of you will be targeted until the last move," I say as I pull out a fresh glass. I set it down beside the map as I reach for the vodka in the liquor cabinet. "They'll want me angry first and then distracted. They've been looking for a way to fuck with us, and they found it. If we show weakness, they'll attack then."

He exhales slowly, shaking his head once, but he doesn't argue, only lifts his chin. "Then you need to keep your eyes on that boy."

I give a single nod, lifting the glass and taking a slow drink. The vodka burns sharp down my throat before I set the empty glass back on the table. "Starting tonight, I want full surveillance coverage of every hallway, door, and exit connected to Anya and Nikolai's part of the house. I don't want guards trailing them—this is still their home, not a prison—but I want alerts if they approach any outer boundary. They won't leave the estate without my knowing."

Stepan glances up from his notepad and tucks the pen behind his ear, then he meets my gaze. "Understood," he says. Like a good soldier, he always follows orders, and I can trust that my family will be safe with him.

He steps back without needing more detail. Renat follows him silently, already pulling out his phone to coordinate the next steps. I watch both men cross the room and disappear through the side door that leads to the lower hall and I know the wheels are already in motion.

"I want those men briefed personally," I call after them, stepping away from the bar cart. I plant my hands on the edge of the table and look from the map to Misha's face. The others can't hear me, but Misha knows to relay my commands. "And if one of them steps out of line—drinks, smokes, stares too long—pull him out. Permanently."

Misha grunts, then reaches for the folder I slide across the table. He flips it open and adjusts his reading glasses. "What about legal protection?" The paperwork is well underway, signed by myself and Anya—though she isn't aware I've signed it for her. She'd only fight me, anyway, and I'd hate to have to take drastic measures to force her. It's easier this way.

"It's being done," I say, walking back around to my chair. I lower myself slowly, and the leather creaks beneath me as I finally settle and rest for a moment. "The last notarized signature goes through next week. After that, he's legally mine."

Misha thumbs through the pages with care. His eyes scan the details until they land near the bottom of the briefing. He taps it twice with a thick finger. "Does Anya agree?"

I lift my head and stare at him, refusing to blink. "Does it matter? The boy is mine, Uncle. Would you let any woman stop you from being a father to your own blood?" My fingers itch to pour another drink, but I stay seated as the door slams open with a crash, shaking the frame and rattling the glass in its panes.

Anya storms into the room. Her eyes flash as she steps inside, hair damp and wild around her face, and her sweater hangs open. Her face is flushed as she stomps across

the Persian carpet in long, fast strides and slaps me across the face with a controlled, furious strike. The sting of her smack is real, but I fix my expression and don't react.

Misha snorts behind her and steps back, clearly amused. The look on his face annoys me as he sets the paperwork on the table and lifts an eyebrow at me. "I'll give you two a moment," he says, tapping the tabletop as he heads for the door. His voice is amused. "She hits better than you, staryy volk."

The door closes behind him, and I finally lift my gaze to look her in the eye. Anya stands in front of me, her fists clenched tightly at her sides. Her breath is fast, chest heaving under her shirt. Her glare doesn't waver.

Her voice cuts through the room before I can say a word. "He saw them dragging that man across the grass." She doesn't move, but the rage in her voice builds. "He asked me why they were hurting him. He said the man looked afraid. And I had no answer, Rolan. No way to make it better."

I straighten slowly, standing from the chair, but she holds her ground. Her fists are still clenched, her jaw locked tight.

"You told me he'd be safe here," she says, shaking her head. "This was supposed to be a home, not another war zone." Her hand rises to smack me again, but I catch her by the wrist and hold it firmly.

"He is safe," I growl, furious that she thinks she has the right to strike me.

She takes a step forward, eyes blazing. "He's watching men get tortured in the garden. That's not safe. That's psychological trauma you won't be able to undo." Her nostrils flare as she says, "It's sickening. He's a baby."

It takes everything inside me to stop myself from hurting her. I'm tired of hearing her



whine about what this life really is. She's lucky the boy only saw blood in the grass. If he carries my name, he'll see worse. She thinks this is shocking. I think she's naive. If anything, Stepan's men went too easy.

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"You're going to have to get used to it, Anya. This is the life he was born to, one he won't escape. He will grow up and take my place one day." I don't loosen my grip on her wrist for a single second, not even when she glares at the union and tries to pull away.

"You don't get to make that decision alone," she says. Her voice doesn't rise, but it sharpens to a point that needles away at my patience. "You want him to grow up here? Then this changes. Starting now."

"You think you can order me around?" I ask, stepping forward. It forces her to take a step back as my body presses in on hers. I lower my voice, but the edge stays there. "You want to be heard? Then watch your tone and stop pretending you're owed a voice in this. You kept my son from me for five fucking years."

She opens her mouth again, but I'm already on her. My hand comes up—not in a strike, but to wrap around her throat. I back her into the wall, forcing her spine against the cold plaster. My grip isn't tight enough to hurt, but it's enough to make her understand that she's not in control.

Her breathing changes. Her fists stay balled at her sides, but the fight in her eyes never dims. She stares at me like she's daring me to take it further.

"I should teach you a lesson," I say, my face close to hers.

Her lips part, but I don't give her time to speak. I tilt my head slightly, dragging my gaze down the line of her jaw until it lands on the dip in her shirt where her tits peek out. I let my stubble graze her cheek as I whisper into her ear.

“You want power?” I murmur. “Then earn it. But you won’t get it by screaming at me in my own house.”

Anya's body grows rigid as I tighten my hand on her throat.

She doesn’t speak, doesn’t move—only stares at me like she still thinks she can win. I drag her gaze back to mine and hold it there.

“You think I don’t see what you’re doing? You come in here, angry, throwing punches, trying to stake your claim—but there’s a reason you didn’t walk away after that first night at the track,” I say, my thumb tracing the edge of her jaw.

Her lips part, and this time, she doesn’t try to argue. Her pulse beats against my fingers.

I shift my hand, loosening my grip on her throat just enough to let her breathe freely, but I don’t step back. My thumb slides across the curve of her neck, following the line to her collarbone. She’s still staring at me like she wants to win, but she’s not pulling away.

I lower my mouth until it hovers just above hers, not touching. I want her to feel my control—a reminder that nothing about this is mutual. My hand shifts lower, anchoring her in place by the hip as I press her harder into the wall.

Her breath hitches. She doesn’t try to stop me. I take her mouth in the same way I take everything. Violently. She stiffens, but I don’t pull back. My grip tightens at her waist, and my other hand stays firm on her throat.

Anya's body trembles against mine, and her hands finally unclench from her sides. Slowly, she lifts them, fisting the fabric of my shirt as if she's the one holding on now. Her tongue dances against mine, a hesitant invitation I accept eagerly. I deepen

the kiss, my tongue sliding against hers as I swallow her moans.

My grip on her hip tightens, lifting her up off the floor until her legs wrap around my waist and the soft cotton of her day dress hikes up around her waist. She's wet through her panties, and I can smell the desire on her. It fuels my arousal further, reminding me just how desperate she is for this—for me.

I press her harder against the wall, grinding my cock tight against her core. Her nails dig into my back as she arches into me. I break the kiss, my breath ragged as I drag a hand down her thigh, lifting her dress higher. Her skin is hot and damp against my fingertips as I slide my hand up her inner thigh, teasingly close to where she needs me most. Anya bites down on her lower lip, her eyes half-lidded with desire as she rocks her hips into my touch.

I smirk at the hunger in her eyes, knowing I have her right where I want her. "You like it when I'm in control, don't you?" I growl against her ear, my breath hot and heavy. Anya's only response is a low moan as she tilts her head back, granting me access to the sensitive column of her neck. I take advantage, nipping and sucking along her pulse point as my fingers continue their torturous exploration.

"Say it," I demand, my voice a low growl. "Tell me you want it."

"Yes," she pants out, her voice shaking with desire. "I... I want it."

A wave of satisfaction washes over me as I slide two fingers beneath the lace of her panties, teasing her entrance before delving inside. Anya's breath hitches as my fingers penetrate her, her body arching into mine. Her nails dig even deeper into my back, her need for me clear in every tortured moan that escapes her lips. I relish in her submission, in the knowledge that despite her defiance, she still craves me as much as I do her.

And when I feel her core tightening around my digits, I pull them back, halting the climb to orgasm.

“What? No...” she whines. “Please.”

“I will teach you to never defy me again,” I growl into her ear. Her elbows push hard into my shoulders as she holds herself up, and I reach beneath her body, loosing my cock from its restraints.

"You will learn your place, Anya," I say through gritted teeth. "And you will learn to beg for it."

Her breath comes in panting gasps as I begin to push inside her, filling her with excruciating slowness.

The anticipation is driving Anya wild. Her breathing grows ragged as I tease her, inch by agonizing inch. She tries to rock her hips against me, but I hold her firmly in place, refusing to let her take control. I want her to feel every last millisecond of this. Her moans grow louder, more desperate, as I finally sheathe myself completely inside her.

"R-Rolan," she pants out, her eyes clouded with lust and defiance.

I grip her hips tighter and start to move—slowly at first, dragging out each thrust until she's mewling my name. Her legs tighten around my waist, her heels digging into my ass as she tries to urge me on faster.

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Anya's cries of pleasure fill the room, bouncing off the walls and feeding the fire inside me. I pick up the pace, thrusting harder and deeper into her depths, relishing in her tightness and the way she clenches around me. I lower my mouth to her neck again, tasting her skin with my tongue as my hips continue to pound into hers.

"You like it when I'm in control, don't you?" I growl against her ear, my breath hot and heavy. Anya's only response is a low moan, her body trembling against mine. Desperate to feel more of her, I grip the neckline of her dress, tearing it from top to waist in one movement. It bares her breasts to my gaze, and I capture one in my palm, squeezing it.

Her nipples harden in response, and she arches her back, offering herself to me fully. I take it as the admission of defeat it is, slamming my hips into hers even harder.

"Say you're mine," I order, and she is so breathless she almost can't speak.

"Y-Yes," she pants out, her voice shaking with desire and submission. "I'm yours, Rolan." The words seem to unravel something inside me, and I lose what little control I have left. My hand leaves her breast and travels down her stomach, sliding between her thighs to find the slick heat of her arousal.

My thumb rubs against her clit in time with my thrusts. I watch her face as she fights for control. "Whose are you?" I demand.

"Yours," Anya gasps out, her eyes squeezed shut as the first waves of pleasure start to crash over her.

As Anya's orgasm washes over her, I feel it in my very bones. Her pussy clenches around my cock, milking me of every last drop of control. My own release comes in stuttering jerks of my hips as I dump into her every ounce of my energy and strength. She continues to clench and convulse even as I pull out and let her feet fall to the ground. She's breathless, half-naked in a torn dress, and I think I've proven my point.

She wants me and even when she disagrees with my orders, she knows I'm the one who calls the shots.

When it's over, the room is silent. She's still catching her breath when the door swings open without warning. Misha steps inside like he owns the place, eyes skimming the scene without apology. His gaze lands on Anya—naked, flushed, scrambling to pull the sweater together over her chest.

I don't even look at her as he struts toward my desk. He looks at me first, then back at Anya, and his mouth pulls into a smirk. "Looks like I missed the show," he says dryly.

Anya grabs the edge of the table for balance, yanking the sweater over her chest with shaking hands. Her face flushes deeper, but she doesn't speak. Her shoulders tighten.

"Get out of my office," I growl.

"Fine," she says, straightening. "Then listen. I want the authority to stop your men when they act like idiots. The nexttime one of them looks at my son wrong or sneers at me in a hallway, I won't wait for permission. I'll put them on the ground and let them crawl to you to complain."

I look past Misha, finally turning my attention to her. "You're my wife," I say calmly. "That means every man in this house takes orders from you—except me."

Her gaze jumps to mine, startled.

I don't blink. "If you want to protect our son, then stop pretending you're a guest. Act like you belong here. Because whether you want to or not, you do."

I keep my eyes on her as she rushes out while Misha chuckles, and I tuck my dick back into my pants. She will learn eventually, and until then, I'll enjoy teaching her, one sexy lesson at a time.

19

ANYA

It started with a call. I'd just finished brushing Nikolai's hair, coaxing him toward bed, when Batyarang from the apartment. His voice came through the burner phone, panicked and uncertain. He said someone had come to the door that afternoon—a man in a suit with a folder tucked under his arm. Said he was from a solicitor's office. Said he needed my signature for a set of adoption papers Rolan had initiated.

I stood there gripping the phone, not speaking. My father kept talking, muttering that he hadn't let the man in, that he'd told him to come back later when I was home. The rest didn't matter because I had no intention to sign those papers.

My hands were shaking so badly I almost couldn't hold onto the phone, and I hung up without responding and left Nikolai's room in silence. Now, I walk the corridor toward Rolan's suite with every step packed with fury. And when I get there, I don't even knock on the door. I slam it open and storm in, not waiting to be beckoned.

He stands at the window in a black T-shirt and slacks, drink in hand, his shoulders wide and still. The door bounces on the wall behind me as I stalk toward him in anger.



"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I don't wait for a response. I stand my ground, fists clenched and eyes locked on him. Every muscle in my body is braced for the fallout. My hand shakes from more than anger—it's betrayal, disbelief, the icy gut-punch of fear. He's trying to take my son, actually attempting to slither into my life as if he has permission.

He turns without flinching and looks at me over the rim of the glass. "You didn't even have the spine to tell me yourself," I say. "You sent someone to my father's door like I'm just some box you needed to check. A man from a solicitor's office with documents I never asked for and never agreed to. You went behind my back, and you knew exactly what you were doing."

My voice rises, shaking with rage I don't even try to mask. Every syllable tastes bitter. The words drag out like a wound reopening. I'm bleeding emotions everywhere on everything and I don't even care.

He walks toward the window, drink in hand, his body relaxed in a way that makes me want to scream. It's like this entire confrontation is beneath him. Like I'm not a person, just an obstacle he expects to brush aside.

"It's a precaution." His tone is too calm for this. It's like he can't see that I'm so angry or he doesn't care. His calmness only stokes the fire in me.

"Bullshit." I step forward, closing the space between us until the heat of my anger could set fire to the air between us. My voice comes out even, held firm by sheer will, but everything in me strains for release. I'm seconds from breaking.

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"You think this place is safe because I say it is? If something happens to me, his legal guardianship has to be clear." He says it like he's explaining a routine business matter, not something that fractures every piece of my world. His eyes never leave mine. "Everyone in my world must know what belongs to my son, even in my absence."

"You mean your ownership," I scoff. "You don't fucking own him, or me!" I try to maintain some semblance of control, but I can feel my pulse pounding in my ears.

Rolan tilts his head as he looks at me and says, "No. I mean what I said. I am his legal guardian, Anya." He crosses his arms and puffs out his chest in victory, but I'm not done. He's done the math, and I'm just the variable he's waiting to eliminate, and I refuse to be pushed around any longer.

I step toward him, heart slamming against my ribs. "You never even told me. You didn't ask. You just filed papers like I'm nothing. But I gave birth to him," I scream, pounding my chest. "I am his mother. I carried him in my womb. I am his guardian." My voice shakes, but I don't back down. His eyes flicker with amusement, but he keeps his expression blank. I'm not giving him the satisfaction of silence.

"You're a threat to his stability, Anya. You and your precious 'Batya' are going to see my son end up at the bottom of Lake Senezh."

The slap lands before I think. My palm stings, but Rolan doesn't even react. His head barely turns. He just stares at me, unmoved. He doesn't care that I'm shaking or that this is breaking me open. His heart is a fucking block of ice. I don't know why I ever for even a second thought he could be something good for me. He's an evil man.

"You kidnapped him, yousukin syn. You're using him like a pawn." He lifts his glass and drains it, swallowing slowly, and I watch the movement of his throat, the way he sets the glass down with quiet control.

"He's my son," I whimper, realizing my rage is doing nothing. If anger doesn't work, I'm not sure what to do. Rolan can't take him from me. Nikolai is all I have. But he doesn't look away.

He wants me to hear it when he says, "He's my son..." To feel it down to the bone. There's no apology in him even after all of this. I should've never returned to Mytishchi.

"He's mine." I shift my stance, refusing to break the line between us. My spine stays straight, even though my heart wants to curl in on itself.

"He's both." Rolan straightens his shoulders and reaches for me, but I back away one step.

"You don't get to pretend this is about protection. This is control." I fold my arms tightly across my chest, trying to keep my breathing steady. I won't be a name on his paperwork. I won't be a footnote in his legacy.

"It's not about control. It's about what's right. You kept my son from me, and now I will have what belongs to me, whether you like it or not." His voice doesn't rise but there's finality in every word. He's already made the decision for both of us.

"Then what about me?" My breath catches, but I force it out and keep my voice even. I wait, bracing for the lie or the truth—whichever hurts more.

He crosses the room in two long strides and his hands come to my waist, and I knock them away with another slap, harder this time. He recoils half an inch but holds his

ground.

"Don't touch me." I step back quickly, my jaw clenched so tightly I think I might crack a tooth. My fingers tremble, but I hold his gaze. I won't let him handle me again the way he did yesterday. He can't just make me melt because the chemistry is strong. I can't let him get in my head.

He breathes through his nose, eyes narrowing. "You're mine too, whether you like it or not. You became mine the moment you walked into my house and chose to stay because you're his mother." He doesn't move closer again, but it feels like he's shoved me backward. "You're my wife, Anya. You signed those papers of your own free will."

"You can't file away my rights. You can't erase who I am to him." My arms gesture wildly as I speak, and it feels better than hugging them over myself. The plan is already whirring around in my head. I have to get Nikolai out of here.

"I don't want to erase you. I want you to realize that I'm right and you won't win." His tone darkens, a thread of something vicious beneath the surface. His words wrap around me like chains.

"You already forced me to stay and now you want me to sign Nikolai's death warrant?" My jaw shakes as the question comes out and the daggers hit me one by one. That's what is going to happen. Nikolai is going to die. Maybe not today, maybe not for a decade, but if he stays here under Rolan Vetrov's roof and is raised by this violent empire, he will lose his life. It terrifies me. I turn and run out, and all I can think of is getting to Batya's contact now.

The house is dark. I run through the hall without stopping, barefoot on the cold tile. The guards glance up but say nothing. They've learned when to stay out of the way now after only a few simple orders from me.

Nikolai's room is quiet. A single nightlight glows against the wall, casting soft shadows across his face. He's curled in the center of the bed, one hand still clutching the blanket. I shove my feet into my shoes then gather him into my arms. He stirs once but doesn't wake. His head rests against my shoulder, and I keep the blanket around him snugly.

I carry him through the corridor and down the stairs, without a thought to my coat or purse. The phone is in my robe pocket, and despite it being bitterly cold tonight, I don't even pause to think things through. My breath is steady now, cold in my chest because I'm determined not to stay here one more second. And no one stops me, not at the bottom of the stairs, not at the front door. My arms ache, but I don't shift my grip.

The cold air bites my skin as soon as I step out, and when my feet hit the driveway, two guards step in front of me.

"I'm leaving," I say, holding Nikolai close. "Don't make a scene." I lock eyes with them, waiting for one to challenge me, but even then they exchange glances and step away. Rolan's orders to heed my words have worked in my favor.

I keep moving forward and my arms tighten around Nikolai as I pass. He begins to stir, and I press kisses to his forehead as I let the plan form in my mind. I'll call a cab to take me to the contact's address and after that, I will go to the apartment to get the cash. After that, I will run far from here, where Rolan won't ever find me.

I make it halfway down the driveway. The gates rise ahead of me in the darkness. Beyond them, the night is wide and open and I can almost taste freedom. And then I hear Rolan again. His voice cuts through the night like the crack of a whip.

"Anya."

I freeze in place, every muscle clenched. I should run, but I stop. I begin to shiver as I turn and see him approaching quickly. His shirt is rumpled, his expression locked on me, and he's not even running. It's like he knows I won't ever ignore him. I'm so easily read. He knows how terrified I am of him.

"Put him down." He stops a few steps away, not reaching for me, but close enough that I can feel the pressure building. His tone is sharp and unforgiving—one he's never used on me, though I've heard him bark at his men like this.

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"No. We're leaving." I adjust my hold on Nikolai, shielding him with my body. The wind bites against my skin again, but I don't move.

Rolan glares at me without blinking as he steps forward and wraps his arms around my boy. "You want to go? Go. But he stays." I hear the gates hum behind me as Rolan attempts to pull Nikolai from my grasp.

"No," I whimper, holding Nikolai tighter. His small body shifts against me, murmuring in his sleep. I press my cheek to the top of his head. "Please... he's not your hostage." My voice comes out rough, and I speak through clenched teeth as tears well up.

"He's my heir." Rolan squares his shoulders as he pulls harder, wrenching my son from my arms. Nikolai stirs as I sob loudly.

"He's a child." My knees nearly buckle as Rolan steps away and Nikolai wraps his stubby arms around his neck.

"He's my child." He lifts his hand and gestures, and one guard steps forward. The others shift like they're waiting for a signal. I glance at them and whip around, defending my back.

"Don't you fucking touch me," I snap, stepping away with my eyes still on Nikolai. My heart is hammering and the men are advancing.

They don't grab me, but they don't stop, either. One reaches out, murmuring soft reassurances to the boy. Two more guards close in behind. It's like they are going to

tear me limb from limb if I don't leave now.

Nikolai shifts again, lets out a soft sound, but stays asleep. His breath puffs out in clouds of crystalized air as I cover my mouth and stand closer to the man I'm starting to hate more than anything.

"You said you wanted to go," he says. His voice is calm, and he doesn't acknowledge the fury he just unleashed. "You're free to go. But he stays with me."

I glare at him, shaking so hard I think I might fall apart. "You don't get to use him like this." My hands curl uselessly. My breath catches in my chest.

"I'm not using him. I'm keeping him safe. You're free to leave, Anya. Any time you want." He turns and walks away, ending the conversation, and I lunge, reaching for my son. The guards pull me back before I touch him. My fingers claw at the air.

"You bastard." The words tear from my throat, raw and helpless. I want them to hurt him, but he doesn't even turn around. My words won't ever touch his heart. It's made of coal, black as night, potent as rattlesnake venom.

Rolan doesn't look back. Nikolai stays cradled in his arms as he disappears into the house and the door closes behind him.

I scream. I struggle. I use every ounce of strength I have, but it doesn't matter. No one is coming to help. No one can intervene. The only command higher than mine is Rolan's, and he gave it without even uttering a word.

"Let me go, you sick fucks." My hand lashes out and swings, snagging one of them in the face, but as soon as my command is given, they let me go.

I will not leave without my son, but I can't get him back from Rolan tonight. The best



I can hope for is to lie in bed holding him and pray that God gives me a pathway through the wilderness by parting the waters for me the way he did the Israelites in the Red Sea.

If a miracle doesn't happen, Nikolai will be lost to the world of crime forever.

20

ROLAN

It's been a week since Anya tried to take my son and run. Since she walked out onto my driveway with my son in her arms and dared me to stop her. She hasn't tried again, but I'm not foolish enough to think she won't try again the instant I let my guard down.

This morning, she walks the estate like a ghost with unfinished business, passing guards who know better than to speak to her. I let her pace the perimeter every morning without interruption to burn off what's left of her fight, but it hasn't translated to her returning to my bed yet.

The feed from the outer garden plays across the security monitor, blurred slightly in the early light. Anya moves slowly along the gravel path with her arms locked around herself and her posture rigid. She might believe it calms her, but all I see is a woman with rage issues and no way to let go.

I could help her with that if she asked, but I don't go to her. Nothing I offer now will mean anything to her. I know that. I've taken her freedom and reduced it to nothing, and she hates me for it.

Stepan waits behind me, tablet in hand as I watch her pacing, but he's not foolish enough to interrupt my thoughts until I look up at him. "Zharovs have gone quiet," he

tells me cautiously. I've already bitten his head off once this week for distracting me from my thoughts. I didn't mean to crush her. I just needed her to understand what is safe.

He shifts his weight as he speaks, watching my face for any sign of reaction because he's not sure how I'll take it. I keep my eyes on the screen. "Define quiet." The last time things went "quiet", we had one of the barns at the track burned to the ground in a turf war we eventually won, but it cost us dearly.

His expression tells me he knows this isn't good news. "There's been no traffic, no chatter, and none of their usual warehouse check-ins," he replies. His fingers move quickly as he scrolls through the data. "They've gone completely dark, Boss. Just look at it."

He drags up satellite images and flips through timestamps. Their properties haven't changed, but we both know silence can be louder than movement.

I sit back in the chair and glance over the top of the monitor. "Then they're planning something," I say as my mind shifts to the inevitable. They discovered I have a son and they thought they could leverage that the way Pyotr did—the parasite. Who the fuck even knows where he is or what rock he crawled under after starting this war? Now that they can't get to Nikolai, they're looking for a different way in.

I tap one finger against the armrest while considering how fast this could unravel. Waiting always costs more than acting first, but without knowledge of what they're doing, acting first will seem like instigation or escalation. Neither of which is my desire. I just want Nikolai safe and my business protected.

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"We think it's big, Rolan. Could be a hit." He doesn't offer reassurance, only possibilities. "They might attack here or they might go after some other weak asset. The track is only barely breaking even. We've owned it five months now. Maybe they'll hit that?" He stays quiet after that. He's waiting for me to set the pace.

"Double the surveillance on all known Zharov properties. I want eyes on their lieutenants, their trucks, their girlfriends. If someone breathes wrong, I want to see it." The only way we keep this war from becoming a bloodbath is to stay one step ahead of them at all times. I have to know which place they're going and when they'll get there, and I have to know two days ahead of time.

Miss one step and someone dies.

"On it, Boss," Stepan answers. We're going to be stretched thin if this plays out wrong, and I can't afford to lift any security on the estate. Nikolai must be protected at all costs, even if it means pulling men from other assets to assure it.

"And reach out to our contact in the militia. If they want a bribe, pay it. I want early warning on anything rerouting into Mytishchi. No surprises." I rise from the chair with every part of me alert, and Stepan keeps working, head bobbing in acknowledgement as I go.

I leave the feed running and walk toward the parlor where I find Nikolai crouched beside the low table with plastic figures scattered around him. His brow furrows as he divides them, placing one group on each side. I stand at the threshold unnoticed. Gone are my thoughts of Anya as I take in the sight of my son playing make believe in a way I remember all too fondly of my own childhood.

He growls low in his throat and drags one figure sharply. "You told him everything, snitch," he mutters. "Now you get the fingers." He slams the toy down to mimic force.

His voice drops deeper than it should be, imitating what he's heard in rooms he wasn't meant to be in. He's not playing. He's repeating a script that's already lodged into his memory, the reason Anya attacked me. She's not wrong for pointing out that a child his age shouldn't be surrounded by this, but this is the world he lives in. How else will he learn?

Walking into the room, I kneel beside him and lower my voice. "What happened to him?" I ask, watching his hands more than the toys. I don't reach in to adjust anything because I want him to lead the explanation on his own terms.

I match the tone of the game, keeping my presence from overtaking his focus, and he doesn't look at me.

"He got caught. He told the boss," Nikolai says, matter-of-fact. The figure takes another hard hit against the table. He punctuates the story through force. His world has rules, and he's enforcing them, much the same way I enforce mine.

"Which one's the boss?" I ask, pointing toward the cluster of standing figures to give him control of the narrative again. It fascinates me the way a child's mind works, and my son is brilliant.

He lifts a taller figure marked with a red stripe. "That one. He hits harder than the others," he says with a tone that mirrors pride. Then he smiles at me with confidence.

The detail matters to him. It proves that the game has structure, that someone enforces the law. I point to another figure slumped near the edge of the table, away from the others. "And this one?" I ask, keeping my tone casual.

"Traitor," he answers without hesitation, looking back down. His voice doesn't quaver, and his hands are already moving to position another plastic soldier. "He had to pay."

I watch him adjust the figures. He's methodical as he sets them up one at a time before using the red-striped figure to knock them down with exploding sounds coming from his mouth. "Why?" I ask, settling more firmly beside him. I keep my voice level, though now I'm really curious. What goes through a child's mind to make believe something like this?

"Because he tried to hurt Mamochka," Nikolai says. "So he had to die because she has to be safe." I'm shocked by how flat his delivery is, the way my men give orders or the way I dish out retribution. It's chilling that at so young an age, he knows this tone.

He resets the figures into new lines, separating the traitors from the loyal. His face remains focused, eyes fixed on the arrangement like it holds meaning only he understands, and I begin to understand why Anya is so world-shatteringly upset.

I nod. "And what does the boss do to liars?" I don't add anything else because he knows exactly what I mean. I turn my head slightly to watch him for hesitation.

Nikolai knocks over the traitor. "Breaks his hands. Like Stepan did in the back yard." His grip tightens on the toy.

He says it like it's normal and that every child in the world witnesses these things. And one day, it will be a normal part of his life. One day, he will lead my family, my men, my organization into the future with these exact tactics and logic, but today, he's supposed to be a child.

I clench my jaw, but I don't raise my voice. "You saw that?" I look him in the eye and search for anything—fear, confusion, regret—but he gives me none of it.

"He screamed. Then he stopped. Then Stepan told him to suck it up," Nikolai says while lining two more figures beside the boss.

He moves the loyal ones into a tight row with deliberate care, arranging them with the same seriousness I've seen men use in real operations. It's organized and exact, too precise for a game.

I glance toward the hallway and find it empty. There's no sound or movement beyond this room. I look back at him and ask, "You remember all that?" I lower my voice further, not wanting this to be more than it already is. I hope the answer's no, even though I already know what's coming.

He shrugs without looking up. "It was loud," he says. His hands are already building another scene like he's just continuing a task. He isn't upset or confused. He's calm, focused, and completely sure of the logic in front of him. That's what stays with me, and it's what haunts Anya. I can feel it.

"And this one?" I tap the snitch, the smallest figure with no arms, sitting apart from the rest.

"Same. You don't talk if you want to keep your fingers," he says. His attention stays locked on the figures.

I say nothing. I don't correct him. I watch the way he sorts the last few. He has rules. There's an internal logic that makes sense to him. He pits loyalty against betrayal and waits for something to break. As far as my world goes, he's going to reign supreme. As far as his childhood, it might well be over already. I'm not sure what I feel about that.

Behind us, I hear the soft patter of footsteps and turn. Anya stands in the doorway with her hand gripping the frame. She watches the game without blinking. Nikolai

doesn't see her. He's still working and still planning consequences.

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"This one told," he says. "He gets his neck cut." He lifts the toy as if he's proud of the lesson and doesn't realize she's there.

Her expression doesn't change. Her lips press together and her shoulders lock before she steps forward, picks him up, and holds him close. Nikolai doesn't resist. He curls into her with an easy smile and a warm peck on the cheek.

"Mama, Batyawas playing with people with me. We were having fun." He peppers her cheek with more kisses as she glares at me.

"So good, Koyla, but it's time for a bath." Her hatred for me throws daggers through her gaze as I stare after them. Their retreat is hasty, and I can only think of my own mamochka and what she might've thought of me as a child playing such angry, violent games with my toy soldiers. Is that why I am the man I am today?

I watch them go. The boy's hand hooks around her collar. She carries him like she's done it every day of his life. And over her shoulder, he peers at me, wiggling his fingers in a goodbye wave that makes me second-guess every fucking choice I've made for the past eight weeks.

I don't stop her. I don't offer comfort. There's nothing useful left to say.

And I don't follow because what's done can't be unlearned.



The air smells better outside even in the frosty air of late December when we should be decorating for Christmas, which Rolan doesn't seem to remember is a thing. Even the dirt has a cleaner scent, which sounds silly, but it's easier to imagine this place's soil not stained with the blood of Rolan's enemies.

The stables sit past the far hedgerow, past where the guards casually drift just within earshot. I've only seen them from the windows of the track when I worked late shifts until now. Ten days of walking the grounds, of letting my steps trace the same hopeless path, eight weeks of being trapped on the Vetrov estate without seeing my father, and this is the first time I've come here.

Rolan didn't ask me to join him. He told me we were leaving and made me get dressed. Said Nikolai needed to grow up the way he did—around horses, around discipline. I didn't argue because arguing now means less than nothing. My voice doesn't carry weight at all, anyway. Besides, Nikolai loves the horses and he's been cooped up just as long as I have.

Rolan walks ahead with Nikolai perched high on his shoulders. They speak in half-laughs, the kind that make me feel distant like I've been left behind or forgotten, which I know is far from the case. I sleep in Nikolai's bed every night, protecting him the way a mother should. It should make me soft to see them like this, but it doesn't. As much as I understand Nikolai needs a father, I'm still completely opposed to the idea that Rolan even knows what that means.

Inside the barn, the scents of hay and sweat welcome us. The staff nod as we pass. One of the older trainers, a man with wide shoulders and faded tattoos on his neck, leans against the stall rail and lifts his chin at us.

"Vetrov," he says to Rolan. Then he glances at me. "You look like your mother." His voice carries the familiarity of someone who remembers things I don't.

I pause, unsure whether to feel comfortable around this man, uncertain if his memory is something I want to be real. But when he glances back to Rolan, the recognition lands there instead. I freeze for a second, realizing it's not me he's recognizing. It's my son, on the shoulders of the man who used to ride here as a boy. His face holds the kind of half-smirk adults give when the past comes full-circle.

The comment wasn't for me—it was for Nikolai. Because this man is no fool and like everyone I ever tried to hide Nikolai's truth from, he sees it in plain sight.

Rolan keeps walking, distracted by Nikolai pointing at one of the darker colts. I stay behind and meet the older man's eyes with a sudden determination.

"That one's yours?" I ask, nodding toward the colt Nikolai's admiring. The question is more than casual, and the man seems to pick up on that.

"Vetrov's." He jerks his chin toward the horse. "That's the stallion. Fast as hell. Mean too. Won't take the bit from just anyone."

I lean against the wooden stall door, absorbing that. "You run him much?"

"Not now. The ground's starting to freeze, making it unsafe and unforgiving for proper racing. It's not the season for pushing these animals too hard. But the family's putting on a small event this week—something private, just for themselves. It's meant to keep spirits high and the competition sharp, even if there's nothing official about it." He shrugs, like it's all routine, but my interest is piqued a little. I lean in, watching Rolan vanish out the stable door, probably headed to another stable to see more horses.

"What kind of event?" Toeing a bit of straw on the hard earth next to my foot, I try to act casual. I'm not usually one to talk to men I don't know, but anything I can learn about this family to gain leverage against Rolan and get my son back is a good thing.

This man is willing to talk, so I'll listen.

"Two-horse race," he says. "Champion stallion against a new filly we've been training. She's young, but sharp. Smart as hell, that one. If she doesn't spook, she might surprise us."

I glance toward the direction Rolan went, but my mind stays locked on the wordrace. A private, internal competition. No stakes on paper. Nothing formal. A plan starts to formulate in my mind. The filly is a potential favorite to win, and there are things I'd deeply love to win in a wager—like my freedom.

"They do that often?" I ask, again, keeping my tone ultra-casual. To this man, I'm nothing more than Rolan's wife—or object if he knows the ins and outs of the Vetrov estate.

"Now and then. Just for fun. But with that filly? Might be worth watching." He clicks his tongue and winks at me. "Mightrace like you do... Imagining you're as fire in the sack as I've heard."

The comment is degrading but I fake a blush for his sake. I'm already putting the pieces together—a bet Rolan can't ignore and a way out he might just accept.

And for once, the odds might be mine to rig.

I stand and listen to the old pervert a few more moments before I raise my hand to my ear and pretend I hear Rolan. "Did you hear that? I think he's calling me. It was good to catch up... Thank you." I rush away before he can waylay me with more stories of the old track, and as I search the stables, the plan in my head solidifies.

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That night at dinner, I wait until the second course. The lights cast a muted glow across the long table, reflecting faintly in the silverware. The wine, untouched by either of us, sits in crystal glasses that catch the light but offer no warmth. Rolan eats with one hand while the other rests on the table beside his plate, and it feels like if he had a gun, his fingers would be wrapped around the pistol grip.

"I want to make a bet," I say. My fork stays suspended above the plate, hovering with a piece of meat skewered there. I already know this could go badly, but it has to be done. It may be my only chance at getting Niklai away from him once and for all. And I know a Vetrov can never turn away from a wager. It's written in their fucking DNA.

He doesn't glance up. He keeps cutting his food with slow precision, with disinterest in what I'm saying. Once Nikolai had his chicken nuggets and apple slices and left the table, Rolan lost all interest in conversation.

"A real one." I keep my eyes on him, refusing to blink, refusing to let him turn this into another unspoken no. He will listen to me, because if he doesn't, I plan to make him listen—maybe with my feminine wiles. It's been long enough that he's probably aching for release.

He slices into the chicken and shoves a bite into his maw. "Go on." He finally looks up at me with calculation, like he's testing the limits of what I'll ask. He has no clue.

"The filly against your stallion—that private race your stablemaster mentioned. If the filly wins, Nikolai and I go free." My chest rises, but I don't breathe until I finish speaking. When he looks at me, I suddenly feel like this isn't such a great idea. He's a

criminal and a thief, and I'm nothing but a waitress and a failure as a mother.

Rolan's expression doesn't change as he wipes his mouth with the corner of his napkin, considering what I've said. He doesn't rush an answer as he thoughtfully chews his bite of food, but his eyes narrow on me.

"And if mine wins?" His tone is casual, but there's something darker in it, which is what I'm afraid of. But backing out now will look weak.

"Then I stay," I reply. "No more games. I stop trying to leave. I accept the terms and I become your wife in the fullest sense of the word." I rest my hands in my lap to stop them from shaking. I won't show him fear—even though that's what I feel. Terror—horrific, punishing, traumatic terror.

He leans back. "You think that horse will give you a future?" He narrows his eyes further, gauging how far I'm willing to go and whether I understand what I'm offering.

"I think she gives me a chance." My voice is steady, but every word costs me. He doesn't move for a long time. He studies me like I'm a move on a chess board and doing it wrong risks losing everything he has staked a claim to. He knows I'm not his to control, but the greed in his eyes, the hunger for more power, it taunts him.

Rolan sets his fork down. "If you try to run afterward, I keep the boy, and you leave without him—alone." He doesn't blink. The line is drawn in blood, and he wants to see if I flinch.

I don't even know what the fuck I'm doing. Losing a bet to Rolan Vetrov might mean signing my life away forever. I've seen what he almost did to my father, and I remember what I had to do to get that debt paid. This time, there will be no weekend at a hotel to back out. It's all or nothing.

I look him dead in the eye and brace myself as I say, "It's a deal?"

He lifts his glass with a smirking expression and says, "Then train her well." He waits for me to raise my glass but he doesn't get one. I refuse to toast him.

With my hands shaking and my heart galloping faster than that filly, I leave him at the table and go find Nikolai. I press my lips to his hair, pull him on my lap, and tell him a story. But the whole time, my mind is already calculating. I taste the edges of freedom, and I'm not letting it slip this time.

22

ROLAN

The estate doesn't ever truly sleep. Even at dawn, someone's always moving—cleaning tack, washing down the stone, walking the perimeter for security. I stand on the back terrace, where the crunch of boots across gravel echoes through the still air. From this vantage, I watch the yard in its usual silence. It isn't the peace an average homeowner can enjoy, just a measure of controlled atmosphere I can bank on. It's the most a man like me can ever hope for.

Inside, they'll be waking soon. She'll be smoothing the boy's collar or folding his socks, something gentle to distract herself from the fact that she bet her life on a horse—a wager she will come to regret woefully. I already know the race schedule and I've already signed off on the entries. The filly's on the sheet, exactly where Anya wants her. What she doesn't know is that it doesn't really matter. Naive woman.

I head inside quietly, ready to wake the day and see this thing through. The staff step aside as I pass, but I don't acknowledge them because I'm too lost in thought. It can't be so easy, can it? To pin Anya to the ground with her own plan... I almost feel guilty that she's walking into this thinking she has a fighting chance. Almost...

Upstairs, the hallway carries the sounds of childhood. Nikolai's voice—loud, animated—is explaining something, probably to a stuffed animal or the maid. I pause near the door, listening as a smile creeps up. He is so full of life and vigor, the way a child should be. I'll be more careful to instruct my men that our less-seemly business should be handled elsewhere, but in due time, he'll learn the way of the business. For now, he'll be free to be a child.

"She wins if she wants it bad enough," he says.

I nudge the door open just enough to see inside. Nikolai kneels on the rug in front of the hearth where a small fire still crackles, toy horses lined up in a messy parade. He's got two separated from the rest—a black stallion and a smaller chestnut with one leg chipped from overuse. He moves them toward each other with a dramatic pause between thrusts, and the clacking of plastic on plastic makes Anya roll over in bed.

"This one cheats," he mutters, nudging the black horse to block the other. "But she still tries."

The maid sits nearby, folding towels with half her attention on the boy. She hums softly to herself as she stacks the linens neatly, pausing every so often to answer one of Nikolai's questions. Anya yawns and stretches, then props herself up on one elbow, watching her son play with the trace of a smile tugging at her lips. She looks tired, but settled, cocooned in the warmth of the room and the moment.

Nikolai glances up and laughs, holding one of the toy horses to his chest. "This one's brave. Even when she knows she'll lose."

Anya leans down and brushes his hair back gently. "That's called courage, solnyshko. You keep that inside you."

He nods, focused on lining the horses back up. She doesn't say anything else, but her hand stays on his shoulder. Just a light touch, as if to remind herself he's still hers.

I watch from the door with a hint of jealousy in my chest. There's something in the way she looks at him that silences the noise in my head for a moment. Something unguarded, and it cuts deep—makes me want her to look at me like that. But I pull back before she notices me and step away from the door. The hall swallows my footsteps as I leave them to their moment.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

When the house fully wakes, I close myself in the office and make the necessary call. The man I trust most with the track answers on the second ring. He's been my bookie for years, knows when to ask questions and when to shut his mouth.

He clears his throat. "Morning, sir. You've got something for me?"

I settle into the chair behind the desk, resting one arm along the edge as I scan the ledger open beside me. "The race two nights from now. The filly my wife picked—she doesn't win, do we understand?" I'm not being vague because I can't afford to be. Fixing races isn't uncommon, but given the stakes in this one, there can be no slip-ups or mistakes.

He pauses for a breath before responding. "Do you want a margin, or should she be overtaken outright?"

"I don't want any accidents or injuries—nothing that draws blood or raises suspicion. The loss needs to look natural. I want clean and controlled, with the filly missing first place narrowly. My entire family will be watching, Dimitri, so make it look good. We have to work with the jockey."

He exhales slowly, the sound crackling faintly through the receiver. "Understood. I'll make the call. The jockey will get a bonus, but he needs to believe it's just for discretion, nothing else. Right?"

"He'll get what he's owed." I flick the end of a pen against the desk, ticking off the plan in my head. "Just remind him. If she wins, he doesn't get paid."

"He won't win, Boss..."

"She," I correct, letting my tone flatten. "The horse is a she."

"Right—my mistake. She won't win."

I rest the receiver gently on its cradle and lean back in the chair, my hand flat against the wood as I exhale through my nose and let the silence confirm it's done. I lean back and stare at the opposite wall. A small painting of the track hangs there, one of the older ones, back when my father was still putting horses through their paces. I remember watching from the rails as a boy, learning what power meant—how it looked galloping past you in waves of muscle and dirt. That was always the point—control the race, decide the pace. Dictate the outcome.

It's no different now.

And Anya? She doesn't even see the reins in my hand. She thinks she's clever. Thinks her plan is brave. But what she doesn't understand—what she never will—is that I let her set the terms so I could set the ending.

I glance toward the window, where morning light begins to stretch across the lawn. The house is noisy now, the air full of motion. I hear Nikolai's voice again, down the hall somewhere, echoing outward toward me as he protests his schoolwork. He wants the horses and Anya wants his studies done.

Their tug-of-war sounds familiar now, like the rhythm of something almost normal. I listen to it for a moment longer, then push back from the desk and rise. Let her think this game is still hers to play. Let her think she still has room to outmaneuver me. In two nights, all of that ends.

ANYA

The crystal tumbler feels solid in my hand as I pour myself three fingers of Rolan's expensive whiskey. The amber liquid burns down my throat, but not nearly as much as the doubt that settles in my chest like a stone.

Tomorrow night. One race. One chance at freedom.

I should be confident. The filly I chose has good bloodlines, decent odds, and I've seen her run. She's fast, agile, with the kind of heart that wins races when it matters most. But standing here in Rolan's study at half past eleven, watching him review security reports with that cold efficiency he applies to everything else in his life, confidence feels like a luxury I can't afford.

He's too calm. Too controlled. Even for him.

"Having second thoughts?" His voice cuts through the silence without his looking up from his papers. The lamplight catches the sharp angles of his face, the way his dark hair falls across his forehead when he concentrates.

"About the race? No."

"About staying." Now he does look up, and those dark eyes find mine with laser focus. "You could just admit defeat now. Save us both the theatre tomorrow night."

The casual arrogance in his tone makes my jaw clench. "Is that what you think this is? Theatre?"

"Isn't it?" He sets down his pen and leans back in his chair, studying me with the same intensity he might use to evaluate a business proposal. "You and I both know how this ends, Anya. The only question is whether you're going to make it easy or

difficult."

"You seem very certain your horse will win."

"I am." He stands, moving around the desk with that predatory grace that makes my pulse quicken despite everything. "Storm's Fury hasn't lost a race in two years. Your little filly is talented, but she's inexperienced. Green."

"Sometimes, green horses surprise people."

"Sometimes." He stops in front of me, close enough that I can smell his cologne, that expensive blend of cedar and something darker that I've never been able to identify. "But not tomorrow night."

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The certainty in his voice, the absolute conviction, makes something twist uncomfortably in my stomach. "You sound like a man who's already seen the outcome."

"I sound like a man who knows horses. And I know my business." His mouth curves in what might charitably be called a smile. "Did you really think I would stake my son's future on something as unreliable as chance?"

"I thought you would honor our agreement."

"I am honoring it. The terms were clear—if your horse wins, you go free. If mine wins, you stay." He moves closer, and I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. "I never said anything about making it a fair fight."

The words hit me like a physical blow. Not because they're surprising—some part of me has always known he would never let this be truly fair—but because hearing him say it so casually, so matter-of-factly, confirms my worst fears.

"You're going to cheat." It's not a question.

"I'm going to win. There's a difference."

"Not to me."

"Then you're more naive than I thought." The mockery in his voice, the casual cruelty of it, makes my vision blur with rage. "Did you honestly believe you could outplay me? You, who grew up watching your father piss away everything he touched at

poker tables and racetracks? You thought you could somehow outwit a man who's been running games since before you could walk?"

The glass is in my hand before I realize I've picked it up, and then it's flying through the air toward his head.

He ducks, of course. The crystal shatters against the wall behind him in a cascade of amber liquid and glittering shards. The sound is satisfying in a way that makes my teeth ache.

"Feel better?" he asks, straightening his tie as if I've done nothing more interesting than comment on the weather.

"Go to hell."

"Already there, Princess. And I'm taking you with me."

He starts toward me again, and I know I should run, should turn and flee this room, this house, this man who seems determined to own every piece of my soul. Instead, I stand my ground, chin lifted, meeting his gaze with all the defiance I can muster.

"If you're so certain you're leaving," he says, stopping just close enough that I have to crane my neck to look at him, "you should take what you want before you're gone."

The words hit me like a physical force. Because he's right, isn't he? Tomorrow night, I'll watch my horse lose, and the day after that, I'll sign whatever papers he puts in front of me, and then what? Then I'll spend the rest of my life in this house, raising our son, sleeping in a bed down the hall from the man who owns me in every way that means anything.

But tonight? Tonight, I could take something for myself.

I kiss him.

It's not gentle or tentative or any of the things a first kiss should be. It's desperate and angry and full of six years of wanting what I can't have. My hands fist in his shirt, pulling him down to me, and he responds immediately. His arms come around me, one hand tangling in my hair while the other spans my waist, and suddenly, I'm pressed against him from chest to thigh.

He tastes like whiskey and something uniquely him, something that makes my head spin worse than the alcohol. His mouth moves against mine with a hunger that matches my own, taking and giving in equal measure. When his teeth catch my lower lip, I gasp, and he uses the opportunity to deepen the kiss until I'm drowning in the taste of him.

This is madness. This is exactly what he wants, what he's been waiting for since the moment I walked back into his life. But I can't bring myself to care. Not when his hands are mapping the curve of my spine with reverent fingers, not when he's walking me backward until my shoulders hit the wall.

"Anya." My name is a growl against my throat as he presses open-mouthed kisses to the sensitive skin there. His stubble scrapes against my neck, rough and masculine in a way that makes me shiver. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

I can't answer because his mouth is doing things that make coherent thought impossible. His hands are everywhere—tangling in my hair, skimming down my sides, tracing the neckline of my dress with a reverence that makes my breath catch. Each touch is deliberate, calculated to drive me higher.

"Six years," he murmurs against my collarbone, his lips trailing fire across my skin. "Six years I've thought about this. About you. About how you tasted, how you felt beneath me."

"Don't." The word comes out breathless, barely audible. "Don't make this about that weekend."

He pulls back just enough to look at me, and what I see in his eyes makes my chest tight. "What else would it be about?"

"This. Now. Not the past."

His hand comes up to cup my face, thumb tracing the line of my cheekbone with surprising gentleness. "The past is what brought us here."

"The past is what destroyed us."



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"No." His voice is soft, almost tender. "The past is what created us. Created him. Created this." His free hand presses against my lower belly, and I know he's thinking about Nikolai, about the life we made together in that hotel room six years ago.

I want to argue, to tell him he's wrong, but his mouth finds mine again before I can form the words. This kiss is different—slower, deeper, more thorough. He takes his time, mapping every inch of my mouth with his tongue, swallowing the small sounds I can't quite suppress.

His hands are already working at the buttons of my dress, clever fingers making quick work of the fastenings despite the way I'm pressed against the wall. The silk is expensive, probably worth more than I used to make in a month, but neither of us cares as it pools at my feet.

Standing before him in nothing but my undergarments, I should feel exposed, vulnerable. Instead, I feel powerful. The way he's looking at me, like I'm something precious and dangerous all at once, makes me feel like I could conquer armies.

"Beautiful," he breathes, hands skimming over my skin like he's memorizing every inch. His palms are warm, slightly rough from whatever manual work he still does despite his position. "So fucking beautiful."

His shirt is expensive too, Italian silk that probably costs more than most people's rent, but I don't care as I tear at the buttons. Some of them ping against the floor, lost in the shadows, but he helps me, shrugging out of the fabric and letting it fall beside my dress.

In the lamplight, his skin is golden, marked with scars that tell stories I don't know but can guess at. There's a tattoo over his heart—Cyrillic script in elegant black ink. Another spans his ribs, and I can see the edge of something larger disappearing beneath his trousers.

"What does it say?" I ask, tracing the letters over his heart with one finger.

His hand covers mine, pressing my palm flat against his chest where I can feel his heartbeat, strong and rapid. "????? ??????? ??????."

Family above all. Of course it does.

"Is that why you're doing this? Taking Nikolai, forcing me to stay?"

"Partly." His other hand slides up my back, finding the clasp of my bra with practiced ease. "But not entirely."

The lace joins the growing pile of clothing on the floor, and then his mouth is on my breast, tongue swirling around the peak until I arch against him with a sound that's half gasp, half moan. He's thorough, patient in a way that makes me want to scream. Every touch is calculated to drive me higher, to make me need him more.

His teeth graze my nipple, just hard enough to make me cry out, and then he soothes the sting with his tongue. The sensation shoots straight through me, making my knees weak and my core clench with want.

"Rolan." His name is a plea, a demand, a prayer all at once.

"Tell me what you want, Anya."

The words stick in my throat. What I want is complicated, dangerous, wrapped up in

years of hurt and longing and fear. What I want is him, but also freedom. Safety for my son, but also this fire that burns between us. I want things that contradict each other, that can't coexist in the same reality.

"You," I finally manage. "I want you."

It's not enough. I can see it in his eyes, the way he's waiting for more. He wants my complete surrender, wants me to admit that this is about more than just physical need. But I can't give him that. Not when I don't even understand it myself.

Instead, I reach for his belt, working the leather free with hands that aren't quite steady. The metal buckle is cool against my fingers, a sharp contrast to the heat radiating from his skin. He lets me work, watching my face as I fumble with the fastenings, and when I finally free him from the confines of his trousers, the sound he makes is purely male satisfaction.

He's beautiful naked, all lean muscle and controlled power. The scars that mark his torso tell stories of violence, of a life lived on the edge of danger, but they don't detract from his appeal. If anything, they make him more compelling, more real. More mine, though I'll never say that aloud.

When he lifts me, I wrap my legs around his waist instinctively. The wall is cool against my back, exquisite compared to the heat of his body pressed against mine. My remaining underwear—a scrap of silk that probably cost more than my old car—disappears with one sharp tug of his hand.

He pauses then, forehead resting against mine, and for a moment we just breathe together. I can feel him against me, hard and ready, but he doesn't move, doesn't take what I'm so clearly offering.

"Last chance," he says, voice rough with want. "If you're going to change your mind,

do it now."

The gentleness in his tone undoes me more than any demand could have. This is him giving me a choice, even now, even when we're both too far gone to think clearly. Even when he holds all the cards and I have nothing left to bargain with.

"I'm not changing my mind."

He enters me slowly, carefully, watching my face for any sign of discomfort. There's none, only the exquisite sensation of being filled, completed, claimed in the most fundamental way possible. I've forgotten how it feels to be stretched this way, to accommodate someone so perfectly suited to my body.

"Christ, Anya." His voice is strained, like he's barely holding onto control. "You feel incredible. Perfect."

I can't form words, can only hold onto his shoulders as he begins to move. Each thrust is deliberate, controlled, designed to drive me higher while he maintains that maddening restraint. The wall behind me provides leverage, and I use it, meeting him stroke for stroke until we find a rhythm that makes stars explode behind my closed eyes.

His mouth finds my throat, teeth scraping against the sensitive skin there. I know he's marking me, claiming me in a way that will be visible tomorrow, but I can't bring myself to care. Not when every nerve ending in my body is singing, not when he's hitting that spot inside me that makes coherent thought impossible.

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"More," I gasp against his ear, and he responds by changing the angle, driving deeper, harder, until I'm sobbing his name like a prayer.

One of his hands slides between us, fingers finding the swollen bundle of nerves where we're joined. The touch is electric, sending shockwaves through my entire system. I'm close, so close I can taste it, but he won't let me fall. Every time I near the edge, he pulls back, changing pace or angle until the sensation ebbs just enough to keep me hanging.

"Please," I whisper, and the word tastes like surrender on my tongue.

"Please what?" His voice is dark velvet, rough with his own need but still controlled enough to torment me.

"Please let me come."

"Not yet." His thumb circles that sensitive spot, light as a feather, maddening in its restraint. "I want to feel you break apart, want to watch you lose control completely."

He shifts again, lifting me higher against the wall, and the new position lets him go deeper than before. I cry out, overwhelmed by the sensation, by the way he fills every inch of me. His mouth crashes against mine, swallowing my sounds, drinking them like wine.

This isn't gentle lovemaking. This is something rawer, more primal. Six years of want and denial and frustrated desire poured into every kiss, every touch, every breathless gasp. When his thumb presses down on my clit at the same time he drives into me, I

shatter.

The orgasm tears through me like lightning, making me arch against him with a cry that echoes off the walls of his study. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me, each one more intense than the last, until I'm boneless in his arms, trembling with the aftershocks.

He follows me over the edge, his release wrung from him with a sound that's half curse, half prayer. I feel him pulse inside me, hot and claiming, marking me as his in the most primitive way possible.

For long moments, we stay like that, pressed together against the wall, breathing hard and trembling. His face is buried in my neck, and I can feel his lips moving against my skin, forming words I can't quite make out.

Eventually, he sets me down, but he doesn't step away. Instead, he gathers me against his chest, one hand stroking my hair while the other traces patterns on my bare back. It's unexpectedly tender, this aftermath, and I find myself relaxing into his embrace despite everything.

"Come to bed," he murmurs against my hair.

I should say no, should gather my clothes and return to my own room, put distance between us and pretend this never happened. But I don't want to. For the first time in years, I feel sated, peaceful in a way that has nothing to do with the physical release and everything to do with the man holding me.

So I nod and let him lead me from his study to his bedroom, our clothes forgotten on the floor behind us.

His bed is massive, covered in sheets made of Egyptian cotton, soft as silk against my

skin when he pulls back the covers and waits for me to slide in. He joins me a moment later, and then I'm surrounded by his warmth, his scent, the solid reassurance of his presence.

"I won't beg to stay," I tell him, because I need him to know this hasn't changed anything. Not really. Tomorrow night, I'll still watch that race with hope in my heart. I'll still believe, however foolishly, that freedom is possible.

"You won't get the chance," he replies, but there's no mockery in it this time. Just quiet certainty, and something that might be regret.

I want to argue, to tell him he's wrong, that tomorrow night changes everything. But the words won't come. Maybe because I'm not sure I believe them anymore. Maybe because, lying here in his arms, freedom seems less important than it did an hour ago.

Sleep takes me gradually, and with it come the dreams. Not the nightmares that have plagued me for years, but memories. Six years ago, in a hotel room that smelled like expensive whiskey and desperation. His hands on my skin, gentle despite the circumstances that brought us together. The way he'd looked at me afterward, like I was something precious he'd never expected to find.

I'd told myself it was just sex, just a transaction to save my father's life. But that was a lie, wasn't it? If it had been just sex, just a cold business arrangement, I would never have agreed to it. No matter how desperate I was, no matter how much danger Batyawas in, I would have found another way.

But I'd wanted him. Even then, even under those circumstances, I'd wanted Rolan Vetrov with a hunger that terrified me. The memory comes back in vivid detail—the way he'd touched me like I was made of glass, the way he'd whispered my name in awestruck worship, the way he'd held me afterward when he thought I was asleep.

And now, six years later, curled against his chest in his bed, I can finally admit the truth to myself. I'd wanted him then. I want him now. And tomorrow night, when my horse loses and my last hope of freedom dies with it, I'll still want him.

Maybe that's enough. Maybe wanting someone, being wanted in return with this kind of intensity, is more than most people ever get.

Or maybe I'm just trying to make peace with a choice that was never really mine to make.

Either way, wrapped in his arms with his heartbeat steady beneath my ear, I sleep more peacefully than I have in years. And if my dreams are full of hotel rooms and desperate bargains and the taste of whiskey on a stranger's lips who became something more, well, that's between me and the darkness behind my closed eyes.

In my dreams, I'm twenty-two again, and he's offering me that same terrible bargain. But this time, when I say yes, it's not just to save my father. It's because I want to know what it feels like to be claimed by a man like Rolan Vetrov. It's because I want to see if the darkness in his eyes matches the darkness in my own soul.

And when I wake tomorrow, I'll pretend I don't remember dreaming at all.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

I had to pry myself out of bed after last night, after she lay with me, her skin soft beneath my hands even hours later. I've been awake since dawn, standing at the window of my study, watching the security patrols cycle through their endless rotations while her scent lingers on my clothes, my sheets, my fucking soul.

Last night changed something. Not just the obvious—the way she came apart in my arms, the way she whispered my name when I buried myself inside her—but something deeper. Something that makes my chest tight when I remember how she looked after, curled against me like she belonged there, like she'd finally found her way home.

She hasn't ever belonged to me. Not the way I've told myself she has, not the way I've convinced everyone else she does. But last night, for those few hours between midnight and dawn, she was mine completely. No games, no manipulation, no carefully orchestrated moves designed to keep her here against her will. Just her choice, raw and honest and devastating in its simplicity.

And tonight, I'm going to destroy that.

The irony tastes bitter as yesterday's coffee. I've spent months maneuvering her into position, setting up the perfect scenario to keep her and Nikolai exactly where I want them. The illusion of hope—designed to give her something to lose so that the fear of losing it would break her just enough to make her stay.

But she's already staying, isn't she? Not because she has to, not because I've trapped her here, but because some part of her wants to. I saw it in her eyes last night, the moment she realized she didn't actually want to leave. The moment she understood

that her fear isn't about being trapped here—it's about what staying here means for our son.

Smart woman. Smarter than I gave her credit for.

Nikolai is the real prize, of course. Always has been. My heir, my legacy, the one person in this world who carries my blood without carrying my sins. Yet. But keeping him means keeping her, and keeping her means accepting that she'll never forgive me for the things I've done to make it happen.

Small price to pay. Or so I tell myself.

The day drags on, and the track is silent when we arrive, closed to the public as promised. Only essential staff and a handful of carefully chosen guests—Misha, a few loyal lieutenants, the kind of men who understand the importance of witnessing moments like this. The floodlights cast everything in stark white relief, turning the dirt oval into something that looks more like an arena than a racetrack.

I take my seat in the private viewing box, the same spot I've watched a thousand races from, but tonight feels different. Tonight feels final.

Anya and Nikolai arrive in silence, crossing the concrete walkway with the measured pace of condemned prisoners. She's dressed simply—dark jeans, a black sweater that makes her skin look pale as moonlight, boots that are practical rather than fashionable. Her hair is pulled back severely, no makeup, no attempt to make herself appealing. She looks like a woman who's already accepted defeat.

Nikolai, by contrast, is practically vibrating with excitement. The Vetrov cap I gave him yesterday is too big for his head, the brim falling down over his eyes every few steps, but he keeps pushing it up and grinning. His small hand is wrapped around hers, and I can see him chattering away even from this distance, though the words are

lost in the evening air.

My son. Five years old and already showing signs of the Vetrov charm, the easy confidence that comes from knowing you're important, that people pay attention when you speak. He has my eyes, my stubborn chin, but Anya's smile, her laugh, her capacity for joy even in the darkest circumstances.

He deserves better than this. Better than a father who rigs races and manipulates the people he claims to love. Better than a legacy built on blood and betrayal and the kind of compromises that eat away at your soul one decision at a time.

But better isn't what I'm offering. Better isn't what the Vetrov name provides. What I'm offering is power, protection, the kind of security that comes from being feared rather than loved. It's what my father offered me, what his father offered him, stretching back through generations of men who chose strength over sentiment every single time.

They take their seats across the track, in the general viewing area rather than joining me in the private box. Anya's choice, obviously. Even now, even after last night, she's maintaining distance. Brilliant woman. Smarter than I deserve.

The horses are brought out for the parade, and I watch Nikolai's face light up as they pass. Storm's Fury looks magnificent under the lights, all power and controlled aggression, the kind of animal that was born to win. The filly—Dancing Queen, her papers say, though Anya calls hersomething else—is smaller, more delicate, but there's fire in her eyes that reminds me of her owner.

Under different circumstances, it might actually be an interesting race. The filly has speed, heart, the kind of determination that sometimes overcomes superior breeding and training. Sometimes. But not tonight. Tonight, her jockey has very specific instructions about how this ends, and fifty thousand rubles in his pocket to make sure

he follows them.

The starting gates clang open, and they're off.

Storm's Fury pulls ahead early, as expected. He's always been a front-runner, likes to set the pace and dare the others to catch him. The filly settles into third place, patient, waiting for her moment. I find myself watching Anya more than the race, studying her profile as she leans forward slightly, hands clasped in her lap.

She believes. Despite everything, despite the impossibility of the situation, she still believes her horse can win. The faith in her expression is heartbreaking and beautiful and makes me feel like the bastard I've always known myself to be.

Halfway through the race, Dancing Queen makes her move. She swings wide around the final turn, closing ground with every stride, and for a moment—just a moment—I think she might actually do it. Might actually overcome the odds and the bribes and the carefully orchestrated outcome I've arranged.

But then her jockey does what he's paid to do. Nothing dramatic, nothing obvious to the casual observer. Just a slight easing of pressure on the reins, a subtle shift in position that breaks her rhythm. She falters, just for a heartbeat, but it's enough. Storm's Fury crosses the finish line two lengths ahead, victorious once again.

The results post immediately. Official. Final. Irrevocable.

I turn to look at Anya, expecting tears, expecting anger, expecting some kind of reaction that will make me feel justified in what I've done. Instead, she simply nods once, like she's confirming something she already knew. Then she bends down, picks up Nikolai, and starts walking toward the car.

She doesn't look at me, doesn't look at anyone, just gathers our son in her arms and

walks away with the kind of dignity that makes my throat tight with something I refuse to acknowledge as guilt.

I let her go. What else can I do? Follow her? Gloat? Explain that this was always how it was going to end, that her hope was just another weapon I used against her? The victory feels hollow already, meaningless in the face of her quiet acceptance.

The ride back to the estate stretches endlessly. Anya sits next to me, staring out the window at the darkened countryside, silent as stone. Between us, Nikolai chatters away about the horses, the race, the excitement of staying up past his bedtime to watch grown-up things happen.

"Did you see how fast they ran, Batya? Did you see Dancing Queen almost catch up? She was so brave, wasn't she? Even though she didn't win, she was still brave."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

Batya. The word hits me like a physical blow every time he says it. Three months ago, he didn't know I existed. Now I'm Batya, the man who gives him rides on my shoulders and teaches him about horses and reads him stories before bed. The man who just destroyed his mother's last hope of freedom to keep him close.

"She was very brave," I agree, catching his eyes as he grins at me. "Sometimes, being brave is more important than winning."

"Is that why Mama isn't sad? Because Dancing Queen was brave?"

Out of the mouths of babes. I glance at Anya, but she doesn't react, doesn't acknowledge that she's listening to this conversation at all. Her reflection in the window looks like a ghost, pale and ethereal and already half gone.

"Your mama understands that some things are more important than winning races," I say carefully.

"Like what?"

"Like family. Like keeping the people you love safe and close." The words come easier than they should, familiar phrases that have been drilled into me since childhood. "Blood loyalty is stronger than anything else in this world, Nikolai. Stronger than money, stronger than power, stronger than any promise anyone might make to you."

My father's words, delivered in his voice, with his absolute conviction. Sergei Vetrov built an empire on those principles, raised his children to believe that family came

before everything else, that betraying blood was the one unforgivable sin. He was a hard man, a cruel man in many ways, but his loyalty to his own was absolute.

I believed him then. I believe him now. But watching Anya's reflection in the window, seeing the way she's already disappearing from me even though she's sitting three feet away, I wonder if there's something missing from that philosophy. Something my father never taught me because he never learned it himself.

"What about love?" Nikolai asks, and the question stops my heart.

"What about it?"

"Is love stronger than family?"

Before I can answer, Anya finally speaks, her voice soft but carrying clearly in the confined space of the car. "Love is family, sweetheart. The best kind of family is built on love, not just blood."

She's looking at our son with quiet strength, her expression gentle in a way that makes my chest ache. This is the mother he knows, the woman who raised him for the first five years of his life with nothing but her own strength and determination. The woman I took him from because I was too proud, too selfish, too convinced of my own righteousness to consider any solution that didn't end with complete victory.

"But Batya says blood is stronger than anything," Nikolai says, confusion clear in his young voice.

"Your batya is right about many things," Anya replies, still not looking at me. "But sometimes, there are different kinds of strength. Sometimes, the strongest thing you can do is let someone go because you love them."

The words hit their target with surgical precision. She's not talking to Nikolai anymore—she's talking to me, delivering a message wrapped in the kind of gentle wisdom that makes it impossible to argue against. Letting me know that she understands exactly what happened tonight, exactly what it means, and exactly how she feels about it.

I want to defend myself, to explain that everything I've done has been for him, for us, for the family we could be if she would just stop fighting me. I want to tell her that love without power is meaningless, that protection requires control, that keeping them safe means keeping them close no matter what the cost.

But the words stick in my throat, trapped by the memory of how she felt in my arms last night, how she looked at me like I was something more than the sum of my sins. For a few hours, I was just Rolan, not the Pakhan-in-waiting, not the man who owns everything and everyone around him. Just a man who wanted a woman desperately enough to risk everything for her.

And now I've thrown that away for the sake of principles that taste like ash in my mouth.

The estate gates come into view, wrought iron and stone that represent everything I've inherited and everything I'll pass down to my son. Security, stability, the kind of power that ensures no one can hurt the people I claim as mine. It should feel like coming home. Instead, it feels like returning to a beautifully appointed prison.

Nikolai falls asleep somewhere between the gates and the front door, exhausted by excitement and the late hour. I carry him upstairs while Anya follows silently behind, and together we put him to bed in the room that's become his over the past few months. His room, in my house, surrounded by toys I've bought him and books I've read to him and all the trappings of the life I'm determined to give him.



She kisses his forehead and whispers something I can't hear, then straightens and finally looks at me directly for the first time since the race ended.

"Thank you," she says, and the words are like a knife between my ribs.

"For what?"

"For letting me say goodnight..."

Before I can respond, before I can tell her that this isn't goodbye, that this is just the beginning of something different, she's gone. Walking down the hallway toward her room, leaving me standing in my son's doorway with the taste of victory turning to poison in my mouth.

I've won. The race, the bet, the war of wills that's been raging between us since the moment she walked back into my life. She'll stay now, sign whatever papers I put in front of her, play the role of dutiful wife and devoted mother. Nikolai will grow up as a Vetrov, learn the family business, inherit everything I've built and everything that was built before me.

Everything I wanted. Everything I fought for. Everything I was willing to destroy her to achieve.

So why does it feel like I've lost the only thing that actually mattered?

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

In the silence of the estate, with my son sleeping peacefully in his bed and my wife—because she is my wife now, whether she wants to admit it or not—locked away in her room like a bird in a gilded cage, I finally understand what my father never taught me.

There's a difference between loyalty born of love and loyalty born of fear. There's a difference between choosing to stay and being unable to leave. There's a difference between winning someone's heart and simply outlasting their resistance.

But understanding comes too late, as it always does. The damage is done, the choice is made, the future is set in stone. Tomorrow, Anya will sign the papers. Tomorrow, we'll make this arrangement official and permanent. Tomorrow, I'll have everything I thought I wanted.

And I'll spend the rest of my life wondering what might have happened if I'd been brave enough—like a little filly named Dancing Queen—to take the risk of actually losing.

25

ANYA

The clock on the nightstand reads 5:47 a.m. when I finally make my decision. I haven't slept a wink, and fatigue pulls at my eyes, but it's time. The estate lies wrapped in that peculiar stillness that comes just before dawn—when even the guards grow complacent and the shadows provide perfect cover for someone desperate enough to use them.

I've been awake all night, my mind churning through possibilities, contingencies, escape routes. Every creak of the old mansion, every footstep in the corridor outside has made my heart race. But now, with pale light beginning to seep through the heavy curtains, I know it's time.

Nikolai sleeps peacefully in the room next to mine, his tiny chest rising and falling in that rhythm that has become the soundtrack to my existence. He doesn't know that today, everything changes. He doesn't know that his mother is about to risk everything on a gamble that could either save us both or destroy us completely.

I dress quickly in the black clothes I'd laid out hours ago—dark jeans, a black sweater, soft-soled boots that won't echo on the marble floors. My hands shake as I zip up the front of my jacket, creating a secure pouch against my chest. When I lift Nikolai from his bed, he barely stirs, just nestles closer to my warmth with that complete trust that breaks my heart and strengthens my resolve simultaneously.

"We're going home, little one," I whisper against his soft hair. "Mama's going to get us out of here."

The hallway stretches before me like a gauntlet. Every shadow could hide a guard, every corner could conceal someone who would drag me back to that gilded prison. But I've studied the patterns, memorized the rotations. The night shift changes at six, and for exactly twelve minutes, there's a gap in coverage near the service quarters.

My feet make no sound on the cold marble as I creep through the mansion's bowels. Past the kitchen where the morning staff won't arrive for another hour. Past the butler's pantry with its endless rows of crystal and China that probably cost more than most people make in a year. Past the portraits of long-dead Vetrovs whose painted eyes seem to follow my desperate flight.

The laundry corridor appears ahead, exactly as I'd scouted it during my supervised

walks. Industrial washers line one wall, their chrome surfaces gleaming dully in the emergency lighting. The air smells of bleach and industrial detergent—clean, sterile, nothing like the warm scent of the small laundromat near my old apartment where I used to take Nikolai in his stroller, where other mothers would coo over him and ask about his father with kind eyes.

I push away the memory. That life is gone, burned away by bullets and blood and choices I never wanted to make. But maybe... maybe we can build something new from the ashes.

The stolen key card feels impossibly heavy in my sweaty palm. I'd lifted it from the housekeeping supervisor three days ago when she'd been distracted by a spilled tray of linens. Such a small thing, a rectangle of plastic, but it represents everything—freedom, hope, the chance to give my son a life that isn't defined by violence and fear.

The rear gate's electronic lock clicks softly as the card slides through the reader. For a moment, nothing happens, and my heart stops. Then the mechanism disengages with a quiet hum, and cool morning air kisses my face.

I'm outside.

The realization hits me like a physical blow. For the first time in months, there are no walls containing me, no armed men tracking my every movement. The sky above is the soft gray-pink of early dawn, and somewhere in the distance, I can hear the first birds beginning their morning songs. Normal sounds. Free sounds.

Nikolai shifts against my chest, making the small, contented noise he makes when he's dreaming. I adjust his blanket and start moving toward the outer wall. Twenty yards. That's all that stands between us and the outside world. Twenty yards to the identities that await us thanks to Batya's contact. Twenty yards to a new life.

I'm through the gate and halfway across the courtyard when the sound of screeching tires shatters the morning silence.

My blood turns to ice. They found us. Somehow, despite all my planning, all my careful timing, they found us. I freeze like a deer in headlights, my mind screaming at my legs to move, to run, to do something other than stand here like a statue waiting for capture.

But when the black SUV slides to a stop in front of me, kicking up gravel and dust, the men who emerge aren't wearing Vetrov colors. They're strangers—three of them, dressed in tactical gear that looks military-grade. Their weapons are drawn before their feet hit the ground.

They're shouting in Russian, but the accents are wrong. Not Moscow Russian like Rolan's men speak, but something harder, more guttural. Eastern European, maybe, or Balkan. The words blur together in my terror, but their intent is crystal clear.

The tallest one reaches me first. His face is scarred, one eye milky with an old injury, and when he grabs my arm, his grip is iron-strong and merciless.

"Please," I gasp in English, then switch to my broken Russian. "Please, don't hurt my baby?—"

He backhands me casually, almost dismissively, and I taste blood. The impact sends me stumbling, but I clutch Nikolai tighter, turning my body to shield him from whatever comes next.

That's when the second man moves. Younger than the first, with dead eyes and hands that move with practiced efficiency. He doesn't hesitate, doesn't show even a flicker of conscience as he reaches for my son.

"No!" The scream tears from my throat as raw and primal as any sound I've ever made. "NO!"

But he's stronger than me, and I'm already off-balance from the blow. His fingers dig into my arms as he pries them apart, and I feel Nikolai's weight leaving my chest like my heart being ripped from my body.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

My baby wakes as strange hands lift him, his face scrunching up in that way that means he's about to cry. The sound he makes—confused, frightened, looking for his mother—drives me past reason, past sanity, past anything resembling rational thought.

I launch myself at the man holding my son, claws extended, teeth bared like some feral thing. I rake my nails down his cheek, drawing blood, and he curses in that harsh language as he tries to hold Nikolai away from my desperate reach.

"Give him back!" I shriek, pounding my fists against his chest, his arms, anywhere I can reach. "He's mine! Give him back!"

The third man moves then, and the butt of his rifle catches me in the stomach. The air leaves my lungs in a whoosh, and I double over, gasping, but I don't stop fighting. Can't stop. Won't stop while they have my baby.

I grab for the gun, for anything, my vision tunneling until all I can see is Nikolai's face growing smaller as they carry him toward their vehicle. He's crying now, that heart-wrenching wail that calls to every maternal instinct I possess.

"Mamochka!"

Another blow sends me to my knees, gravel biting through my jeans to tear at my skin. Blood fills my mouth, warm and metallic, but I keep crawling toward them, keep reaching for my son even as my body betrays me.

"Nikolai!" His name comes out broken, desperate. "Nikolai, Mama's here!"

Mama's?—"

A boot connects with my ribs, and something cracks. The world tilts sideways, colors bleeding together like a watercolor left in the rain. But even as I fall, even as my vision starts to go dark around the edges, I can hear him crying, "Mamochka!"

They're at their vehicle now, one of them climbing into the driver's seat while the other two handle my son like he's cargo instead of a tiny human being who needs his mother. The engine roars to life, drowning out everything else.

"Please," I whisper, not even sure if the words make it past my lips. "Please don't take him. Please."

But they're already moving, tires spinning on loose gravel as they accelerate toward the road. I try to push myself up, try to run after them, but my body won't obey. My arms shake and give out, sending me face-first into the dirt.

The last thing I see clearly is the SUV's taillights disappearing around the bend, taking my entire world with them.

After that, time becomes fluid, meaningless. I might scream—probably do scream—but the sounds feel like they're coming from someone else. My throat is raw, my voice gone, but the keening continues, rising from some place so deep inside me that I didn't know it existed.

Hands touch me eventually. Gentler hands than the ones that took my baby, but I fight them anyway because nothing in this world is safe anymore. Nothing is sacred. They took my son. They took my son, and I couldn't stop them.

Voices swim in and out of focus. Russian voices, familiar accents this time. Vetrov security, probably, drawn by the commotion. Too late, as always. Too fucking late.



Someone's asking me questions, demanding answers I don't have. Who were they? What did they want? How did they know? It's Rolan. He wants answers I don't have.

I want to laugh at the absurdity of it. How did they know? How does anyone know anything in this world of shadows and secrets and blood money? Maybe they were rival family members. Maybe they were mercenaries hired by enemies I don't even know I have. Maybe they were just opportunistic monsters who saw a woman with a baby and decided to take what they wanted.

It doesn't matter. None of it matters because they have him, and I failed.

I failed my son. I failed the one person in this world who depended on me completely, who trusted me to keep him safe. I was supposed to protect him, and instead, I led him straight into danger with my desperate gamble for freedom.

The medic—because apparently, someone called a medic—keeps trying to clean the blood from my face, but I pull away. I don't want to be fixed. I don't want to be patched up and made presentable. I want to hurt. I want to bleed. I want the outside to match the devastation inside.

But they persist, professional in their efficiency, treating me like a broken doll that needs repairing. Gauze and antiseptic. Ice for the swelling. Something sharp being pulled from my cheek—glass, maybe, from when I fell.

Through it all, one thought keeps circling through my damaged mind like a prayer or a curse. I will find him. No matter what it takes, no matter who I have to become, no matter what lines I have to cross—I will find my son.

The old Anya might have been helpless, might have curled up in a corner and waited for someone else to save her. But that woman died the moment those strangers put their hands on my boy. What's left is something harder, something with sharp edges

and no remaining innocence.

They want to play games with people's lives? They want to treat children like pawns?

Fine.

But they picked the wrong mother to fuck with.

26

ROLAN

I'm reviewing security footage in my office when the screaming starts.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

The sound cuts through the reinforced glass, through the thick walls, through everything I've built to keep the world out. It's primal—desperate. The kind of sound that makes your blood turn to ice before your mind even processes what you're hearing.

I know that voice. I know it better than my own heartbeat.

I'm moving before the first guard bursts through my door, before the radio chatter explodes across every frequency, before my phone starts buzzing with calls I don't have time to answer. The hallway blurs past me as I sprint toward the sound, my dress shoes echoing against marble that suddenly feels too pristine, too clean for whatever hell is waiting outside.

The screaming stops.

That's worse than the noise. The silence is a void that swallows everything—my breath, my thoughts, my carefully constructed control. I hit the south doors at full speed, shouldering through the reinforced steel like it's paper.

The scene unfolds in slow motion and lightning speed all at once. My men are scattered across the courtyard like toys, some speaking frantically into radios, others running toward the perimeter. Tire tracks scar the gravel near the south gate, deep gouges that tell a story I don't want to read.

And there, crumpled against the stone wall like a broken doll, is Anya.

Blood. So much blood it turns my vision red at the edges. It streaks from her temple

down her neck, soaking into the fabric of her dark shirt. Mud cakes her arms, her legs, her face. She's not screaming anymore because she can barely breathe.

I'm across the courtyard before my mind even registers the cold. Stepan and three others spill out behind me, but their voices fade to white noise. Everything fades except her.

I drop to my knees beside her, the gravel biting through my pants. My hands find her shoulders and I shake her—not gently, not like the fragile thing she looks like right now. Hard enough to bring her back from wherever the pain has taken her.

"Anya." Her name tears out of my throat like broken glass. "Look at me."

Her eyes flutter open, unfocused and glassy. Blood has pooled at the corner of her mouth. When she tries to speak, nothing comes out but a whisper of air.

"Where is he?" The words explode from me with enough force to make her flinch. "Where is Nikolai? What happened? Who took him?"

She blinks, trying to focus on my face. Her lips move but no sound emerges. I lean closer, close enough to smell the copper tang of blood mixed with her fear.

"They—" The word is barely a breath. "Three men. Black SUV. They—" Her voice breaks entirely.

Three men. Black SUV. The information burns through my brain like acid, but it's not enough. Not nearly enough.

"Which direction?" I'm shaking her again, harder this time. "Anya, which fucking direction?"

She lifts one trembling hand and points east, toward the main road. Toward a thousand possible routes out of the city, out of the country, out of my reach.

"Stepan!" My voice carries across the courtyard like a gunshot. "Get Dr. Isaev here now. And I want every camera, every tracker, every fucking piece of surveillance equipment we have online in the next sixty seconds."

I slide my arms under Anya's body and lift her off the ground. She weighs nothing. She's always been small, but now she feels like she might dissolve entirely if I'm not careful. Her head lolls against my shoulder, leaving a dark smear on my shirt.

The back door of my medic's SUV is already open and he hovers over me as I carry her. I lay her across the leather seats as gently as I can manage with rage coursing through my veins like poison. Her shirt rides up, revealing more cuts, more bruises. Someone put their hands on her. Someone hurt what's mine.

"Take her to the infirmary," I tell my medic without looking at him. "Don't stop for anything. Not traffic, not police, not the fucking apocalypse. Get her to Dr. Isaev and keep her alive."

The door slams shut and the SUV peels out, carrying away the only person who might have answers I need. But I can't wait for her to recover. I can't wait for information to trickle in through proper channels.

My son is out there. My son is in the hands of animals who had the balls to come onto my property, hurt his mother, and steal what belongs to me.

I turn to face my captain of the guard, and the fury must show on my face because he actually takes a step back.

"Full lockdown," I snarl. "Every road in and out of the city. Every airport, train

station, bus depot. Every contact we have in Moscow PD, FSB, border patrol—I want them all activated right fucking now."

"Sir, it's been less than five minutes since?—"

"I don't care if it's been five seconds!" The words roar out of my mouth as an echo that bounces off the estate walls. "My son is missing and every second you waste talking is another second those bastards get farther away. Move!"

He's already pulling out his radio, barking orders to teams across the city. Good. But it's not enough.

I stride to the weapons locker built into the side of my garage. My hands shake—actually shake—as I punch in the code. Inside, lined up like soldiers, are enough firearms to outfit a small army. I grab my Kalashnikov, the one I've used for wet work since I was barely older than Nikolai is now. The weight of it in my hands is familiar, comforting in a way that nothing else can be right now.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

I check the magazine. Full. I slam it home and chamber a round with a sound like breaking bones.

"Sir." One of my newer men approaches cautiously. "Shouldn't we wait for more intelligence? We don't know who we're dealing with, how many of them there are, what their?—"

I spin around and press the barrel of the rifle against his chest. He goes very still.

"My son," I say quietly, each word precise as a scalpel, "is out there with people who think they can take what's mine and walk away breathing. You can either help me find him, or you can stay here and explain to my uncle why you thought waiting was a good idea. What's it going to be?"

He swallows hard. "I'll get the team ready, sir."

"Five minutes." I lower the rifle but keep my finger near the trigger. "Full tactical gear. We're not going in soft."

As he runs toward the armory, I pull out my phone and scroll through contacts until I find the one I need. Arman picks up on the second ring.

"I need everything you have on vehicles moving on this side of the city in the last ten minutes," I say without preamble. "Black SUVs, three occupants, heading east from my location."

"Rolan? What's?—"

"My son has been taken." The words taste like blood in my mouth. "Find them, Arman. Use every camera, every traffic system, every fucking satellite you can access. Find them or find another job."

I hang up before he can respond and dial Derrick.

"I need a cleaner on standby," I tell him. "Multiple bodies. Tonight."

"How many are we talking about?"

I think about Anya's blood on my hands, the way she couldn't even speak my son's name without breaking apart.

"All of them," I say. "Every last fucking one."

The line goes quiet for a moment. "Understood. I'll have a crew ready."

My men are loading into two black Escalades when my phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number.

We have the boy. Fifty million rubles. Instructions to follow.

Fifty million rubles. They think this is about money.

I show the message to Stepan as he adjusts his tactical vest. His face goes hard.

"Orders, sir?"

I ignore the message without responding and slide the phone back into my pocket. Let them think I'm considering their offer. Let them get comfortable, maybe make mistakes.



"We find them first," I tell him.

"And when we do find them?"

I think about Nikolai's laugh, the way he calls me Batya even though he doesn't understand what that word really means yet. I think about Anya, broken and bleeding because she tried to protect him. I think about the fear that must be tearing through my son right now, wherever he is.

"When we find them," I say, checking my rifle one more time, "we remind the world why the Vetrov name still means something in this city."

The second SUV's engine turns over with a growl. My phone buzzes again—probably Arman with camera footage, or maybe the kidnappers getting impatient. I don't look at it.

I slide into the passenger seat and roll down the window. The night air is crisp, carrying the scents of rain and exhaust and something else. Something that smells like war.

"Drive," I tell my man behind the wheel. "And when I tell you to stop, we paint the fucking streets red."

The Range Rover lurches forward, carrying me away from the safety of my estate and toward whatever hell is waiting in the darkness. Behind us, the second vehicle follows like a shadow, loaded with enough firepower to level a city block.

## Page 53

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:25 pm*

Somewhere out there, my son is crying for his mother. Maybe he's calling for me too, using that word that still sounds foreign and perfect when it comes from his lips.

Batya.

I'm coming, Nikolai. And God help anyone who tries to stop me.

The speedometer climbs past ninety as we hit the main road. Moscow spreads out before us like a neon maze, ten million people going about their lives while mine falls apart at the seams.

But not for long.

Tonight, the city is going to learn what happens when you take something that belongs to Rolan Vetrov.

Tonight, someone is going to bleed.

27

ANYA

Pain wakes me before consciousness does. It starts as a dull throb across my ribs, then sharpens into something that feels like broken glass grinding against bone. My head pounds with each heartbeat, and when I reach up to touch my temple, my fingers come away sticky with dried blood that's matted into my hair.

The ceiling above me is white and sterile. Medical equipment hums somewhere to my left. The smell of antiseptic burns my nostrils, but underneath it lurks something metallic and dark that makes my stomach lurch.

Blood. My blood.

Memory crashes back in fragments. Dawn light. The south gate. Black SUV. Hands tearing Nikolai from my arms while I screamed and clawed and?—

"Nikolai." His name escapes as a broken whisper.

I try to sit up too fast and the world tilts sideways, nausea washing over me in waves. My vision goes gray at the edges and I have to grip the sides of the narrow bed to keep from collapsing back onto the pillow.

"Easy, easy." It's a woman's voice with a soft and professional tone. A nurse appears beside me, her hands gentle but firm as she helps me settle back against the raised mattress. "You've had a severe concussion. You need to move slowly."

"Where—" My throat feels like sandpaper. "Where is my son?"

The nurse's face changes, sympathy flickering across her features before she looks away. That's all the answer I need.

"You were brought in by Mr. Vetro's medic," she says instead, adjusting something on the IV stand beside my bed. "He carried you from the car. Wouldn't let anyone else touch you."

Rolan. I remember his voice cutting through the haze of pain, his hands on my shoulders. The way he demanded answers I could barely give. I remember the medic too—though not as vividly. Everything is a blur. Everything is hazy.

"Where is he now?" I ask. "Where's Rolan?"

Another flicker of something—worry, maybe fear—crosses her face. "He left immediately after finding you, dear. That was... several hours ago."

Several hours. The words hit me like a physical blow. Several hours since those men took my son, since they disappeared into the sprawling maze of Moscow with the only thing in this world that matters to me.

I throw back the thin hospital blanket and swing my legs over the side of the bed. The floor feels ice-cold against my bare feet, and standing makes my head swim, but I force myself upright. The change in position has me swaying, bracing myself on the bed railing, to which I'm grateful not to be handcuffed. I wouldn't put it past him, though...

"Ma'am, you really shouldn't?—"

"I need to find them." Each step toward the door sends fresh waves of pain through my skull, but I keep moving. "I need to help look for him."

I make it halfway down the corridor before two guards materialize in front of me. They're not rough, but they're immovable, their bodies blocking the path to the exit like a wall of muscle and Kevlar.

"Mrs. Vetrov," one of them says carefully. "You need to return to your room."

Mrs. Vetrov. The name sounds foreign and sharp in my ears. "I need to find Rolan. I need to know what's happening with Nikolai."

The guards exchange a look. "Mr. Vetrov left orders that you were to rest. He'll be in contact when there's news."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:26 pm*

"When there's news? When there's news!" I screech the words out, swinging at the man's chest, pummeling him with my fists. "My son has been kidnapped. I'm not going to lie in bed waiting for updates like some helpless?—"

"Ma'am." The second guard's voice is gruff as he grips me by the waist and pulls me back from my fear-induced rage tantrum. "Mr. Vetrov took a full tactical team. He left armed and he hasn't checked in since. Right now, the best thing you can do is recover." I squirm and kick, fighting against his grip as the words settle in my chest like a stone.

Of course he's armed. This is Rolan Vetrov, and someone took his son. They might as well have signed their own death warrants.

The guards escort me back to the infirmary room with the kind of polite insistence that makes it clear I don't have a choice. I sink back onto the bed and stare at the ceiling, listening to the steady beep of medical equipment and trying not to think about what Nikolai might be going through right now.

Is he scared? Is he calling for me? Does he understand what's happening, or does he think this is some kind of game?

The questions circle in my mind like vultures, each one more unbearable than the last.

Hours crawl by. The light outside the small window shifts from pale morning to harsh afternoon to the golden glow of approaching sunset. I drift in and out of sleep, but every time I close my eyes, I see Nikolai's face, hear his voice calling for me.

Tears well up and drain from my eyes until I'm drowning in them, back in the car after the race when my sweet boy cheered about his Dancing Queen being so brave. And now I feel like a shell of a woman, just a husk of what my son deserves from me. I can't find him. I couldn't even hold on to him. I was supposed to be taking him to freedom, not hand delivering him to the fucking enemy whom I'm powerless against.

A knock on the door jolts me awake and fear bristles my entire body. One of the guards steps inside, his expression carefully neutral, but the weapon in his hand and the way he glowers at me aren't comforting.

"Rolan?" I ask, rolling over to see if they have news of his return.

"Ma'am, there's someone at the gate requesting to see you. Says it's urgent."

My heart leaps. "Rolan?"

"No ma'am. It's... a Pyotr Morozov. Says he's your father."

The hope that had flared in my chest dies instantly, replaced by something cold and bitter. Batya. Of course it's Batya, showing up now when everything has already gone to hell.

I follow the guard through corridors I've never seen before, past rooms filled with medical equipment and security monitors. We move so slowly, I'm sure he's annoyed with me, but the bruising to my stomach and ribs makes it almost impossible to move. The estate feels different in daylight—less like a fortress and more like a hospital, all clean lines and sterile surfaces.

We emerge through a side door into the courtyard where I can see the main gate in the distance. Even from here, I can make out a familiar figure pacing behind the iron bars like a caged animal.

Batya looks smaller than I remember, his shoulders hunched beneath a wrinkled jacket. His hair has gone completely gray since I saw him last, and his face is pale and wild-eyed. When he spots me approaching, he grabs the gate with both hands and shakes it.

"Any! Anya, we need to talk. Right now."

The guards unlock the gate just long enough to let him through, then lock it again behind him. Batya rushes toward me and grabs my arms, his fingers digging into my flesh hard enough to leave bruises.

"Batya, you're hurting me."

"Listen to me." His voice is urgent, breathless. "I made a mistake. A terrible mistake."

I try to pull away from his grip, but he holds on tighter. "What are you talking about?"

"The Zharovs. The people who took Nikolai." His eyes are wide with something that looks like terror. "They're not going to use him as leverage like I thought. They're not going to trade him for money or territory or anything else."

The world seems to tilt around me. "What do you mean?"

"They're going to kill him, Anya." The words fall from his lips like stones. "And when they're done with the boy, they're going to kill me too. That was always the plan."

For a moment, I can't breathe. Can't think. Can't process what he's telling me.

"You knew?" The words come out as a whisper. "You knew they were going to take

him?"

"I didn't know it would go this far!" He's crying now, tears streaming down his weathered cheeks. "I thought... I thought they just wanted information. Leverage against Rolan. I thought the debt could be covered, that we could work something out, that?—"

I shove him back with enough force to send him stumbling. "You sold us out. You sold out your own grandson."

"I was trying to fix things! I was trying to make it right!"



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"By betraying us to his enemies?" The words tear out of my throat like broken glass.  
"By giving them the ammunition they needed to destroy him?"

"I didn't mean for this to happen. I didn't think?—"

"You never think!" I'm screaming now, and I don't care who hears me. "You never think about anyone but yourself and your debts and your stupid, selfish choices!"

Batyareaches for me again, but I step back, putting distance between us.

"If Nikolai dies," I tell him, my voice deadly quiet, "it will be your fault. Not the Zharovs'. Not some anonymous kidnappers. You. Your greed. Your cowardice."

"Anya, please?—"

"You've done enough, Batya." I turn my back on him and start limping toward the estate. "You've done more than enough."

I don't look back as the guards escort him off the property, don't listen to his voice calling my name, begging for forgiveness I don't have to give.

Back in the infirmary room, I curl up on the narrow bed and wrap my arms around my stomach, trying to hold myself together. The silence presses in from all sides, broken only by the steady beep of monitors and the distant sound of helicopters somewhere over the city.

Rolan is out there in the darkness, hunting the people who took our son. And I'm

here, useless and broken, waiting for news that might never come.

I close my eyes and try to breathe through the crushing weight of helplessness. Somewhere in Moscow, my little boy is scared and alone, surrounded by people who plan to hurt him just to hurt us.

And there's nothing I can do but wait.

28

ROLAN

The hunting lodge squats in the darkness like a cancer against the tree line, its windows glowing amber in the pre-dawn hours outside Tver. I study it through military-grade night vision binoculars from our position on the ridge, counting the shadows that move behind drawn curtains. Seven men, maybe eight. Armed but overconfident, drinking and smoking as if they believe the world beyond these woods doesn't exist.

They're about to learn otherwise.

"Thermal confirms movement on the ground floor," Stepan whispers into his radio from his position fifty meters to my left. "Two guards patrolling the perimeter. Kitchen and main room occupied. No movement upstairs, over."

"Teams Alpha and Bravo, confirm positions, over," I breathe into my comm unit.

"Alpha in position, south entrance, over."

"Bravo ready, north side, over."

The calls come through as I chamber a round in my rifle and feel the familiar sense of approaching death settling into my bones. This isn't the first time I've painted the Russian countryside red, and it won't be the last. But tonight feels different because this is about my blood—a child who calls me Batya because he doesn't know any better words for the man who would burn the world to keep him safe.

"Remember," I say into the radio, my voice barely above a whisper but carrying the authority of a man who has never learned to doubt his own capacity for violence. "The boy comes out alive and unharmed. Everyone else dies. No prisoners, no negotiations, no mercy—over."

Static crackles back through the earpiece. "Understood, sir, over."

I slide down the embankment toward the lodge, my boots finding purchase on frost-covered earth that crunches softly beneath my weight. The night air bites at my exposed skin, carrying the scents of pine needles and wood smoke from the chimney that rises from the lodge's slate roof. Somewhere inside that building, my son waits in whatever hell these animals have constructed for him.

The first guard dies without even knowing what's happening to him. I come up behind his position near the woodshed and slide my combat knife between his ribs with the precision of long practice. The blade finds his heart on the first try, and he drops to the frozen ground with nothing more than a soft exhale that could be mistaken for wind through the trees.

I stare down at him as blood rushes from the wound first, then makes his breathing come as quiet gurgling noises. When the first few droplets of blood come out his nose and mouth, I move on.

The second guard turns toward the sound just as Stepan's silenced pistol speaks from the darkness. The man's forehead sprouts a ghastly hole and he crumples forward into

a pile of split logs that scatter with a sound like breaking bones. It's too much noise, and someone inside will have heard it, but I'm not making apologies tonight.

"Perimeter secure," I whisper into my radio. "Breach in thirty seconds—over."

I reach the lodge's rear door and press my back against the weathered wood siding. Through the window beside me, I can see into a kitchen where two men sit at a scarred wooden table, playing cards and drinking from bottles of vodka that gleam like liquid silver in the lamplight. They're laughing about something, their voices carrying the casual cruelty of men who have forgotten that actions carry consequences.

But I'm going to remind them who I am and why no one ever crosses me or my family and lives to tell about it. It won't even register to them until it's too late.

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"Execute," I breathe into the comm.

The world explodes into violence and noise. Alpha team hits the front door with a battering ram that splinters the door like kindling, while Bravo comes through the north windows in a cascade of shattered glass and shouted orders. I kick in the rear door and step into chaos that unfolds with the terrible clarity of organized brutality.

The first man in the kitchen reaches for a pistol holstered beneath his arm, but he's drunk and slow, and I put two rounds through his center mass before his fingers find the grip. He staggers backward against the sink, crimson blossoming across his shirt like spilled wine, and slides to the floor with his cards still clutched in his left hand.

The second man has better reflexes. He overturns the table and dives behind it, his own weapon already in his hand and spitting fire in my direction. Bullets chew through the doorframe beside my head, launching shards of wood and glass flying like angry wasps.

I roll left and come up behind the kitchen island, using its bulk as cover while I assess angles and opportunities. The man behind the table is shouting something in Russian, probably calling for backup that will never come. Through the doorway that leads to the main room, I can hear the distinctive chatter of automatic weapons fire punctuated by screams and breaking furniture.

My men are earning their wages tonight.

I wait for the shooter to pause to reload, then vault over the island and put three rounds through the overturned table. The wood is thick but not thick enough to stop

military-grade ammunition. The man's return fire dies abruptly, replaced by a wet gurgling sound that tells me everything I need to know about his current condition.

"Kitchen clear," I report into my radio, stepping over bodies that are already beginning to cool. "Find my fucking son!"

The hallway beyond the kitchen runs toward the front of the lodge, and I can see muzzle flashes lighting the main room like deadly fireworks. One of my men—Viktor, I think—has taken cover behind an overturned couch and is laying down suppressing fire while his partner advances on two Zharov soldiers who have barricaded themselves behind a massive stone fireplace.

The soldiers are trapped and they know it. Desperation makes them sloppy, and they expose themselves too long while trying to return fire. Viktor's partner takes them both down with a controlled burst that paints the stone hearth with arterial spray.

"Main room secure," Viktor's voice crackles through my earpiece. "Three down."

I count bodies in my head. Two outside, two in the kitchen, three in the main room. That leaves at least two unaccounted for, and one of them could be guarding my son.

"Upstairs clear," Stepan reports from somewhere above me. "No targets, no hostages."

That means Nikolai is still on the ground floor, probably in one of the back bedrooms I haven't cleared yet. I move deeper into the lodge, my rifle raised and ready, stepping over shell casings and pools of blood that reflect the overhead lights like dark mirrors.

The first bedroom is empty except for rumpled bedding and the lingering stench of unwashed bodies. The second contains nothing but hunting equipment and

ammunition crates stacked against the far wall. But the third door is locked, and when I press my ear against the wood, I can hear something that makes my blood turn to ice in my veins.

Sobbing. Quiet and desperate and heartbreakingly familiar.

I step back and kick the door just below the handle. The lock mechanism tears free from the frame with a sound like breaking thunder, and the door swings open to reveal a scene that will live in my nightmares for whatever years I have left on this earth.

Nikolai sits bound to a wooden chair in the center of the room, his small hands tied behind his back with rope that has left red marks on his wrists. A gag made from torn fabric covers his mouth, but his eyes are wide and alert above it. When he sees me, those eyes fill with tears that spill down his cheeks like small rivers of relief.

He's alive. He's hurt and terrified and probably traumatized, but he's alive and breathing and looking at me like I'm every hero from every story anyone has ever told him.

"Batya," he tries to say through the gag, the word muffled but unmistakable.

I'm across the room in three strides, dropping my rifle and pulling out my knife to cut through the ropes that bind him. My hands are shaking—actually shaking—as I work the blade between the fibers, sawing through his restraints with movements that feel clumsy and desperate.

"It's okay," I tell him, my voice rougher than I intended. "Batya's here. Batya's got you."

The ropes fall away, and I pull the gag from his mouth with fingers that are steadier

than they have any right to be. Nikolai launches himself at me before I can even straighten up, his small arms wrapping around my neck with a strength that nearly knocks me backward.

He's crying now, great heaving sobs that shake his entire body. I hold him against my chest and feel something inside me that I didn't know was broken begin to heal itself.

"I want to go home," he whispers against my throat. "I want Mama. I want to go home, Batya."

"We're going home," I promise him, standing up with his weight settled against my shoulder. "Right now. We're going home."

I retrieve my rifle with my free hand and key my radio. "Package secured. All teams, prepare for extraction."

We're halfway to the front door when the last Zharov soldier makes his final mistake.

He comes out of nowhere—probably been hiding in a closet or under a bed like the coward he is—with a hunting knife raised above his head and murder in his eyes. He's screaming something in Russian about honor and blood debts, but all I hear is the sound of metal cutting through air toward my son.

The blade catches Nikolai across the shoulder before I can react, parting fabric and skin with surgical precision. My son cries out in pain and surprise, and I feel something fundamental snap inside my chest like an overstressed cable.



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I don't remember drawing my sidearm. Don't remember aiming or making the conscious decision to pull the trigger. One moment, the Zharov soldier is lunging toward us with his kniferaised, and the next moment, he's flying backward with a hole through his chest the size of my fist.

The forty-five-caliber hollow-point catches him center mass and lifts him off his feet, sending him crashing into the wall behind him with enough force to crack the plaster. He slides down slowly, leaving a red smear on the whitewashed surface, his knife clattering uselessly to the floor.

He's still alive when he hits the ground, his eyes wide with shock and his mouth opening and closing like a fish pulled from water. Blood bubbles between his lips as he tries to speak, to say something that might matter in these final seconds of his worthless life.

I walk over to where he lies bleeding and look down at him with all the emotion I might show a piece of discarded garbage.

"You hurt my son," I tell him quietly.

Then I put another round through his forehead and watch the light go out of his eyes forever.

Nikolai is crying again, pressing his face against my shoulder and trembling like a leaf in a hurricane. Blood seeps through his torn shirt where the knife caught him, but the wound looks shallow. He'll need stitches and antibiotics, but he'll live.

Which is more than I can say for anyone else in this building.

"All clear," I report into my radio, holstering my pistol and checking Nikolai's shoulder with fingers that probe gently around the edges of the cut. "Extraction now—over."

My men are already moving, their job finished with the kind of professional efficiency that comes from years of practice. Bodies lie scattered throughout the lodge like broken dolls, and the air is thick with cordite and copper and the particular smell that comes from violent death in enclosed spaces.

We're out the front door and moving toward the vehicles within minutes. Stepan takes point while Viktor and the others provide rear security, their weapons still ready in case any Zharov reinforcements are stupid enough to show themselves.

The ride back to Moscow passes in silence. I hold Nikolai in my lap while I examine his wound, my son's blood mixing with the blood of his captors on my clothes and hands. The boy doesn't speak during the medical attention, just keeps his arms wrapped around my neck and his face buried against my shoulder.

He smells like fear and unwashed hair and something else underneath it all—something that reminds me of Anya's perfume from that night six years ago when everything began. He's part of me and part of her, this small, perfect thing that somehow came from all the darkness we've waded through together.

I stare out the window at the passing countryside and think about the men we left cooling in that lodge. Seven human beings who woke up this morning with plans and hopes and fears, who will never see another sunrise because they made the mistake of touching what belongs to me.

I should feel something about that. Regret, maybe, or at least some acknowledgment

of the weight that comes with taking lives. But when I look down at Nikolai's bandaged shoulder, at the way he clings to me like I'm the only solid thing in a world that has suddenly revealed its capacity for cruelty, all I feel is a cold satisfaction that justice has been served.

They hurt my son. They terrified him and bound him and made him cry for his mother in the darkness of a place that smelled like death and desperation.

So I killed them all.

And I would do it again without hesitation, without mercy, without a single second of doubt.

Because that's what fathers do for their children, even when those children came into their lives through blackmail and manipulation and circumstances that no one would call ideal. That's what love looks like when it's filtered through violence and shaped by the kind of choices that most people never have to make.

I hold my son closer and watch Moscow's lights grow brighter on the horizon, and I know with absolute certainty that the world is exactly one safe place smaller for the men who thought they could take him from me.

29

ANYA

The sound of engines roaring up the estate's drive tears me from restless sleep like a gunshot. Voices follow—men shouting orders, doors slamming, the heavy footfall of tactical boots on gravel. I know that controlled chaos, the particular rhythm of soldiers returning from war.

I throw myself out of bed and bolt from the infirmary room, my bare feet slapping against the cold marble floors as I run toward the front of the estate. My ribs scream with each stride, but I don't care about pain right now. Nothing matters except the possibility that those voices mean what I think they mean.

The front hall stretches before me like a cathedral, all soaring ceilings and polished stone, but I barely register the grandeur. My entire world has narrowed to the massive oak doors at the far end and the sounds of arrival beyond them.

The doors swing open just as I reach the center of the hall.

Rolan strides through the entrance like an avenging angel dressed in tactical black, his clothes stained dark with what I pray is someone else's blood. But it's not him that makes my heart stop beating for three full seconds—it's the small figure cradled against his chest.

Nikolai. My son. My baby. Alive and awake and looking at me with eyes that are too wide and too knowing for a child who should still believe the world is fundamentally safe.

He's pale, his dark hair matted and unwashed, and there's dried blood streaked along his shoulder where his torn shirt hangs in tatters. But he's breathing and conscious and reaching toward me with one small hand that trembles like a leaf in winter wind.

"Mama," he whispers, and the sound breaks something in my chest that I didn't know was still whole.

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I sob—actually sob—as I reach for him, my hands shaking so violently I'm afraid I might drop him. But then his weight settles into my arms and he's solid and warm and real, and I hold him so tightly against me that he whimpers in discomfort.

"I'm sorry, baby," I whisper into his hair, loosening my grip just enough to let him breathe. "I'm so sorry. Mama's here now. Mama's got you."

He doesn't pull away. Instead, he burrows deeper against my shoulder and wraps his thin arms around my neck with a desperation that tells me more about his ordeal than any words could. He smells like dried sweat and something metallic that makes my stomach clench, but underneath it all he still smells like my son.

When I look up to thank Rolan, to ask him what happened and how badly Nikolai is hurt and whether the men who took him are dead or just wishing they were, I find empty space where he stood moments before.

He's already walking away, his broad shoulders disappearing through the doorway that leads to the east wing. He doesn't look back, doesn't speak, doesn't acknowledge that he just returned the most precious thing in my world to my arms.

Dr. Isaev appears at my elbow with the quiet efficiency of someone accustomed to medical emergencies in the Vetrovhousehold. He examines Nikolai with gentle hands while I hold him, checking his pupils and pulse and the angry red line across his shoulder where someone—some animal—cut him with a blade.

"Superficial," the doctor murmurs, more to himself than to me. "He'll need proper cleaning and stitching, but nothing vital was damaged."

I carry Nikolai upstairs to one of the guest rooms, settling him on the bed while Dr. Isaev tends to his wound with supplies from his ever-present medical bag. My son is quiet during the treatment, not crying or complaining, just watching everything with those too-serious eyes that have seen things no child should ever witness.

"Are the bad men gone, Mama?" he asks as the doctor applies the final bandage.

"Yes, baby," I tell him, smoothing his dark hair away from his forehead. "Batyamade sure they can't hurt you anymore."

He nods solemnly, as if this makes perfect sense to him. As if he always knew that when the monsters came for him, Rolan Vetrov would come hunting them in return.

Once Nikolai falls asleep—exhaustion finally claiming him despite everything—I leave him in the care of two guards who look like they'd rather die than let anything happen to him again. Then I storm through the estate's corridors toward Rolan's suite, fury and gratitude and a dozen other emotions I can't name burning in my chest like competing fires.

I don't knock. I simply push through the heavy doors and find him standing beside his bed, methodically peeling off his bloodstained tactical jacket. His white shirt underneath is stained crimson across the chest and sleeves, and his knuckles are raw and split from whatever violence he visited upon the men who took our son.

He looks up when I enter but doesn't speak, just continues undressing with the mechanical precision of someone performing a familiar ritual.

"Tell me everything," I demand with just a touch of desperation. "How did you find him? How badly was he hurt? Did you kill them?"

Rolan drops the ruined jacket onto the floor and begins unbuttoning his shirt. "The

Zharovs won't be touching you or Nikolai again."

"That's not what I asked."

"It's all you need to know."

His shirt joins the jacket on the floor, revealing a torso marked with ink and new bruises that tell the story of recent violence. There's blood under his fingernails and splattered across his forearms—but definitely not his own.

"I need to know if it's over," I press, stepping closer. "I need to know if my son is safe."

"Your son is safe." He moves to the bathroom doorway and pauses, his back to me.

"He's always been safe. The moment he became mine, he became untouchable."

Mine. Not ours. Mine. The possessiveness in his voice should irritate me, but instead it sends something warm and fierce racing through my veins.

"What about mybatya?" The question emerges before I can stop it. "If the Zharovs knew where to find Nikolai, they might know where to find him too."

Rolan turns back to face me, and there's something cold and final in his dark eyes.

"Pyotr is being watched. If the Zharovs try to touch him, they'll die before they get out of their car."

"But what if?—"

"I'm handling it, Anya." His voice slices through my protests. "I'm handling all of it."

The certainty in his tone, the absolute confidence that he can control everything and

everyone who might threaten what belongs to him, should terrify me. Instead, it breaks something loose inside my chest that I've been holding locked away since the moment I agreed to his deal six years ago.

I cross the room to him in three quick strides and rise up on my toes to kiss him with all the desperation and gratitude and terrifying need that I've been trying to deny since I walked back into his world.

The kiss is fierce and possessive and everything I haven't let myself feel until this moment when the alternative—losing him, losing this, losing the safety he's built around us—seems unbearable.

He doesn't ask why I'm kissing him or what's changed or what this means for whatever twisted arrangement we've been dancing around. He simply lifts me onto his dresser with hands that are still stained with the blood of men who threatened his family and shows me exactly how much he needs this too.



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His mouth moves against mine with a hunger that borders on violence, and I meet it with equal ferocity. My hands tangle in his hair while his work at the fabric of my nightgown, tearing through silk and lace with the same ruthless efficiency he probably used to tear through the men who took our son.

My body arches against him, desperate to feel the heat of his skin against mine. Rolan's hands know me better than my own, caressing and exploring as if he's been waiting for this moment just as long as I have. His fingers find the lace of my underwear and he makes short work of that too, tearing it away like it's nothing more than tissue paper. The harshness of his actions only fans the flames of my desire, the knowledge that I'm the only one who can bring this feral side out in him.

He growls low in his throat as he finally frees me from the last barrier between us, his hot breath bathing my exposed skin. "You're mine, Anya," he grunts out between kisses. "You've always been mine." His words are both a statement and a warning.

As Rolan's hands explore every inch of my body, I can no longer deny the depth of my feelings or the fire that rages between us. "Rolan," I gasp, arching my back to meet his touch. The intensity in his eyes sets my soul on fire, a blaze that threatens to consume me whole.

He kisses a fiery trail down my neck, burning my flesh with his desire. His lips find my breast, and he takes my nipple between his teeth, teasing it with just the right amount of pressure. "Mine," he growls again, like a feral beast staking his claim.

Rolan lifts his head, his chest heaving with ragged breaths that fill the room. His eyes, usually cold and calculating, are now on fire with desire for me and only me. In this

moment, I know he means every word. I am his, and he is mine.

"Prove it," I dare him, my voice a breathless whisper. I need him to say the words, to know that this is real and not just a product of our grief and desperation. His grey eyes burn into mine, the flames in their depths reflecting the inferno that rages within me.

Rolan's answer is in the way he lifts me up and carries me to his bed, as if I weigh no more than a feather. He lays me down gently on the rumpled sheets, his hands trembling as he discards his own clothes. He's as affected by this as I am, and that knowledge sends a thrill of anticipation through me. This isn't just about sex for him, either. This is about claiming what's his, and I've never wanted anything more.

His body covers mine, his weight pressing me into the mattress in a delicious way that I've only ever dreamed of. His lips find mine again, and our tongues dance together in a heated tango that matches the rhythm of our pounding hearts. His hands roam my body, reacquainting themselves with every curve and imperfection as if he's been lost at sea and I'm the beacon guiding him home.

He kisses a trail down my jawline, his five o'clock shadow scratching my sensitive skin in a way that heightens my senses even more. Rolan's hands grip my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh as he pushes me against the headboard and dives between my thighs.

The first touch of his stubble on my inner thigh makes me jolt, but it's quickly erased by the sensation of his sucking and licking at my core. Rolan's tongue flicks against my clit, sending white-hot bolts of pleasure coursing through my veins. I grip the sheets, nails digging into the expensive bedding as he teases me with his tongue and lips. He knows exactly how to make me writhe and moan, exactly how to bring me to the brink of ecstasy before pulling back, denying me the release I so desperately crave.

"Rolan!" I gasp, arching my hips toward him, begging for more. His only response is a low chuckle, the sound vibrating against my sensitive folds and making shockwaves buzz through every muscle. He drags his fingers down my slickness, teasing me mercilessly before sliding two inside me, curling them inward as if he's searching for something specific.

"There," I whimper, arching into his touch. "Yes... like that," I plead, spreading myself wider for his assault.

Rolan growls in approval, his tempo increasing as he hits that spot again and again. I'm on the edge of climax, my toes curling into the sheets as my orgasm builds inside me like a storm ready to break. "That's it, Anya," he grunts, his breath hot against my ear. "Let go for me."

His command is all I need, and my climax overtakes me like a tidal wave, crashing over me in waves of ecstasy that leave me trembling and gasping for air. Rolan doesn't stop there, however. He continues to pleasure me, determined to wring every last drop of satisfaction from my spent body. A second orgasm pushes through the first, intensifying every sensation until I'm convulsing and twitching.

Finally, when I'm nothing but a quivering mass of boneless limbs, he pulls away and looks at me with a smirk. "That," he says between labored breaths, "is just the start."

I gasp for air, my entire body still humming with the aftershocks of my powerful orgasms. Rolan's smirk only serves to fan the flames of my desire even more. "Well, prove it, then," I challenge him, a newfound confidence swelling in my chest as I smirk at him.

He smiles, a wolfish grin that makes me shiver with anticipation and a healthy dose of apprehension.

Rolan positions himself at my entrance, his hard cock throbbing against my slick folds. "You sure you can handle more, Anya?" he asks, his voice low and gravelly. I nod, unable to form words as he slowly pushes inside me, filling me completely. His every thrust is deliberate and controlled, his eyes locked on mine as if he's memorizing every single twitch and moan that escapes my lips.

Rolan's hips move in a slow, sensual rhythm that threatens to drive me insane. His eyes never leave mine, as if he's trying to imprint this moment on both of our memories. Heat pools between my thighs as he picks up the pace, his thrusts becoming more urgent and demanding. Each time he bottoms out within me, a white-hot flash of pleasure pulses through my body, starting in my core and radiating outward.

His name is a keening cry on my lips as he angles his hips, hitting that sweet spot within me that sends me spiraling even further into the abyss of pleasure. His breathing becomes ragged, his thrusts becoming erratic as he nears his peak. "Anya," he grunts, his voice hoarse with desire.

Rolan's steely grip on my hips tightens, and I can feel the tension coiling in his muscles as he nears his climax. "Come with me," he growls, his eyes boring into mine with a searing intensity. That single command is all I need, and my orgasm crashes over me again, my inner walls contracting around him as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me. Rolan groans my name as he follows me over the edge, his release hot and pulsing deep inside me.

Afterward, we stay pressed together in the aftermath of shared need and mutual claiming. His forehead rests against mine while we both try to remember how to breathe normally, and I can taste the salt of tears I didn't realize I was crying.

"You're not going anywhere," he tells me quietly, his voice rough with emotion he rarely lets show. "Not you, not Nikolai. You're mine now—both of you."

I should argue and remind him that I'm not some possession to be claimed and kept. I should tell him that love isn't about ownership or control or the ability to destroy anyone who threatens what you consider yours.

But I don't argue this time. Because somewhere between watching him carry our son home covered in the blood of our enemies and feeling him move inside me like he was staking a claim on my soul, I realized something that terrifies and thrills me in equal measure.

"I don't want to go," I whisper against his lips. "I love you, Rolan. I think I've loved you since that first weekend six years ago, and I've been running from it ever since."

His hands tighten on my waist, and for a moment he looks almost vulnerable in the dim light filtering through his bedroom windows.

"Then don't run anymore," he says simply.

And for the first time since I agreed to his original deal, I don't want to.

30

ROLAN

The call comes at three in the morning, yanking me from the restless sleep that has become my constant companion since Nikolai returned home. Viktor's voice cuts through the darkness like broken glass.

"We found Pyotr Morozov, Boss. He's alive, but barely."

I'm already reaching for my clothes before he finishes speaking. The cold December air bites through the windows of my study as I pace, listening to Viktor's report. My bare feet are silent against the marble floor, but my heart pounds like a war drum.

"Where?" The single word carries all my fury, all my desperate need to finally, finally give Anya something instead of taking from her. Pyotr has been missing one week without a trace, and I've had nothing but disappointing news to present to my wife every time she's asked.

"Warehouse district, sector seven. Tied to those Zharov loyalists we've been tracking. Surveillance picked up chatter two hours ago—they're holding him as punishment for what they call 'interfering with the boy's abduction.' They plan to finish what they started, Boss. Tonight."

The rage that fills me is different from the calculated fury I've lived with for years. This is primal, protective, something that claws at my chest and demands blood. They want to hurt her family. They want to hurt what belongs to me, and I thought they

learned their fucking lesson the first time. If they think they'll escape this, they're wrong, and if they think I won't go as hard on them for Pyotr's life as I did my son's, they're doubly wrong.

"How many men?"

"Three confirmed, possibly four. The warehouse is isolated, single entry point, minimal security. They're not expecting company."

"They're about to get it." I'm already pulling on my tactical vest, checking the magazine in my Glock. "Assemble the strike team. I want Renat, Misha, and Stepan in full gear. We leave in ten minutes."

Anya watches me from the window of our room with a hollow look in her eyes—not the same forlorn expression I'm told she had while Nikolai was missing, but almost as bad. I promised her to protect what she cares about, and until now, I've had no news to even go on. But now I get even. Now I finish this so she can rest easily for the first time in six years.

The drive through Moscow's empty streets gives me too much time to think. I stare out at the city I've conquered, the empire I've built brick by bloody brick, and all I can see is Anya's face when she realizes her father is gone. The way her shoulders curved inward when she thought no one was watching, the hollow look in her eyes that I put there with my own hands.

I've taken so much from her. Her freedom, her choices, her peace. I've caged her like a beautiful bird and convinced myself it was love. But this—saving her father—this is something I can give back.

Viktor sits beside me in the passenger seat, his fingers drumming nervously against his thigh. "Boss, what if it's a trap? The Zharovs have been quiet lately. Too quiet."

"Then we spring it." I check my weapon one more time, the familiar weight of steel grounding me. "But if there's even a chance that old man is alive in there, we're going in."

The warehouse looms ahead like a concrete tomb, its broken windows staring down at us like dead eyes. We have the lights cut two blocks away and proceed on foot, our boots silent against the cracked cement.

Misha takes point, his massive frame moving with surprising grace as he signals the all-clear with two fingers darting in the direction of the door. Through the grimy windows, we can see movement inside. Shadows dancing against harsh fluorescent lighting. The murmur of voices is casual and unconcerned.

They don't know death is coming for them tonight.

I peer through a crack in the boarded-up window and my blood turns to ice. There, in the corner of the warehouse like discarded trash, sits Pyotr Morozov. He's tied to a metal chair, his head lolling forward, silver hair matted with blood. His clothes are torn, his face a map of bruises, but his chest rises and falls with shallow breaths.

They have him gagged and it looks like he's barely breathing. I see a car battery and a bucket of water nearby. So they've been torturing him—probably for information about me, which he wouldn't be able to give them.

He's alive. Barely, but alive.

Two men stand near him, one counting a stack of cash like he's doing nothing more complicated than buying groceries. The other is speaking rapid Russian into a cell phone. A third figure lurks in the shadows by a stack of crates, smoking a cigarette that glows like a tiny ember in the darkness.



"Yes, the old bastard is still breathing," the man on the phone is saying. "We'll finish it tonight and dump the body in the river. No one will find him."

The rage that fills me is beyond description. It's molten steel in my veins, a roaring furnace that threatens to consume everything in its path. These animals dare to touch what belongs to me. They dare to hurt Anya's family.

I signal to my men, fingers moving in the silent language we've perfected over years of violence. Misha and Renat circle around to the back entrance. Stepan takes position by the loading dock. Viktor stays with me.

When I give the signal—a sharp whistle that cuts through the night air—all hell breaks loose.

The warehouse explodes into chaos. Misha kicks in the back door just as Viktor and I breach the front, our weapons raised, death singing in our hands. The man counting money spins toward us, his eyes wide with shock, but he's too slow. Viktor's bullet catches him center mass, and he crumples like a broken doll.

The one on the phone tries to run, screaming something about reinforcements, but Stepan is there to greet him with cold steel. The cigarette smoker has better reflexes—he dives behind the crates and returns fire, his muzzle flashes strobing in the darkness.

"Take him alive if possible," I shout over the gunfire, but even as the words leave my mouth, I know it won't happen. These men signed their death warrants the moment they touched Anya's father.

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The firefight is brief but vicious. Concrete chips fly as bullets ricochet off warehouse walls. The air fills with cordite smoke and the sharp crack of gunfire. When the echo of the last shot fades, three bodies lie cooling on the warehouse floor.

I holster my weapon and move toward Pyotr, my hands surprisingly steady as I cut the ropes binding him to the chair. His eyes flutter open as I work, unfocused and glazed with pain.

"Any?" he whispers, his voice barely audible.

"She's safe," I tell him, catching his weight as he slumps forward. "She's at home, waiting for you."

"The boy," he wheezes. " MyKoyla..."

"Safe, old man... They're both safe now."

The old man weighs nothing in my arms as I carry him toward the vehicles. Misha and Renat flank us, their weapons still drawn, eyes scanning for threats that don't come. The Zharov loyalists are finished, their blood seeping into the warehouse floor like spilled wine.

During the drive back to the estate, Pyotr drifts in and out of consciousness. I watch him in the rearview mirror, this broken man who gambled away his daughter's happiness, who sold his grandson's safety for a handful of rubles, and I feel something I haven't experienced in years.

Forgiveness.

Not because he deserves it, but because Anya loves him. Because family—even damaged, flawed, infuriating family—is everything. It's the only thing that matters when the world turns dark and cold.

The estate's iron gates swing open to welcome us home, and I see her immediately. Anya stands on the main balcony like a figure carved from marble, her white nightgown ghostly in the predawn light. She doesn't move as our convoy rolls up the circular drive, doesn't breathe, but I can feel her tension even from this distance.

When she realizes who we've brought home, her knees nearly buckle.

I climb out of the vehicle and gesture to Misha, who carefully lifts Pyotr from the back seat. The old man is conscious now, blinking in the early morning light like a man emerging from a long nightmare.

Nikolai appears in the front doorway, rubbing sleep from his eyes, drawn by the sound of the engines. When he sees his grandfather, he doesn't hesitate. He runs down the stone steps and throws his small arms around Pyotr's legs, his voice high and sweet in the morning air.

"Dedushka! You came back!"

That's when Pyotr breaks.

He collapses to his knees right there in the middle of the driveway, his arms wrapping around his grandson as sobs rack his beaten body. Years of shame and regret pour out of him like poison from a wound, and I watch as Anya flies down the steps to join them.

She doesn't speak, doesn't ask questions, just wraps her arms around both of them and holds on like she'll never let go. Her tears fall silently, soaking into her father's torn shirt, and I stand apart from this moment of grace like the devil watching angels dance.

When Pyotr finally looks up at me, his eyes are clear for the first time since I've known him.

"You saved me," he says, and the wonder in his voice cuts deeper than any blade.

"No." I crouch down so we're eye to eye, this man who nearly cost me everything, who I now understand is part of the foundation that holds my world together. "I saved my family."

The words hang in the air between us, heavy with meaning. Anya looks up at me with those dark eyes I've drowned in since the first moment I saw her, and I see something there I've been afraid to name.

Hope.

"Family is everything," I tell her, my voice rough with emotions I've kept locked away for too long. "It's the only thing that matters when everything else falls apart. And you, Anya—you and Nikolai and even this stubborn old man—you're my family now."

I reach into my jacket and pull out a folded document, the papers I've been carrying for weeks like a talisman. "Pyotr's debts are paid in full. All of them. Every ruble he's ever owed to anyone in this city is wiped clean. He's under my protection now, which means he's untouchable."

Pyotr's eyes widen as he takes the papers with shaking hands. "I don't understand.

Why would you?—"

"Because she loves you." I look at Anya as I speak, seeing the tears streaming down her face. "And I love her."

The admission hangs between us like a bridge finally built across an impossible chasm. Anya rises slowly, leaving her father and son kneeling in the driveway, and walks toward me. Each step brings her closer to the man I've become, the one who would burn down the world to keep her safe.

When she reaches me, she doesn't speak. She simply places her hand against my chest, over the heart I thought had died years ago.

"I love you too," she whispers, and the words hit me like absolution. "God help me, Rolan, but I love you."

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This time, when she says it, I don't freeze. I don't retreat behind walls of ice and control. I pull her against me and hold her like she's the only solid thing in a world gone mad.

"I know," I murmur into her hair, breathing in the scent of her, the warmth of her, the impossible gift of her forgiveness. "I know, and I love you back. I love you enough to let you go if that's what you need. But I'm hoping—God, I'm hoping you'll choose to stay."

She pulls back to look at me, her face wet with tears but radiant with something I've never seen before. Not resignation, not fear, but choice. Real choice, freely given.

"I'm staying," she says, and the words remake my world. "We're staying. All of us."

Behind us, Nikolai helps his grandfather to his feet, chattering excitedly about breakfast and showing him his new toy cars. The sun is rising over Moscow, painting the sky in shades of gold and crimson, and for the first time in my life, I understand what redemption feels like.

It tastes like forgiveness on a woman's lips. It sounds like a child's laughter echoing off stone walls. It feels like coming home to a family you never thought you deserved but will spend the rest of your life protecting.

The Vetrov empire is built on fear and blood and the bones of my enemies. But this—Anya in my arms, Nikolai calling me Batya, even Pyotr looking at me with something approaching respect—this is built on something stronger.

This is built on love.

And love, I'm finally learning, is the only foundation that never crumbles.

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## EPILOGUE: ANYA

Three months have passed since Rolan brought my father home, and the estate has settled into something I never thought possible—peace. Not the brittle quiet of a ceasefire, but the deep, abiding stillness of a place where violence has finally laid down its arms.

I stand on the balcony of what has become our bedroom, watching Nikolai race through the courtyard below. His laughter echoes off the stone walls as he chases a red ball that bounces unpredictably across the ancient cobblestones. Two guards—Misha and Maxim—watch him with the careful attention of men who understand that this child's safety is worth more than their lives. But their vigilance has softened into something almost paternal, and I catch Misha smiling as Nikolai attempts an elaborate somersault that ends in a giggling heap.

The coffee in my hands has gone cold, forgotten in the simple pleasure of watching my son be a child, really be a child, for perhaps the first time in his life. No fear shadows his movements, no cautious glances over his shoulder. He runs with the wild abandon of a boy who knows he is safe, who knows he is loved, who knows that the walls around him are protection rather than prison.

I'm wearing a dress Rolan bought me—soft cream silk that moves like water when I walk, nothing like the armor of designer clothes he used to choose for me. This feels like something I might have picked for myself, back when I was young enough to believe in fairy tales and happy endings. My hair falls loose around my shoulders, no

longer scraped back into the severe chignon I used to favor. Everything about me has softened in these weeks, as if I'm finally allowing myself to breathe.

The sound of footsteps on marble makes me turn, but I don't need to look to know it's him. Rolan moves with a presence that fills every room he enters, but it's different now. Less predatory, more settled. He approaches without speaking, his bare feet silent against the stone floor of the balcony, and takes his place beside me at the railing.

We stand in comfortable silence, watching our son play. The morning sun catches the silver threads in Rolan's dark hair, and I notice new lines around his eyes—not from stress this time, but from laughter. He's been smiling more lately, real smiles that transform his entire face. It makes him look younger, less like the fearsome Pakhan who rules Moscow's underworld and more like the man who holds me close in the darkness and whispers my name in the stillness of night's passion.

"Will it ever open?" I ask, the question slipping out before I can stop it. I don't look at him, just continue watching Nikolai, but I feel Rolan's attention shift to me.

"What?"

"The cage." I gesture vaguely at the walls surrounding us, the guards, the iron gates that mark the boundaries of our world. "Will it ever open?"

His silence stretches long enough that I begin to regret the question. I don't want to anger him, but living under his thumb is heavy. I know he means well and wants to protect us, but I want so much more for our son. Then his voice comes quietly in a way that makes my chest tighten.

"It's open now."



I turn to face him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"You're still here." He meets my eyes, and I see something in them that takes my breath away. Vulnerability. Wonder. The look of a man who has received a gift he never dared ask for. "The cage is open, Anya. It's been open since the night I told you I loved you. You're here because you choose to be."

The words hit me like a physical blow, not because they hurt but because they reveal a truth I've been afraid to examine too closely. He's right. The locks on the doors have been turned, the keys placed in my hands, and I've chosen to stay. Not because I have to, but because I want to. Because somewhere in the midst of all the pain and fear and anger, this place has become home.

I don't answer him directly. Instead, I let my head fall against his shoulder, feeling the solid warmth of him, the steady rhythm of his breathing. He smells like expensive cologne and something uniquely him—power and danger and safety all wrapped together. His arm comes around me, holding me close but not too tight, and I realize this is what contentment feels like.

"The adoption paperwork is final," he says after a while, his voice careful, as if he's not sure how I'll react to this news.

I lift my head to look at him. "Final?"

"Nikolai is my son. Legally, officially, in every way that matters." His hand moves to cup my face, thumb tracing the line of my cheekbone. "He'll carry the Vetrov name. He'll inherit everything I've built. He'll be protected by laws and traditions that go back generations."

The magnitude of this gift overwhelms me. Not just the money or the power, but the belonging. The absolute certainty that my son will never be alone, never be forgotten,

never be anything less than precious. I think of all the nights I lay awake wondering what would happen to Nikolai if something happened to me, and now I know. He would be safe. He would be loved. He would be home.

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"Are you telling me this because you think I'm supposed to be happy now?" I ask, and I can't keep the note of challenge out of my voice. "Like checking items off a list—son adopted, father saved, wife secured?"

Rolan chuckles, the sound rumbling through his chest where I'm pressed against him. "No, ptichka. I'm telling you because it's done, and because I wanted you to know that whatever happens between us, he's protected. Forever."

The endearment—little bird—should annoy me. It should remind me of the cage metaphor, of all the ways he's tried to control me. Instead, it sounds like love. Like the kind of nickname that develops between two people who've seen each other at their worst and chosen to stay anyway.

"I want a real wedding," I say suddenly, the words surprising me as much as they clearly surprise him.

"What?"

"A real wedding. With a dress I choose and flowers I pick and music I like. Not the sterile contract signing we had, but something real. Something that feels like choosing you instead of being chosen by you."

His face goes very still, and for a moment I wonder if I've pushed too far. Then his mouth curves into a smile that transforms his entire face, making him look like the boy he must have been before violence and power changed him.

"The world is yours," he says, and his voice is soft with wonder. "Anything you want,

Anya. Everything you want."

"I want white roses," I continue, warming to the theme, letting myself imagine it for the first time. "Lots of them. And I want the ceremony in the garden, not inside. I want Nikolai to be our ring bearer, and I want my father to walk me down the aisle even though we're already married."

"Done."

"I want a photographer who captures real moments, not posed shots. I want a cake that tastes like something other than cardboard and frosting. I want to dance with you to a song I actually know the words to."

"All of it." He turns to face me fully, his hands framing my face like I'm something precious. "Every single thing you want and anything else you can think of. We'll tear up the old paperwork and start fresh if you want. Make it legal and binding and real in a way that matters to you."

I study his face, looking for the catch, the condition, the price I'll have to pay for this gift. But there's nothing there except love and a kind of desperate hope that breaks my heart.

"Why?" I whisper.

"Because you deserve to choose." His thumb traces my lower lip, and I see years of regret in his eyes. "I took so much from you, Anya. Your freedom, your safety, your chance to fall in love on your own terms. I can't give those things back, but I can give you this. I can give you the wedding you dreamed of when you were young and still believed in happy endings."

"And if I want to invite people? Real people, not just your men and their wives?"

"Invite whoever you want. We'll fly them in from anywhere in the world."

"What about security? Won't it be dangerous to have that many people here?"

"Let me worry about security. You just worry about being happy."

The simplicity of it undoes me. After years of calculating the cost of every choice, of weighing the danger in every decision, he's offering me the luxury of pure want. The freedom to choose beauty over strategy, joy over survival.

"I used to dream about my wedding when I was little," I admit, leaning into his touch. "I would plan it in my head during the long nights when Batya was out gambling. White dress, white flowers, white cake. Everything pure and perfect and untouched by the ugliness of the world."

"You can have that," he says fiercely. "All of it. We'll make it so perfect that even the ugliness of how we started won't be able to touch it."

"And after? After the wedding and the cake and the dancing, what then?"

"Then we live." He kisses my forehead, soft and reverent. "We raise our son and drive each other crazy and fight about little things and make up in ways that make the fighting worthwhile. We grow old together if we're lucky, and we make sure Nikolai never has to choose between love and survival the way you did."

"You make it sound so simple."

"Maybe it is. Maybe love is supposed to be simple, and we just made it complicated."

Below us, Nikolai's laughter rings out again as he successfully catches the red ball. He holds it up triumphantly, looking around for approval, and when he spots us on

the balcony, he waves with the uncomplicated joy of a child who knows he is seen and celebrated.

"Look, Batya! Mama! I caught it!"

Batya. The word still sends a shock through me every time I hear it. Not because it's wrong, but because it's so completely right. Rolan raises his hand to wave back, and I see the wonder in his face, the kind of awe that comes from being trusted with something infinitely precious.

"He's going to be taller than you," I observe, studying the long lines of my son's growing body.

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"Good. He should be bigger than his old man. Stronger too, hopefully. Smarter, definitely."

"Will you teach him about the business?"

"When he's old enough to understand what it really means, yes. But I hope by then there will be less of it to teach. I'm working on making things more legitimate, more legal. I want him to inherit an empire, not a war."

"And if he doesn't want any of it? If he wants to be a doctor or a teacher or an artist?"

"Then he'll be the best doctor or teacher or artist the world has ever seen, and his trust fund will make sure he never has to compromise his dreams for money."

The fierce protectiveness in his voice makes my throat tight. This is what I never had—a parent who would move heaven and earth to give me choices, who would build me a life where I could choose love over survival, dreams over desperation.

"I love you," I tell him, and the words come easier now, less like an admission of defeat and more like a celebration of victory.

"I love you too." He pulls me closer, and I go willingly, melting into the warmth and strength of him. "More than I ever thought I could love anything. More than I knew I was capable of."

"Even though I fought you every step of the way?"

"Especially because of that." His laugh is warm against my hair. "You think I wanted a woman who would just roll over and accept whatever I decided? I fell in love with your fire, Anya. Your courage. The way you refused to break even when breaking would have been easier."

"I almost left," I confess. "That night after Nikolai was taken, when you brought me back and I saw what I'd done—I almost ran. I was going to take him and disappear, find somewhere you'd never find us."

"I know." His arms tighten around me. "I was waiting for it. Watching for it. It would have killed me, but I wouldn't have stopped you. Not if it was what you really wanted."

"But I didn't want it. That's what scared me the most. I wanted to stay, even after everything. Even knowing what you're capable of, what this world is capable of. I wanted to stay and build something with you."

"And now?"

I pull back to look at him, this man who has remade himself as thoroughly as he's remade my world. "Now I want my wedding. I want white roses and a cake that doesn't taste like cardboard and a dance with my husband to a song I actually know the words to."

"Then you'll have it." He kisses me softly, a promise sealed with warmth and breath and the taste of morning coffee. "All of it. Everything you want and everything you don't even know you want yet."

"What if I want something impossible?"

"Then I'll make it possible."



"What if I want something that doesn't exist?"

"Then I'll create it."

"What if I want the stars?"

"Then I'll learn to fly."

I laugh, the sound bubbling up from somewhere deep inside me, somewhere that has been quiet for too long. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm in love." He grins, and the expression transforms his entire face. "It makes men do ridiculous things."

"Good," I say, rising up on my toes to kiss him again. "I like you ridiculous."

And as Nikolai's laughter echoes through the courtyard and the morning sun warms our faces, I realize that this is what happiness feels like. Not the desperate, clinging kind that comes from finally getting what you've always wanted, but the deep, abiding kind that comes from choosing to build something beautiful with someone you love, even when the foundation is cracked and the walls are scarred.

The cage is open. It has been open all along.

And I'm choosing to stay.