



Bratva Boss's Secret Baby

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: "Get away from what's mine."

What do you do when you're mistaken for a cold-blooded killer?

Then, you're saved from a predator in a dark hallway and claimed with five words:

"Get away from what's mine."

I thought that was the end of it. One terrifying, electric moment with a handsome stranger.

I was wrong.

The next time I saw my possessive protector, he wasn't saving me.

He was kidnapping me.

He believed I was someone else, the woman who betrayed his family and murdered his brother.

He said he'd get the truth out of me.

No matter what he had to do...

But like so many men before him, he underestimated me.

I managed to escape, and for a few weeks, I was free.

Until I found out that the night we shared in his luxurious mansion left me with a secret.

One that would tie me to this obsessive billionaire Bratva boss forever.

I'm pregnant with his baby.

And once he finds me,

He's never letting go.

Total Pages (Source): 95

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

1

Sabrina

I can feel the bass in my bones as I weave between tables, balancing a tray of overpriced champagne flutes like I've done this a thousand times before... because I have. Two hours into my shift at Haus Modesto, and I'm already counting down until last call.

The dress Maya picked out for me tonight clings to every curve. It's a black number that's supposed to make me look sophisticated but mostly just makes me feel exposed. The heels are at least three inches too high, and my feet are already screaming in protest.

I get a lot of looks, but at what cost?

I'm working the VIP section tonight, which means bigger tips, but also bigger egos and wandering hands that think a hundred-dollar bottle service gives them the right to treat me like part of the entertainment.

I deliver champagne to table twelve, occupied by three investment bankers who've been here since happy hour, their ties loosened and inhibitions long gone. One of them grabs my wrist as I set down his glass, his grip sticky with sweat and entitlement. "What time do you get off, beautiful?"

I extract my wrist smoothly, keeping my smile plastered in place. "Sorry, I've got plans."

“Come on, don’t be like that. We’re having a good time here.”

“I’m sure you are.” I step back, putting distance between us. “Can I get you gentlemen anything else?”

They wave me off, already distracted by whatever crude joke one of them is telling. I turn away, releasing a shaky breath. Three years of this job, and I still haven’t perfected the art of deflecting without completely killing the mood. The mood that pays my rent.

I’m scanning the room for my next table when something makes me pause. A shift in the atmosphere. Like the yellow cloudy moment before a storm breaks.

In the far corner, where the lighting dims to almost nothing, sits a table I hadn’t noticed before, occupied by four men in suits, but they’re not like the usual clientele. These aren’t tech bros trying to impress dates or real estate agents celebrating a sale. They sit with the kind of stillness that suggests violence is always an option, even when they’re drinking thousand-dollar scotch.

The one at the head of the table commands attention without trying. In a black suit and black tie, with black hair swept back from a face that could’ve been carved from marble, he holds my attention longer than is appropriate. He’s not laughing at his companions’ conversation or checking his phone or scanning the room for entertainment.

He’s watching me.

Heat crawls up my spine, and I force myself to look away. He’s just another wealthy asshole, who thinks his money makes him interesting. I’ve served plenty of them. Yet when I steal another glance, those gray eyes are still fixed on me with an intensity that makes my heart stutter and contradicts my dismissive assessment.

I grab an empty tray from the bar and head toward the restrooms, needing a moment to collect myself. The hallway back here is dimmer and quieter, a pocket of relative calm in the chaos of the club. I lean against the wall and close my eyes, trying to shake off the feeling of being watched.

“Sabrina.”

I know that voice before I turn around. Carter Williams, a local wannabe entrepreneur, thinks owning two food trucks makes him some kind of business mogul. He’s been coming to Haus Modesto for months, always sitting at the bar, always ordering the same whiskey sour, and always trying to convince whoever will listen that he’s about to “disrupt the mobile dining industry.”

Tonight, he’s had too much to drink. I can tell by the way he’s swaying slightly, his usually perfectly styled hair mussed and his shirt untucked.

“Hey, Carter.” I keep my voice light, professional. “Having a good night?”

“Would be better if you’d finally let me take you out.” He steps closer, crowding me against the wall. “Come on, babe. You’ve been playing hard to get for months. When are you gonna give a guy a chance?”

The alcohol on his breath makes me wince, but I maintain my smile. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m not really dating anyone right now.”

“That’s not what I heard.” His hand comes up to rest against the wall beside my head. “Heard you’re just picky. Think you’re too good for a guy like me.”

“That’s not?—”

“I’ve got money, Sabrina. Real money. Not like these tech assholes throwing daddy’s

cash around. I built something from nothing.”

I try not to wrinkle my nose as his alcohol-laced breath blasts my face. “I know you did, and that’s really impressive, but?—”

His other hand lands on my waist, and I freeze. This isn’t the first time a customer has crossed the line, but something about Carter’s desperation tonight feels different. Dangerous.

“Just one date,” he says insistently, tightening his fingers. “One night, and I promise you’ll see what you’ve been missing.”

“Carter, I need you to step back.” I put my hands against his chest, trying to create distance without escalating the situation. “You’re drunk, and you’re making me uncomfortable.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Uncomfortable?” His laugh is bitter. “You walk around here in that dress, serving drinks and smiling at every guy who looks at you, but I’m making you uncomfortable?”

“Please—”

His grip shifts to my wrist, and suddenly, I’m not playing nice anymore. I’m trapped, and he’s too close, and the hallway feels like it’s shrinking around us. “Let me go, Carter.”

“You don’t know what you want. You think you do, but you don’t. Someone like me could take care of you. You wouldn’t have to work in a place like this anymore, dressed like a slut.”

Before I can respond, shove him away, scream, or do any of the things racing through my mind, a shadow falls across us.

“You need to get away from what’s mine.”

The voice is quiet and controlled, with just the faintest hint of an accent. Russian, maybe. Carter’s head snaps up, and his grip on my wrist loosens as he takes in the man standing behind him.

It’s him. The man in black from the corner table. Up close, he’s even more imposing—easily six-four, with shoulders that strain against his expensive suit and eyes like winter storms. He doesn’t look angry. He doesn’t look anything at all, which somehow makes him more terrifying than if he’d been shouting.

“What the hell—” Carter starts, but the words die in his throat when those gray eyes land on him.

“I said step away.” There’s no threat in the words. No raised voice or clenched fists. Just a simple statement delivered with the kind of quiet authority that suggests this man is used to being obeyed.

Carter releases my wrist like I’ve burned him, stumbling backward. “Look, man, this doesn’t concern you. We’re just chatting here.”

“No. You were leaving.”

It’s not a suggestion. Carter must hear it too, because he straightens his shirt and mutters something under his breath, probably a curse, though I can’t make it out. He shoots me one last look, wounded and resentful, before disappearing back into the main club.

I expect the stranger to follow suit, to return to his table now that the situation is handled. Instead, he steps closer, and I become acutely aware that I’ve simply traded one problem for another.

He touches the spot where Carter grabbed my wrist, curling his fingers around the same spot with a gentleness that surprises me. His touch is warm, calm, and completely different from Carter’s desperate grabbing. “Are you hurt?” he asks.

I should pull away as I thank him and walk back to work while pretending this never happened. Instead, I study his face, noting the sharp line of his jaw, the way his dark hair is perfectly styled despite the heated situation, and the small scar that cuts through his left eyebrow.

“I’m fine.” The words come out breathier than I intended. “Thank you.”

He doesn't release my wrist. Instead, he traces his thumb across my pulse point, and I wonder if he can feel how fast my heart is beating.

"What's mine," I repeat, finding my voice. "That's what you said to him. What's mine."

His mouth curves into something that's not quite a smile. "Did I?"

"I don't belong to anyone."

"No?" He studies me with those unsettling gray eyes, like he's reading something in my face that I don't even know is there. "Interesting."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he releases my wrist and steps back, and I immediately miss the warmth of his touch.

"Enjoy the rest of your evening," he says, and then he's gone, melting back into the crowd like he was never there at all.

I stand in the hallway for a long moment, my wrist tingling where he touched it, trying to process what just happened. A stranger intervened when Carter got handsy. That part makes sense. Men like him, wealthy and powerful, probably consider the entire club their territory, but the way he looked at me, like he knew me. Like he'd been waiting for me... That was unsettling.

I shake my head and return to the main floor, grabbing my tray and diving back into the rhythm of work. Table fourteen needs another round, and table nine is ready for their check. These are normal, manageable things.

When I risk a glance toward the corner table, he's still there and still watching me with that same intense focus that makes my skin feel too tight and my breath catch in my throat.

I deliver drinks and clear tables and smile at customers, but I'm hyperaware of his presence. Every time I move through his line of sight, I feel his attention like a physical touch. It should make me uncomfortable and want to hide in the back until his group leaves.

Instead, it makes me want to walk over there and demand to know what game he's playing.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

When Maya calls last call, I'm both relieved and disappointed. The stranger and his companions settle their tab—a number that makes my eyes widen when I catch a glimpse of the receipt—and file toward the exit. I busy myself with closing duties, wiping down tables and stacking chairs, while trying unsuccessfully not to watch him leave.

At the door, he pauses and turns back. Our gazes meet across the room, and for a moment, everything else fades away. It's just him and me and the strange electricity that's been crackling between us all night.

Then he's gone, and I'm left standing in the middle of an emptying nightclub, wondering if I imagined the whole thing.

"Earth to Sabrina." Jessie appears at my elbow, her own closing duties finished. "You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Just tired," I lie, stacking the last of the chairs onto a table. "Long night."

"Carter giving you trouble again?"

I consider telling her about the incident in the hallway, but something stops me. Maybe it's the memory of warm fingers on my wrist, or the way the stranger looked at me like he could see straight through to my soul. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

She studies my face for a moment, clearly not buying it, but she doesn't push. "Come on. Let's get out of here. I'll drive you home."

As we walk toward the employee exit, I worry that tonight changed something. I'm concerned the man in black didn't just intervene in a bad situation but set something in motion that I'm not prepared to handle. It's a paranoid thought that I can't dispel.

I tell myself I'm being dramatic. He was just another wealthy customer, who happened to be in the right place at the right time. The intensity I felt was just adrenaline from the confrontation with Carter, but as Jessie's car pulls away from Haus Modesto, I look in the side mirror, half-expecting to see a black SUV following us into the night.

There's nothing there except empty streets and the distant glow of city lights.

It still feels like he's watching me somehow. The hollow ache in the bottom of my stomach tells me whatever this is, it's far from over.

Back at the apartment, I kick off my heels with a groan of relief and collapse onto our secondhand couch. Jessie disappears into the kitchen, returning with two glasses of wine. It's just cheap stuff from the corner store, but it does the job.

"Okay, spill," she says, settling beside me and tucking her legs under her. "And don't tell me it was just Carter being his usual creepy self. You've been weird all night."

I take a sip of wine, buying myself time. How do I explain the way my skin felt electric every time his gaze found me? How do I describe the way my pulse jumped when he touched my wrist, or the strange certainty that he knows something about me that I don't even know myself?

"There was this guy," I finally say. "At table seven. He... intervened when Carter got handsy."

"Good. It's about time someone put that asshole in his place." Jessie's expression

darkens. “What did he do?”

“Nothing violent. He just told him to back off.” I run my finger around the rim of my wine glass. “There was something about him and the way he looked at me, like he was...”

When I don’t finish, she prompts, “Like he was what?”

“Like he was waiting for me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Waiting for you? Sabrina, you’ve never seen this guy before in your life, right?”

“Right. That’s what makes it so strange.” I lean back against the couch cushions, closing my eyes. “Maybe I’m overthinking it. Maybe he was just being a decent human being.”

Even as I say it, I know instinctively that’s not the whole truth. Decent human beings don’t claim ownership of strangers. They don’t look at you like they can see every secret you’ve ever kept. They don’t make you want to follow them into the dark.

2

Nikandr

I hadn’t intended to act tonight. The plan was simple observation and a quiet assessment of the rumor that had reached my ears three weeks ago through carefully cultivated channels. The woman who vanished with Vadim Morozov’s secrets, who may have helped orchestrate my brother’s murder ten years ago, had resurfaced.

I expected shadows and whispers and carefully gathered intelligence that would lead

me to her hideout or safe house. I didn't expect to find her here, in this city, working the floor of an upscale nightclub like a goddess pretending to be ordinary.

But it's her. Every detail aligns perfectly with the description burned into my memory of the face that launched a thousand betrayals, the voice that could convince saints to sin, and the way men orbit around her like she's a gravity well they can't escape. Even now, watching her weave between tables with practiced grace, I see the effect she has on every male in her vicinity.

Irina Volkov. I've never seen her prior to tonight, but it has to be her.

We're at another club now, though. It's open later, and my night tend to go all the way until morning.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“What was that about earlier?” Maksim asks, and I know he’s talking about the girl.

“Just a drunk getting handsy with staff,” I say, reaching for my drink. The scotch burns down my throat, but it does nothing to wash away the taste of confusion that’s coating my tongue.

Maksim’s dark eyes narrow. “And you felt the need to intervene because...?”

“Because I don’t like watching women get assaulted in establishments where I’m conducting business.”

It’s a reasonable explanation and the kind of thing the old me might have said, but Maksim has known me too long to buy it completely. “This is about the Volkov woman.”

It’s not a question. He’s been my second-in-command for eight years, and he can read me better than anyone else alive. “Possibly.”

“Nikandr.” His voice carries a warning. “If that’s her, she’s the enemy. If it’s not her, she’s a civilian who doesn’t deserve to get caught in the crossfire of our war with Morozov.”

“I’m aware of the variables.”

He shakes his head. “Are you? Because from where I’m sitting, it looks like you just claimed ownership of a woman you’ve been watching for three hours.”

The accuracy of his observation irritates me. “I said what I needed to say to get Williams to back off. We’re not there anymore. We left her alone for the night, and I think that’s fair.”

He arches a brow. “You could have accomplished the same thing by taking the bastard with us when we left. Could’ve taken care of him the old fashioned way, without talking to the girl.”

I flash a quick smile. “Too messy. Too public. Besides, I wanted to see her up close to know for sure that it’s her.”

Maksim doesn’t look convinced, but he doesn’t push further. Smart man. He knows when I’ve reached the limits of what I’m willing to discuss, especially in a public setting.

For the rest of the evening, I force myself to focus on the conversation at our table while my mind threatens to wander too far with a woman I shouldn’t be so attracted to. She’s dangerous, able to strike like a viper, but her lips are soft and her eyes are innocent.

I bet that’s how she gets them. Innocent eyes. It’s hard not to believe every word she says.

When the bartender announces last call, I settle our tab and lead my men toward the exit.

We walk out into the cool night air, where Maksim is already waiting beside our SUV.

“We need to talk,” he says without preamble.

“Not here.” I slide into the back seat and give the driver an address across town. “My office. Twenty minutes.”

The ride passes in silence, but I can feel Maksim’s disapproval radiating from the seat beside me like heat from a furnace. He’s right to be concerned. In our line of work, emotional involvement is a luxury that gets people killed.

Despite that, I can’t forget her expression when I touched her wrist, or the way her eyes widened with something that looked remarkably like wonder. If she’s Irina Volkov, she’s the most accomplished actress I’ve ever encountered. If she’s not...

If she’s not, then I’ve just inserted myself into the life of an innocent woman based on nothing more than a resemblance to someone who destroyed my family. The thought should horrify me. Instead, it makes me want to know everything about her, including her real name, her history, and what she dreams about when she falls asleep in whatever small apartment she can afford on a bottle service salary.

At my office, Maksim pours himself vodka and settles into the chair across from my desk.

Before he can speak, I say, “Did you get surveillance on the club? Video, audio... The works?”

“It’s in progress. I contacted our source there before we left. He’ll have everything installed by Thursday.”

Of course, he did. Maksim thinks three steps ahead on his worst day. It’s what makes him invaluable and occasionally insufferable.

“What else?” He sips the vodka slowly.

“I want everything we can dig up on every employee. Full background checks, financial records, and social media presence. Everything, including her.” I don’t have to identify who ‘her’ is.

He snorts. “You mean especially her. What are you going to do if she turns out to be exactly who we think she is?”

The question hangs in the air. If she’s Irina Volkov, she’s the key to ending Vadim’s operation, getting justice for my brother’s murder, and bringing down half the criminal enterprises on the West Coast with the knowledge in her head.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

If she's Irina Volkov, she's also the most dangerous woman I've ever met, and touching her tonight was the equivalent of playing Russian roulette with a fully loaded chamber.

Without hesitation, I say, "Then we proceed as planned."

"And if she's not?"

"Then we have a problem."

Maksim's laugh is harsh. "We? No, my friend. You have a problem. The rest of us will be smart enough to walk away."

He's right, of course. He's almost always right, which is why I've kept him close all these years despite his occasional tendency toward brutal honesty.

"Pull the old surveillance footage from the club," I say with a glare. "Everything they have going back six months. I want to study her patterns, her interactions... everything."

"Nikandr." There's warning in his voice again. "Whatever you're thinking, remember we have a job to do. Morozov has been quiet too long, which means he's planning something. We can't afford distractions."

"I understand the stakes."

He doesn't hide his skepticism. "Do you? Because from where I'm sitting, it looks

like you're about to risk everything we've built on a woman who may or may not be the key to our revenge."

I lean back in my chair and close my eyes, letting his words settle over me, accepting his assessment is accurate. Everything I've worked for over the past decade, every sacrifice I've made, and every line I've crossed in pursuit of justice for my brother's murder hinges on making smart decisions.

Yet when I remember the way she looked at me tonight, the genuine confusion in her eyes when I claimed her as mine, I don't know how to forget about her if she isn't Irina. "Set up the surveillance. We'll figure out everything else as we go."

Maksim drains his vodka and stands. "Famous last words."

After he leaves, I pour myself a drink and walk to the window overlooking the city. Somewhere out there, she's probably getting ready for bed, washing off her makeup and slipping into whatever she wears to sleep. The thought makes my jaw clench with an emotion that feels suspiciously like longing.

I pull out my phone and scroll through the preliminary information Maksim's contacts at the club provided earlier. She's living as Sabrina Clyde, twenty-six years old, and employed at Haus Modesto for three years. She lives in a modest apartment across town with a roommate named Jessica Witman. She has no criminal record, no suspicious financial activity, and no red flags that would indicate she's anything other than what she appears to be.

But appearances can be deceiving, especially in my world. The smartest predators are often the ones who look the most innocent.

I finish my drink and head home to an empty penthouse that suddenly feels more isolated than usual. Tomorrow, I'll start watching the surveillance footage. I'll look

for inconsistencies in her story, tells that might give away her true identity, or any sign that she recognizes me as more than just another wealthy customer.

I honestly don't know if I hope that she's Irina or pray she's not.

3

Sabrina

Later in the evening, while trying not to think about the mystery man at the club who rescued me earlier, I'm sitting cross-legged on our threadbare carpet, surrounded by a sea of paperwork that represents everything wrong with the American healthcare system, studying the latest bill from Mercy General. The envelope is thin, which gives me false hope until I tear it open and see the amount printed in unforgiving black ink.

Twelve thousand, four hundred and sixty-seven dollars.

The insurance company has decided, three years after my mother's death, that certain treatments weren't "medically necessary" and they're retroactively denying coverage. The letter uses phrases like "upon further review" and "administrative adjustment" to mask what amounts to corporate theft, but the bottom line is clear—they want their money back, and they want it from me.

"Another love letter from the medical-industrial complex?" asks Jessie from across the room, where she's folding laundry. She's handling this better than I am.

"They're saying Mom's pain medication wasn't necessary for her treatment plan." I scan the dense paragraphs of medical jargon and legal terminology. "Apparently, dying of stomach cancer doesn't qualify as sufficient justification for morphine."

She stops folding and looks at me with the expression she reserves for moments when she's trying very hard not to say something that will make me cry. "What does your lawyer say?"

"I can't afford a lawyer, and they know it." I set down the letter and lean back against the couch. "The whole system is designed to wear people down until they give up and pay whatever they're told to pay."

"Have you tried calling your father again?"

I snort softly. My father, David Clyde, owns three car dealerships across central California and lives in a house that could fit our entire apartment complex in its backyard. He also hasn't spoken to me since my mother's funeral, where he showed up for exactly long enough to make an appearance before disappearing back to his new family and his new life.

"He's not going to help," I say, because that's easier than explaining I called him twice this week and his secretary told me he was "unavailable" both times. "He made his position clear when Mom got sick."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

Jessie's jaw tightens in a way that suggests she has opinions about my father she's keeping to herself for my sake. She needn't bother, because I have the exact same opinions of my deadbeat, absent sperm donor. "So what's the plan?"

"Same as always. I'll pick up more shifts and hope I can pay them off before they send it to collections." I gather the papers into a neat stack and slide them back into their folder. "Maya said she might have some extra VIP shifts available this week."

"Sabrina." Jessie's voice carries the kind of gentle firmness that means she's about to say something I don't want to hear. "You're already working six nights a week. When do you sleep? When do you eat actual meals instead of whatever the kitchen staff leaves out?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You're running yourself into the ground trying to pay off debt that isn't even legally yours."

"It was my mother's debt, which makes it mine now." The words come out sharper than I intended, but I'm tired of having this conversation. "It's the principle of the thing."

She sets down the shirt she was folding and comes to sit beside me on the floor. "Your mom wouldn't want you to sacrifice your entire life to pay off medical bills that the insurance company should have covered in the first place."

I stiffen. "My mom isn't here to tell me what she wants."

The words are heavy with the kind of grief that never quite fades even after three years. Jessie doesn't try to argue with that logic because she knows it's not really about logic. It's about guilt and love and the desperate need to do something, anything, that honors the woman who raised me alone after my father decided we weren't worth the inconvenience.

"I'm going to take a shower," I say, standing up and stretching muscles that have been cramped from sitting on the floor too long. "Early shift tomorrow."

She watches me with something akin to sadness but doesn't try to argue with me again. I appreciate that, because it's hard enough to stay the course I've set without people encouraging me to stop, even my BFF.

The next evening at Haus Modesto, I'm two hours into what promises to be a relatively quiet Wednesday night when I notice him again. He's sitting at a different table this time, closer to the bar and with a clear sightline to every entrance and exit in the place. The positioning feels deliberate, like he's a chess player who's thinking several moves ahead.

Tonight, he's alone.

There's no entourage of dangerous-looking men in expensive suits or business associates sharing drinks and conversation. It's just him, nursing what looks like the same glass of scotch he ordered an hour ago and watching me with that same unsettling intensity that made my skin feel electric last night.

I deliver champagne to table six and try to ignore the way my pulse quickens every time I move through his line of sight. The rational part of my brain keeps insisting he's just another wealthy customer who is returning to the club, but rational thinking has never been my strong suit when it comes to men who look like they could bench press a motorcycle and probably have.

Maya catches me during a lull between orders. “You know that guy at table twelve has been asking about you.”

My stomach does something complicated. “Asking what?”

“Whether you work here regularly, what your schedule is like... The usual creepy rich guy stuff.” She shrugs like this is nothing unusual, which in our line of work, it isn’t. “I told him to talk to you directly if he wants to know something.”

“Thanks.” I grab a tray of empty glasses and head toward the bar, acutely aware I’m now walking directly past his table.

He doesn’t say anything as I pass. I tense, but he doesn’t reach out to stop me or make some comment designed to get my attention. He just watches me with those winter-storm eyes and something that might be amusement playing at the corners of his mouth.

By the time my break comes around, my nerves are stretched so tightly I feel like I might snap if someone looks at me wrong. I need air and space and five minutes where I’m not hyperaware of every move I make.

The back alley behind Haus Modesto isn’t much to look at, but it’s quiet and relatively clean, and most importantly, it’s away from the noise of the club. I lean against the brick wall and close my eyes, letting the cool night air wash over my overheated skin.

The first thing I notice is how quiet it is back here with no thumping bass, no conversation, and no clinking of glasses or laughter from the bar. Just the distant hum of traffic and the occasional car passing on the street beyond the alley.

The second thing I notice is that I’m not alone.

I don't hear footsteps or see movement in my peripheral vision. It's more instinctual than that, the primitive part of my brain that evolved to keep our ancestors alive in a world full of predators suddenly screams something is wrong.

I open my eyes and start to turn around, but I'm already too late.

A hand clamps over my mouth from behind, cutting off the scream that was building in my throat. Another arm wraps around my waist, pinning my arms to my sides and lifting me off my feet with an ease that suggests my attacker is both larger and stronger than me.

I try to bite the hand covering my mouth, but thick gloves prevent my teeth from finding purchase. I try to kick backward, but my heels are designed for looks, not self-defense, and my legs are pinned at an angle that makes it impossible to generate any real force.

Panic floods my system like ice water, sharp and cold and completely overwhelming. This isn't happening. This can't be happening. Things like this don't happen to people like me in places like this.

Even as my mind rebels against the reality of the situation, my body is already shutting down. The hand over my mouth isn't just preventing me from screaming. It's also making it hard to breathe. The arm around my waist is cutting off circulation to my legs, and the awkward angle at which I'm being held is putting strain on muscles that weren't designed for this kind of stress.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I try to struggle, fight back, or do any of the things that women are supposed to do when they find themselves in situations like this, but the truth is that all the self-defense classes in the world didn't prepare me for the reality of being overpowered by someone who's bigger, stronger, and clearly more experienced at this kind of violence than I am.

The last thing I see before everything goes dark is the brick wall of the alley spinning away from me as my attacker carries me toward what I assume is a waiting vehicle. The last thing I think is that I should have listened to Jessie when she told me to be more careful about working late shifts alone.

The last thing I feel is a sharp pinch in my neck, like a bee sting, followed by a warmth that spreads through my veins like honey.

Then nothing.

4

Nikandr

Sabrina is awake when we reach the safehouse, wide-eyed, furious, and fighting every second of it. The sedative has worn off enough for her to be fully conscious, but she's unsteady on her feet, and there's a thunderous headache written across her features. She tried to fight Viktor when he helped her from the car, nearly landing a solid kick to his ribs before I intervened.

I steady her with a hand on her elbow that she immediately tries to shake off. "Easy."

The converted boutique hotel rises before us through the trees, all natural stone and elegant lines that suggest wealth rather than the fortress it actually is. It's designed to look like a wealthy businessman's weekend retreat, and the deception has served us well over the years. Security measures are built into every inch of the property, from bulletproof glass to motion sensors hidden among the landscaping.

Viktor pulls into the circular driveway, and through the windshield, I see Maksim waiting near the entrance with the expression he reserves for moments when he thinks I've made a catastrophically bad decision. His arms are crossed, his posture rigid, and even from this distance, I feel his disapproval.

She doesn't resist when I help her walk from the SUV, but I can feel the tension coiled in her muscles like a spring under pressure. She lost her shoes in the process of subduing her and bringing her to the SUV back at the club. Her bare feet are already dirty from the ground, and she's lost one of her earrings somewhere. She's calculating distance to the tree line, memorizing the layout of the driveway, and looking for anything that might give her an advantage if she decides to run.

Smart woman. Unfortunately for her, I've thought of everything she's thinking of and quite a few things she hasn't. The property is surrounded by motion sensors, and the nearest road is miles away through dense forest that would be nearly impossible to navigate in the dark.

Maksim approaches us with a controlled fury in his posture. His expression flashes with irritation at the situation I've created. "We need to talk."

I nod toward the building. "After I get her settled."

He glances to the woman beside me, taking in her disheveled appearance and the way she's holding herself like she's ready to fight or flee at a moment's notice. "This wasn't the plan."

I keep walking toward the entrance. “Plans change.”

He falls into step beside me, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Not like this they don’t.”

She’s clearly listening to every word of our exchange, filing away information for future use. It occurs to me that bringing her here might have been a mistake, but it’s too late for second thoughts now. The decision was made the moment I saw her in that alley, the moment every instinct I’ve developed over thirty-four years of survival screamed she was the key to everything.

“What do you want? Why have you kidnapped me?”

The fury in her voice as she demands answers cuts deeper than any weapon might. She’s not crying or begging like most people would in her situation. Instead, she’s watching everything with calculating intelligence that makes me wonder if I’ve underestimated her completely.

Her voice is hoarse but steady, with an undertone of steel that suggests she’s not going to break easily, asking new questions when I don’t answer the first round. “Where the hell am I? What do you want from me?”

I don’t reply immediately. Not yet. First, I need to get her somewhere secure, where we can have a proper conversation without Maksim’s disapproval and without the risk of other staff members overhearing details they don’t need to know.

The interior of the safehouse maintains the upscale hotel aesthetic that provides perfect cover for our operations. The marble floors were imported from Italy, tasteful artwork adorns the walls and silk wallpaper, and the furniture implies wealth without being overly flashy. The lobby area features a reception desk that’s usually unmanned but equipped with surveillance equipment that would make government facilities

jealous.

She takes it all in with the kind of wide-eyed appreciation that suggests she's not used to this level of luxury, which is another mark in the "not Irina Volkov" column. Irina grew up in wealth and privilege before she chose to throw it all away for ideology and revenge. This woman's reaction to expensive surroundings feels genuine in a way that would be difficult to fake.

But then again, Irina is tricky. I can't be too careful.

I lead her down a hallway lined with doors that look identical but serve very different purposes. Some are guest suites designed for extended stays, others are interrogation rooms equipped with soundproofing and restraints, and a few contain equipment that most people would prefer not to think about. The carpeting is thick enough to muffle footsteps, and the lighting is designed to be both elegant and functional.

The suite I've chosen for her is on the second floor, far enough from the main operations areas to provide some privacy but close enough that she'll never be truly alone. The keycard system ensures every entry and exit is logged, and the hallway is monitored by cameras that are invisible unless you know where to look.

I slide the keycard through the electronic lock and push open the door, revealing a space that could easily pass for a high-end hotel room if you don't notice the reinforced walls or know the bulletproof windows don't open. The room is decorated in warm neutrals with touches of gold.

I step aside so she can enter. "This is where you'll be staying."

She moves into the room cautiously, her bare feet silent on the plush carpet. The space is larger than most apartments, with a sitting area that includes a leather sofa and matching armchair, a king-sized bed with Egyptian cotton sheets, and an

ornate bathroom. Fresh flowers sit on the side table, and there's a basket of expensive toiletries waiting in the bathroom.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

Her voice carries bitter resignation mixed with growing anger. “Staying? You mean this is where you’ll be keeping me prisoner.”

I cross my arms and lean against the doorframe, studying her reaction to the surroundings. “I prefer to think of it as protective custody.”

She whirls around to face me, and there’s fire in her expression that reminds me of why I was drawn to her in the first place. “Protective custody? You kidnapped me from behind the club and drugged me unconscious.”

She’s not wrong, and we both know it. There’s no point in pretending this was anything other than what it was, an impulsive decision made in a moment when instinct overrode everything else, and the possibility that she might be Irina Volkov became more important than protocol or common sense.

I keep my voice level and controlled. “You were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Her laugh is harsh and bitter. “Wrong place? I was taking a break from work. In an alley behind the club where I’ve worked for three years.”

“Wrong time,” I repeat, studying her face carefully for any micro-expression that might give her away.

She backs toward the window, putting distance between us. “Wrong time for what? What exactly do you think I am?”

I reach into my jacket and pull out a photograph I've been carrying for the past week. It's grainy and ten years old, but there's resemblance is unmistakable. "I think you might be someone who's been missing for a very long time."

The woman in the photograph has the same honey-blond hair, similar enough bone structure that the differences can be explained with plastic surgery, and the same full lips that beg for kisses. Yet there's something harder in her expression, something calculated, that's completely absent from the woman standing in front of me.

I hold out the photo and watch her face carefully as she takes it. "This woman's name is Irina Volkov. She disappeared ten years ago with information that got my brother killed."

Sabrina stares at the photograph for a long moment, her face going pale as she processes what I'm telling her. Then she looks up at me with an expression that's equal parts confusion and horror. "You think I'm her?"

I keep my voice steady. "The resemblance is remarkable."

She hands the photograph back to me with hands that are trembling slightly. "I'm not her. I've never seen this woman before in my life."

I take the photo and slip it back into my jacket. "Are you sure about that?"

Her voice rises with stress and disbelief. "Of course, I'm sure. I would remember if I'd lived another life under a different name, or met someone who looks so much like me."

I arch a brow. "Memory can be unreliable."

She backs against the window, pressing her shoulders to the glass. "Not that

unreliable. This is insane. You kidnapped me because I look like someone you're looking for?"

I move closer, stopping just outside arm's reach. "Among other reasons."

Her voice gets sharper. "What other reasons?"

"You work in a place that attracts a certain type of clientele. The kind of people who might have information about dangerous things. You could still be useful."

She shakes her head rapidly. "I serve drinks and make small talk. I don't interrogate customers about their criminal enterprises."

I tilt my head. "But you listen and observe. You're in a position to overhear things that most people never would."

She looks around the room as if searching for an escape route. "This is crazy. You're crazy if you think I'm some kind of spy or informant."

I settle into the chair across from the bed, making it clear this conversation is going to continue whether she likes it or not. "Then prove it."

Her voice cracks slightly. "How exactly am I supposed to prove I'm not someone else?"

"Start by answering my questions honestly."

For the next hour, I probe for inconsistencies while she answers every question with the kind of detail that suggests she's either telling the truth, or she's had years to perfect her cover story. She tells me about surface details about her childhood in Modesto, her mother's death from cancer, her father's abandonment, and her

struggles to pay off medical debt that isn't legally hers. It's clear she's keeping details to herself, but it feels like she's trying to protect herself, not lie to me.

I ask about her first job at a coffee shop near campus, the manager who stole tips, and her time at Olive Garden before she started working at the club. She provides names, dates, and specific details about coworkers, customers, and daily routines that would be nearly impossible to fabricate convincingly.

Each answer builds on the last, creating a web of small details that feels authentic in a way professional cover stories rarely do. Either Sabrina Clyde is exactly who she claims to be, or she's the most thoroughly prepared operative I've ever encountered.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

The conversation reveals a woman who's been fighting to survive on her own since she was eighteen, who dropped out of college to care for a dying mother, and who's been carrying debt that destroyed her family long before she was old enough to understand what medical bills could do to a person's life.

A soft knock at the door interrupts us. Maksim enters without waiting for permission, his expression grim. He looks between us before addressing me. "We need to talk." He says it more firmly this time.

I look at Sabrina, who's watching our exchange with attention that suggests she's trying to piece together information from context clues. Her exhaustion is finally showing as the adrenaline that's been carrying her through the night starts to fade.

"We'll continue this later," I say.

She moves to sit on the edge of the bed, her shoulders sagging with fatigue. "Lucky me."

I follow Maksim out into the hallway, making sure to lock the door behind me. The electronic keycard system means she's secure but not uncomfortable, which is exactly the balance I'm trying to strike.

Maksim crosses his arms and leans against the wall. "So, what's your assessment?"

I ponder a moment before answering. "She's either innocent little Sabrina, or she's damn good at telling lies."

“Which do you think is more likely?”

That’s the question I’ve been avoiding for the past hour because I don’t like the answer, but I grit my teeth and respond anyway. “I think we took the wrong woman.”

“We?” he asks pointedly. His expression doesn’t change, but there’s concern in his posture. “If that’s true, we have a civilian who can identify all of us and knows the location of this facility.”

I flinch. In our world, witnesses are loose ends, and loose ends get people killed. “She’s not a threat, and she slept for most of the drive up here. She doesn’t know anything about where we are or even really how we are.”

He scoffs, shaking his head. “She’s seen your face, Nikandr. She knows you kidnapped her. She can place you at the club on at least two occasions. How is that not a threat?”

I turn away from him and look back toward the door, where she’s probably listening to every word we’re saying. “Because she still doesn’t know anything about us. We don’t have to be seen by her again.”

“Yet, but how long do you think it will take her to figure it out once she gets back to her normal life? She’ll report all of this to the police, and they certainly know who we are.”

The smart thing would be to eliminate the problem before it becomes a bigger problem. The safe thing would be to make sure she never has the chance to tell anyone what happened tonight, but the thought of harming her makes something cold and violent coil in my chest, and not in the way that usually motivates me to action. “We’re not killing an innocent woman.”

He lets out a harsh sigh. “Then what exactly are you proposing we do with her?”

“I need more time to determine if she really is innocent.”

Maksim pushes away from the wall and moves closer, lowering his voice. “How much more time?”

I toss out a number before I can overthink it, which isn’t like me at all. “Forty-eight hours. If I can’t determine her true identity by then, we’ll discuss other options.”

He studies my face with the expression of someone who’s known me long enough to read between the lines. “Forty-eight hours, huh? What if she turns out to be exactly who she claims to be?”

I hesitate. “We’ll figure out how to handle the situation without anyone getting hurt.”

“And if she’s Irina Volkov?”

This time, I reply immediately. “Then we proceed as planned.”

Maksim studies my face for a moment longer, then turns and walks back toward the elevator. “Forty-eight hours, Nikandr. After that, this becomes a business decision instead of a personal one.”

After he’s gone, I return to my own suite and spread the Irina Volkov files across the desk, staring at the photographs, surveillance reports, and intelligence gathered from a dozen different sources over the past ten years. Everything I have on the woman who helped orchestrate my brother’s murder is spread before me.

The resemblance between Irina and Sabrina is undeniable, but resemblance isn’t evidence. The more time I spend with Sabrina, the more I’m convinced that she was

in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I got a little too hasty and emotional.

But doubt is a luxury I can't afford, especially when the stakes are this high. Tomorrow, I'll begin the process of verifying every detail of her story. I'll call in favors, access databases, and trace her life back to the day she was born if necessary. If she's innocent, I'll find a way to let her go without compromising our security or putting her in danger.

If she's not innocent, if she really is Irina Volkov living under an assumed identity, everything changes.

I look at the photograph of Irina one more time, studying the face that has haunted my dreams for a decade. Somewhere out there, the real Irina is probably living under another identity, safe from the consequences of her choices while my brother's killer remains free, but maybe not. I have a woman who might be her locked in a room down the hall, and I have forty-eight hours to determine if Sabrina is also Irina.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I pour myself a glass of vodka and settle in for what promises to be a very long forty-eight hours.

5

Sabrina

The suite is gorgeous, but it's sterile in the way that expensive hotel rooms always are. Everything is perfectly arranged, from the fresh flowers on the side table to the stack of fluffy towels in the bathroom, but there's no warmth here. No personality.

It's a beautiful cage, and I'm the bird trapped inside.

The lock clicks my captor, and the sound echoes through the room like a gunshot. I wait, listening for footsteps in the hallway, but the carpeting is too thick to hear anything beyond the door. The silence that follows is deafening.

I sink onto the edge of the bed, my legs finally giving out as the adrenaline that's been carrying me through this nightmare starts to fade. The Egyptian cotton sheets are softer than anything I've ever owned, but they might as well be sandpaper for all the comfort they provide. This isn't a guest room. This is a prison cell dressed up in designer furnishings.

My head throbs, and the injection site is still tender. My mouth tastes like copper and fear, making me suspect I bit myself at some point during the abduction or unconscious period afterward. I touch the spot on my neck gingerly, wincing when my fingers find the small puncture wound. Whatever he used to knock me out is still

making me dizzy, and every time I move too quickly, the room spins.

I need to think. I need to figure out what the hell is happening to me and how to get out of here alive.

The man who brought me here thinks I'm someone named Irina Volkov, a woman who disappeared ten years ago with information that got his brother killed. The resemblance is notable, but I've never seen that woman's face before in my life. I would remember. You don't forget something like that.

He doesn't believe me, of course. That much was clear from the way he questioned me, probing for inconsistencies in my story like he was expecting me to slip up and reveal my true identity. The problem is that my true identity is exactly what I told him—Sabrina Clyde, twenty-six years old, from Modesto, California. I'm a woman drowning in medical debt and working at a nightclub to keep her head above water.

There's nothing particularly exciting about me, and I'm definitely not worth kidnapping.

The sitting area has a leather sofa that's buttery soft, and a stack of windows offering a peaceful view of the mountains and forest.

I walk over to test the glass, pressing my palms against the cool surface. It doesn't budge. The windows are sealed, and the glass is thick enough that I suspect it's bulletproof.

So much for an easy escape.

I examine the rest of the room, looking for anything that might help me get the hell out of here, or at least understand what I'm dealing with. The bathroom is stocked with expensive toiletries and thick towels, but there's nothing that could be used as a

weapon. The furniture is too heavy to move, and everything breakable has been removed or secured.

He's thought of everything.

A soft knock at the door makes me freeze. I back away from the windows, my heart galloping as I wait to see who's coming in. The lock disengages with an electronic beep, and the door opens to reveal a man I haven't seen before.

He's younger than my captor, maybe early thirties, with the kind of build indicating he spends serious time in the gym. He's carrying a tray with water, sandwiches, and what looks like soup, and he enters the room like I'm a guest instead of a prisoner.

I press myself against the far wall. "Who are you?"

He sets the tray on the coffee table without answering, then straightens and looks at me with the kind of professional detachment that's somehow more unnerving than outright hostility. This isn't personal for him. I'm just another job, another problem to be managed. "Eat something," he says finally. His voice is surprisingly gentle. "You'll feel better."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat anyway. Boss's orders."

He turns and walks back toward the door, and I realize this might be my only chance to get information from someone who isn't playing mind games with photographs and accusations.

"Wait." I take a step toward him. "What's your name?"

He pauses at the door but doesn't turn around. "Doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

"Eat the food, drink the water, and get some rest. Someone will be back to check on you later."

The door closes behind him with an electronic click, and I'm alone again. The smell of the food makes my stomach growl despite everything, reminding me I haven't eaten since starting my shift at the club. How long ago was that? Hours? Days? Time has lost all meaning in this nightmare.

I approach the tray cautiously, half-expecting the food to be drugged. I guess if they wanted me unconscious, they wouldn't need to be so subtle about it. They could just inject me with whatever they used in the alley, so my hunger overcomes my fear.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

The sandwich is turkey and Swiss on sourdough bread, and it tastes better than anything has a right to in a situation like this. The soup is tomato basil and seems homemade, while the water is cold and clean. I eat mechanically, my body demanding fuel even as my mind races through possible escape scenarios.

Looking up, I suddenly notice a small, dark circle in the corner of the room. It's positioned high up near the ceiling and camouflaged among the decorative molding, but once I spot it, I can't look away.

A camera.

They're watching me right now. They're probably recording everything I do to analyze every expression on my face and dissect every word I speak. The realization hits me like ice water, and I drop the spoon I was using for the soup. It clatters against the coffee table, sounding unnaturally loud in the silent room.

Panic floods my system, sharp and cold and overwhelming. I bolt toward the door and start pounding on it with both fists. "Let me out!" I scream, hammering against the solid wood until my hands ache. "Let me out of here right now!"

There's no response to indicate that anyone can hear me or cares I'm falling apart. I keep pounding anyway, because the alternative is to collapse on the floor and give up, and I'm not ready to do that yet. "I'm not who you think I am," I shout at the camera, turning away from the door to face the lens directly. "My name is Sabrina Clyde, and I've never heard of Irina Volkov before tonight. This is kidnapping. This is insane!"

My voice cracks on the last word, stress and exhaustion finally overwhelming the

anger that's been keeping me upright. I slide down the door until I'm sitting on the floor, my back pressed against the wood, my knees drawn up to my chest.

I don't know how long I sit there. It's long enough for the remaining food to get cold and for the shadows outside the windows to shift. I remain there long enough to cycle through anger to fear to desperation and back to anger again.

When the door finally opens, I scramble to my feet and back away, putting the coffee table between myself and whoever is entering.

It's him. My captor. The man with winter-storm eyes and the kind of stillness that suggests he has no problem using violence.

He steps into the room and closes the door behind him, then leans against it with his arms crossed. He's changed clothes since I last saw him, trading the expensive suit for dark jeans and a black sweater that makes him look less like a businessman and more like a predator. "Irina." He says the name like it means something, like it carries weight and history and pain.

The sound of it makes something cold settle in my stomach. "That's not my name."

"No?" He tilts his head slightly, studying my face with the intensity of someone trying to solve a puzzle. "Then why are you so upset?"

I gesture wildly toward the camera. "Because you're holding me prisoner. Because you drugged me and brought me to God knows where, and you're watching me like I'm some kind of lab rat."

He doesn't react to my outburst. He doesn't flinch or step back or show any sign that my words have affected him at all. He just watches me with that same unnerving stillness, like he's waiting for something specific.

“You kidnapped me,” I continue, my voice rising with each word. “You drugged me unconscious and brought me to this place and locked me in a room, and now you’re asking me why I’m upset? What kind of man does that? What kind of monster are you?”

Still nothing. No reaction, no explanation, and no sign he feels even a flicker of remorse for what he’s done to me. There’s something deeply wrong with this man.

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly aware I’m still wearing the black dress from the club. It feels like a costume now, a reminder of the life I had before this nightmare began. “I want to go home.”

“Where is home, Irina?”

The way he keeps using that name makes my skin crawl. “My name is Sabrina. Sabrina Clyde. I live in an apartment on Maple Street with my roommate, Jessica. I work at Haus Modesto serving drinks to people like you who think their money makes them untouchable.”

“People like me?”

I sneer. “Rich. Entitled. Used to getting whatever you want no matter who gets hurt in the process.”

That gets a reaction, finally. Not anger or defensiveness, but something that might be amusement flickering in those handsome gray eyes. “Is that what you think I am?”

“You kidnapped me because I look like a photo. That’s insane.”

He pushes away from the door and moves closer, and I instinctively back toward the windows. He stops when he reaches the coffee table, close enough that I can see the

small scar that cuts through his left eyebrow and smell the expensive cologne he wears. “Tell me about your mother,” he says quietly.

I stare at him in disbelief. “Are you serious? You want to ask me the same questions again?”

“I’ll ask them as many times as it takes to be satisfied they’re true.”

“Or until you’ve convinced yourself I’m Irina,” I counter, crossing my arms. “No matter what I say, you’re going to keep pushing until you hear what you want to hear. Honestly, you’re obsessed with that woman.”

“I am,” he replies flatly.

I groan. “Well, I hope you don’t have a girlfriend or wife or anything because she’d be terribly jealous of how much you talk about Irina.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

He doesn't deny it, which somehow makes everything worse. He just uses the same dispassionate tone and says, "Your mother. Tell me about her."

I don't want to talk about my mother with this man. I don't want to share anything personal with someone who's holding me prisoner, but there's something in his voice, a gentleness that wasn't there before, that makes me answer despite myself.

"She died three years ago. Cancer."

"What kind of cancer?"

"Stomach. It took two years to kill her, and every day of those two years was agony." Tears sting my eyes, and I blink them back furiously. I won't cry in front of him. I won't give him the satisfaction.

"You took care of her."

It's not a question, especially since he knows my answer from the last round of questions, but I nod anyway. "Someone had to. My father certainly wasn't going to do it."

"Where is your father now?"

I tense, gnashing my teeth as instinctive anger floods me, directed purely at my father. "Living his best life with his new family. He has money, you know. Plenty of money. He just didn't want to spend it on us."

He's quiet for a moment, processing this information. "The medical bills."

"Twelve thousand dollars and counting. The insurance company decided three years after the fact that her pain medication wasn't necessary." I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "Apparently, dying of cancer doesn't qualify as sufficient justification for morphine."

"So you work at the club to pay off debt that isn't legally yours." He summarizes my previous answer.

"It was my mother's debt, which makes it mine." I meet his stare directly, refusing to look away. "That's what decent people do. They take care of the people they love, even after they're gone."

Something flickers across his face, too quickly for me to identify. Pain, maybe. Or recognition. "And Irina Volkov? You're certain you've never heard that name before?"

I glare at him. "I'm certain. I would remember if I met someone who looked like me. I don't know her and didn't know she was a missing person until you told me."

"Missing person." He repeats the words slowly, like he's testing how they sound. "Is that what you think she is?"

I let out a sound of frustration. "I don't know what she is. I only know what you told me. She disappeared ten years ago with information that got your brother killed."

"My brother." His tone sharpens. "What do you think happened to my brother?"

The question feels like a trap, but I answer anyway. "How the fuck should I know? I'd guess he's dead. I think someone killed him, and you blame this Irina woman for

it.”

“And what do you think I plan to do when I find her?”

The temperature in the room seems to drop ten degrees. “I think you plan to kill her.” I shiver as I say the words.

He doesn’t confirm or deny it. He just watches me, and I realize I’m standing in a room with a man who’s killed before and will kill again. The knowledge sits in my stomach like a stone. “Are you going to kill me?” The question comes out softly.

He’s quiet for so long that I start to think he’s not going to answer. When he finally speaks, his voice is soft and controlled. “I’m going to decide what to do with you once I’m sure you’re not a threat.”

I want to rage at him, but fear keeps me more subservient. I sound meeker than I’d like when I say, “I’m not a threat to anyone. I serve drinks for a living.”

“People who serve drinks hear things. See things. Remember things.”

I moisten my dry lips. “I don’t know anything. I don’t listen to those kinds of things.”

His smile lacks genuine amusement. “Maybe, or maybe you deal in the kinds of things that get people killed.”

The words linger, and I press my back against the window, as far from him as I can get in the confines of the room. Desperation seizes me, and I remember from a self-defense class that I need to humanize myself to an attacker. He already knows everything about me, but I don’t know anything about him. “What’s your name?”

He doesn’t answer.

“If you’re going to hold me prisoner, the least you can do is tell me your name.”

“No.”

I frown. “Why not?”

“Because names have power. Because once you know who I am, everything changes.”

“Everything’s already changed. You kidnapped me. You brought me here. You’re threatening to kill me if you decide I’m a threat.” My voice rises again, stress and exhaustion making it harder to control my emotions. “How exactly could things get worse?”

“Knowing who I am might mean I can’t let you go if you aren’t Irina.” With those stark words, he moves toward the door, and our conversation is apparently over. “Get some rest. We’ll talk again tomorrow.”

“Wait.” I take a step toward him, desperation making me bold. “How long are you going to keep me here?”

He pauses with his hand on the door handle. “As long as it takes.”

“As long as what takes?”

“As long as it takes for me to decide whether you’re telling the truth.”

I sigh in vexation. “I am telling the truth. I’ve been telling the truth since the moment I woke up in your SUV.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.” The words aren’t at all reassuring when delivered in that disconnected way. He opens the door, and a second later, the door closes behind him with a click, leaving me alone again. This time, the silence feels different. Heavier. More final.

I slide down the wall until I’m sitting on the floor once more and stare at the camera in the corner. Somewhere in this building, he’s probably watching me fall apart. Studying my reactions, looking for cracks in my story, or waiting for me to slip up and reveal whatever he thinks I’m hiding.

There’s nothing to reveal. I have no secret identity, no hidden agenda, and no information about missing women or dead brothers or dangerous secrets. The problem is, he doesn’t believe me. If he continues to disbelieve me, if he decides I’m lying about who I am, he’ll kill me for being Irina.

If I convince him of the truth, that I’m Sabrina, not Irina, I’m no longer a hostage. Then I’m a loose end. If he decides I know too much about his operation, this beautiful room will become my tomb.

I need to get out of here and soon before he makes his decision and I become a problem that needs to be eliminated. Right now, being Irina or Sabrina seems likely to lead to certain doom.

I stand up and walk to the windows, pressing my palms against the bulletproof glass. Jessie is probably wondering where I am. Maya might have noticed that I never came back from my break. Someone might be looking for me, but they’ll never think to look here.

I’m on my own.

The thought should terrify me, but instead, it makes something hard and determined

settle in my chest. I've been on my own before. I survived my parents' divorce, my father's abandonment, my mother's illness and death, and the financial catastrophe that followed. I've been fighting to survive since I was a child.

I can fight now.

I just need to be smart about it. I need to watch and listen and learn everything I can about this place and the people who run it. I need to find weaknesses, opportunities, and ways to turn their own security measures against them. I need to do it before my captor decides the safest thing to do is make sure I never leave this room alive.

The camera in the corner is still watching, recording everything I do and say. Let it watch. Let him see I'm not giving up, and I'm not the kind of woman who breaks easily.

Let him see I'm going to fight.

6

Nikandr

I haven't really slept except for an hour here or there. Forty-eight hours have passed since I gave Maksim the deadline, and I've spent most of them staring at the camera feed from Sabrina's room like a man possessed. I've analyzed every expression she makes, every gesture, and every inch of her body language. None of it matches what I know of Irina Volkov.

According to all my research, Irina was always aware of how her actions might be perceived. She moved through the world like an actress playing a role, every smile and laugh and tear carefully orchestrated for maximum effect. The woman on my screen is raw in a way that Irina never was, her emotions playing across her face

without filter or consideration for who might be watching.

When she discovered the camera, the panic that overtook her was genuine. When she pounded on the door and screamed, it wasn't a performance designed to elicit sympathy. It was the reaction of someone who had been pushed beyond their breaking point and was fighting back in the only way they knew how.

But I can't let go. Some part of me—the part that's been hunting Irina for ten years—refuses to accept this woman might be exactly who she claims to be. If she's not Irina, I'm back to square one. Back to chasing shadows and following leads that go nowhere. Back to living with the knowledge that my brother's killer is still out there, and the woman who made it possible is free to enjoy the life she stole from him.

The door to my office opens without a knock, and Maksim enters with the expression he's been wearing for the past two days. It's concern mixed with barely contained frustration, like he's watching me make a mistake that will get us all killed. "We need to talk."

I don't look away from the monitors. On screen, Sabrina is sitting by the window, staring out at the forest with the kind of hollow exhaustion that comes from prolonged stress. She's barely touched the food we've been bringing her, and there are dark circles under her eyes that suggest she's sleeping as poorly as I am.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“About what?” I know, of course.

“You’ve been obsessing over surveillance footage for two days instead of focusing on the actual threat we’re facing.”

I finally turn to look at him. “What threat?”

“Vadim’s been quiet too long. Our sources say he’s planning something big, something that’s going to shake up the entire West Coast operation. We should be preparing for that, not playing games with a woman who isn’t even our target.”

I frown. “You don’t know that she isn’t our target.”

Maksim moves closer to my desk, his voice dropping to the tone he uses when he’s trying very hard not to lose his temper. “Nikandr, I’ve run every background check we have access to. Sabrina Clyde is exactly who she says she is. Born in Modesto, attended community college until her mother got sick, and worked a series of low-paying jobs to make ends meet. There’s a paper trail going back twenty-six years. School records, medical records, and employment history. It’s all legitimate.”

I shake my head. “Records can be fabricated.”

“Not this thoroughly. Not this convincingly.” He leans forward, placing his hands on my desk. “She’s not Irina Volkov, which means she’s a civilian who can identify all of us.”

The implication hangs between us. In our world, civilians who know too much don’t

get to go home and pretend nothing happened. They become problems that need to be solved, permanently. “I’m aware of what she is.”

He lets out a soft snort. “Are you? Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re trying to find reasons to keep her around instead of reasons to let her go.”

The accusation hits closer to home than I’d like to admit. “Once we locate and capture the real informant, I’ll figure out how to let her go without compromising our security.”

“And how exactly do you plan to do that? She’s seen your face, Nikandr. She knows about this facility. She can place you at the club. How do you propose we solve that problem?”

I turn back to the monitors, watching her trace patterns on the window glass with her fingertip. “I’ll think of something.”

“You’ll think of something.” Maksim’s laugh is harsh. “This isn’t like you. You don’t take unnecessary risks, and you don’t let emotions cloud your judgment. What’s changed?”

I scowl at him. “Nothing’s changed.”

He shakes his head. “Everything’s changed. You kidnapped a woman based on a resemblance to a photograph, brought her to our most secure facility, and now, you’re talking about letting her go like she’s a lost puppy instead of a security risk.”

The truth is that everything has changed, but not in the way Maksim thinks. It’s not about the mission or the risk or even the resemblance to Irina. It’s about the way she looked at me when I asked about her mother, the pain in her voice when she talked about her father’s abandonment, and the stubborn strength that keeps her fighting

even when she's trapped and outnumbered.

It's about the fact I want to protect her instead of eliminate her, which is the most dangerous thing I could possibly feel right now. "She's not going anywhere until I'm satisfied she's not a threat."

Maksim studies my face for a long moment, then shakes his head. "Forty-eight hours, Nikandr. That was the deal. Time's up."

He's right, and we both know it, but I'm not ready to make that decision yet. Not ready to choose between my mission and a woman who might be exactly as innocent as she claims. "Give me more time."

"How much more time?"

"A few more days."

"A few more days for what? To convince yourself she's Irina so you can justify keeping her? Or to convince yourself she's not so you can figure out how to let her go?"

Both. Neither. I don't know anymore, and that uncertainty is eating at me like acid. I speak coldly. "Just give me more time. It's my decision to make as thepakhan."

Maksim stands and walks toward the door, then turns back to face me. "I've known you for eight years, and I've never seen you like this. Whatever you think you're doing, whatever you think you're accomplishing by keeping her here, is going to end badly for all of us. You'repakhan, but you have a duty to your men too."

After he leaves, I force myself to look away from the monitors and focus on the reports scattered across my desk. They contain intelligence about Vadim's operation,

surveillance photos from his known associates, and financial records that might give us insight into his next move.

My concentration is shot. Every few minutes, I catch myself glancing at the screen where Sabrina sits by the window, and each time I do, something tightens in my chest that has nothing to do with the mission and everything to do with the way she refuses to break despite everything I've put her through.

By evening, I decide I need to see her again. Not to interrogate her or probe for inconsistencies in her story, but to bring her food personally and maybe understand why she's gotten under my skin in a way no one has in years.

I take the elevator to the second floor and walk down the hallway to her room, carrying a tray with soup, bread, and fruit she probably won't eat. She's been refusing most of the food we brought her after her first meal.

I slide the keycard through the lock and push open the door before clipping it back to my belt. She's sitting on the bed now, her knees drawn up to her chest, and she looks up when I enter with the kind of wariness that's become her default expression around me.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“I’m not hungry,” she blurts before I have the chance to say anything.

“You haven’t eaten in twelve hours.”

“I’m not hungry,” she repeats, more firmly this time.

I set the tray on the coffee table anyway. “You need to eat something.”

“What I need is to go home.”

“That’s not an option right now.”

She unfolds herself from the bed and stands, and there’s something different in her posture—less fear and more anger, like she’s decided cowering isn’t going to get her anywhere. “How long are you going to keep me here?”

“As long as it takes.”

She lets out a genuine snarl of anger and frustration. “As long as what takes? You’ve asked me the same questions a dozen times, and my answers haven’t changed. I’m not this Irina woman. I don’t know anything about your brother or whatever information she supposedly stole. I’m nobody important.”

I move closer, drawn by the fire in her voice despite every instinct telling me to maintain distance. “Maybe that’s the problem.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Maybe I don’t want you to be nobody.” The words slip out before I can stop them, and the moment they’re in the air between us, I realize how dangerous they are. They reveal far too much about what’s really happening here.

She stares at me for a long moment, and I can see her trying to process what I just said. “You’re insane.”

“Probably.”

“You kidnapped me because you thought I was someone else, and now you’re keeping me here because you don’t want me to be nobody? Do you realize how crazy that sounds?”

“Yes.”

My honesty seems to catch her off guard. She was expecting denials or deflection, not an admission that this whole situation has spiraled beyond anything that could be considered rational.

“Then let me go.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Because you’ve seen too much. Because you know where we are and who we are and what we’re capable of. Because in my world, loose ends get people killed, and you’re the biggest loose end I’ve ever created.

I don’t say any of that. Instead, I step close enough that I can see the gold flecks in her hazel eyes and smell the faint scent of the expensive soap from her bathroom. “I

don't trust myself to let you walk away."

Something flickers in her expression. It's surprise, maybe, or recognition of the attraction that's been building between us despite the circumstances. She doesn't step back, even though she should. Every survival instinct she has should be screaming at her to put distance between us. "You're afraid I'll go to the police."

"No." I reach up and touch her cheek, and she flinches but doesn't pull away. "I'm afraid I'll never see you again."

She stares at me with wide eyes, her breathing shallow, and I can see her pulse hammering at the base of her throat.

I lean closer, drawn by something I don't understand and can't control. Her lips part slightly, and for a moment, I think she might let me kiss her. For a moment, I think she wants me to.

Then reality crashes over me.

If she's Irina, my plans for her ultimately include killing her for what she did to my brother. If she's really Sabrina, she's innocent and doesn't deserve to be dragged into my violent world.

Either way, this can't happen.

I jerk back like I've been burned and turn toward the door. "Eat the food."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Wait.” Her voice stops me before I can leave. “What’s your name?”

I pause with my hand on the door handle, every muscle in my body tense with the effort of walking away from her. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

I don’t answer. I can’t answer, because giving her my name would make this real in a way that I’m not prepared to handle. It’s not even about fear that she’ll have my name to give the police if and when I let her go. It’s about her having power over me. Hearing her say my name might break me.

I walk out and the door automatically locks behind me, putting physical distance between us even though the damage is already done. She’s gotten under my skin in a way no one has in years, and that makes her more dangerous than any enemy I’ve ever faced.

For the rest of the evening, I force myself to stay in my office and focus on work. I review intelligence reports, analyze financial data, and plan operational strategies for scenarios that might never come to pass. I tackle anything to keep my mind occupied and away from the woman locked in the room upstairs.

Thunder rumbles outside as a storm moves in from the mountains, and I welcome the distraction of weather that matches my mood. Rain begins to patter against the windows, and the wind picks up enough to rattle the glass in its frames.

For the first time in hours, I’m not checking the camera feed. I’m proving to myself I

can conquer this weird obsession and think about something other than the way she looked at me when I almost kissed her.

I'm making progress on a logistics report when my office door bursts open. Maksim stands in the doorway, his hair damp from the rain and his expression grim. "She's gone."

I flinch, but I don't respond immediately. I don't ask how or when or where she might have gone. I don't demand details or explanations or theories about what happened. I simply stand up, grab my coat and my gun from the desk drawer, and walk toward the door.

"Nikandr—" Maksim starts.

"How long?"

"Maybe an hour. The guard checked on her at nine, and she was there. When he went back at ten with a snack, the room was empty."

I check my watch. It's nearly eleven now, which means she has at least an hour's head start and probably more. In this weather and terrain, that could be the difference between finding her and losing her forever. "Any idea how she got out?"

"Security system shows the door was opened with a keycard at 9:47. She walked right out."

The words jerk me to a halt. "Whose keycard?"

Maksim's expression grows darker. "About that..."

I think back to my visit to her room and the way she touched my arm when I leaned

close, the moment when I almost kissed her and lost all sense of professional distance. Her hand brushed my hip when I pulled back. I touch my belt, and my blood turns cold. There should be a keycard clipped to it, but there's nothing there. "Security footage?"

He watches me touch my belt and nods as I realize she took my card, having the grace not to rub it in. "That shows her waiting by the door, then walking out like she owned the place. She's smart, I'll give her that. She waited for the guard rotation and timed it perfectly, so she's been listening at the door over the past two days."

I pull on my coat and check the ammunition in my gun, my mind reeling from the realization of how thoroughly she played me. "Which direction?"

"East, toward the main road, but Nikandr, she's on foot in this weather?—"

He's probably right, but she's also proven to be far more resourceful than I gave her credit for. The woman who pickpocketed my keycard while I was distracted by the urge to kiss her is not someone to underestimate.

I walk past Maksim toward the elevator, my mind already shifting into hunting mode. "Get Viktor and Anton. Have them take the south and west perimeters. Radio if you find anything."

"What about you?"

"I'll take the east route. If she's heading for the road, that's where she'll end up."

The elevator doors close before he can respond, and I spend the short ride to the ground floor thinking about everything I know about Sabrina. She's smart, stubborn, and resourceful. She's also alone in unfamiliar territory during a storm that's only going to get worse.

I need to find her before the weather does what I haven't been able to bring myself to do.

I need to find her before it's too late. I still don't know what I'll do with her then, but like a blinding epiphany, I accept what I've known all along...

I can't bring myself to harm her for any reason.

Sabrina

I run until my lungs burn and my legs shake with exhaustion. The storm hits harder now, rain driving down in sheets that soak through my dress in minutes and turn the forest floor into a treacherous maze of mud and fallen branches. Every step is agony without shoes, which was one aspect of my escape plan I never managed to find a solution for, but I keep moving because stopping means giving up, and I'm not ready to do that.

The keycard I lifted from his belt when he leaned close is still in my hand in case I need it to access a gate. This property surely has a huge fence, though I haven't seen it yet. I can't see much through the rain, save for the moments when lightning flashes across the sky.

I think about the moment he almost kissed me, when his guard was completely down and all his attention was focused on my mouth. That's when I moved. Desperation made it possible to suppress the desire flooding through me, and I snatched it when I had a chance.

Now I'm free, but freedom in the middle of nowhere during a thunderstorm with heavy rain doesn't feel like victory. It feels like trading one kind of death for another.

Thunder crashes overhead, and lightning illuminates the forest in stark, terrifying detail. I have no idea how far I've come or how much farther I need to go to reach the highway. My bare feet are torn and bleeding from roots and rocks, and the cold is starting to settle deep in my bones.

Still, I keep running because the alternative is going back to that beautiful prison and pretending I don't feel something dangerous building between us every time he looks at me. I saw the way he stared at my mouth, and the hunger in his eyes mirroring mine. Staying means losing myself completely.

The sound of an engine cuts through the storm like a blade.

I freeze, pressing myself against the trunk of a massive pine tree and listening to the low rumble growing closer. Headlights sweep through the trees ahead of me, and I realize I haven't been running in circles. I've been heading straight for the road as I'd planned.

Too late, though, because he's found me.

The black SUV stops fifty yards away, engine idling, and its headlights cutting through the rain. I can't see him through the windshield, but I know he's there.

Waiting.

Watching.

I could run deeper into the forest and try to lose him in the darkness and the storm, but my body is already at its limit, and I won't make it much farther in these conditions.

The driver's door opens, and he steps out into the rain.

Even through the storm, in the darkness, he moves with the kind of predatory grace that makes my breath catch. He doesn't hurry or call out threats or demand I come back. He just walks toward my hiding spot with the calm certainty of someone who knows exactly how this is going to end.

I break cover and run.

It's pointless, we both know it, but some stubborn part of me refuses to make this easy for him. If he wants me back, he's going to have to work for it.

My bare feet slip on wet leaves, and I go down hard, scraping my palms against rough bark as I try to catch myself. Before I can get back up, strong hands close around my arms and haul me to my feet.

I spin around to face him, expecting anger or threats or the cold fury I saw in his eyes when he first brought me to the safehouse, and I denied being Irina. Instead, I see something that looks almost like relief.

"You're bleeding." His voice is quiet, but there's something underneath it that makes me regret running from him.

I feel... guilty.

I look down at my hands, at the cuts from rocks and thorns, and the blood mixing with rain. "I'm fine."

"You're hypothermic."

He's right. I'm shaking so hard I can barely stand, and my lips feel numb. The adrenaline that carried me this far is starting to fade, leaving nothing but bone-deep exhaustion and the kind of cold that settles in your marrow.

He doesn't say anything else. He doesn't lecture me about the stupidity of running or threaten me with punishment for stealing his keycard. Instead, he shrugs out of his coat and wraps it around my shoulders, and the gesture is so unexpectedly gentle that it breaks something inside me.

“Don’t.” I try to push away the coat, but my hands are shaking too badly to be effective. “Don’t be nice to me.”

“Why not?”

“Because it makes this harder.”

Something flickers in his expression, pain or maybe understanding. “Makes what harder?”

“Hating you.”

He’s quiet for a long moment as rain runs down his face and soaks through his sweater. “Do you hate me?”

The honest answer is no. I should hate him. He kidnapped me, held me prisoner, and threatened my life. But what I feel is far more complicated and dangerous than hate. “I want to.”

“But you don’t.”

It’s not a question, and I don’t answer it. Instead, I let him guide me back to the SUV, help me into the passenger seat, and sit quietly while he turns up the heat until the warmth starts to penetrate the cold settled in my bones.

The drive back to the safehouse passes in silence. I stare out the window at the storm-lashed forest and try to figure out what happens now. He caught me and is bringing me back. The escape attempt failed, which means I’m exactly where I started, except now he knows I’m capable of more than he thought.

The knowledge should terrify me, but instead, it feels almost like relief. No more pretending to be helpless. No more playing the victim and hoping he’ll take pity on me. We both know I’m a woman willing to risk everything for freedom.

The question is what he plans to do about it.

Back in my room, my prison, he locks the door and turns to face me. His dark hair is

still damp from the rain, and his sweater clings to his chest in a way that makes it hard to concentrate on anything else.

“Give me the keycard.”

I reach into the pocket of his coat and pull out the stolen card, holding it out to him. Our fingers brush when he takes it, and the contact is like an electric shock.

“How long were you planning this?”

“Since I realized I was going to die here. If you believe I’m Irina, you’ll kill me. If you accept I’m Sabrina, you’ll still kill me as a loose end you have to address.”

He winces slightly but doesn’t address that. “And the pickpocketing?”

Heat rises in my cheeks. “Since you leaned close and I realized you were distracted. I’ve been looking for an opening, expecting it to come from the guard who brings my meals, not you.”

His mouth curves into something that might be a smile if there was any humor in it. “Distracted by what?”

I don’t answer. We both know what distracted him, just like we both know this conversation is heading somewhere dangerous.

“You could have killed yourself out there.”

I shrugged. “Better than waiting for you to do it.”

“I would never hurt you.”

The words come out quiet and fierce, and there's something in his voice that makes me believe him despite everything. "You kidnapped me."

"I thought you were someone else."

I arch a brow. "And now?"

"Now, I know you're exactly who you said you are."

I stare at him, trying to process what that means. "So you'll let me go?"

He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "I can't."

I nod slowly. "Because I've seen too much." He'll either keep me alive as a prisoner, or he'll have one of his men kill me if he truly can't bring himself to do it.

"Because I don't want to," he says, narrowing his eyes.

The admission makes me blink and second-guess my confidence that I'm going to die here. He takes a step closer, and I should back away. I should put distance between us before this goes any farther. Instead, I stand my ground and watch something hungry and desperate flicker in his gray eyes. "This is insane."

"Probably."

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“You’re holding me prisoner.” I mean to sound accusatory, but it sounds almost... seductive when the words emerge.

“Yes.”

I lick my lips. “I should be trying to escape again.”

His smile appears more sincere this time. “Yes.”

“Instead, I’m standing here wanting you to touch me.” The words slip out before I can stop them, and the moment they’re in the air, everything changes. The careful distance we’ve been maintaining shatters, and suddenly, he’s right in front of me, his hands framing my face.

“Say that again.”

I swallow a lump in my throat. “Which part?”

“The part about wanting me to touch you.”

“I want you to touch me.” The words come out as a ragged whisper. “Even though I shouldn’t. Even though this is crazy.”

He leans closer, his forehead resting against mine, and tension radiates from him like heat. “If we do this, everything changes.”

I stare into his eyes. “Everything already changed the moment you took me.”

“Sabrina.” He says my name like a prayer, and something inside me crumbles at the sound of it. It’s the first time he’s called me anything besides Irina.

“What’s your name?” I reach up and touch his face, feeling the rough stubble along his jaw. “Your real name.”

“Nikandr.”

“Nikandr.” I test the syllables, liking the way they feel on my tongue. “That’s Russian.”

“Yes.”

“Is that what you are? Russian?”

“Among other things.” His accent bleeds through more noticeably with those words.

I want to ask what other things, to understand who he really is and what he does and why he was looking for a woman who disappeared ten years ago, but those questions can wait. Right now, all I care about is the way he’s looking at me like I’m something precious and dangerous and completely irresistible. “Kiss me, Nikandr.”

He doesn’t need to be asked twice. His mouth crashes into mine, hungry and desperate and nothing like the careful restraint he’s shown since bringing me here. I kiss him back with equal ferocity, pouring three days of fear and anger and unwanted attraction into the connection between us.

His hands slide into my hair, holding me exactly where he wants me, and I melt against him with a soft sound that might be surrender. He tastes like danger and possibility, like everything I should want to run from and everything I can’t resist.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard, and there's something wild in his eyes that makes my pulse race. "This is a bad idea," I manage.

He nods. "Terrible idea."

"We should stop."

"Probably." He rests his forehead against mine instead.

Neither of us moves to put distance between us as he traces his thumb along my lower lip, and I part my mouth automatically, drawing the digit between my teeth.

The sharp intake of his breath is all the encouragement I need. I bite down gently, then soothe the pressure with my tongue and watch his control fracture in real time.

"Fuck..." The word comes out rough and desperate. "Sabrina."

"I'm right here."

"You have no idea what you're doing to me." He sounds like I'm torturing him.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I press closer, letting him feel every curve of my body against his. “Show me.”

That’s all it takes. His control snaps completely, and suddenly, his hands are everywhere—tangling in my hair, skimming along my ribs, and sliding down to cup my ass and pull me even closer. The kiss turns desperate, all teeth and tongue and barely contained need.

I can feel his cock against my hip, hard and insistent, and the knowledge that I affect him this way sends heat pooling low in my pussy. I roll my hips against him experimentally, and his groan vibrates against my mouth.

“Christ, you’re going to kill me.”

“Good.” I nip at his lower lip, enjoying the way his hands tighten on me. “You deserve it.”

He laughs against my mouth, the sound dark and full of promise. “You want to make me suffer?”

“Maybe.”

“Then you’re going to love what I have planned for you.”

Before I can ask what he means, he’s lifting me, and my legs automatically wrap around his waist as he carries me toward the bed. He sets me down gently, like I’m something fragile, then steps back to look at me.

“Last chance,” he says quietly. “Once we do this, there’s no going back.”

I reach for the hem of my dress, the same black cocktail dress I was wearing at the club three days ago, and pull it over my head in one smooth motion. His eyes go dark as he takes in the sight of me in nothing but black lace underwear, and I feel powerful in a way I haven’t since this whole nightmare started. “I don’t want to go back.”

He moves toward me with predatory grace, his hands going to the hem of his sweater. “Then we won’t.”

I watch him undress with growing hunger, taking in the sight of broad shoulders and muscled chest, along with the tattoos that snake across his ribs and disappear beneath the waistband of his jeans. I recall a movie I saw about thebratva, and how the tattoos mean things, like time in prison or one’s specialty when it comes to crime. There are stars on his chest, confirming he’s a bad man, but he makes me feel good. There’s a scar along his left shoulder that looks like it came from a knife, and another on his abdomen that speaks to a life of violence I can’t even imagine.

Right now, he’s not a dangerous man who kidnapped me. He’s just Nikandr, looking at me like I’m the answer to a question he’s been asking his entire life.

He joins me on the bed, his weight dipping the mattress, and we’re kissing again. Slower this time and deeper, like we have all the time in the world to explore each other. His hands map the curves of my body with reverent attention, and everywhere he touches feels like it’s catching fire.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs against my throat, trailing his lips down to the hollow where my pulse is racing. “So fucking beautiful.”

I arch into his touch, fisting my hands in the sheets as he works his way lower. When his mouth closes over my nipple through the lace of my bra, I gasp and push closer,

needing more contact.

He takes his time, lavishing attention on first one breast and then the other, until the lace is damp, and I'm squirming beneath him. Only then does he reach behind me to unclasp the bra, pulling it away to reveal me completely.

"Perfect." The word is barely more than a breath against my skin. "Absolutely perfect."

His mouth returns to my breast, this time with nothing between us, and I cry out at the sensation. He uses his teeth and tongue with devastating skill, alternating between gentle and demanding until I'm writhing beneath him.

"Nikandr." His name comes out as a plea, and I feel him smile against my skin.

"What do you need?"

"More."

"More what?"

"Everything. I need everything."

He kisses his way down my body, pausing to nip at the sensitive skin of my ribs, to soothe the sting with his tongue. When he reaches the waistband of my panties, he looks up at me. "Can I taste you?"

The question makes heat pool in my slit, and I nod frantically. "Please."

He slides the lace down my legs with agonizing slowness, caressing every inch of skin he reveals. When I'm finally naked beneath him, he settles between my thighs

and looks up at me with something that might be worship.

The first touch of his tongue makes me arch off the bed, and a broken cry escapes my lips. He works me with patient skill, alternating between broad strokes and targeted pressure until I'm trembling on the edge of something incredible.

"Let go," he says against my labia. "I've got you."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

The encouragement is all I need. I shatter completely, convulsing as waves of pleasure crash over me. He works me through it, holding my hips steady, until I'm boneless and gasping.

When I finally come back to myself, he's kissing his way back up my body, and I taste myself on his lips when he claims my mouth.

"Thank—" I start, but he silences me with another kiss.

"We're not done."

He reaches for his jeans, and I watch through heavy-lidded eyes as he strips away the last barrier between us. He's gorgeous—all lean muscle and controlled power—and the sight of his cock fully aroused makes my mouth go dry.

"Condom?" I ask.

He reaches into the nightstand drawer and produces a foil packet, and I take it from him with hands that are still shaking slightly.

"Let me."

I tear open the packet and roll the latex down his shaft, enjoying the way his breath hitches at my touch. When I'm finished, he positions himself at my pussy and looks into my eyes. "You're absolutely certain?"

Instead of answering with words, I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him

closer. He enters me slowly, giving me time to adjust, and the sensation of being filled completely makes me gasp.

“Okay?” he asks, his voice strained with the effort of holding still.

“More than okay.”

He begins to move, setting a rhythm that has me clinging to his shoulders and gasping his name. Every thrust hits exactly the right spot, and I feel another climax building embarrassingly quickly.

“You feel incredible.” He groans against my ear. “So tight, so wet, and so perfect.”

“Harder.” The word slips out, and he responds immediately, snapping his hips against mine with increased force.

The new angle has me seeing stars, and I rake my nails down his back as pleasure builds to an almost unbearable peak.

“Come for me,” he commands, sliding his hand between us to find the bundle of nerves that sends me over the edge. “Let me feel you come around my cock.”

I shatter around him, my inner walls clenching as another orgasm tears through me. The sensation triggers his own release, and he buries his face in my neck as he follows me over the edge.

We collapse together, breathing hard, our bodies still joined. When he finally pulls away to dispose of the condom, I immediately miss the weight of him.

He returns to the bed and pulls me against his side, and I curl into his warmth with a contentment I haven't felt in longer than I care to remember. “That was—” I start.

“Worth kidnapping you for?”

I laugh despite everything. “I was going to say incredible, but sure. Let’s go with that.”

He presses a kiss to the top of my head, and for a moment, I can almost forget this started with him taking me against my will. I almost forget he’s still keeping me prisoner, and tomorrow, I’ll still be locked in this room with no way home.

Almost.

But not quite.

“What happens now?” I ask quietly.

“Now we sleep.”

“I mean after that. Tomorrow. Next week. What happens to me?”

He’s quiet for so long I think he’s not going to answer. When he finally speaks, his voice is carefully controlled. “I don’t know.”

It’s not the answer I want, but it’s honest, and somehow, that’s enough for now. I close my eyes and let myself drift, held safely in the arms of the man who destroyed my life and then put it back together in ways I never could have imagined.

8

Nikandr

I wake to her curled against me, her head on my chest and her hair spilling across my shoulder like silk. For a moment—just one perfect, stolen moment—it feels real. Normal. Dangerous.

Her breathing is soft and even, and she makes a small sound in her sleep that goes straight through me. I allow myself the luxury of studying her face in the morning light filtering through the bulletproof windows. Without the wariness and fear that have defined her expressions since I brought her here, she looks younger. Peaceful. Beautiful in a way that has nothing to do with her resemblance to Irina Volkov.

The full weight of what I've done crashes over me like ice water. I kidnapped an innocent woman because she looked like someone else. I held her prisoner for days, threatened her life, and then last night, I made love to her like she was mine to take. The fact that she wanted it, that she kissed me back and cried my name when she came apart in my arms, doesn't change the fundamental wrongness of the situation.

It makes it worse.

She stirs against me, flattening her palm against my chest, and my heartbeat accelerates at the simple contact. This is dangerous territory, the kind of emotional involvement that gets people killed in my world. As I watch her eyelashes flutter against her cheeks, I can't bring myself to care about the danger.

A sharp knock at the door shatters the moment.

Sabrina jolts awake, her eyes wide with confusion and something that might be panic. The reality of where she is, and what we did last night, crashes over her features like a wave.

I slide out of bed and reach for my jeans. “Get dressed. Quickly.”

She doesn’t argue as she scrambles for her discarded underwear and dress while I put my clothes on. By the time I unlock the door, she’s sitting on the edge of the bed trying to look like she wasn’t just naked in my arms.

Maksim enters without invitation, his expression grim. His gaze flicks between Sabrina and me, taking in our disheveled appearances and the unmistakable evidence of what happened here. His jaw tightens, but he makes no comment about the fact I was clearly sharing Sabrina’s bed. He crosses his arms and stares at me directly. “We need to talk.”

I glance at Sabrina, who’s watching our exchange with attention. “Give us a minute.”

Maksim’s voice carries an urgency that makes my stomach clench. “Now, Nikandr.”

I meet his stare. “What is it?”

He looks at Sabrina again, then back at me. “We found her.”

I blink and steady myself against the doorframe. “Found who?” Somehow, I already know what he’s going to say though.

He pulls out his phone and shows me a photograph. “Irina Volkov. She’s in Prague. Confirmed identity and confirmed location. Our contact sent photos an hour ago.”

The room goes very quiet. I hear Sabrina's sharp intake of breath and feel her stare boring into the side of my face, but I can't look at her. Not yet. Not until I process what Maksim just told me.

I take the phone from him and study the image. The woman in the photograph is unmistakably Irina—older, with her hair a different color, but the bone structure is identical. More importantly, there's something in her expression that was never present in Sabrina's face. A hardness. A calculation. It's the look of someone who's spent years running from the consequences of her choices.

Still, I ask, "You're certain?"

He points to a detail in the photograph. "Facial recognition software gave us a ninety-seven percent match. She's been living under the name Eugenie Kozlov, working as a translator for a private security firm. She has the same bone structure, same mannerisms, and even the same scar on her left hand from when she cut herself on broken glass at your brother's apartment."

The scar. I remember that detail from the police reports. If this woman has the same scar, there's no doubt. Irina Volkov is alive and living in Prague.

Which means the woman sitting on the bed behind me is exactly who she's claimed to be all along and innocent of everything except looking like someone who destroyed my family ten years ago. I already knew that in my heart, but now, I can't pretend otherwise.

I've been wrong this whole time. Sabrina isn't a threat. She's just collateral damage from my obsession with finding my brother's killer.

Maksim crosses his arms. "What do you want me to do?"

I hand him back the phone. “Send a team to Prague. I want her brought back here alive.”

He nods toward Sabrina without looking at her directly. “And her?”

That’s the question I’ve been avoiding since almost the moment I impulsively kidnapped her and brought her here. What do I do with an innocent woman who’s seen too much, knows too much, can identify too much? Aspakhan, there should be only one answer to that question, and it’s not one I’m prepared to consider. I straighten and meet his stare. “I’ll handle it.”

Maksim’s expression doesn’t change, but there’s concern in his posture. “Nikandr?—”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I cut him off with a sharp gesture. “I said I’ll handle it.”

He studies my face for a long moment, then nods once. “The Prague team leaves in two hours. I’ll coordinate from here.”

After he’s gone, the silence stretches between Sabrina and me like a chasm. I can feel her watching me, waiting for an explanation or reassurance or some indication of what happens next, but I don’t have any of those things to offer.

I have confirmation she’s innocent, and letting her go is the right thing to do even if it’s the last thing I want.

She speaks quietly, her voice carefully controlled. “They found her. The real Irina.”

I turn to face her, and the hope flickering in her expression cuts through me like a blade. She thinks this means freedom. She thinks confirmation of her innocence will make everything different between us.

She’s right, of course. It makes everything different. “Yes.”

She nods slowly, processing this information. “I told you I’m not her.” She angles up her chin with a hint of defiance.

“You did.” I give her a small smile. “Vehemently and repeatedly.”

She’s quiet for a moment. When she looks directly at me, I see the questions building behind her eyes. “What happens now?”

I can't meet her gaze. I can't look at her and explain her innocence doesn't make this situation any less complicated. If anything, it makes it worse. She's not a criminal I can eliminate without conscience. She's an innocent woman, who's seen too much of my world to simply walk away. I move toward the coffee table, needing something to do with my hands. "I'll have breakfast brought up."

She tilts her head, confusion flickering across her features. "Breakfast?"

"You need to eat. Keep up your strength."

"For what?"

I don't answer immediately because I'm still processing what Maksim told me. Instead, I pick up the phone and place an order for breakfast, buying myself time to figure out how to handle this conversation.

Twenty minutes later, I'm carrying a tray myself instead of sending a guard, bearing fresh fruit, pastries, eggs Benedict, and exquisite coffee. I set it on the coffee table and take the chair across from her, noting the way she's watching my every movement with growing confusion.

She stares at the food like it might bite her.

I gesture toward the spread. "You should eat something."

She shakes her head. "I'm not hungry."

I study her face, memorizing every detail because I know this might be the last time I get to look at her like this, without barriers between us and what I have to do next crushing everything we built last night.

I don't say a word about the night before. I can't bring myself to acknowledge what happened between us when I know what I have to do next. Instead, I keep my voice carefully neutral. "Arrangements have been made."

The words come out flat and businesslike, like she's a problem that's been solved rather than a woman I made love to just hours ago.

She straightens in her chair. "What kind of arrangements?"

"A car will take you home."

She stares at me in disbelief. "Home?"

I nod curtly. "Yes."

The silence that follows is deafening. She searches my face for some sign of the man who whispered her name in the darkness, who held her like she was something precious, but I've locked that part of myself away where it can't complicate what needs to happen.

"I can leave?" Her voice comes out smaller than before.

"Yes."

"Just like that?"

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Just like that.”

Something flickers across her face—hurt, maybe, or confusion about my sudden coldness. Last night I was telling her she was beautiful, and this morning, I’m discussing her departure like it means nothing to me. It’s better this way. Cleaner and less complicated, and I won’t let her see it’s hurting. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

I reach into my jacket and pull out the device I took from her pocket the night I drugged her and brought her here. “Your phone. Everything’s exactly as you left it.”

She takes it from me, and our fingers brush briefly. The contact sends electricity up my arm, and I have to force myself not to pull her closer.

I continue, trying to focus on logistics instead of the way she’s looking at me. “There are several messages from your roommate. She’s worried. You’ll want to call her.”

She scrolls through the messages with growing concern, then looks up at me with something that might be confusion or hurt. “What should I tell her?”

“Whatever you think she’ll believe.”

She continues scrolling, her face growing paler with each message. “She filed a missing person report.”

I nod sharply. “We’re aware. It’s been handled.”

She looks up sharply. “Handled how?”

“The report was withdrawn. There’s no record of it in the system.”

Her face goes even paler. “You can do that?”

“I can do a lot of things, Sabrina. Most of them you don’t want to know about.”

She stares at me for a long moment, processing the information I just revealed, accepting the kind of power it takes to make official reports disappear, and the connections that would be necessary to manipulate police databases.

Sabrina’s suddenly all too aware of the kind of man she spent the night with. She sets aside the phone and looks at me directly. “Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?”

“Cold. Distant. Like last night never happened.”

The question cuts deeply. I am being cold and distant, and it’s a deliberate choice designed to make this easier for both of us. “Last night was a mistake.” The words come out harsher than I intended, and I watch her flinch as if I’d struck her.

“A mistake,” she repeats slowly.

“Yes.”

“Which part? The part where you made me feel safe for the first time in days? Or the part where you made me feel like I mattered to someone?” She sounds almost conversational and is clearly trying to mimic my aloofness without as much success.

I force myself to remain seated when every instinct is screaming at me to go to her.
“All of it.”

She licks her lips as though marshaling her emotions. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I can see it in your eyes.” She leans forward, her voice dropping to a whisper. “You’re scared.”

I have to draw on my willpower not to react. “I’m not scared of anything.”

“You’re scared of what you feel for me. You’re scared because caring about someone makes you vulnerable, and vulnerable people get hurt in your world.”

She’s reading me like an open book, and the accuracy of her assessment is terrifying, but I can’t afford to let her see how right she is. I stand and move toward the window, putting physical distance between us. “It doesn’t matter what I feel. You’re leaving.”

“Because you’re making me leave.”

“Because it’s what’s best for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Shouldn’t I get a say in what’s best for me?” she asks with a hint of challenge.

I turn to face her, and the pain in her expression nearly breaks my resolve. “Not in this case.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t understand what you’d be choosing. You don’t understand what my life is like, or what it would mean to be part of it.”

She stands and moves closer, and I have to fight the urge to back away. “Then explain it to me.”

“Some things are better left unexplained.”

She looks angry and frustrated now. “That’s not your choice to make.”

I nod, resolved. “Yes, it is, because I’m the one who brought you into this mess, and I’m the one who’s going to get you out of it.”

A soft knock at the door interrupts whatever she was going to say next. Viktor enters with the kind of professional neutrality that suggests Maksim briefed him on the situation. He nods respectfully. “The SUV’s ready when you are, miss.”

She looks at me one more time, and I see everything she wants to say painted across her face. There are questions about why this has to end so abruptly, arguments about what we could be if we tried, and pleas for more time to figure out what we mean to

each other. I brace myself to counter it all, but she doesn't say any of those things.

Instead, she walks toward Viktor with the kind of dignity that makes my chest ache and stops at the threshold but doesn't turn around.

I call out before I can stop myself. "Sabrina."

She freezes but doesn't look back.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry for all of it."

She speaks without turning, her voice quiet but steady. "No, you're not. You're sorry it has to end this way, but you're not sorry it happened. Neither am I."

Then she's gone, following Viktor down the hallway toward whatever life waits for her beyond these walls. I stand at the window and watch the car disappear into the forest, carrying away the woman who turned my world upside down in the space of four days.

The absence hits me like a wound.

Maksim appears beside me several minutes later, silent for a long moment before he speaks. "At least it's over."

I don't answer because it's not over. It will never be over. She's under my skin now, burned into my memory, and no amount of distance or time is going to change that, but she's safe, and she's free, and that has to be enough to satisfy me after what I did to her.

Even if it feels like I'm dying.

Sabrina

It's been ten weeks since Viktor drove me home through winding mountain roads, when I walked back into my apartment and tried to pretend that four days of my life hadn't been erased and rewritten.

I gave Jessie a lame excuse about meeting a man, making a foolish choice, and it not working out. She accepted it with the kind of gentle understanding that reminded me why we've been friends since college, though I catch her watching me sometimes with questions she doesn't ask.

Tonight, the club feels smaller than usual, the air thick with sweat and tequila and the cloying sweetness of whatever fruity cocktail is the special of the week. The bass from the sound system pounds through the floor and into my bones, and something in my stomach flips violently.

I press my hand to my mouth and rush toward the back hallway, barely making it to the mop sink before my dinner comes backup. The retching is violent and exhausting, leaving me shaky and pale as I grip the edge of the industrial sink.

"Brina?" Jessie's voice cuts through the sound of running water as I splash cold liquid on my face. "You okay?"

I straighten slowly, my legs unsteady. "Fine. Just something I ate."

She crosses her arms and leans against the doorframe. "You've been 'fine' for two weeks now. This is the fourth time I've found you throwing up."

"It's probably just a bug."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“A bug that lasts two weeks?” She steps closer, her expression shifting from casual concern to genuine worry. “When’s the last time you saw a doctor?”

I dry my face with paper towels, avoiding her stare. “I don’t need a doctor. I need to get back to work.”

“Maya can cover your tables.” She takes the paper towels from my hands and forces me to look at her. “Sabrina, you’re scaring me. You disappear for four days, come back looking like you’ve seen a ghost, and now you’re sick every night. What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. I’m fine.”

“Stop saying you’re fine when you’re clearly not.” Her voice carries the sharp edge she gets when she’s about to dig in her heels. “You’re making an appointment tomorrow, and I’m driving you.”

“Jessie—”

“No arguments. Tomorrow morning, first thing.”

I want to protest and insist I don’t need medical attention for what amounts to a stomach bug, but the truth is, I’ve been sick for exactly two weeks, and I’ve missed my last two periods. I’m sometimes irregular—stress and irregular sleep schedules will do that—but not like this.

Not when I can pinpoint exactly when everything changed.

One night with Nikandr. One perfect, terrible night that I've replayed in my mind a thousand times since I've been home. One night when we used protection but protection isn't foolproof, and sometimes, the universe has a sense of humor that borders on cruel. "Fine," I say because arguing will only make her more suspicious. "I'll make an appointment."

The next morning, Jessie drives me to a walk-in clinic across town that takes patients without insurance questions and doesn't require appointments weeks in advance. The waiting room smells like disinfectant, and I sit in an uncomfortable plastic chair trying to convince myself I'm overreacting.

The nurse calls my name after twenty minutes that feel like hours. She's young, maybe my age, with kind eyes and a gentle voice that immediately puts me at ease. "What brings you in today?"

I explain the nausea, the exhaustion, and the way food tastes different than it used to. I don't mention the missed periods because saying it out loud will make it real, and I'm not ready for real yet.

She asks routine questions about my medical history, my lifestyle, my symptoms, and then she suggests what I've been dreading since Jessie forced me to make this appointment. "I'd like to run a pregnancy test, just to rule it out."

I nod because refusing would be suspicious and because I need to know for certain even though my body has already given me the answer. "Of course."

The test itself takes seconds. The waiting takes fifteen minutes that stretch into a lifetime. I sit on the examination table in a paper gown, staring at the motivational posters on the walls and trying not to think about what the results might mean.

When the nurse practitioner returns, she's carrying a chart and wearing the kind of

carefully neutral expression that medical professionals perfect for delivering life-altering news. “The test is positive,” she says gently. “You’re pregnant.”

The words stun me. I can’t breathe. My vision blurs around the edges, and I clutch the edge of the examination table to keep from falling. Suspecting it and having it confirmed are two different things. Suddenly, it’s real in a way that makes my chest tight with panic and something that might be wonder. “How far along?” My voice comes out as barely more than a whisper.

She checks the chart. “Based on your last menstrual period, approximately twelve weeks.”

I frown. “That can’t be right. It was exactly ten weeks ago.”

She nods. “We go based on your last period, so that tacks on two weeks.”

I nod, understanding now how they calculate me to be twelve weeks though it’s only been ten weeks since I left the safehouse, walking away from Nikandr and trying to pretend what happened between us was just a mistake with which I could learn to live.

“Are you okay?” The nurse practitioner leans forward, concern etching her features. “Do you need a minute?”

I nod frantically, not trusting my voice. She gives me privacy to process and let the reality of my situation sink in. Twelve weeks pregnant with the child of a man whose last name I don’t know, whose phone number I don’t have, and whose world is so far removed from mine that it might as well be another planet.

The same man who made it very clear I don’t belong in his life.

When I finally compose myself enough to rejoin the world, the nurse practitioner goes over my options with the kind of professional compassion that suggests she's had this conversation many times before, including prenatal vitamins, dietary changes, follow-up appointments. It's the standard protocol for women who plan to continue their pregnancies.

She also mentions other options, speaking delicately about termination procedures and counseling services, and I'm shaking my head before she finishes the sentence. "No. I'm keeping it." The decision comes out of me fully formed, like it was waiting just beneath the surface for someone to ask the right question. This child is mine, created in a moment of connection that was more real than anything I've ever experienced, even if the circumstances were impossible.

This child is mine, and I'm keeping it.

Jessie is waiting in the lobby when I emerge, and one look at my face tells her everything she needs to know. "Oh, honey." She stands and pulls me into a hug that almost breaks my carefully constructed composure. "Are you okay?"

"I'm pregnant." The words sound weird aloud, both foreign and familiar at the same time.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

She pulls back to look at me, her hands on my shoulders. “How do you feel about that?”

“Terrified. Overwhelmed. But also...” I search for the right words. “Also strangely happy? Is that crazy?”

“It’s not crazy. It’s human.” She guides me toward the exit, her arm around my waist like she’s afraid I might collapse. “What do you want to do?”

“I’m keeping it.” The certainty in my voice clearly surprises her. “I’m going to be a mother.”

We sit in her car in the clinic parking lot for almost an hour, talking through the practical implications of what this means, including doctor appointments, prenatal care, and maternity leave from the club, which will unofficially begin when I start showing. They can’t fire me for being pregnant, but it’s an unwritten rule at the club. No one wants to be served drinks by a pregnant woman.

I can probably eke out a few weeks or months working in the kitchen or cleaning the club but that will mean no tips and reduced income. How am I going to afford a baby on a cocktail waitress salary, assuming I can return when he or she is born? How am I going to manage childcare? I don’t have answers, except to one question. “No,” I say firmly when she asks if I plan to tell the father.

She frowns. “Don’t you think he has a right to know?”

That’s a question I’ve been dreading. I stare out the windshield at the busy street

beyond the parking lot, watching normal people live their normal lives while my world shifts on its axis. “It’s complicated.”

“How complicated can it be? You call him, you tell him, and then you figure out what kind of role he wants to play.”

I turn to face her, and something in my expression must give away the magnitude of what I’m not telling her because her face goes pale.

“Sabrina, who is this man?”

The whole story wants to come pouring out—the kidnapping, the mistaken identity, the safehouse, and the way he made me feel like I was the most important thing in his world before sending me away like I was nothing, but I can’t tell her any of that without putting her in danger and dragging her into something she could never understand.

Instead, I tell her a version of the truth that skips the most dangerous parts. “His name is Nikandr. He’s...wealthy. Powerful. The kind of man who solves problems in ways that most people can’t imagine.”

She frowns. “What does that mean?”

“It means he’s not safe. It means the world he lives in is violent and unpredictable, and I don’t want my child anywhere near it.”

“But if he’s the father?—”

“He doesn’t know I’m pregnant, and I’m not going to tell him.” The words come out sharper than I intended. “This child is mine. I’m going to raise it alone, and that’s final.”

Jessie studies my face for a long moment, and I can see her weighing whether to push for more information or accept what I'm willing to share. "What aren't you telling me?" she asks finally.

"Nothing that you need to know."

"Sabrina—"

"Please." I reach over and take her hand. "I know this doesn't make sense from the outside, but I need you to trust me on this. I can't contact him. I won't contact him. This baby is going to be better off without him in our lives."

The words hurt to say because part of me remembers the gentleness in his touch, and the way he whispered my name like it meant something, but I also remember the coldness in his voice when he told me to leave, and the casual way he mentioned making police reports disappear, conveying the understanding that his world operates by rules I could never comprehend.

A child changes everything. A child needs stability, safety, and predictability, which are all things Nikandr's life lacks.

Jessie squeezes my hand. "Whatever you decide, you won't face it alone. If you want to terminate, I'll be with you at the clinic. If you want to raise this baby without the father, you'll have support. Love. Family."

The word 'family' breaks something loose in my chest, and tears start to flow. "I'm scared."

"Of course you're scared. You're twenty-six years old, you work at a nightclub, and you're about to become a single mother. Being scared is rational."

I sniffle and wipe my face with the back of my hands. “What if I’m not good at it? What if I screw this up?”

“Then you’ll figure it out as you go, like every other parent in the history of the world.” She starts the car and begins backing out of the parking space. “First things first though. We need to get you some prenatal vitamins and figure out how to tell Maya you’re going to need more flexibility in your schedule.”

The practical concerns feel overwhelming, but they’re also grounding. Doctor appointments I can schedule. Vitamins I can take. Work accommodations I can negotiate even if it means taking a pay cut from the time I’m showing until a couple of weeks after the baby is born. The thought of returning to work so quickly sends a pang through me, but I have to be realistic. I won’t be able to take much more time than that. Still, these are problems with solutions, unlike the complicated mess of feelings I have about Nikandr.

“What about when people ask about the father?” I ask as we drive home.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“You tell them it’s none of their business, or you tell them he’s not in the picture. Maybe you make up a story about a brief relationship that didn’t work out.” She glances at me sideways. “The truth is, it doesn’t matter what other people think. What matters is that you and this baby are healthy and safe.”

Safe. The word echoes in my mind as we drive through the familiar streets of our neighborhood. I am safe now, in a way I wasn’t during those four days at the safehouse. My child will be safe, growing up far away from the violence and danger of Nikandr’s world, but safety comes with a price. It means my child will never know their father. It means I’ll never see him again or have the chance to tell him that our one night together created something beautiful and precious.

It means carrying this secret for the rest of my life.

That evening, I sit on my bed with my laptop, researching pregnancy nutrition, prenatal care, and all the myriad things I should be doing to ensure a healthy pregnancy. The information is overwhelming, but I push on.

Underneath the practical concerns is a deeper truth that I’m only beginning to understand. I’m going to be a mother. In approximately seven months, I’m going to be responsible for a tiny human being who will depend on me for everything.

The thought should terrify me more than it does. Instead, I feel a strange sense of peace settling over me. This child is mine in a way that nothing else has ever been. This child is proof that something good came from those four impossible days, even if I can never tell anyone how or why.

I place my hand on my still-flat stomach and try to imagine the life growing inside me. It's far too small to feel yet, but real nonetheless—real and mine and completely dependent on the choices I make from this moment forward.

“It's going to be okay,” I whisper to my unborn child. “I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to love you enough for both parents.”

The promise feels sacred in the quiet of my bedroom. This child will never doubt that they are wanted and loved. Even if they never know their father, they'll know they came from something real that mattered if only for a short time.

10

Nikandr

I'm in the middle of a business call with our Prague contact when Maksim walks into my office without knocking. He stands in the doorway with tension that suggests whatever he's carrying is going to complicate my day significantly.

The conversation on the phone involves final arrangements for Irina's capture. Our team has her under surveillance and will move within the week. It should be the culmination of ten years of searching, but I'm distracted by Maksim's presence, along with the lingering, intermittent memories of Sabrina that constantly haunt me, blindsiding me during the most mundane and the most dangerous moments, with no apparent trigger. Forgetting her is proving to be impossible.

He says nothing at first, just standing there holding a manila folder like it contains something explosive, watching me with an expression I can't quite read.

I wrap up the call quickly. “We'll continue this later.”

After ending the call, I look up at him expectantly. He crosses the room with deliberate steps and tosses the folder onto my desk without ceremony. “Close whatever you’re working on,” he says, nodding toward my computer screen. There’s almost a note of... pity in his voice.

His gravity makes me comply without question. I minimize the financial reports I’ve been reviewing and turn my full attention to whatever crisis requires his immediate intervention.

“I didn’t know whether to tell you about this,” he says finally, leaning against the edge of my desk. “It seemed like some kind of weird, twist of fate that she’d pick a business you own through legitimate means for this, but I don’t think she’s manipulating you. I doubt she knew you own the clinic.”

I open the folder, and my world tilts sideways. The first thing I see is a grainy surveillance photograph taken outside the urgent care clinic on Fifth Street. The timestamp shows it was taken three weeks ago. The image quality is typical security camera footage, functional but not particularly clear, yet I recognize the subject immediately.

Sabrina.

She’s captured mid-stride as she steps out through the glass doors, one hand cradling her stomach in a gesture that’s both unconscious and protective. The other hand holds what appears to be paperwork, and another woman walks beside her, arm around her waist as though offering support. Sabrina is wearing an oversized hoodie that makes her look smaller than I remember, and her face is pale and exhausted in a way that speaks to more than just lack of sleep.

Attached to the surveillance photo is a printout that makes the air leave my lungs in a rush. It’s her medical file, complete with test results, appointment notes, and a

diagnosis that hits me like a sledgehammer to the chest.

Pregnant. She was twelve weeks gestation at the time of visit.

I read the information once, my brain struggling to process what I'm seeing. Then I read it again, more slowly, as the news starts to sink in. She's pregnant with my child, and she never told me.

I feel faint for a moment as I stare at the numbers on the page. Twelve weeks at the time of the visit, which was three weeks ago. That makes her fifteen weeks now. Fifteen weeks of carrying my child and saying nothing. Fifteen weeks of morning sickness and doctor appointments and prenatal vitamins, all handled alone. That can't be because it was thirteen weeks, two days, and roughly six hours since she left me... Since I sent her away, I remind myself.

I look closer at the information and soon realize the NP calculated it from the date of her last period, not conception. There's no question the baby is mine then. "How did you get this?" My voice comes out rougher than I intended.

Maksim straightens and crosses his arms. "From a routine audit of all visitors to all your legitimate businesses. We do this every few weeks to make sure there are no known associates of our enemies scoping out our legit operations."

I set down the papers carefully, fighting to keep my hands steady. "The medical file, I mean?"

He shrugs a shoulder. "Easy enough since you own most of the urgent care facilities in the area. This clinic is one of them." He pauses, studying my reaction carefully. "When her nameflagged in our security review, it was simple to access her records through the backdoor our IT people programmed into all your businesses. All your medical properties use the same database system, and we have access to them all."

Of course. I'd forgotten about the clinic on Fifth Street, which is one of dozens of legitimate businesses I own throughout California. Those investments provide both income and cover for our other activities. She had no way of knowing she was walking into a facility I controlled when she chose it for her pregnancy test.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I let out a harsh laugh when I see a note added to the file that it was also faxed to Women's Associates four days after Sabrina's visit at her request, which is another clinic I own. Her regular prenatal care will be done by a doctor technically in my employment as well. The irony would be amusing if I weren't fighting the urge to put my fist through the wall.

I stand from my chair and move to the window that overlooks the forest surrounding my estate. It's the same forest she ran through that night when she tried to escape, though from a different direction, where we have the safe house, bleeding and desperate and completely unprepared for the dangers that waited in the darkness.

Now she's pregnant, and she's still trying to handle things on her own. "She didn't even give me the chance to protect her," I say quietly.

"Sir?"

I turn to face Maksim, and whatever he sees in my expression makes him take a step back. "She's carrying my child, and she's trying to survive without me. Like I wouldn't have moved heaven and earth to keep them both safe."

"Maybe she thought you wouldn't want?—"

"She thought wrong." The words come out sharp enough to cut glass. "She thought she could make this decision unilaterally, could carry my blood and handle it like it's her problem to solve instead of our situation to navigate together."

Rage coils low in my chest, cold and controlled but unmistakably lethal. Not rage at

the pregnancy, which surprises me with an intensity that's closer to overwhelming joy than anger. It's rage at her presumption that she had the right to keep this from me, and rage at the thought of her facing prenatal appointments, morning sickness, expenses, and all the fears that come with pregnancy without anyone to support her.

Like she ever had the option to run from what we created together.

I've spent thirteen weeks telling myself letting her go was the right choice. She's better off without me and safer in her normal life than she would be in my world. I convinced myself that caring about her meant protecting her from the dangers in my life, but this development erases all of that careful rationalization. She's not just a woman I care about anymore. She's the mother of my child, and that makes her mine in a way that transcends choice or preference or what might be best for her.

She belongs to me now just as the child belongs to me. Whatever fantasy she's been living about handling this independently ends today. "Get my car."

"Nikandr, maybe we should think about this?—"

"Get my car," I repeat, my voice carrying the kind of authority that ends conversations. "I want Viktor ready to move in ten minutes."

Maksim doesn't argue, knowing better than to question me when I'm using that tone, and the decision has been made and all that remains is execution.

He carefully sidesteps it but is still registering a different form of protest when he asks, "What about Prague? The operation is scheduled for tomorrow."

I glare at him. "Prague can wait. This is more important."

His eyes widen, but he doesn't say anything. He looks genuinely shocked that I'd put

anything about the operation to find and bring in Irina. Moments ago, I would have been shocked too if someone had been audacious enough to claim there could ever be anything more important than bringing down Vadim and getting revenge for my brother's murder, but all it took was a grain surveillance photograph and new knowledge to change every damned thing once again.

After he leaves, I stare at the photo again, memorizing every detail of Sabrina's appearance, including the protective way she holds her stomach. The exhaustion etched into her features worries me, and I wonder how she's managing alone. The woman beside her must be her roommate Jessie, whom she mentioned several times during interrogation, so she isn't completely alone.

Fifteen weeks.

I grab my phone and do a quick Internet search, learning the first trimester is already over, which means she's past the highest risk period for miscarriage. She might have felt the baby move already and probably lies awake at night with her hand on her stomach wondering if it's a boy or a girl. She probably has a hundred questions about labor and delivery and how she's going to manage as a single mother.

Those are all thoughts I should have been part of from the time she discovered she was pregnant. These are all decisions I should have been helping her make the past three weeks.

I check my watch. It's three in the afternoon, which means she's probably getting ready for work. The club doesn't open until evening, but the staff typically arrives around four to set up for the night shift. If I leave now, I can be there when she arrives. Fortunately, Viktor is waiting with the SUV when I step out of the house a short time later.

The drive to Modesto gives me time to think and plan exactly how this conversation

is going to unfold. Viktor drives while I sit in the passenger seat, reviewing everything I know about Sabrina's life since she left the safe house. Her work schedule, her living situation, and her financial struggles. Before this, it was all information that seemed irrelevant when I was trying to convince myself to stay away from her. Now it's intel that will help me understand exactly how I'm bringing her into my world.

She's been working at the club five nights a week, probably trying to save money before the pregnancy becomes visible, and she's forced to take a lesser position or maternity leave. She shares that cramped apartment with her roommate, splitting rent on a place that's barely suitable for two people, let alone two people and a baby. She has no family support and no safety net beyond whatever pathetic savings account she's managed to accumulate on a cocktail waitress salary. Most of her salary goes to paying medical bills that aren't even her legal responsibility.

She's been trying to prepare for single motherhood with nothing but determination and hope, and the thought of her struggling alone while carrying my child makes something violent and protective surge through my chest.

That ends today.

The club is exactly as I remember it. The parking lot is mostly empty except for a few cars that probably belong to staff members. I can't really be sure until I see her, but my senses attune to her, and I'm sure she's here. She's close, and she has no idea how things are going to change after today.

"Stay with the car," I say to Viktor as he parks near the street. "I'll handle this myself."

"Sir, are you sure that's wise? If she makes a scene?—"

“She won’t make a scene. She’s too smart for that.” I check my weapon out of habit, then think better of it and leave it in the car. The last thing I need is for Sabrina to think I’m here to threaten her. “This is a conversation, not a confrontation.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

Viktor looks skeptical but doesn't argue. He knows better than most that when I make up my mind about something, discussion is pointless. I see him getting out the parabolic mic as I start to jog toward the door. I allow it since he'll be on edge enough without being able to see me. At least hearing me will reassure him I'm safe, and I don't particularly care who hears the conversation that's about to take place right now, still stewing in anger that she didn't tell me despite my concerns for her.

11

Sabrina

Fifteen weeks. The number haunts me as I stand in front of my bedroom mirror, adjusting the wrap dress I bought specifically to hide the small but unmistakable curve of my belly. The deep burgundy fabric drapes perfectly, concealing what I'm not ready for the world to see, but I'm fighting a losing battle. Every day brings me closer to the point where loose clothing won't be enough.

I smooth the fabric one more time and grab my purse from the dresser. The envelope inside contains my latest ultrasound photos. They're images I've stared at for hours, trying to reconcile the tiny human shape on the screen with the magnitude of what it represents. My child. Growing stronger every day while I scramble to figure out how I'm going to provide for them.

The financial reality has been keeping me awake at night. Even with Maya's promise to move me to kitchen work once I can't hide the pregnancy anymore, the pay cut will be devastating. Nomore tips means surviving on minimum wage, and minimum wage doesn't cover rent, utilities, groceries, and prenatal care, let alone the thousands

of dollars I'll need for the actual birth since I have crappy insurance. Medicaid for pregnancy is an option, and the application sits on my desk, not yet filled out, because I still make too much until I switch to the kitchen.

I've run the numbers a dozen different ways, and they never add up to anything resembling security.

The worst part is the growing acknowledgment I might have to swallow my pride and determination to keep my child out of his world to find Nikandr. Not because I want him in my life or because I think he'd be a good father, but because I'm running out of options. A child shouldn't suffer because their mother was too stubborn to ask for help, even if the someone is abratvapakhan.

Even If were ready to do that, how do I find a man who exists in the shadows? How do I contact someone whose last name I don't even know?

My phone buzzes with a text from Maya."Hey, girl, you forgot to grab your check yesterday. It's in the office when you get a chance."

I close my eyes and curse under my breath. My paycheck. The one thing I can't afford to forget, and somehow, it slipped my mind completely. The pregnancy brain fog is real, and it's making everything harder than it needs to be.

I grab my keys and head for the door. The club is only a fifteen-minute walk from my apartment, and the exercise might help clear my head. Plus, I can't afford to waste gas on unnecessary trips when every dollar needs to be stretched as far as possible.

The afternoon air is crisp, with the kind of autumn bite that means winter isn't far behind. That means another worry to add to my ever-growing list. Heating bills will get higher as the weather gets colder, though California winters are usually mild. I pull my hoodie tighter around myself and walk faster, as if speed can outrun the

anxiety that follows me everywhere these days.

The club looks different in. The neon signs are dark, and the parking lot is mostly empty except for a few cars that belong to staff members preparing for the night shift. I try the main entrance first, but it's locked. Maya must not be in yet, which means I'll have to use the employee entrance around back. I walk around the building, noting the way shadows seem to gather in corners despite the bright afternoon sun.

The back door is propped open with a cinder block, and I hear music playing inside. Someone's definitely here, even if it's not Maya. I poke my head through the doorway and call out. "Hello? Anyone here?"

"Sabrina?" Eli's voice comes from somewhere near the bar. "That you?"

"Yeah. I just need to grab my check."

"Come on in. Maya's not here yet, but I can let you in from behind the bar."

I find Eli restocking bottles, his sleeves rolled up and a towel thrown over his shoulder. He's one of the few male employees at the club, a bartender who's been here longer than anyone else and treats the place like his personal kingdom.

"Thanks," I say as he lifts the hinged section of the bar to let me through. "I can't believe I forgot it yesterday."

"Happens to the best of us. Envelope's on Maya's desk, I think."

The office is barely bigger than a closet and crammed with filing cabinets and boxes of inventory. Maya's desk is a disaster zone of receipts, schedules, and employee paperwork, but I spot my envelope immediately. My name is written across the front in Maya's careful handwriting, and seeing it brings a small surge of relief.

I stuff the envelope into my purse and turn to leave, already planning how to stretch the money. The electric bill is due in three days, and I still need groceries and gas. Maybe if I'm careful, I can make it last until my next paycheck.

"Sabrina?"

I freeze at the sound of my name. The voice doesn't belong to Eli. It's deeper and rougher, with an edge that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I turn around slowly and see a man standing in the office doorway. He's one of the regulars, someone I've served drinks to maybe a dozen times over the past few months. Carl, I think his name is. Mid-forties and average height, with the kind of forgettable face that doesn't stick in your memory until you have a reason to be afraid of it.

"Hi," I say carefully, trying to keep my voice light. "Carl, right? I didn't know you were here. The club doesn't open for a little while yet."

"I was talking to Eli about something." He doesn't move away from the doorway, effectively blocking my exit. "I wanted to ask you about something too."

Something in his tone makes my stomach clench with unease. I've served enough drunk men to recognize when a situation is about to go sideways, and every instinct I have is screaming at me to get away from him. "I actually need to get going," I say, taking a step toward the door. "Maybe we can talk when I'm working later?"

He doesn't move. If anything, he leans more heavily against the doorframe, making it clear I'm not leaving until he says I can. "It'll just take a minute." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "I've been wanting to talk to you for a while now."

I force myself to stay calm, to think rationally instead of giving in to the panic that's starting to build in my chest. Eli is just outside in the main area. If something happens and I scream, he'll hear me. This man might be a regular customer, but he's not

stupid enough to try anything with witnesses around. “What did you want to talk about?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“You’ve been looking different lately.” His gaze travels down my body in a way that makes my skin crawl. “Different in a good way. Softer.”

My hand moves instinctively to my stomach, and his smile widens. The gesture is unconscious and protective, but it tells him everything he needs to know.

“You’re pregnant,” he says, and it’s not a question.

I don’t answer, but I don’t need to. He can see the truth in my face, in the way I’m standing, and in the defensive posture I’ve unconsciously adopted.

“That’s what I thought.” He takes a step into the office, and I take a step back. “Been watching you for weeks, trying to figure out what was different. Makes sense now.”

“I really need to go.” I try to push past him, but he catches my arm.

“Not yet.” His grip is firm but not painful—yet. “We haven’t finished talking.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Please let me go.”

“Sure there is.” He pulls me closer, and I smell alcohol on his breath despite the early hour. “See, I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately. Wondering what it would be like to get to know you better.”

The panic that’s been building in my chest explodes into full-blown terror. This isn’t just an uncomfortable conversation anymore. This is dangerous. “Let go of me.” I try to pull away, but his grip tightens.

“Now that I know you’re pregnant, it makes things even more interesting.” His voice drops to a whisper. “Pregnant women are so much more sensitive. So much more responsive. Such a shame I have to do this, but if you’re pregnant, that’s it...”

That’s when I see the knife.

It appears in his free hand like magic, the blade catching the fluorescent light from the office ceiling. It’s not particularly large, but it doesn’t need to be. Sharp metal is sharp metal, and I’m trapped in a confined space with no way out.

“You’re going to come with me,” he says conversationally, as if he’s asking about the weather. “We’re going to go somewhere quiet, and you’re going to let me show you how much I appreciate pregnant women.”

I look into his eyes and see something that makes my blood run cold. This isn’t a crime of opportunity or a moment of poor judgment. This is planned, deliberate, and he’s thought about this scenario enough to bring a weapon. For some reason, I’m convinced it isn’t even about raping me. There’s something more going on.

He’s going to hurt me. He’s going to hurt my baby.

That realization triggers something primal and fierce in my chest. I might be pregnant and vulnerable, but I’m not helpless. I’ve lived in this neighborhood long enough to know how to protect myself, and I’ll be damned if I let some predator touch me or my child.

“Okay,” I say quietly, letting my shoulders slump in apparent defeat. “Okay, you’re right. Let’s go somewhere quiet.”

He smiles and relaxes slightly, thinking he’s won. That’s his mistake.

I drive my knee up into his groin with every ounce of strength I have.

He doubles over with a strangled scream, and the knife clatters to the floor. I don't wait to see if he recovers. I push past him and run toward the main area of the club, screaming for Eli.

"Help! Someone help me!"

Carl recovers faster than I expected. I hear him behind me, cursing and stumbling, and then his hand closes around my arm again. This time, his grip is painful and desperate, his nails dig into my skin.

"You stupid bitch." He spins me around to face him. "You think you can?—"

I don't let him finish. I rake my nails across his face, aiming for his eyes, and when he flinches back, I drive my elbow into his solar plexus.

He staggers but doesn't go down, and I realize with growing horror that he's much stronger than I am. I'm desperate, but he's stronger, and I'm fifteen weeks pregnant, which means I can't fight the way I normally would. I can't risk taking hits to my stomach or falling wrong.

He shoves me hard against the wall, and my head hits the concrete with enough force to make my vision blur. For a moment, I think I might pass out, but the fear for my baby keeps me conscious and fighting.

"You're going to pay for that." He's panting as he presses his body against mine to pin me in place. "I was going to be nice, but now we're going to do this the hard way. I just have to bring you in alive..."

The realization of what he intends to do makes me fight even harder. I claw at his

face, his arms, or anything I can reach, while screaming at the top of my lungs. “Eli, help me please!”

But the music in the main area is loud, and I don’t know if he can hear me over the sound. Panic starts to set in as Carl pins my wrists above my head with one hand and fumbles for something in his pocket with the other.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

The knife. He's going for the knife he dropped.

That's when I hear the back door slam open with enough force to rattle the building.

Carl freezes, turning his head toward the sound, and I use his momentary distraction to knee him again. This time, I catch him in the thigh, and he stumbles back enough for me to see who's coming down the hallway.

Nikandr.

He moves like death itself, silent and deadly, his gaze locked on Carl with focused intensity that promises violence. He's wearing a dark suit that makes him look even more dangerous than usual, and there's something in his expression that makes me afraid. Not fear for me. My relief is so intense it's almost painful.

The fear is for Carl, but it dispels as I realize I don't care what happens to him.

"Get away from her." His voice is quiet but carries more menace than any scream ever could. "Now."

Carl must hear it too because he releases me and takes a step back. He's either too drunk or too stupid to understand the magnitude of danger he's in. "Hey, man, this is none of your business," he says, trying to sound confident. "The lady and me was just havin' a conversation."

Nikandr doesn't respond with words. He moves faster than I would have thought possible, covering the distance between them in two strides. Carl has time to raise his

hands defensively, but it doesn't matter. Nikandr's first punch lands in his solar plexus with enough force to lift him off his feet. The second catches him in the jaw, and something cracks. Carl crumples to the floor like a marionette with cut strings, unconscious before he hits the ground.

The entire encounter lasts less than ten seconds.

I stare at Carl's motionless form, then at Nikandr, who's standing over him with the calm, detached expression of someone who's done this before. Many times.

I stammer out the first thing that comes to mind. "He's a regular. He's never acted like this before."

Nikandr's expression darkens, and he delivers a sharp kick to Carl's unconscious form. "He'll never act like it again with you."

Before I can process what just happened, he grabs my arm and starts pulling me toward the back door. "We're leaving. Now."

I stumble behind him, too stunned and still trying to process everything that's happened to protest, at least for the moment.

12

Nikandr

I'm done playing games.

The moment I drag Sabrina out of that club and into the SUV, I'm on the phone with my men. Viktor was standing in the alley a few feet from the car, weapon in hand, which tells me he heard enough through the parabolic mic to know the situation went

sideways. He rushes back to the SUV and starts to get behind the wheel.

I hold up a hand. “Handle the intruder. Make it look like a robbery gone wrong. I want him to wake up with no memory of the past hour and a healthy fear of dark alleys.”

“Copy that. What about the woman?”

I glance at Sabrina, who’s pressed against the passenger door like she’s considering jumping out of a moving vehicle. She’s pale, trembling, and there’s blood at the corner of her mouth from where that piece of shit slammed her head against the wall.

I want to kill him. I want to drag him somewhere quiet and spend hours making him regret every breath he’s ever taken, but right now, I have one priority, which is to get her to safety. “She’s coming with me, and I’ll drive. Call Maksim to pick you up and then have him meet me at her place.”

He nods. “You’re taking her to the estate?”

I don’t even glance at her before answering. “Yes. Something’s not right about this.”

He steps back, and I start the engine, pulling away from the alley. I focus on driving, but my peripheral vision is locked on Sabrina. She’s holding her stomach with both hands in that protective gesture I’ve already learned to recognize, and the sight of it sends something possessive and violent surging through my chest.

Fifteen weeks pregnant with my child, and some lowlife thought he could put his hands on her? The rage is so intense it’s almost blinding.

“Where are we going?” Her voice comes out shaky and small.

“Your apartment. You’re going to pack.”

She stills for a moment. “Pack for what?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“For staying with me.” I keep my tone calm but firm. She will come with me, and she should know by now I’m not above kidnapping her to make it happen.

She turns to stare at me, and I see her trying to process everything that just happened. The attack, my sudden appearance, and the casual way I’m rearranging her life without asking for permission.

“I can’t just move in with you.”

“You can and you will.”

“Nikandr—”

“No.” I take a corner harder than necessary, and she grabs the door handle for stability. “That man didn’t attack you randomly, Sabrina. This wasn’t some drunk customer who got handsy. This was planned.”

She frowns, looking still somewhat disconnected, but her gaze is sharpening. “What do you mean?”

“Someone’s been watching you, and it wasn’t my people.”

Her face goes even paler, if that’s possible. “How do you know?”

“Because I know how these things work. I’ve been in this business long enough to recognize surveillance when I see it.”

I pull into the parking lot of her apartment complex, noting the way she flinches when I get out of the car. She's scared of me now, or at least more aware of what I'm capable of than she was before. Good. Fear might keep her alive.

I come around to her side of the vehicle and open the door. "Come on."

She hesitates for a moment, then takes my offered hand and lets me help her out. Her fingers are icy cold, and a fine tremor runs through her entire body.

"I need to call Jessie," she says as we walk toward the building. "She'll be worried if I don't come home."

"We'll handle Jessie."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she's not safe either, and we're going to make sure nothing happens to her."

Sabrina's apartment is on the second floor, and she fumbles with her keys for almost a minute before managing to unlock the door. Her hands are shaking too badly for fine motor control, and I finally take the keys from her and handle it myself.

"Thank you," she whispers.

The apartment is exactly what I expected, being small, clean, and furnished with pieces that look like they came from thrift stores and estate sales. It's the kind of place where people live when they're trying to make ends meet on service industry wages, and seeing it reinforces my determination to get her out of here. "Go pack. Take everything you'll need for an extended stay."

She nods and starts toward what I assume is the bedroom, but I catch her arm gently.

“Sabrina.”

She looks up at me with those hazel eyes that have been haunting my dreams for thirteen weeks, and I see fear and confusion and something that might be relief.

“Are you hurt?”

She touches the corner of her mouth where the blood is starting to dry. “Just shaken up. He hit my head, but I don’t think it’s serious.”

“And the baby?”

She freezes completely, her face going white as she stares at me in shock. For a moment, she looks like she might faint. “How do you—” She can’t seem to finish the sentence. Her hands fly to her stomach in that protective gesture, and I watch the exact moment when she realizes there’s no point in denying it anymore. “How long have you known?” Her voice comes out as barely a whisper.

“For about an hour. Your name flagged in a routine security audit of my businesses. I own the clinic you visit... and Women’s Associates too.”

She sinks against the wall like her legs won’t hold her anymore. “You weren’t watching me?”

“No. I let you go, and I meant it.” The admission costs me something, but it’s the truth. I had fought the obsessive need to spy on her directly and hadn’t given in to temptation to have my men follow her. Other than having Maksim check sporadically for the first week, to ensure she didn’t go to the police—and he checked with our contact there, not her by monitoring her directly—I backed off. Somehow, I resisted

temptation though she was never far from my thoughts. “This was coincidence... Or bad luck, depending on how you look at it.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

She stares at me with a mixture of relief and something that might still be betrayal. “But you came for me.”

I nod. “The moment I found out.”

The silence stretches between us, heavy with everything we’re not saying. Then she straightens, struggling to regain her composure. “The baby’s fine,” she says quietly. “I didn’t take any hits to my stomach.”

The relief that floods through me is so intense it’s almost painful. “Good. Go pack while I check something.”

She disappears into the bedroom, and I start moving through the apartment like I own it because in a sense, I do now. She’s carrying my child, which makes her mine, and anything that’s hers becomes mine by extension.

I start with the obvious places anyone could hide a small surveillance device, including the smoke detectors and electrical outlets. It doesn’t take long to find what I’m looking for in the vent cover in the living room. It’s slightly askew, just enough to suggest it’s been removed recently.

I lift it carefully and reach inside, closing my fingers around a small, sophisticated piece of equipment that definitely doesn’t belong in a low-rent apartment building. It’s a wireless, battery-powered camera, with enough memory to record weeks of footage. I hold it up and examine it more closely. The make and model are familiar. I use similar devices for my own surveillance operations. This isn’t some amateur job. Whoever placed this has resources and training.

“Sabrina?”

She appears in the bedroom doorway with an armful of clothes. “What is it?”

I hold up the camera. “They’re watching you.”

Her cheeks pale, and she drops the clothes. “What do you mean?”

“Someone planted surveillance equipment in your apartment. It wasn’t me or my crew. Someone else.”

The color drains from her face entirely. “How long has it been there?”

I hesitate and look up at the vent again before answering. “Based on the dust patterns, at least a couple of weeks. Maybe longer.”

She sinks down onto the couch like her legs won’t hold her anymore. “The man at the club. Carl. You think he was?—”

“I think he was paid to watch you. He’s a regular customer, which means he had access to you on a predictable schedule. Someone’s been using him to monitor your movements.”

She frowns, looking confused. “He did say a couple of things about following orders... But why? I’m nobody. I don’t know anything?—”

“You know me.” I speak firmly, almost harshly, wanting to cut through her denial. “You spent four days at my safehouse. You’ve seen my face, know my first name, and can identify my voice. That makes you valuable to my enemies.”

She stares at me with growing horror. “Your enemies.”

“I’m sure you’ll find it hard to believe that I have enemies, but there are people who would love nothing more than to get their hands on someone who could provide intelligence about my operations.” I pocket the camera and move toward the window, checking the street for anything that looks out of place. “Or who would use you to get to me if they suspect there’s anything...personal between us.”

“By hurting me?”

“By hurting you and our child.” The possessive way I say ‘our child’ makes her flinch, but I don’t care. It’s the truth, and she needs to understand what that means. “They were inside yourhouse, Sabrina. They’ve been watching you eat, sleep, shower, and probably listening to your phone conversations with your roommate. This isn’t about choice anymore.”

I turn to face her, and she’s hugging herself like she’s trying to hold the pieces together.

“You’re coming to stay with me at my estate outside the city. Not because I’m forcing you, but because it’s the only way to keep you and our child safe.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, processing the magnitude of what I’m telling her. Then she nods just once, but it’s enough. “Okay, I’ll come with you.” She stands up and starts gathering the clothes she dropped. “I need you to promise me something.”

“What?”

“You said you’d take care of Jessie too. What does that mean?”

“It means she’ll be protected. Relocated if necessary.”

She shakes her head, looking worried. “She won’t want to leave the city. Her whole

life is here.”

I inhale and exhale to maintain my calm. My priority is Sabrina, but I can’t dismiss her concerns for her friend. “We’ll make sure her whole life is protected.” I pull out my phone and speed-dial Maksim. “It’s me. I need you to handle something.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“What kind of something?” he asks, sounding wary.

“Protection detail. Jessica Witman, Sabrina’s roommate. Full coverage until we determine the scope of the threat.”

He hesitates, sounding unhappy without making a sound. “How comprehensive?”

“Whatever it takes. If she won’t relocate voluntarily, we watch her apartment, her workplace, and observe her daily routine. I want to know if anyone so much as looks at her wrong.” The warm smile Sabrina gives me causes a fluttering sensation in my chest.

“Copy that. Anything else?”

I scowl, thinking of Carl, that shit stain who dared lay hands on her. “Run background checks on all the regular customers at the club where Sabrina works. Focus on anyone who’s been showing up more frequently in the past few months, and pay attention to anyone vulnerable to coercion, blackmail, or payoffs.”

He sounds slightly confused. “Am I looking for surveillance assets?”

“No. I want you to find anyone who might be on someone else’s payroll.” At his confirmation, I end the call and look at Sabrina, who’s watching me with an expression I can’t quite read.

“Satisfied?”

“Thank you.” Her voice is quiet, but there’s genuine gratitude in it. “She’s all the family I have.”

“Then she’s family to me too.”

The words surprise both of us, but I don’t take them back. If Sabrina is mine—and she is—then the people she cares about become my responsibility as well.

She disappears into the bedroom again, and I continue my sweep of the apartment. I find two more cameras—one in the bedroom, hidden behind a picture frame, and another in the kitchen, tucked inside a cabinet. That one has a microphone built in, making it bulkier, but still not too obvious unless one knows for what they’re searching. They’re all the same brand and all positioned to provide comprehensive coverage of her daily activities.

Someone has been watching her for weeks, possibly since I returned her to the city after her time at the safe house. They’ve been learning her routines, her habits, and her vulnerabilities. The attack at the club wasn’t random. It was either a test or an escalation, and either possibility makes my blood run cold.

By the time Sabrina emerges with two suitcases, I’ve found and disabled five separate surveillance devices. I don’t tell her about all of them. She’s shaken enough already, but I make sure she understands the scope of what we’re dealing with.

“This is organized,” I say as we load her belongings into the SUV. “Professional. Whoever’s behind this has resources and patience.”

“Do you know who it is?”

I have suspicions, but I’m not ready to share them yet. Vadim Kozlov has been expanding his operations on the West Coast, and using surveillance assets to gather

intelligence on his rivals is exactly the kind of strategy he'd employ.

Whether he still believes Sabrina is Irina Volkov, or whether he's figured out that she means something to me personally, the end result is the same. She's a target, and if she's discussed the pregnancy at all in the kitchen, they know about the baby too. "I'm working on it, but until I know for sure, you're staying where I can protect you."

She nods and gets into the passenger seat without argument. The fight has gone out of her, replaced by the kind of exhausted acceptance that comes with recognizing an unwinnable situation.

As we drive toward the estate, I occasionally glance at her. She's fifteen weeks pregnant with my child, and I've just uprooted her entire life to bring her into mine. Six months ago, if someone had told me I'd be in this situation, I would have laughed.

Now all I can think about is keeping her safe. Keeping them both safe.

Whatever I felt for her before—attraction, possessiveness, or the kind of dangerous obsession that makes smart men do stupid things—has amplified tenfold by the knowledge she's carrying my blood. She's mine now in a way that transcends choice or preference. She's the mother of my child, which makes her the most important thing in my world.

I'll kill anyone who tries to take her away from me.

"What's your estate like?" she asks quietly as we leave the city limits behind.

"Secure. Comfortable. It's far enough from civilization that unexpected visitors are easy to spot."

She seems to think for a moment before asking, “Will I be a prisoner again?”

The question makes me flinch. “You were never my prisoner. You were my guest under difficult circumstances.”

She snorts and looks at me. “I was locked in a room.”

“For your own protection.” I try to sound convincing, though I’m sure she’s not buying it any more than I am as I say it.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

The outrage and skepticism almost visibly pours off her. “And now?”

I consider how to answer that. She’ll have more freedom at the estate, with acres of grounds to explore, staff to interact with, and resources I never provided at the safehouse. She’ll also be under constant surveillance, protected by men who take orders from me and no one else. “Now, you’re family,” I say finally. “And family doesn’t get locked in rooms.”

Her small huff speaks volumes. “I bet family doesn’t get to leave either.”

I risk a quick look at her, so she can see how serious I am. “Not when leaving means dying.”

She’s quiet for the rest of the drive, staring out the window at the landscape rolling past. I want to comfort her, to promise this situation is temporary, but I’ve never been in the habit of making promises I can’t keep. The truth is, I don’t know how long it will take to neutralize the threat against her. I don’t know if the people watching her apartment are connected to Vadim, or if there’s another enemy I haven’t identified yet.

What I do know is that she’s carrying my child, and I’ll burn down half of California before I let anyone hurt her. If that means keeping her close for the rest of our lives, then that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make, even if she never forgives me for it.

The Belov estate is colder than I imagined. It's vast, silent, and guarded like a war bunker draped in marble. Everything here is beautiful and expensive and completely lifeless, from the crystal chandeliers that catch light from windows I can't see through to the exquisite Persian rugs that are so costly, I'm afraid to walk on them.

My guest suite is bigger than my entire apartment, filled with luxuries I didn't ask for and don't know how to use. There's a sitting area with a fireplace, a bathroom with a tub that could fit three people, and a walk-in closet that's currently holding the two suitcases I packed in a hurry. The bed is large enough to sleep a family and covered in silk sheets that feel foreign against my skin.

I stand at the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking out at grounds that stretch beyond what I can see, and try to convince myself that this is temporary. Once Nikandr finds whoever was watching me, I'll be able to go home and pretend none of this happened.

Even as I think it, I know it's a lie. There's no going back from this. Not from the pregnancy, not from knowing what I know about his world, and certainly not from the way he looks at me, like I'm both a threat and something precious that needs to be protected.

I don't feel safe here. I feel contained.

The distinction matters more than I thought it would. At the safehouse, I was a prisoner, but at least I understood the rules. Here, I'm supposedly a guest, but I feel trapped, just in a prettier cage.

A soft knock at the door interrupts my brooding. I open it to find a woman in her fifties with graying hair pulled back in a neat bun and kind eyes that remind me of my mother. "Miss Clyde? I'm Eugenie, the house manager. Mr. Belov asked me to check if you need anything."

“I’m fine, thank you.”

She studies my face with the practiced eye of someone who’s good at reading people.

“Have you eaten? It’s past dinner time, and you look pale.”

My stomach churns. “I’m not really hungry.”

“Morning sickness?” she asks gently, so she knows about the pregnancy. Of course, she does. Nikandr probably briefed his entire staff.

“Something like that.”

She tuts with sympathy. “It usually gets better after the first trimester.”

“I’m in the second,” I say almost woodenly.

Her frown deepens. “Stress then. I have ginger tea that might help settle your stomach.”

Her kindness is unexpected and somehow makes everything worse. I don’t want to like anything about this place or the people in it. I don’t want to get comfortable.

“That’s very thoughtful, but I’m really okay for now.”

She nods but doesn’t look convinced. “If you change your mind, just press the call button by the bed. Someone will always be available.”

After she leaves, I lock the door and lean against it, wondering how many people in this house are watching my every move. How many cameras are hidden behind expensive artwork and elegant mirrors? How many ways are there for Nikandr to monitor me without me knowing?

I pull out my phone and call Jessie, desperate to hear a familiar voice.

“Brina? Thank God. I’ve been worried sick since that guy Maksim showed up at the club with two men the size of refrigerators.”

“Are you okay? Where are you?”

“I’m fine. They moved me to some swanky apartment in the financial district. Honestly, it’s nicer than anywhere I’ve ever lived.” Her voice takes on a more serious tone. “But what the hell is going on? This Maksim guy won’t tell me anything except I’m not safe at home, and you’ve been ‘relocated’ somewhere safer.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I sink onto the bed and try to figure out how to explain something I don't fully understand myself. "Someone was watching me. Watching us. They had cameras in the apartment."

"Cameras?" Her voice goes up an octave. "What kind of cameras?"

"The kind that record everything. Nikandr found them when we went to pack my things."

She curses. "How long do you think they were there?"

"Weeks, maybe months." The thought makes my skin crawl all over again. "One of the regulars from the club—that shifty creep, Carl—attacked me today. Nikandr thinks he was paid to watch me and try to take me for some reason."

The silence on the other end of the line stretches so long I think the call might have dropped. "Jessie?"

"I'm here. I'm just processing the fact that someone was watching us shower and sleep and live our lives without us knowing." Her voice is shaky now. "Where are you?"

"Nikandr's estate. It's..." I look around the opulent room and try to find words that capture how surreal this all feels. "It's like a museum. Beautiful and cold and completely isolated."

She sounds worried. "Are you safe?"

I don't hesitate, not wanting her to worry. "I think so, but this place feels like a really expensive prison."

She's silent for another moment as though gathering her thoughts. "Brina, someone broke into our home and planted cameras. Someone paid a man to watch you and probably hurt you. You and the baby are only alive because Nikandr showed up when he did."

I know she's right. Logically, I understand everything she's saying is true, but logic doesn't make the grief any smaller.

"I know. I just..." I take a shaky breath. "I've lost everything. My job, my apartment, and my independence. I didn't choose any of this."

"You didn't choose to get pregnant either, but you're dealing with it."

I shake my head even though I can't see it. "That's different."

She lets out a small sigh. "Is it? Both situations require you to adapt to circumstances you didn't plan for."

I want to argue with her, to point out that choosing to keep my baby is completely different from being forced to live under Nikandr's protection, but the truth is, both situations involve giving up control over my life, and that terrifies me more than I want to admit. Part of me accepted there was a possibility Nikandr would be involved in my life in some way when I chose to keep the pregnancy.

"What if this is permanent?" I whisper the fear aloud. "What if I never get to go home?"

She sounds encouraging but also firm. "You'll build a new home. You can do this."

After we hang up, I lie on the impossibly soft bed and stare at the ceiling, feeling more alone than I have since my mother died. The silence in this house is oppressive, broken only by the distant sound of footsteps in hallways I haven't explored and voices speaking in languages I don't understand.

I try to sleep, but my mind won't quiet. Every time I close my eyes, I see Carl's face, feel his hands on me, and remember the moment when I thought he might actually hurt my baby. The terror of that moment keeps replaying in an endless loop, mixed with the relief of seeing Nikandr appear like some kind of avenging angel.

I hate that I needed rescuing and I couldn't protect myself or my child. I really hate that my safety now depends entirely on a man whose world operates by rules I'll never understand.

Around midnight, driven by a hunger I can't name, something deeper than the physical need for food, I give up on sleep and make my way downstairs. The house is different at night, full of shadows and echoes that make it feel even larger and more intimidating than it did during the day.

I find the kitchen more by accident than design, following the smell of lingering herbs and the soft glow of light. It's massive, with professional-grade appliances and enough counter space to feed an army, but somehow, it feels more welcoming than the rest of the house, maybe because Nikandr is already there.

He's sitting at a large island in the center of the room, laptop open in front of him, wearing jeans and a black sweater that make him look less like a dangerous criminal and more like a man who belongs in a kitchen at midnight. There's a cup of coffee at his elbow and papers scattered across the granite surface.

He looks up when I enter, and something in his expression shifts from focused concentration to gentle concern. "Can't sleep?"

I shake my head and hover in the doorway, suddenly unsure why I came down here.
“I was hungry.”

“Pregnancy cravings?”

The casual way he says it, like discussing my pregnancy is the most natural thing in the world, startles me. “Something like that.”

He closes the laptop and stands up, moving with that fluid grace I remember from before. “What sounds good?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I hesitate before saying, “I don’t know. Something simple.”

Without another word, he opens the massive refrigerator and starts pulling out ingredients. I see him remove bacon, lettuce, and tomatoes from the fridge and bread from the box on the counter. It takes me a moment to realize what he’s making. “You don’t have to cook for me.”

“I know.” He doesn’t look up from the bacon he’s placing in a pan. “I can though. You’re hungry, and I’m already awake.”

He moves around the kitchen with the kind of effortless precision that speaks to years of practice. He toasts the bread to a perfect golden brown, cooks the bacon until it’s crispy but not burned, and slices the tomatoes with knife skills that would impress a professional chef.

“How do you know how to cook like that?”

He glances at me while he assembles the sandwich, and there’s something vulnerable in his expression that I haven’t seen before. “My parents died when I was sixteen. It was just me and my brother after that.”

The simple explanation makes me blink. I knew his brother was dead. That much was obvious from our conversation at the safehouse, but I hadn’t thought about what their life might have been like before that. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.” He sets the sandwich on a plate, cuts it in half, and slides it across the island toward me. “You learn to take care of yourself when you have to.”

I nod in agreement before taking a bite, and it's perfect. The bacon is crispy, the lettuce is fresh, the tomatoes are juicy, and the mayonnaise is just the right amount. It tastes like comfort food, like something someone who cares about you would make when you're sad and tired and overwhelmed. My mom made grilled cheese and tomato soup in those times, but this ranks right up there. "This is really good."

He smiles, looking genuinely pleased. "My brother had specific requirements for his BLTs. I got a lot of practice."

There's affection in his voice when he mentions his brother, mixed with a grief that time hasn't completely healed. It makes him seem more human and less like the dangerous stranger who turned my life upside down.

"What was he like?"

Nikandr leans against the counter and goes still for a moment, considering. "Yaroslav was older than me and the kind of person people listened to. He was also smarter than me and better at keeping things balanced."

"You loved him."

"More than anything." The simple admission seems to surprise him as much as it surprises me. "He was the only family I had left."

I think about Jessie, how lost I would be without her friendship and support, and I begin to understand why finding his brother's killer has consumed ten years of Nikandr's life. "The Irina you're searching for had something to do with...losing him?"

His expression gets grimmer. "She killed him and disappeared like she never existed."

The pain in his voice is raw and immediate, like the wound is still fresh despite the passage of time. I want to say something comforting, but what comfort can I offer someone whose entire world was destroyed by an act of violence?

Instead, I take another bite of the sandwich and let the silence stretch between us. It's not uncomfortable, exactly, but more like a shared acknowledgment of grief that can't be fixed with words.

When I finish eating, he takes the plate and washes it in the sink. I watch his hands as he works, remembering how they felt on my skin that night thirteen weeks ago, and something warm and dangerous unfurls in my chest.

I shouldn't be attracted to him after everything that's happened when I'm carrying his child and trapped in his house with no clear path back to my old life, but sitting in this kitchen at midnight, having him take care of me in small, simple ways, I can't deny part of me still wants him. "Thank you for the sandwich," I say when he's finished cleaning up.

He turns to face me, and there's something in his expression that makes me tremble slightly. Not fully desire, but a kind of careful hope he's trying to mask. "You don't have to thank me, Sabrina. Taking care of you isn't a burden."

The way he softly says my name, like it means something important, makes my chest tighten with emotions I don't want to examine too closely.

He moves past me toward the doorway, and for one foolish second, I wish he'd stayed. I wish he'd kissed me goodnight or touched my face the way he did that morning at the safehouse. Why can't this be simple instead of complicated by pregnancy and danger and the vast differences between our worlds?

Of course, he doesn't stay, though he pauses in the doorway and looks back at me one

more time. “Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow will be easier.”

Then he’s gone, leaving me alone in the kitchen with the lingering scent of his cologne and the dangerous realization that despite everything that’s happened, and all the reasons I should hate him, I’m drawn to him all over again. This time, I don’t think I’ll be strong enough to walk away.

14

Nikandr

For the next three days, I watch her from the study with the camera feeds muted, filled with frustration I can’t quite name. The ice in my glass melts while I sit motionless, tracking her movements across multiple screens like she’s a target instead of the woman carrying my child.

She walks through the halls like she’s trying not to exist. Her shoulders draw in, her movements become careful and deliberate, and her gaze always lowers to avoid meeting anyone else’s. When Eugenie approaches to offer her tea, Sabrina’s smile is distant and forced. When the gardener nods politely as she passes the windows, she flinches slightly before returning the greeting. The sight bothers me.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I saved her from that attack at the club. I brought her to the safest place I know and ensured her protection with the best security money can buy. I've stationed men who would die before letting harm come to her, so why doesn't she feel safe? Why does she move through my house like she's walking through a minefield, waiting for something terrible to happen?

The monitor shows her now, sitting curled on the edge of her bed in the massive suite I had prepared specifically for her comfort. She's wearing one of the maternity dresses Eugenie ordered from the most expensive boutique in San Francisco. The soft blue fabric drapes elegantly over the subtle curve of her belly, but she might as well be wearing prison stripes for all the comfort it seems to bring her. She shifts position frequently, as though she can't get comfortable in the luxury that surrounds her.

I've barely spoken to her beyond polite inquiries about her health and whether she needs anything after that night when I made her a BLT. Every conversation feels stilted and formal, like we're strangers conducting business instead of two people who created a life together during four days that transformed everything.

Every time I approach her, she tenses. Not obviously, because she's too well-mannered for that, but I see it in the way her spine straightens, and her hands clasp together in front of her like she's bracing for some kind of impact. Yesterday, when I asked about her doctor's appointment, her knuckles went white.

This morning, when I inquired about breakfast, she stammered through her response like I was interrogating her instead of showing concern. It's the same defensive posture she adopted at the safe house when she first arrived, except this time, she's not drugged or confused about her circumstances.

This time, she's simply afraid of me.

The realization sits like lead in my stomach, growing heavier each day that passes without improvement. I've given her everything I thought she needed to feel comfortable and secure—luxury, comfort, and protection from every conceivable threat—but none of it matters if she can't relax enough to appreciate any of it.

The irony isn't lost on me. I've spent years learning how to intimidate, control, and make people bend to my will through fear and force. Now I need to do the opposite, and I have no idea where to start.

Maksim walks into the study drops a manila file on my desk with more force than seems strictly necessary. The sound makes me flinch, which irritates me further. My nerves have been on edge since bringing Sabrina here, though I can't pinpoint exactly why. He nods toward the bank of monitors showing various angles of the estate grounds and security checkpoints and offers his unsolicited opinion. "She doesn't trust you yet."

I don't answer immediately. Instead, I drain what's left of the vodka in my glass and continue staring at the monitor, watching the woman carrying my child look utterly miserable in lavish surroundings. The alcohol burns, but it doesn't ease the tight knot of frustration in my chest. If anything, it makes the image on the screen sharper and more painful to watch.

Maksim sighs, and the sound carries the weight of disapproval and long experience dealing with my particular brand of stubbornness. "If you want her to stop flinching every time you speak, you have to build trust. I mean emotional safety, not just physical protection."

"She is safe," I say sharply, turning away from the screen to meet his steady gaze. "She's safer than she's ever been in her life."

He arches a brow. “She’s safe from outside threats, absolutely, but she’s not safe from you.”

The words make me jerk like he hit me. “I’ve never hurt her.”

“Haven’t you?” He settles into the leather chair across from my desk, clearly preparing for a longer conversation than I want to have. “You’ve uprooted her entire life and brought her to a place where she knows no one and understands nothing about how things work. You’ve made her completely dependent on you for everything from food to safety to basic human contact. That’s a different kind of violence, Nikandr.”

I want to argue with him, to point out everything I’ve done has been necessary for her protection. The cameras in her apartment, the attack at the club, and the surveillance equipment we found all prove she needed someone to take care of her whether she wanted it or not. Her independence was an illusion that nearly got her and my child killed.

The image on the screen makes the argument die in my throat before I can voice it. She looks so small sitting there on the edge of that enormous bed, so lost and alone despite being surrounded by every luxury I could think to provide. Her hand rests on her stomach in that protective gesture I’ve learned to recognize, and something about the motion looks unconscious or instinctive, like she’s offering comfort to the life growing inside her because no one else is around to offer comfort to her.

As I watch, she turns toward the window, and even through the grainy security feed, I can see the longing in her posture. She wants to be anywhere but here.

“What do you suggest I do?” The question comes out rougher than I intended, scraped raw by the admission that I’m failing but desperately need to succeed.

“Talk to her. Not about security measures or prenatal vitamins or whether she’s comfortable in her suite.” He leans forward, his expression serious. “Talk to her like she’s a person whose thoughts and feelings matter to you.”

I scowl. “They do matter.”

“Then show her that, especially if you want civil co-parenting down the road.” He pauses, studying my expression with a calculating look that tells me he’s about to say something I don’t want to hear. “Or closer than that.”

Something flickers in my chest at his words, dangerous and warm and completely unwelcome. Something closer. The possibility of more than just shared custody and formal arrangements moves me. The thought of Sabrina choosing to stay, choosing me, not because she has to but because she wants to, causes a blinding surge of hope.

I push away the thought before it can take root. That kind of thinking leads to weakness, compromised judgment, and emotional vulnerability that gets people killed in my world. I’ve seen what happens to men who care too much about women who don’t belong in this life. They make mistakes. They hesitate at crucial moments. They end up dead, and the women they tried to protect end up worse than dead.

“This isn’t about romance, Maksim. This is about protecting my child and the woman carrying him.”

“Is it?” He raises an eyebrow. “To me, it looks like you’re trying to protect someone you care about more than you’re willing to admit.”

I hesitate buying myself time to formulate a response that doesn’t reveal more than I intend. “I care about her safety and the child’s welfare. Everything else is secondary.”

“If you say so.” His tone suggests he doesn’t believe me for a second. “Caring about

someone's safety means caring about their emotional well-being too. You can't protect someone's body while destroying their spirit and expect them to be grateful for it."

The words sting because they're true. I've been so focused on eliminating external threats that I haven't considered what my methods might be doing to Sabrina herself. I thought bringing her here would make her feel secure, but instead, I've just traded one kind of danger for another.

"I don't know how to do this," I say quietly, the confession tasting like failure. "I know how to eliminate threats and neutralize enemies, to make people fear me enough to leave the things I care about alone, but I don't know how to make someone feel safe instead of trapped."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

Maksim nods like this admission doesn't surprise him. "Emotional safety isn't about control, Nikandr. It's about trust, and trust requires vulnerability from both parties."

I instinctively protest. "Vulnerability gets people killed."

"So does isolation." He stands and moves toward the door, then pauses with his hand on the handle. "You asked me what I suggest you do. Here's my advice—stop watching her through cameras and start spending time with her as a person. Learn what she needs beyond physical security. Give her some agency in her own life, even if it's just small choices."

"And if that puts her at risk?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Life is risk. You'll deal with those risks as they arise. Right now, the biggest risk to her emotional stability is you."

After he leaves, I sit alone in the study, staring at the monitor where Sabrina remains curled on her bed like a beautiful, wounded bird in a gilded cage. I've clipped her wings in the name of protecting her, but protection without choice is just another form of captivity.

I think about what Maksim said about vulnerability and trust. The concepts feel foreign and dangerous in my world. Everything I've learned about survival has been built on the foundation that showing weakness invites attack, control equals safety, and the only way to protect what matters is to eliminate every possible threat before it can materialize.

Sabrina isn't a business asset or a strategic advantage. She's a woman carrying my child, and she deserves better than to feel like a prisoner in what should be her refuge.

I close the laptop and push back from the desk, decision crystallizing in my mind. Maybe I can't undo the circumstances that brought her here, but I can try to make her time here less miserable. I can start treating her like a person instead of a problem to be managed. The leather chair creaks as I lean back, and I catch my reflection in the dark window, seeing a man who looks older than his years, wearing exhaustion like an expensive suit. I've aged in the days since the attack.

I can make her feel safer and wanted here. I just have to figure out how to do that without compromising her safety or revealing more of myself than I'm prepared to share.

The file Maksim left catches my attention, and I flip it open to distract myself from thoughts that lead nowhere productive. Inside are surveillance photos and intelligence reports about recent activity in the city, updates on various business operations, and background checks on several individuals who've been flagged as potential security concerns.

"Any update on Morozov?" I ask when Maksim returns an hour later, not looking up from the reports.

"We're keeping an eye out," he says, settling back into his chair. "His people might be watching too, but there's been no movement near the estate so far that we've detected."

That comes as a relief, though I know better than to assume it will stay that way indefinitely. Vadim Morozov is patient and methodical, the kind of enemy who prefers to study his targets thoroughly before making his move. That he hasn't acted yet doesn't mean he won't act eventually.

“What about the club? Any developments with the investigation into the attack?”

“Local police are treating it as a random assault. The man—Carl Morrison—claims he doesn’t remember anything about that afternoon, which is convenient for us. That leaves no connection to larger criminal activity.”

“Good. And the roommate?”

“Jessica Witman is secure in the safe house downtown. She’s asking questions about when she can return to her normal life, but she’s cooperating with the protection detail.”

I nod, satisfied the immediate loose ends are being handled properly, but as I close the file and look back at the monitor, the larger problem remains unchanged. Sabrina sits alone in her beautiful room, looking like she’d rather be anywhere else in the world. She shouldn’t feel alone here with me.

The thought comes unbidden, followed immediately by the uncomfortable recognition that I want her to be happy here. Not just safe or comfortable, but genuinely content in a way that has nothing to do with luxury or security measures. I want her to choose to stay, even when the immediate danger has passed.

The admission scares me more than any physical threat I’ve ever faced, because it means I’m already more invested in this woman than I ever intended to be. She’s become more than just the mother of my child or a person under my protection. She’s become someone whose happiness matters to me in ways I don’t fully understand.

That level of emotional investment is exactly the kind of weakness I’ve spent my entire adult life learning to avoid, but as I watch her on the screen, curled alone on that enormous bed with one hand resting protectively over our child, I realize some kinds of weakness might be worth the risk, especially if the alternative is watching

the mother of my child slowly wither away in a prison of my making.

15

Sabrina

Five days into my stay at the estate, Nikandr surprises me by joining me for lunch in the sunroom. It's a beautiful space with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the gardens, filled with natural light and comfortable furniture that actually feels lived-in rather than staged for a magazine shoot. I've taken to eating here when the formal dining room feels too overwhelming, which is most of the time.

He appears in the doorway carrying a plate of his own, wearing dark jeans and a gray sweater that makes his eyes look almost silver in the afternoon light. "Mind if I join you?"

I gesture to the empty chair across from me, surprised by the request. Over the past few days, our interactions have been limited to brief encounters in hallways and polite inquiries about my health. This feels different and more intentional.

"How are you settling in?" he asks as he sits down, cutting into what appears to be some kind of gourmet sandwich that makes my simple salad look inadequate by comparison.

"Fine. The house is beautiful." The response comes automatically and is the style of polite deflection I've perfected over years of waitressing. Something in his expression tells me he's looking for more than surface pleasantries.

"But?" he prompts gently.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I take a bite of lettuce and consider how honest I want to be. “It’s just very different from what I’m used to. Everything here is so...” I search for the right word. “Perfect. Like a museum.”

“I suppose it might feel that way.” He pauses, seeming to weigh his next words carefully. “I didn’t exactly design it with comfort in mind. More like security.”

“It shows.” The comment slips out before I can stop it, and I immediately regret the sharpness in my tone. “I’m sorry. That was rude.”

“It was honest. There’s a difference.” He takes another bite, chewing thoughtfully. “What would make you more comfortable?”

The question catches me unprepared. I expected him to be offended by my criticism, not interested in addressing it. “I don’t know. Maybe just...less formality? I feel like I’m going to break something expensive every time I move.”

“You won’t break anything. If you did, it could be replaced.”

“Easy for you to say. You probably don’t know what any of this stuff costs.”

His laughs transforms his entire face. “Actually, I know exactly what everything costs. I just care more about your comfort than my furniture.”

The admission warms something in my chest that I’ve been trying to keep cold. I focus on my salad to avoid meeting his gaze. “How are you handling the pregnancy cravings?”

“Pickle ice cream and peanut butter on everything.” I make a face. “What about you? Any weird food combinations you’re secretly addicted to though you aren’t pregnant.”

He seems to think it over for a moment. “When I was younger, I used to eat cereal for dinner at least three times a week. Yaroslav always said it was going to stunt my growth.”

The mention of his brother creates a shift in the conversation as something heavier settles between us. I’ve learned not to push when he brings up his family, but this time, I’m curious enough to risk it. “What was it like, growing up with just the two of you?”

He sets down his sandwich and leans back in his chair, considering the question. “Chaotic. We were both too young to be taking care of ourselves, but we figured it out. Yaroslav was better at the practical stuff—cooking, managing money, and making sure we went to school most of the time.”

“How old were you when your parents died?”

“I was twelve. Yaroslav was seventeen.” His voice gets quieter. “I don’t know how, but he kept us both out of the foster system.”

I try to imagine being twelve and suddenly orphaned, responsible for yourself and dependent on a brother who wasn’t even an adult himself. My own childhood had its challenges, but at least I had my mother until I was twenty-three. “That must have been terrifying.”

“It was, but we had each other, which made it manageable. Yaroslav always said we were a team, so as long as we stuck together, we could handle anything.” His expression darkens. “He was right, until he wasn’t.”

The pain in his voice is raw and immediate, and I want to offer some kind of comfort. “I’m sorry. Losing him like that... I can’t imagine.”

“What about you? You mentioned your mother was sick.”

The change of subject is clearly intentional, but I don’t mind. Talking about my own loss feels easier than watching him struggle with his. “Stomach cancer, three years ago. It was fast and brutal, from diagnosis to funeral in eight months.”

His eyes reflect sympathy. “That’s why you were working at the club?”

I nod, pushing lettuce around my plate. “Insurance didn’t cover everything, and the bills kept coming even after she died. I was working two jobs for a while, trying to stay afloat.”

“And your father left after all that? Sounds like a piece of shit.”

I grimace. “David Clyde, sleazy car salesman, left us when I was five, actually. One day he was there, the next day he wasn’t. My mom never wanted to talk about it, so I stopped asking.”

Nikandr’s expression hardens. “He just left? No explanation or anything?”

I nod. “Just a note on the fridge. Some men aren’t built for responsibility, though he seems to manage just fine with his new family. My mom was better off without him, even if things were harder financially.”

He frowns hard enough to make grooves appear at the sides of his mouth. “Still, when she died, and he knew you were alone, he should have stepped up. You shouldn’t have had to handle all that alone.”

The statement is simple, but something in his tone makes my chest tighten. “I managed. I’m still managing.”

“You don’t have to anymore.”

The words are loaded with implications, but I let them pass without reacting. I take a sip of water to gain time to think of a response that doesn’t reveal how much his offer tempts me.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“The baby will be lucky to have you fighting for them,” he says quietly. “Not every child gets a mother willing to sacrifice everything for their welfare.”

I meet his gaze, startled. “I haven’t sacrificed everything...”

“Haven’t you? You gave up your job, your apartment, and your independence. You’re sitting in a stranger’s house, completely dependent on my protection, because you put your child’s safety above your own comfort.”

When he puts it like that, it sounds almost noble instead of pathetic. “I didn’t have much choice.”

He seems unconvinced. “There’s always a choice. You could have run when you found out I knew about the pregnancy. You could have refused to come here and taken your chances on your own, but you chose to trust me with the most important thing in your world.”

I shake my head. “I chose to trust you with our baby’s safety. That’s different.”

“Is it?”

The question lingers as we finish eating, and I sneak glances at him when I think he’s not looking. This thoughtful, gentle, and genuinely interested version of Nikandr is harder to resist than the dangerous stranger who swept into my life and turned everything upside down, and I know how the effort to resist that side turned out.

After lunch, he walks me back to my suite, and for the first time since arriving at the

estate, I don't feel like I'm being escorted by a guard. The conversation continues as we walk, touching on whether I'm hoping for a boy or a girl. "I don't know, but we might wit the next ultrasound," I day as we pause outside my door. "I just want him or her to be healthy."

His expression is open, and his eyes are vulnerable. "He or she will be. You're taking good care of our child."

"We're taking good care of him or her," I correct without thinking, then immediately regret the slip. The word 'we' implies a partnership that doesn't exist, as a shared investment in this pregnancy that goes beyond his obligation to protect his heir.

Instead of correcting me or pulling back, he smiles. "Yes. We are."

That night,the dream comes back with a vengeance.

I'm in the club again, but this time, the hallway stretches endlessly in both directions. Carl is there, but his face keeps changing. Sometimes it's him, sometimes it's a faceless stranger, and sometimes, it's no one at all. The knife appears anddisappears, the walls close in and expand, and no matter how fast I run or how loudly I scream, I can't find the exit.

When I finally manage to wake myself up, I'm drenched in sweat and shaking so hard the bed frame creaks. My heart pounds against my ribs like it's trying to escape, and for a second, I can't remember where I am or whether the threat is real.

Then my bedroom door slams open.

Nikandr bursts through with a gun drawn, scanning the room with of focused intensity that suggests he's prepared to kill whatever threat he finds. He's wearing pajama pants and nothing else, his hair disheveled like he was pulled from sleep, but

his movements are completely alert and controlled.

“What happened?” His voice is sharp and demanding.

“Nothing. I’m fine. It was just a nightmare.”

He lowers the weapon but doesn’t relax, his gaze moving over every corner of the room like he’s checking for hidden dangers. “You screamed.”

“I did?” I touch my throat, surprised to find it sore. “I didn’t realize.”

“Loud enough to wake half the house.” He sets the gun on my dresser and moves closer to the bed, his expression shifting from tactical alertness to genuine concern. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Just scared.” The admission feels pathetic, but I’m too shaken to maintain any pretense of strength.

He sits on the edge of the bed without asking permission, reaching out to brush damp hair back from my forehead. The gesture is so gentle, so natural, that it takes my breath away.

“The same dream?”

I nod, not trusting my voice. His hand is warm against my skin, and I find myself leaning into the touch despite every rational thought telling me to maintain distance.

“Tell me about it.”

“It’s just my stupid brain processing what happened at the club.”

“Trauma isn’t stupid, Sabrina. Neither are the dreams that come with it.”

The understanding in his voice breaks something loose in my chest. “I keep running, but I can never get away. Every time I think I’ve found the exit, it turns out to be another hallway and another dead end. Sometimes, the baby is in danger too, and I can’t protect them either.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“But you did protect them. You fought back, you got away, and you’re both safe now.”

“Because you showed up. If you hadn’t?—”

“But I did.” His thumb traces across my cheekbone, wiping away tears I didn’t realize had started falling. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

The promise should terrify me. Three weeks ago, I would have seen it as a threat to my independence. But sitting here in the dark, still shaking from the terror of my subconscious, it feels like the first real safety I’ve known in years.

“Will you stay?” The request slips out before I can stop it. “Just until I fall asleep again?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Of course.”

I expect him to pull up a chair or settle into the sitting area across the room. Instead, he moves around to the other side of the bed and lies down beside me, fully clothed on top of the covers. His arms come around me without hesitation, pulling me against his chest like he’s done this a hundred times before.

“Better?” he murmurs against my hair.

I nod, already feeling the panic start to subside. His heartbeat is steady under my ear, his body warm and solid against mine. For the first time since arriving at the estate, I feel truly safe.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“For what?”

“For not making me feel weak for needing this.”

His arms tighten around me. “Needing comfort doesn’t make you weak. It makes you human.”

We lie together in the dark, and gradually my breathing slows to match his. The terror fades, replaced by a different kind of intensity. I’m acutely aware of every point where our bodies touch, every breath he takes, every subtle shift in his position. The attraction I’ve been trying to suppress comes flooding back, stronger than ever.

When I tilt my head up to look at him, his eyes are already on my face. In the dim light filtering through the curtains, he looks younger, less guarded, like the man I glimpsed during those four days at the safehouse before everything became complicated.

“Nikandr,” I whisper, not sure what I’m asking.

“I know.” His voice is rough with the same want I’m feeling. “I know.”

I don’t remember making the conscious decision to kiss him. One moment we’re looking at each other in the darkness, and the next my mouth is on his, desperate and searching and unable to hold back anymore. All the longing I’ve been trying to suppress, all the attraction I’ve been denying, pours out in that single contact.

When he kisses me back, it’s with everything he’s been holding in too. His hand tangles in my hair, his mouth moves against mine with a hunger that makes my entire body come alive. This isn’t the careful kiss of someone who’s being polite. This is

raw need, desperate want, the kind of passion that burns away every rational thought.

I forget about the pregnancy, the complicated circumstances that brought us together, and all the reasons this is a terrible idea. All I can think about is the way he tastes, the way his hands feel on my skin, the way my body responds to his touch like it's been waiting for this moment since the day I left the safehouse.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. His forehead rests against mine, and I can see the conflict in his eyes, want warring with concern, while desire fights against his protective instincts.

"Sabrina..." I press my fingers to his lips.

"Don't," I whisper. "Don't think about all the reasons we shouldn't. Not tonight."

He captures my hand and presses a kiss to my palm, sending heat shooting through my entire body. "Are you sure?"

Instead of answering with words, I kiss him again, pouring every ounce of certainty I possess into the contact. This time when he responds, there's no hesitation or holding back. It's just pure, overwhelming need that threatens to consume us both.

16

Nikandr

When Sabrina kisses me with everything she's been holding back, something inside my chest breaks open. All the careful control I've maintained since bringing her here dissolves under the desperate hunger of her mouth against mine. She tastes like hope and danger and everything I've been trying not to want.

I should stop this, pull away, and remind us both of all the reasons this complicates an already impossible situation. Yet when her fingers tangle in my hair, and she makes that soft sound of need against my lips, rational thought abandons me entirely. “Sabrina,” I say against her mouth, her name coming out like a prayer.

“Please,” she whispers back, and the single word undoes me completely.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I roll us carefully so she's beneath me, mindful of the life growing inside her, and take my time mapping the changes in her body. Her breasts are fuller than I remember, and more sensitive if the way she arches into my touch is any indication. The slight curve of her belly where our child grows makes something possessive and protective surge through me.

"You're so beautiful," I say, pressing kisses along the column of her throat. "Even more beautiful than I remembered."

She pulls my sweater over my head with trembling hands, skating her palms across my chest like she's memorizing the feel of my skin. When she traces the scar along my ribs from a knife fight three years ago, I tense automatically.

"Does it hurt?" she asks softly.

"Not anymore." The truth is more complicated than that, but right now, nothing matters except the way she's looking at me with tenderness that makes my chest ache.

I help her out of the silk nightgown she's wearing, revealing the body that's haunted my dreams for weeks. Her skin is softer than I remember, and when I lean down to trace my tongue along the sensitive spot just below her ear, she gasps and presses closer to me.

"I've thought about this," she says breathlessly, "Every night since I got here. Many nights before too, when I was in my apartment. I've thought about what it would feel like to have you touch me again."

“Just touching?” I ask, sliding my hand down her side to rest on her hip.

“More than touching.” Her confession comes out in a rush, like she’s embarrassed by her own desire. “I’ve thought about everything.”

I capture her mouth in another kiss, deeper this time, letting her taste the promise of what’s coming. I find the side of her panties, and when I slip beneath the silk to touch her pussy, she’s already wet and wanting. I press my forehead against hers, struggling to maintain some semblance of control. “You’re perfect.”

She rocks against my hand, chasing the friction she needs, and the sight of her losing herself to pleasure makes my cock ache with the need to be inside her. I force myself to go slowly, to worship every inch of her body the way she deserves.

I take my time removing her panties, pressing kisses to her inner thighs as I work my way higher. Her skin is soft as silk, and she trembles under every touch of my lips. When I reach the apex of her thighs, I pause to look up at her, taking in the flush spreading across her chest and the way her lips part in anticipation.

“You’re sure about this?” I ask one more time, even though my body is screaming at me to stop talking and start tasting.

“Absolutely.” She fists her hands in my hair, directing me where she wants me

When I finally taste her, she cries out and lifts her hips off the mattress. Her pussy is sweet and intoxicating, and I lose myself in the sounds she makes as I explore her geography with my tongue. I take my time, learning what makes her gasp, moan, and her entire body shake with need.

She writhes and pants as her thighs tremble on either side of my head. “That feels incredible.”

I slide one finger inside her while continuing to work her clit with my tongue, and she practically comes apart beneath me. Her walls are tight and hot around my finger, and when I add a second, she rocks against my hand desperately.

“More. Please, I need more.”

I curve my fingers inside her, finding the spot that makes her back arch off the bed, and work it relentlessly while my mouth continues its assault on her clit. She’s so close her body coils tighter with every stroke.

“Let go,” I coax against her skin. “Come for me, Sabrina.”

When her orgasm hits, she screams my name as her whole body convulses. I work her through it, gentling my touch as the waves subside, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs while she comes back down.

“I...” She trails off, apparently unable to find words.

“That was just the beginning,” I whisper, returning my mouth to her clit to make her come again.

“Nikandr, please?—”

“Let me take care of you,” I say, lifting my head slightly. “Let me make you feel good.”

I use my mouth and tongue to bring her right to the edge, then pull back when she’s trembling and desperate. She makes a sound of frustration that goes straight to my cock, but I want to draw this out, want to make it last.

“Don’t stop,” she pleads, reaching for me. “Please don’t stop.”

“I’m not stopping. Just slowing down.” I kiss my way back up her body, paying special attention to her breasts until she’s arching beneath me all over again. “I want to feel you come around my cock.”

She helps me out of my pajama pants, her hands shaking with need and anticipation. When she wraps her fingers around my shaft, I groan and have to grab her wrist to keep from losing control entirely.

“Your hands...” I let my head fall back as she strokes me slowly. “You’re going to kill me.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Good,” she says with a wicked smile, twisting her wrist in a way that makes me see stars. “I want you as desperate as you made me.”

She leans down and takes me in her mouth, and I nearly come off the bed. Her tongue swirls around the head of my cock while her hand works the base, and the combination of sensations is almost too much to bear.

“Sabrina, stop.” I’m gasping and pulling her away reluctantly. “I need to be inside you.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” she asks, lying back and spreading her legs in invitation.

I position myself carefully between her thighs, hyper-aware of her pregnancy and the need to be gentle despite the fire burning through my veins. The head of my cock brushes against her entrance, and we both shudder at the contact.

“You’re sure you’re ready?” I ask, even though I’m dying to push inside her.

“I’ve been ready since the moment you walked into the room,” she says, reaching down to guide my cock inside her opening.

When I push inside her slowly, inch by inch, she makes a sound of pure satisfaction. She’s so tight and hot and perfect that I have to stop moving entirely to keep from coming immediately.

“Christ...” I inhale and exhale slowly while bracing myself on my forearms above

her. “You feel incredible. Better than I remembered.”

She lifts her hips experimentally, taking me deeper, and the movement sends shockwaves of pleasure through both of us. “You’re so big,” she whispers, her nails digging into my shoulders. “I can feel every inch of you.”

I start to move slowly, pulling almost all the way out before sliding back in, and she meets every thrust with enthusiasm. Her breasts bounce with each movement, and I can’t resist leaning down to capture one nipple in my mouth.

“Yes.” She arches into me. “Just like that.”

I increase the pace gradually, building a rhythm that has her gasping and clinging to me. Every thrust brings us closer together, not just physically but emotionally, like we’re finally acknowledging what’s been building between us since that first night at the safehouse.

“Harder,” she urges, wrapping her legs around my waist. “I need more.”

I give her what she wants, driving into her with more force while being careful not to put pressure on her belly. The sound of our bodies coming together fills the room, along with her moans and my harsh breathing.

“Touch yourself,” I say, voice rough with desire. “I want you to come first.”

She slides her hand between us, finding her clit, and the sight of her touching herself while I’m buried inside her is almost my undoing. Her walls flutter around me as she works herself, and I know she’s close.

“That’s it.” I change my angle to hit that spot inside her that makes her cry out. “Come for me, Sabrina. Let me feel you fall apart.”

With a breathless whimper, she presses on her clit and cries out. Her pussy clamps around me as she comes, milking my release. With a shout of relief, I let go, spilling my seed inside her, bare this time, with no barriers between us. Fucking perfection.

Afterward, we lie in silence, the sheets tangled between us, with her head tucked beneath my jaw. Her breathing gradually slows, and I notice the moment the tension leaves her body completely. I expect the guilt to creep in as I worry about what this means for our already complicated situation, but it doesn't come. Instead, a strange calm settles over me, like the last piece of a puzzle has shifted into place.

Sabrina speaks first. "We need to figure out how to raise this child together. Civilly."

I nod against her hair, though something about the word "civilly" sits wrong with me. It sounds distant and formal, like we're business partners negotiating a contract instead of two people who just made love with desperate intensity.

"I know the circumstances aren't ideal," she says, tracing lazy patterns on my chest with her fingertip, "But I want us to be able to co-parent without drama or resentment."

Tension flares in my chest at the word "co-parent," though I can't entirely explain why. The term implies separation, division of responsibility, and shared custody arrangements that would require me to give her up half the time. The thought makes my skin itch with something that feels dangerously close to panic. "I'll try," I say instead of voicing any of that.

What I don't tell her is this isn't about civility for me. It's about proximity, and the fact that I can't breathe properly when she's not within reach. The idea of her taking our child and disappearing into a life I'm not part of makes me want to tear apart the world.

She tilts her head up to look at me, and in the dim light I see the uncertainty in her expression. “I have an appointment with my doctor in a few days. It’s the sixteen-week checkup, and maybe a gender ultrasound if the baby cooperates.” She pauses, like she’s gathering courage. “You can come if you want.”

The offer surprises me. I’ve been expecting her to maintain boundaries around her medical care, to keep some parts of the pregnancy separate from my involvement. “You want me there?”

She barely hesitates. “I think you should be there... If you want to be.”

“I want to be.” The response comes without hesitation. “I want to be part of all of it.”

She settles back against my chest, apparently satisfied with my answer. “Good. I hope we can find out if we’re having a boy or a girl.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Do you have a preference?”

She shakes her head. “Healthy is all I care about, but I have to admit the idea of a little boy with your eyes is pretty appealing.”

Something warm and dangerous spreads through my chest at the image. A son. A child who might grow up to be strong and protective and loyal like Yaroslav was. Or a daughter who inherits Sabrina’s courage and compassion and stubborn independence. I’d be thrilled with either. “What about names?” I ask.

“I haven’t really thought about it yet. It still feels surreal sometimes, knowing there’s a whole person growing inside me.”

“It’s not surreal to me.” I slide my hand down to rest on her belly, marveling at the subtle changes in her body. “Every time I see you, I think about them. I wonder what they’ll look like, what kind of personality they’ll have, and whether they’ll be more like you or me.”

“Hopefully more like me,” she says with a soft laugh. “The world doesn’t need another person with your particular skill set.”

The comment stings more than it should, even though I know she doesn’t mean it cruelly. “My particular skill set is what’s keeping you safe.”

She blinks, and her expression becomes serious instead of teasing. “I know. I’m grateful for that, but I want our child to have choices you never had.”

Our child. Not “my child” or “the baby,” but “our child.” The possessive pronoun does something to me, making the reality of what we’ve created feel more solid and permanent. “I can’t disagree with that,” I finally say.

We fall silent again, but it’s comfortable now, weighted with exhaustion and satisfaction and something that feels remarkably like contentment. Sabrina’s breathing evens out, and I think she’s asleep until she speaks again.

“Nikandr?”

“Mm?”

“Thank you for making me feel safe enough to let you in.”

I press a kiss to the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her shampoo and the lingering traces of our lovemaking. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

She doesn’t respond, and this time, I can tell from the rhythm of her breathing that sleep has finally claimed her. I watch her face in the moonlight, memorizing the peaceful expression that’s been so elusive during her time here.

As my eyes drift closed, I realize it’s the first time in ten years I haven’t felt alone in the world. Since Yaroslav’s death, I’ve surrounded myself with loyal men and strategic alliances, but none of it filled the hollow space where my family used to be.

Now, lying here with her curled against my chest and our child growing safely inside her, that hollow space doesn’t ache anymore. For the first time since I was twenty-four-years-old, I’m not facing the world completely alone.

The thought should terrify me. Caring this much about someone makes one vulnerable by creating weaknesses enemies can exploit, but as I hold the woman

carrying my child, listening to her soft breathing in the darkness, I can't bring myself to regret any of it.

17

Sabrina

A couple of days later, I'm sitting cross-legged on my bed, phone pressed to my ear as Jessie's familiar voice fills the space around me. For the first time since arriving at the estate, I feel something close to normal.

"So, let me get this straight," Jessie says, and I can picture her pacing around her temporary apartment the way she always does when she's processing something complicated. "You and the scary Russian mob boss are going to co-parent your baby like a divorced couple from suburbia?"

I wince at her blunt assessment, even though it's not entirely inaccurate. "We're going to try to raise this child together without drama. Civilly."

"Civilly," she repeats, and I can hear the skepticism in her voice even through the phone. "Brina, this isn't a normal man we're talking about. You know that, right?"

"I know he's dangerous." The admission comes easier now than it would have a week ago. "He's also the father of my child, and he's been nothing but protective of both of us."

"Protective, yes, but intentions don't cancel out consequences." Jessie's voice softens, losing some of its edge. "I believe he means well, I really do, but meaning well doesn't change the fact his world could get you hurt."

I pull my knees up to my chest, careful not to put pressure on my belly, and consider

her words. She's not wrong. The past week has given me glimpses of just how different Nikandr's life is from anything I've ever known. It's clear in the way staff members defer to him with a mixture of respect and fear, the constant presence of armed security, and the phone calls conducted in languages I don't understand, discussing things I'm probably better off not knowing about.

"It's not just about surviving," I say quietly. "It's about raising a child in a world where loyalty is paid in blood. Where showing weakness can get you killed. Where the wrong choice doesn't just affect you, it affects everyone you care about."

She gasps softly. "You think you can handle that?"

I hesitate to answer. Can I handle raising a child in Nikandr's world? Can I teach them to be good and kind and compassionate while also teaching them the survival skills they'll need in a life where violence is always a possibility? "I don't know, but I have to try. This baby didn't ask to be born into this situation, but they're going to be. The least I can do is make sure they have two parents who can work together instead of tearing each other apart."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

Jessie is quiet for a moment, and when she speaks again, her voice is gentler. “You care about him.”

It’s not a question, and I don’t try to deny it. “Yes.”

“How much?”

I think about the past few nights, about the way Nikandr holds me when the nightmares came, the careful tenderness in his touch, and the way he listens when I talk about my fears for our child. I think about the way my chest tightens when he’s gone for too long, and the relief that floods through me when he returns safely. “More than I should,” I whisper.

Jessie sounds gentle when she asks, “And how does he feel about you?”

That’s the question I’ve been avoiding, even in my own thoughts, because I don’t know. He wants me, that much is obvious. He’s protective of me and the baby but want and protection aren’t the same thing as love, and I’m not naive enough to think they are. “He cares about the baby, and I think he feels responsible for me because of that.”

“But?”

“I don’t know if he sees me as anything more than the woman carrying his child.” The words hurt to say out loud, but they need to be said. “Still, maybe that’s enough. Maybe it has to be.”

Jessie makes a sound of frustration. “Sabrina, you deserve more than being someone’s obligation.”

“Do I?” The question comes out sharper than I intended. “I’m pregnant with a man’s child after spending four days with him. I work at a nightclub and live in a studio apartment with furniture from yard sales. Six months ago, I was drowning in medical debt and working two jobs just to keep the lights on. What exactly do I deserve?”

She still sounds stern but tender. “You deserve to be loved for who you are, not just for what you can give someone else.”

Her words make tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “Maybe love is a luxury I can’t afford right now.”

“Love isn’t a luxury, Brina. It’s a necessity, especially when you’re bringing a child into the world.”

We’re both quiet for a moment. Jessie sighs, and when she speaks again, there’s a strange mixture of resignation and hope in her voice. “I can hear it, you know. When you talk about him.”

“Hear what?”

“The way your voice changes. Gets softer. Like maybe you’re falling for him despite all the very good reasons you shouldn’t be.”

I want to deny it, but the words stick in my throat because she’s right. There is something blooming to life when I think about Nikandr, something warm and dangerous and completely terrifying. Hope, maybe. Or the beginning of something that could turn into love if I’m not careful.

“I don’t trust it,” I say honestly. “The feelings, I mean. How can I know if what I’m feeling is real, or if it’s just gratitude mixed with pregnancy hormones and the trauma of everything that’s happened?”

“You probably can’t know for sure yet, but that doesn’t mean you should ignore it entirely.”

I’m surprised by that advice. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, hold space for the possibility of something good. Of peace, happiness, and love, but never stop protecting yourself.” Her voice takes on the fierce protectiveness I’ve known since we were in college. “Promise me you won’t lose yourself in this, Sabrina. Promise me you’ll remember who you are underneath all of this.”

“I promise.”

“Also promise me you’ll call if things go bad. If you need an exit strategy, if you need help, if you need anything at all, you call me. I don’t care how dangerous his world is. I’ll find a way to get to you.”

The loyalty in her voice makes my chest ache with gratitude. “I promise that too.”

After we hang up, I sit in the quiet of my room and think about everything she said about love and protection and the difference between the two. I contemplate the hope I’m trying not to feel and the fear I can’t quite ignore.

I think about Nikandr and the way he looked at me this morning when he brought me coffee in bed, like I was something precious he was afraid of breaking. He talks about our baby with a mixture of wonder and protectiveness that makes my heart skip beats.

Maybe Jessie's right. Maybe there is something real building between us that goes beyond shared responsibility and physical attraction. Or maybe I'm just a pregnant woman clinging to romantic fantasies because the alternative—raising a child with someone who sees me as nothing more than a convenient vessel—is too depressing to contemplate.

Either way, I won't know for sure until I stop being afraid to find out.

The next day, I work up the courage to ask Maksim about having Jessie visit for lunch. I find him in the kitchen, going over some kind of security schedule with two other men I don't recognize. When he sees me, he dismisses them with a nod and turns his attention to me.

“What can I do for you, Miss Clyde?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“I was hoping to have my friend Jessie over for lunch tomorrow. I know it’s probably a security risk, but?—”

“Tomorrow works,” he interrupts, already pulling out his phone. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

I blink in surprise. “Just like that? No background checks or security protocols or arguments about unnecessary risks?”

Maksim looks up from his phone with something that might be amusement. “You expected more pushback?”

“Honestly? Yes.”

“Nikandr wants you to be happy here, to feel safe and at home. Having your friend visit is part of that.” He returns his attention to his phone, typing what looks like a lengthy message. “Besides, we’ve already done a thorough background check on Jessica Witman. She’s not a threat.”

The casual way he mentions the background check should probably bother me, but it doesn’t. In Nikandr’s world, paranoia isn’t a character flaw but a survival skill. “Will there be any special restrictions? Things she can’t see or places she can’t go?”

“She’ll be escorted at all times and limited to the main floor common areas. But other than that, no restrictions.”

“And Nikandr?”

He looks temporarily puzzled. “What about him?”

“Will he be joining us for lunch?”

Maksim’s expression becomes carefully neutral. “He has business to attend to tomorrow. Regarding Vadim.”

The name sends a chill down my spine, even though I don’t fully understand who Vadim is or why he’s a threat. “What kind of business?”

His tone is dismissive. “The kind you don’t need to worry about.”

It’s clearly a sensitive subject, but I press anyway. “Is he in danger?”

“Nikandr is always in some degree of danger. It’s the nature of his work.” Maksim’s tone gentles slightly. “He’s very good at what he does, and he has excellent people protecting him. He’ll be fine.”

I nod, trying to project a confidence I don’t feel. The thought of Nikandr facing some unknown threat while I sit safely in his house makes my stomach twist with anxiety, but pushing for more information won’t get me anywhere except frustrated. “Thank you for arranging the lunch.”

“You’re welcome. And Miss Clyde?” He pauses in the doorway. “Your friend is important to you, which makes her important to Nikandr. She’ll be perfectly safe here.”

The next day, watching Jessie’s reaction to the estate is almost worth the stress of being dragged into Nikandr’s mysterious world. By the time we’re settled in the sunroom with an elaborate lunch spread before us, she’s practically speechless. “Okay,” she says finally, picking at her salmon. “I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“Why you might be tempted to stick around. This place is insane. Like, movie-star-mansion insane.”

I laugh despite myself. “It’s not about the house, Jess.”

“I know, but it doesn’t hurt, right?” She takes a sip of the expensive wine Maksim selected for her since I’m sticking to sparkling water and sighs. “I still think you’re crazy, but I’m starting to understand the appeal.”

We talk for hours, catching up on everything that’s happened since I left my old life behind. She tells me about her temporary apartment, the strange men who shadow her movements but never interfere, and how surreal it feels to be living in a world where protection comes with a price tag most people can’t imagine.

“It’s like being in a movie.” She shakes her head. “Except the movie is my actual life, and I have no idea how it ends.”

I nod emphatically. “That makes two of us.”

She sets down her wine glass and studies me carefully. “Can I ask you something without you getting defensive?”

“Probably not but go ahead.” I grin.

“Do you think he loves you? Or do you think he just sees you as the mother of his child?”

The question is uncomfortable even though I’ve been asking myself the same thing for days. “I don’t know. Sometimes when he looks at me, it feels like there’s

something real there. Something deeper than just obligation or responsibility.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

She cocks her head slightly. “And other times?”

I nibble on my lower lip while trying to decide how to compose my answer. “Other times, I wonder if I’m just projecting what I want to see because the alternative is too scary to think about.”

Jessie nods thoughtfully. “What scares you more? That he doesn’t love you, or that he does?”

I consider the question, surprised by how difficult it is to answer. “Both, I think. If he doesn’t love me, I’m just a convenience. Just someone to carry his child and warm his bed when he wants company. But if he does love me...”

“Then you’re falling in love with a man whose enemies would use you to destroy him.”

“Exactly, and he’d never let me go if I decide that’s what I want someday.” I take a sip of sparkling water, wishing it were something stronger. “Either way, I lose.”

She surprises me by shaking her head. “Not necessarily. Maybe there’s a third option.”

“Which is?”

“Maybe love isn’t about winning or losing. Maybe it’s about choosing to be vulnerable with someone despite the risks.” She reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. “Your mom loved your dad, even knowing he might leave. She still thought

it was worth it to have you.”

The comparison makes my chest tighten. “And look how that turned out.”

“She got you out of it. That wasn’t nothing, Brina. That was everything.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a moment, watching the gardens through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Then Jessie speaks again, her voice quieter. “Has he told you about his brother? About what happened?”

“A little. I know someone named Irina killed him, and that’s who Nikandr was looking for when he found me.”

“Maksim told me more about it on the drive here. Not details, but enough to understand why Nikandr is the way he is.” She pauses, choosing her words carefully. “He’s been alone for a long time, Sabrina. Really alone. The kind of alone that changes a person fundamentally.”

“What are you saying?”

She appears to be carefully choosing her words. “I’m saying maybe the reason he doesn’t know how to show love is because he hasn’t had anyone to love in ten years. That doesn’t mean he’s not capable of it.”

The idea hadn’t occurred to me before, but it makes a certain kind of sense. I think about the gentle way he touches me when he thinks I’m asleep, like he’s still surprised I’m real. It’s impossible not to notice the way he remembers small details about my preferences and tries to accommodate them without being asked. “You think I should give him a chance?” I’ve been fighting what I feel for him, so the idea of surrendering leaves me with conflicted emotions.

“I think you should give yourself a chance to be happy, loved, and to build something good out of this impossible situation.” Her expression grows serious. “I also think you should have an exit strategy. Just in case.”

As the afternoon wears on, I relax in a way I haven’t since arriving at the estate. Having Jessie here makes everything feel more normal and manageable. Maybe this new life doesn’t have to mean losing everything I was before.

When it’s time for her to leave, she hugs me tightly and whispers in my ear. “He makes you happy. I can see it in your face.”

I don’t disagree. “It’s complicated.”

“The best things usually are.” She pulls back to look at me seriously. “Just remember what I said about protecting yourself and call me if you need anything.”

After she’s gone, I sit alone in the sunroom and think over her words about happiness, protection, and the delicate balance between hope and self-preservation. I don’t get a sudden epiphany, but my determination to fight against what I’m feeling is fading fast.

18

Nikandr

The doctor’s office is smaller than I expected and more intimate than the sterile medical facilities I’m used to. I’ve owned Women’s Associates for three years, but this is my first time inside the building. From the property listing, I thought the spaces would be larger, but there’s something comforting about the human scale of everything here. Sabrina sits on the examination table in a hospital gown that dwarfs her frame, swinging her legs nervously while we wait for Dr. Price to return with the

ultrasound equipment.

“You don’t have to stay for this part if it makes you uncomfortable,” she says, fidgeting with the edge of the gown.

I move my chair closer to the table. “I want to be here.”

“It might be weird. Seeing everything, I mean.”

“Sabrina.” I wait until she looks at me. “I want to be here for all of it. Every appointment, every milestone, every moment that matters—and I’ve seen everything by now anyway,” I add with a wink that makes her blush.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

She nods and visibly relaxes. The doctor arrives, introduces herself to me, and does the physical exam while asking questions before saying, “Let me get the ultrasound machine.” Hearing those words makes me nervous and excited.

Soon, Dr. Price returns wheeling in the ultrasound machine. “This is your first ultrasound together?” she asks as she prepares the equipment.

“Yes.” The word catches in my throat, coming out huskily.

Dr. Price smiles warmly at both of us. “Well, you’re in for a treat. The pregnancy is at sixteen weeks now, so we should get some excellent images of the baby. We can usually tell gender by now. If not, we’ll try again at the twenty-week detailed anatomy exam.”

Sabrina lies back on the table and unsnaps some of the closures on the front of her gown, exposing the gentle curve of her belly. Dr. Price applies gel to the transducer and presses it against Sabrina’s skin, moving it slowly as grainy images appear on the monitor. “There we are,” says the doctor with a smile. “Let me just...”

The image shifts, becomes clearer, and suddenly, I’m looking at the profile of a tiny human being. I see perfect features in miniature, delicate limbs moving in slow motion, and a spine like a string of pearls curved in impossible grace.

Sabrina gasps softly beside me. “That’s our baby,” she whispers, her voice thick with wonder.

I can’t speak, breathe, or do anything but stare at the screen where my child moves

and grows, completely unaware their father is a man who's killed more people than he can count.

"And here's the heartbeat," says Dr. Price, adjusting a dial.

The rapid, strong, and unmistakably alive sound fills the room. Each beat hammers against my chest like a physical blow, and I have to grip the edge of the examination table to keep from swaying. This is real. This tiny person is real, half of their DNA comes from me, and they're depending on both Sabrina and me to keep them safe in a world that's more dangerous than they'll ever understand.

Dr. Price continues her examination, taking measurements. "Heartbeat looks excellent. Growth is right on track, and all the major organs are developing normally. Everything looks perfect."

I watch Sabrina's face as she stares at the monitor, tears streaming down her cheeks in silent amazement. She reaches for my hand without looking away from the screen, and when her fingers intertwine with mine, my chest constricts.

Dr. Price pauses in her measurements and looks at both of us. "Would you like to know the gender? Baby's in a good position today, so I can tell with reasonable confidence."

Sabrina looks at me, eyebrows raised in question. We discussed this beforehand and decided we wanted to know, but now that the moment is here, I find myself hesitating.

"Yes," Sabrina says when I don't immediately respond. "I want to know."

"I...think so..." I do want to know, but I'm almost afraid to discover it at the same time. This child will transform every aspect of my life, and I don't know if I want to

savor the surprise or delay the inevitable. If it seems real now, it will be so much realer when I know if I'm having a son or a daughter.

Dr. Price nods and continues her examination. "It's surprisingly common for parents to be split on the decision. I'll write it down for you. That way you can look together when you're ready, or if you're planning a gender-reveal party..."

Twenty minutes later, we're sitting in the back of my car with a sealed envelope between us. Viktor is upfront, but the privacy screen is up, separating us. The ultrasound photos are scattered across the seat between us in a collection of profile shots and close-ups that make the reality of our child impossible to deny.

Sabrina turns the envelope over in her hands nervously. "Are you ready, or do you want to wait?"

I'm still a little ambivalent about learning already, but it's clear she's eager to know, so I nod, and my heart is beating almost as fast as our baby's was on the monitor.

She opens the envelope and unfolds the paper inside, reading silently for a moment before her face breaks into a radiant smile. "It's a girl." Her voice is soft with amazement. "We're having a daughter."

I stare at the paper in her hands, though the words blur together as a thousand instincts detonate at once. A daughter. My daughter. The weight of it crashes over me like a tidal wave, crushing every violent instinct I've built a life on.

In my world, daughters are precious beyond measure and vulnerable beyond comprehension. They're protected with a ferocity that borders on obsession and sheltered from realities that could destroy their innocence. They're also targets—weapons that enemies use against the men who love them.

I think about Yaroslav, and how he used to talk about having children someday. He wanted sons who could carry on the family name and daughters he could spoil and protect. He never got the chance to have either.

“Nikandr?” Sabrina’s voice sounds concerned. “Are you okay?”

I look at her and see my daughter’s mother wiping tears from her cheeks with quiet wonder. She’ll teach our child how to be kind and compassionate and good in a world that rewards none of those qualities and seems undaunted by the prospect.

Something ancient and protective locks into place in my chest, stronger than anything I’ve ever felt before. This isn’t just about keeping them safe anymore. This is about building a life where my daughter never has to know that her father once made his living through violence. I clear my throat, forcing the words out. “I want to secure another property.”

Sabrina blinks in surprise. “Another property? The estate is large enough?”

I interrupt, struggling to explain. “Something quieter, more permanent, and away from the city.”

She tilts her head, studying my expression. “You mean like a house? I’m confused, because your current house is?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“I mean like a home.” The distinction matters more than I can explain. “Somewhere our daughter can grow up without armed guards at every entrance.”

Sabrina frowns slightly. “But your business?—”

“Can be managed from anywhere.” The lie comes easily, though we both know it’s not entirely true. “I want her to have safety, stability, and a childhood that doesn’t involve learning to sleep through gunshots.”

She studies my face carefully, and I wonder what she sees there. After a long moment, she nods slowly, perhaps understanding what I’m so clumsily conveying. “Okay. We can look at properties. Maybe something with a good school district nearby.”

The casual way she says “we” does something to my chest that I don’t want to examine too closely. She’s not just agreeing to let me provide a house for our daughter. She’s agreeing to build a life together, to be a family in ways that go beyond shared custody and polite cooperation. “Private school. It’s more secure.”

She shrugs. “As long as it’s not repressive to her creativity, and she isn’t living there, I’m willing to consider the idea.”

I smile for a moment, imagining quiet future discussions about our daughter’s education, friends, hobbies, and interests. Longing for that simplicity fills me as I take a breath, knowing my next words will sound like weakness to anyone in my world, but not to her. “There’s something else. I’ve been thinking about stepping back from certain aspects of my work.”

“What kind of aspects?” she asks quietly, looking almost hopeful.

I speak bluntly. “The kind that require me to be away for days at a time or put me in situations where I might not come home.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, processing. When she speaks, her voice is careful. “You’re talking about retiring?”

“Not immediately or all at once, but eventually, yes.” I reach for one of the ultrasound photos, studying the perfect profile of our daughter. “I can’t be the kind of father she needs if I’m constantly looking over my shoulder for enemies.”

She watches me trace the outline of the baby’s face with my finger. “What would you do instead?”

“Legitimate business ventures. Investments...” I trail off, not wanting to be too specific about the illegal activities I’d be leaving behind.

She nods with understanding. “Instead of whatever it is you do now.”

“Yes.”

Her expression grows more serious. “Can you just walk away? Will the people you work with just let you retire to the suburbs and coach little league?”

Her questions are fair, and they highlight problems I haven’t fully worked out yet. Walking away from my current life won’t be simple or safe. There will be people who see my withdrawal as weakness and others who view it as betrayal. Some will try to use my family against me, viewing them as leverage to force me back into the game, but none of that changes my determination to try.

I meet her gaze directly. “I’ll figure it out. Whatever it takes to give our daughter a normal life, I’ll make it happen.”

“Even if it means giving up everything you’ve built?” she asks softly.

“What I’ve built isn’t worth preserving if it puts her in danger.”

She reaches over and takes my hand, sounding like she’s near tears when she speaks again. “Our daughter is lucky to have you.”

The simple statement means more than any declaration of love could. She’s not saying she cares about me or that she wants a future together. She’s saying I’ll be a good father, which somehow matters more than any romantic sentiment at the moment.

I squeeze her hand gently. “I hope so.”

“I know so. I’ve seen how you take care of people you care about, like the way you protected me, and the way you’ve made sure Jessie is safe even though you barely know her. Our daughter will never doubt she’s loved.”

I want to tell her I love her too, moved to blurt it out, but I hold back. Sabrina doesn’t seem ready to hear such words from me, and I’m not sure I want to utter them. I can’t deny I’m in love with her, at least as much as I can love anyone, but how do I show that or prove that? It’s better to maintain my silence for the moment until I figure out those details.

That night, after we’ve returned to the estate and Sabrina has gone to bed early with a stack of pregnancy books, I sit in my study and call Maksim.

“How did the appointment go?” he asks after answering.

“It’s a girl.” I’m beaming as I say that.

I can hear the smile in his voice. “Congratulations. I assume everything else was normal?”

“Perfect. The baby’s healthy, Sabrina’s healthy, and everything is progressing exactly as it should.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Good. That’s a relief.” His tone shifts slightly. “You sound different though.”

I lean back in my chair, staring out at the gardens where security lights illuminate the grounds in carefully planned patterns. “I’ve been thinking about making some changes.”

“What kind of changes?” His voice is cautious now.

“Stepping back from active operations and delegating more responsibility. Eventually, I’ll be transitioning to purely legitimate business ventures.” The silence on the other end of the line stretches long enough that I wonder if the call has dropped. “Maksim?”

“I’m here. Just processing what you’re telling me.” His voice is carefully neutral. “You’re talking about retirement.”

“Not right away, but yes, eventually.”

He lets out a long breath. “Because of the baby?”

“Because of my family.” The word feels foreign on my tongue, but also right in ways I hadn’t expected. “I can’t raise a daughter in this world, Maksim. I won’t have her grow up thinking violence is normal, and fear is just part of life.”

“And you think you can just walk away after everything you’ve built, leaving behind everyone who depends on you?” The questions echo Sabrina’s concerns but coming from Maksim they carry additional weight because he understands in a way she can’t.

He knows better than anyone how dangerous it can be to show weakness in our world, and how quickly allies can become enemies when they sense vulnerability.

I rub my temples. “I’ll transition slowly. Put safeguards in place and make sure everyone who works for me is taken care of.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about, and you know it.” His voice carries years of shared experience.

He’s right. The real danger won’t come from my own people, but from enemies who see my withdrawal as an opportunity to strike and from rivals who view my desire for a peaceful life as proof that I’ve gone soft. “I’ll handle the security concerns as they arise.”

Maksim makes a sound of frustration. “By hiding in some suburban fortress for the rest of your life?”

“By being smart about how I extract myself from situations that could put my family at risk.”

He sighs, and I can picture him rubbing his temples the way he does when he’s trying to solve an impossible problem. “What do you need from me?”

“Time to figure this out, support while I transition, and your word that you’ll help me keep them safe no matter what happens.”

“You have all of that. You’ve always had all of that.” His voice softens with something like affection.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Wait until we see if this is actually possible.”

After we hang up, I sit alone in the darkness and think about the ultrasound photos tucked away in my desk drawer. They’re proof of my daughter’s existence, her perfect innocence, and her complete lack of awareness that her existence has already changed everything about my priorities.

I don’t know if it’s possible to build the kind of life I want for her, or if I can successfully transition from the man I’ve been to the man I need to become, but I have to try. The alternative of raising her in a world where violence is always just beneath the surface is unacceptable.

She deserves better than that. They both deserve a normal, safe, and happy life.

I’ll do whatever it takes to give it to them.

19

Sabrina

A few days later, Nikandr surprises me by suggesting we go shopping for the baby. Not online shopping with overnight delivery to the estate, but actual shopping in an actual store where normal people buy things for their children. “Are you sure?” I ask, looking up from the pregnancy book I’ve been reading in the sunroom. “Won’t that be a security risk?”

He closes his laptop and gives me a look that’s half-amusement, half-determination. “I think we can manage a trip to a baby boutique without causing an international incident.”

The drive into town feels surreal. I sit in the passenger seat of Nikandr’s understated

sedan instead of the bulletproof SUV to which I've grown accustomed, watching familiar neighborhoods roll past the windows. Maksim follows in a second car at a discreet distance, but for the first time in weeks, I feel almost normal.

The boutique Nikandr chooses is in an upscale shopping district, where everything costs three times what it should but comes wrapped in tissue paper and tied with ribbon. A soft chime announces our arrival, and I'm immediately surrounded by the most beautiful baby things I've ever seen.

The scent of lavender and something clean and powdery that must be designed to make expectant mothers lose their minds with nesting instincts hits me. Display cases showcase handmade booties that cost more than my most expensive pair of shoes, and the lighting is soft and warm in a way that makes everything look like it belongs in a magazine.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“May I help you?” A woman in her fifties approaches with the kind of polished smile that suggests she works on commission. She take in Nikandr’s expensive watch and my obvious pregnancy, and her expression brightens considerably.

“We’re shopping for our first baby,” Nikandr says smoothly, resting his hand at the small of my back in a gesture that’s becoming natural between us.

“How wonderful. When are you due?”

“August,” I say, my voice coming out softer than usual. Saying it out loud to a stranger makes it feel more real somehow.

“A summer baby. How lovely. Are you finding out the gender?”

“It’s a girl,” Nikandr says, and there’s something in his voice—pride, maybe, or wonder—that makes my chest tighten with emotion.

The saleswoman clasps her hands together. “Oh, how perfect. We have the most beautiful selection for little girls. Follow me.”

I walk slowly through the store, past shelves lined with onesies in every imaginable color, pastel blankets so soft they feel like clouds, and impossibly tiny socks that make my chest ache with tenderness. Everything is perfect and precious and designed for babies who will grow up safe and loved and wanted.

A rack of newborn gowns catches my attention, with each one more delicate than the last. I touch the edge of a white cotton dress with tiny pink rosebuds embroidered

around the neckline. The fabric is so soft it seems impossible that human hands could create something this fine. “This would be perfect for coming home from the hospital.” I lift it carefully from the rack.

He moves closer, studying the tiny garment. “It’s beautiful, like something for a princess.”

The way he says it, like he already sees our daughter as someone precious and worthy of beautiful things, makes my eyes ache with unshed tears. I’ve never had someone look at me and see potential royalty, but he looks at our unborn child and sees nothing but wonder.

I add the gown to our basket and continue browsing, running my fingers over soft blankets and miniature cardigans. Each item feels like a small act of faith, a belief that our daughter will arrive safely and grow up surrounded by love. “Look at this.” I pick up a stuffed bear with button eyes and a red ribbon around its neck. The fur is incredibly soft, and I picture our daughter holding it, sleeping with it curled against her chest, or carrying it with her as she takes her first steps and says her first words.

When I look up, he’s watching me with an expression I can’t quite read. There’s something tender in his eyes that makes my heart skip in ways that have nothing to do with pregnancy hormones.

“It’s perfect,” he says quietly. “She’ll love it.”

I set the bear carefully in the shopping basket we collected at the entrance, then move on to a display of newborn outfits. Everything is so impossibly small that it’s hard to believe a real person will actually wear these clothes.

A mobile hanging above the display catches my attention. It has delicate elephants in soft gray and white, dancing on nearly invisible strings. When I touch it gently, it

spins with the softest chiming sound, like tiny bells in the distance. “Do you think she’ll be big or little?” I ask, holding up a onesie that couldn’t fit a doll and see the label reads “Micro-preemie,” which makes me sad.

“Healthy,” he says immediately. “That’s all that matters.”

I smile at his answer and add mobile to our basket after returning the tiny onesie, which I hope our daughter can never wear, to the rack. The elephants continue their gentle dance, and I imagine her lying in her crib, watching them spin.

I gravitate toward a section of baby books, running my fingers along the spines of classics I remember from my own childhood. “Goodnight Moon,” “Where the Wild Things Are,” and “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” among them. Each title brings back memories of my mother’s voice and the way she’d curl up beside me on my narrow twin bed to transform each story into an adventure.

A leather-bound collection of fairy tales catches my attention, and I pull it from the shelf. The cover is embossed with golden letters, and when I open it, the pages are filled with beautiful illustrations of princesses and castles and happily-ever-afters. “She should have stories,” I say, more to myself than to Nikandr. “Good ones. The kind that teach her she can be brave and strong and still believe in magic.”

He steps closer, looking over my shoulder at the delicate illustrations. “What kind of stories did your mother tell you?”

“All kinds, but my favorites were always the ones where the princess saved herself.” I turn to a page showing a girl with long dark hair climbing down from a tower using her own braided locks. “She used to say waiting for rescue was overrated.”

He chuckles. “Smart woman.”

“The smartest.” I close the book and add it to our growing collection before I pick up a board book with bright colors and simple words. “This one’s for when she’s little. Before she’s ready for princesses and adventures.”

I let out a soft gasp at a familiar title. “My mother used to read this one to me.” I pull out a copy of “Love You Forever.” I flip through the pages, remembering her voice and the way she’d change her tone for different characters. The familiar words blur slightly as unexpected tears prick my eyes.

He moves closer, looking over my shoulder at the illustrations. “What was she like?”

“Stubborn. Protective. She had this way of making everything seem possible, even when things were falling apart around us.” I close the book and add it to our growing collection. “She would have loved being a grandmother.”

“She would have loved you as a mother,” he says softly.

The simple statement makes me nod, and I have to blink back sudden tears. “I hope I can be half as good as she was.”

“You will be.” His certainty surprises me. “I’ve seen how you care for people. Our daughter is lucky to have you.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I want to ask if he thinks she's lucky to have him too, but something about the moment feels too fragile to push. Instead, I continue browsing, letting myself imagine bedtime stories, lullabies, and all the small rituals that will make up our daughter's childhood.

By the time we reach the register, our basket is overflowing with the stuffed bear, several outfits in newborn and three-month sizes, the mobile with dancing elephants, soft blankets, books, and a ridiculous number of tiny socks that I couldn't resist. The saleswoman beams at us as she begins scanning each item.

"First baby?" she asks, though the answer is obvious from the way I'm watching every item get carefully wrapped.

"Yes." I touch my belly.

"It shows. First-time parents always buy the most beautiful things." She holds up a pair of tiny booties covered in pearl buttons. "These are handmade by a local artisan. They're some of our most popular items."

I start to protest when I see the total climbing higher and higher on the register display, but Nikandr hands over his credit card without even blinking. The casual way he dismisses the expense—enough to cover my rent for two months—should probably bother me, but instead it makes me feel cared for in a way I'm not used to.

"This is too much," I whisper as the clerk runs his card.

"It's not nearly enough," he counters, signing the receipt with quick, decisive strokes.

As the clerk carefully wraps each item in tissue paper and places them in elegant shopping bags with ribbon handles, I catch myself smiling. The whole process feels like a ritual, with each tiny outfit and soft blanket being prepared like gifts for a princess.

The saleswoman includes several samples of baby lotion and a small teddy bear as complimentary gifts. “Congratulations again,” she says as she hands us the bags. “Your daughter is very lucky.”

Walking out of the store with arms full of packages, I feel lighter than I have in months. This feels normal in a way I haven’t experienced since before everything changed. We’re just two expectant parents buying things for their baby and planning for a future that suddenly seems possible instead of terrifying.

When Nikandr places his hand on the small of my back, I don’t flinch away like I might have a week ago. The touch is warm and protective without being possessive, and I lean into it slightly as we walk.

“Thank you,” I say as we step out onto the sidewalk, “For letting me have something normal.”

“You don’t have to thank me for normal, Sabrina. You deserve normal.”

The way he says my name, soft and deliberate, makes something flutter in my chest. I’m not sure when the heat between us turned into something warmer and steadier. This feels less like desire and more like the foundation for something tangible.

We’re walking toward the car, my arms full of shopping bags, when I catch sight of a man in a dark jacket, leaning against a lamppost, and staring directly at us. He’s not moving or pretending to be doing anything else. He just watches with an intensity that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Something about his posture, and the way he holds himself perfectly still while everything around him moves, sends a surge of fear through me. He's too focused and deliberate. Normal people don't stand that way or stare that openly.

I slow my steps, trying to get a better look without being obvious about it. The man appears to be middle-aged and average height, with graying hair visible beneath a baseball cap. There's nothing particularly distinctive about him except for that unnerving stare.

When I do a double take, shifting my bags to get a clearer view, he's gone. He vanishes into the crowd of shoppers as if he was never there at all. I scan the sidewalk frantically, looking for any trace of the dark jacket or the baseball cap, but see nothing unusual.

"Everything okay?" asks Nikandr, following my gaze across the street.

I scan the sidewalk again, looking for any sign of the man in the dark jacket, but see nothing unusual. There are only normal people going about their lives, carrying shopping bags, pushing strollers, or talking on phones.

"Yeah," I say finally, deciding not to mention what I saw. It could all be in my head anyway. Things have been peaceful lately, and maybe I'm just not used to feeling safe. Maybe I'm seeing threats that don't exist because part of me is still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"You sure?" His voice carries the kind of alertness that tells me he's already shifting into protective mode.

"I'm sure. I thought I saw someone I recognized, but I was wrong."

He doesn't look entirely convinced, but he doesn't push. Instead, he opens the

passenger door for me and waits until I'm settled before closing it and walking around to the driver's side.

As we pull away from the curb, I cradle the bag of baby clothes against my chest and let myself imagine what our life could look like with a normal family life. There will be bedtime stories, birthday parties, and school plays. I can picture it clearly. Not just surviving this situation or getting through the pregnancy but actually building something good together. Something real.

The thought should terrify me, but as I watch him drive, noting the careful way he checks the mirrors and the unconscious protectiveness in the way he positions himself between me and potential threats, I don't feel afraid. I feel hopeful.

Maybe that's naïve. Maybe I'm setting myself up for heartbreak by believing we can have something normal and beautiful together. Maybe, maybe, maybe... Sitting here with bags full of tiny clothes and impossible dreams, I can't bring myself to care about the risks.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks, glancing over at me.

"Baby names," I lie, not ready to share the deeper thoughts swirling through my mind.

“Any ideas?”

“A few. What about you?”

He’s quiet for a moment, considering. “I keep thinking about my grandmother’s name, Elizabeth. It means grace in Russian.”

“Elizabeth,” I repeat, testing the sound of it. “I like it. It’s beautiful.”

“What about middle names?”

“Maybe something that honors my mother? Her name was Claire.”

“Elizabeth Claire.” He says it slowly, like he’s imagining calling our daughter by that name. “It’s perfect.”

The easy way we slip into planning our daughter’s name, and the natural rhythm of discussing our future fills me with calm confidence. This isn’t just about shared responsibility or physical attraction anymore but about building something together while creating a family that goes beyond the circumstances that brought us into each other’s lives.

When we arrive back at the estate, Nikandr insists on carrying all the shopping bags upstairs to the nursery he’s been having renovated. I follow him down the hall to a room I haven’t seen since the day I arrived, and when he opens the door, I gasp.

The space has been transformed into something out of a fairy tale. There are soft gray

walls with white trim, a crib that looks like it was handcrafted by artists, and a rocking chair positioned perfectly by the window. Everything is elegant and beautiful and completely ready for our daughter's arrival.

"When did you do all this?" I ask, running my fingers along the edge of the crib.

"I've been working on it since I found out you were pregnant. I hope you'll stay long enough to use it."

The carefully neutral way he phrases it tells me he's trying not to pressure me, but there's something vulnerable in his expression that suggests my answer matters more than he's willing to admit.

"I'm sure I will. I like it here...with you."

The admission surprises both of us, but it feels true in a way that has nothing to do with fear or obligation. I want to stay not because I have to, but because I can imagine being happy here with him, building the kind of life our daughter deserves.

As we unpack the shopping bags together, arranging tiny outfits in the dresser and placing the stuffed bear in the crib, I let myself believe maybe fairy tales can come true, and two people from completely different worlds can find a way to build something beautiful together.

Maybe this can actually be real.

20

Nikandr

The framed photo of our daughter at twenty weeks' gestation, captured in stunning

detail by the latest ultrasound technology during the anatomy scan, sits in a place of honor on my desk, centered between my laptop and the secure phone I use for business calls. I can see her profile clearly now, including the curve of her nose, the shape of her lips, and tiny fingers that will someday hold mine.

The appointment three days ago was unlike anything I'd experienced. Watching her move and stretch on the monitor, seeing her heart beating strong and steady, and knowing she's healthy and growing exactly as she should all changed something for me. It made the abstract concept of fatherhood into something immediate and urgent.

I pick up Elizabeth's photo now, studying the image that's already burned into my memory. Dr. Price printed several copies, but this one captured the perfect moment when our daughter turned toward the camera, almost like she was looking directly at us.

"She's going to be beautiful," Sabrina had whispered in the darkened exam room, tears streaming down her face as we watched our child move on the screen.

Beautiful and innocent and completely unaware that her father has spent years building an empire on violence and fear. The thought makes my chest tighten with something that feels like shame and desperate determination.

I set the photo back in its place and turn my attention to the documents spread across my desk. There are financial reports, asset valuations, and succession plans I've been working on for weeks. The quiet process of dismantling everything I've built over the past fifteen years is delicate work.

I can't simply walk away without ensuring the transition won't create a power vacuum that invites war. Too many people depend on the stability I've provided, and too many enemies would see my withdrawal as an opportunity to seize territory and resources.

A knock at my study door interrupts my planning. Maksim enters without waiting for permission, carrying a thick folder and wearing the expression he gets when he's been working on complex problems.

"The latest reports you requested," he says, dropping the folder on my desk.

I flip it open and scan the first page of the detailed financial projections for transitioning our legitimate businesses away from any connection to illegal operations. The numbers are sobering but manageable as I look at the facts distilled down to numbers and details, including three construction companies, two import/export businesses, the medical clinics, and a dozen smaller ventures that generate clean revenue. "Talk me through the timeline," I say, studying the charts and projections.

"The construction companies are the easiest. They're already operating independently with minimal oversight from us. We can sell them outright to the current management teams within sixty days. A lot of money is laundered through them, but that could be curbed and gradually transition to fully legitimate businesses within...eighteen months, after wrapping up current contracts with...certain associates."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I nod, making notes in the margins. “What about the import business?”

“More complicated. There are existing contracts and relationships that will take time to unwind, and a lot of smuggling happens through these. I recommend transferring ownership to a holding company based in the Cayman Islands, then gradually selling shares to legitimate investors over the next year as we focus on cleaning up the source of the goods moving through them.”

I nod in agreement. “And the medical facilities?”

“Those stay exactly as they are. They generate clean revenue from essential services, and they give you a legitimate reason to maintain certain connections in the business community.” Maksim pulls out a separate document. “I’ve identified twelve facilities we can expand into full-service clinics. The profit margins are excellent, and the business model is completely above board.”

I review the expansion plans, impressed by the thoroughness of his research. “What’s the total investment required?”

“Forty-two million for the medical expansion. Another fifteen to transition the construction companies, or an estimated forty million in profit if you just sell them to others looking for that type of investment without any change. The import restructuring will cost about eight million in fees and taxes.”

“Acceptable. I want at least two free clinics though, where people can go without insurance, or if they have bad insurance.” My thoughts are squarely on Sabrina and her mother as I say that.

Maksim looks surprised. “That will eat into profits?—”

“I don’t care. Make it happen.” At his nod, I close that section and move to the next page. “What about territory management?”

“I’ve been in preliminary discussions with Anton Volkov and Dmitri Kozlov. Both are interested in taking over different sectors of our illegal operations, and both have the infrastructure to maintain stability without involving us directly.”

I know both men well enough to trust their capabilities. “Terms?”

“Volkov wants the waterfront territory and shipping operations. He’s offering twelve million plus ongoing tribute payments to key people who might otherwise cause problems during the transition.”

I nod since it’s a generous offer. “And Kozlov?”

“He wants the gambling and entertainment businesses. Twenty-eight million upfront, plus he agrees to honor all existing protection agreements for two years.”

The numbers are lower than what those operations generate annually, but the clean break is worth the financial loss. “What about enforcement and collections?”

“That’s where it gets complicated.” Maksim shifts in his chair. “Those operations can’t be transferred cleanly. They’re too tied to personal relationships and reputation. We’ll have to wind them down gradually.”

“How gradually?”

“Six months minimum. We honor existing contracts but don’t take on new business. Existing debts get collected or forgiven on a case-by-case basis. Anyone who wants

to continue in that line of work gets transferred to Volkov or Kozlov's organizations with our recommendation."

I consider the implications. "And if someone doesn't want to transfer?"

"Generous severance packages and new identities if they want them. We take care of our people, Nikandr. That doesn't change."

"Good." I flip to the next section, which details offshore banking and asset protection. "Tell me about the financial restructuring."

"I've identified thirty-seven million in liquid assets that can be moved to legitimate accounts in Switzerland and Singapore within thirty days. Another sixty million in investments that will take longer to liquidate without attracting attention."

"Timeframe for full liquidation?"

"Eighteen months for everything, but I recommend keeping about twenty million in easily accessible accounts as insurance money in case the transition doesn't go as smoothly as we hope."

The suggestion makes practical sense, even though the idea of needing insurance money makes my stomach tighten. "What kind of problems are you anticipating?"

He arches a brow. "Vadim is the obvious concern, but there could be others who see your withdrawal as an opportunity to settle old scores or grab territory. Having liquid assets available gives us options if we need to solve problems quickly."

I study the financial projections, noting the careful way Maksim has structured everything to minimize tax implications and regulatory scrutiny. "What about ongoing expenses? Security, staff, and maintenance of legitimate businesses?"

“The medical facilities generate enough revenue to cover all necessary. The construction company sales will provide a substantial cash cushion if you go that route, and the territory transfers include ongoing consultation fees that will supplement income during the transition period.”

“Consultation fees?”

“Both Volkov and Kozlov want to maintain access to your expertise during their first year of operations. Nothing that compromises your exit strategy, but enough involvement to ensure a smooth transition and continued loyalty from people who might otherwise cause problems.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

The arrangement makes sense from a strategic standpoint, though the idea of maintaining any connection to those operations makes me uncomfortable. “Define ‘consultation.’”

“Monthly meetings to discuss territorial disputes, advice on major decisions, and recommendations for key personnel. There will be no direct involvement in day-to-day operations, and no participation in anything illegal. You become an elder statesman offering guidance, not an active participant.”

I nod slowly, mulling it over. “For how long?”

He gives me a terse smile. “One year maximum. After that, you’re completely out.”

I close the folder and lean back in my chair, processing the magnitude of what we’re discussing. It’s hard to believe fifteen years of careful planning and strategic expansion can be dismantled, transitioned, or redistributed in less than two years.

“There’s one more thing,” he says. “Personal security during and after the transition. You’ll need protection for your family that doesn’t depend on active Bratva connections.”

“What do you recommend?”

“A private security firm. Legitimate, licensed, with no connections to organized crime. I know a company in London that specializes in protecting high-net-worth individuals who’ve received credible threats. They’re discreet, effective, and expensive. It might be worth buying into such a company as well.”

“Cost just for protection if I don’t choose to invest?”

He looks down briefly at his tablet. “Two million annually for comprehensive protection. Less if you’re willing to accept reduced coverage after the first year.”

The expense is manageable, and the peace of mind would be invaluable. “Set up a meeting.”

“I’ve scheduled one for next week. They’ll conduct a full security assessment of any properties you plan to use, recommend personnel, and develop protocols for your family’s protection.”

I nod, making notes about timing and logistics. “What else?”

Once more, he consults his tablet. “Legal documentation. We need to ensure everything we’re doing is properly structured to avoid future complications. I recommend bringing in a specialist who handles high-level asset protection and international business law.”

“Someone clean?”

He nods. “Completely. No connections to anything questionable. I know a firm in New York that handles this kind of work for Fortune 500 executives and foreign nationals. They’ll ask minimal questions and provide maximum protection.”

The thoroughness of Maksim’s planning impresses me, though it also highlights just how complex this process will be. “What’s the timeline for legal documentation?”

He seems to be calculating before he answers. “Sixty days to set up the basic structure, plus another six months to complete all transfers and establish full legal protection for your assets and family.”

I study the folder again, noting the careful attention to detail in every projection and recommendation. “You’ve put a lot of work into this.”

He shrugs. “I want to make sure you can actually walk away when the time comes with no loose ends, no unfinished business, and no reasons for anyone to come looking for you.”

The simple statement encapsulates years of loyalty and friendship. Maksim isn’t just helping me plan an exit strategy. He’s ensuring that I can build the life I want for my family without constantly looking over my shoulder. He and I both know I have to deal with Vadim before I can fully escape though.

He shifts in his chair. “What about Sabrina? Are you planning to tell her about this?”

The question hits a nerve, and I wince slightly. “Not yet. I want the groundwork laid and the path secured before I make promises I might not be able to keep.”

He nods like he approves of that strategy. “She’s going to figure it out eventually. The woman isn’t stupid.”

“I know, but I also know she’s still nervous. She glances over her shoulder sometimes like she’s expecting threats to materialize out of thin air.” The observation comes out rougher than I intended. “I never want her to feel that way again, especially when our daughter arrives.”

“So, you’re going to keep her in the dark while you dismantle your entire life?” He sounds skeptical.

I frown at him. “No. I’m going to protect her from worry she doesn’t need to carry.” I close the financial reports and stack them neatly. “She’s finally starting to relax and starting to believe we might have a future together. I won’t jeopardize that by

burdening her with details about exit strategies and succession planning.”

Maksim studies my face carefully. “You love her.”

The statement isn’t quite a question but demands an answer, nonetheless. I could deflect or point out that love is a luxury I can’t afford in my position but sitting here with my daughter’s ultrasound photo watching over us, the lie won’t come. “Yes.”

“Does she know?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“I haven’t told her.” The admission feels like confessing weakness. “I’m not sure she’s ready to hear it, and I’m not sure I’m ready to say it.”

He seems like he might smile for a moment. “But you’re willing to give up everything for her.”

I give him a repressive look. “I’m willing to give up everything for them and the family we’re building together.” I pick up the ultrasound photo again, tracing the outline of our daughter’s profile with my finger. “Love isn’t just about words, Maksim. It’s about choices, and I choose them over everything else.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re doing the right thing.”

I smile briefly. “That’s worth a lot more than you might believe, Maksim.”

That night, after dinner and a movie that Sabrina picked—some romantic comedy that would normally make me reach for my phone—I actually pay attention to the story. Not because the plot is particularly compelling, but because watching Sabrina react to it is fascinating.

She laughs at the funny parts, rolls her eyes at the ridiculous romantic gestures, and tears up during the emotional scenes in a way that makes my chest ache with tenderness. Somewhere during the second act, she curls up against my side, her head finding the spot between my shoulder and chest that seems designed for her.

“This is nice,” she whispers sleepily, resting her hand on the curve of her belly.

“What is?”

“This. Being normal. Watching terrible movies and eating too much popcorn and not thinking about anything complicated.”

I press a kiss to the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her shampoo. “You deserve normal.”

“We deserve normal,” she corrects, and the way she includes me in that statement does something to my chest I don’t want to examine too closely. By the time the credits roll, she’s asleep against me, breathing deeply in a way that tells me she feels safe. I should wake her to suggest we move to the bedroom, where she’ll be more comfortable.

Instead, I reach for my phone and send a carefully worded text to Maksim that commits to the plan we’ve designed: Start liquidating non-essential assets. Move offshore accounts to secure locations. Timeline is 6 months max.

His response comes within minutes: Understood. Will have preliminary plans ready by tomorrow.

I set aside the phone and settle back into the couch, careful not to disturb Sabrina’s peaceful sleep. Tomorrow I’ll begin the process of systematically destroying everything I’ve spent years building. I’ll make enemies of former allies and burn bridges that can never be rebuilt.

Tonight, holding the woman I love, and the child we created together, I can’t bring myself to regret any of it. Some things are worth burning the world down for, and my family is at the top of that very short list.

These will be my final months in the Bratva. Once Vadim is eliminated and the

immediate threats are neutralized, I want nothing left of this life to return to—no territory to reclaim, no operations to restart, and no reason for anyone to come looking for the man I used to be.

I'll become someone new, who's worthy of the family I'm determined to protect, and can teach his daughter about honor and loyalty without having to explain why those lessons came written in blood.

The transformation won't be easy, and it won't be without cost, but as I watch Sabrina sleep, one hand unconsciously protective over our child, it's the only choice with which I can live.

My daughter will never know the sound of gunfire. She'll never see her father's hands stained with blood. She'll grow up believing the world is fundamentally good because I'll make sure the darkness never touches her. That's a promise I intend to keep, no matter what it costs me.

21

Sabrina

The afternoon sun through the tall windows of the sunroom creates geometric patterns across the plush carpet where I've spread out baby clothes in careful piles after they've all been washed. Eugenie removed them from the dressers where we'd put them to handle the task, which hadn't occurred to me the day we came home from the baby boutique.

Sorting through onesies and tiny socks all over again should feel overwhelming but instead, it brings a strange sense of peace. Each miniature garment represents the possibility this could all work out, and we can become the family I'm starting to believe we might be.

I hold up a pale yellow sleeper with little ducks embroidered across the chest, imagining our daughter wearing it during those first precious weeks. The fabric is impossibly soft, and I can almost picture Nikandr's large hands struggling with the tiny snaps, his usually demeanor cracking into something tender and uncertain.

The image makes my chest ache with longing and possibility.

Things between us have shifted over the past few weeks in ways I'm still trying to understand. He's been more present and thoughtful. Not just protective—though that instinct runs so deeply in him I doubt it'll ever fade—but genuinely attentive to what I need and want. He brings me coffee exactly how I like it without being asked. He listens when I talk about the baby, both my fears and excitement, without trying to fix everything or take control.

Yesterday, he spent an hour assembling a rocking chair for the nursery, reading the instructions twice before starting and refusing my offer to help. When he finished, he tested it carefully, rocking back and forth with a concentration that made my heart flutter.

"It's perfect," I told him, settling into the chair to test the smooth motion.

He stood there watching me, hands shoved into his pockets, and for a moment, his expression was so tender I almost convinced myself I saw love there.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

I fold the yellow sleeper and add it to the growing pile, then reach for my phone. The conversation I need to have with Jessie can't wait any longer. She's been patient with my scattered updates and careful omissions, but I owe her honesty about where my heart is leading me.

The phone rings twice before her familiar voice fills the sunroom via the speakerphone as I set it down to continue folding and sorting. "Hey, Mama. How are you feeling today?"

"Good. Better than good, actually." I lean back against the couch cushions. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Uh oh. That tone usually means you're about to do something that scares me."

I laugh despite the nervous energy building in my chest. "Not scared, exactly. More like...ready."

"Ready for what?"

I take a breath, gathering the words I've been turning over in my mind for days. "Things with Nikandr have changed, Jessie. He's different now. More open, more..." I search for the right word. "Present. Like he's actually here with me instead of just protecting me."

"That's good, right? You sound happy about it."

"I am happy about it. That's the problem." I run my free hand over the curve of my

belly, feeling the baby's subtle movements beneath my palm. "I'm ready to have a real conversation with him about our future, not just co-parenting arrangements or keeping things civil for the baby's sake."

Jessie is quiet for a long moment, and I can practically hear her thinking. "What kind of conversation?"

"The kind where I tell him I want commitment. A real future together. Not just shared custody, but an actual life—marriage, family, and growing old together... All of it."

She seems to be struggling with what to say. "Sabrina..."

"I know what you're going to say?—"

She interrupts with a short laugh that has no amusement. "Do you? Because what I'm going to say is that I want you to be happy, but I also want you to be safe. Wanting something from a man like him..." She sighs. "There are things about his life that don't just disappear because you're having his baby."

The careful way she phrases it tells me she's trying to be diplomatic, but her concern comes through clearly. "I know that. I'm not naïve about who he is or what he's done."

"Then you know that the life he's built doesn't have an easy exit ramp. Men like him don't just retire and become suburban dads."

I stand and walk to the window, looking out at the perfectly manicured grounds that surround this beautiful prison. "What if he was willing to try? What if he wanted to leave it all behind?"

She sounds skeptical. "Has he said that?"

“Not exactly in those words, but there are indications...” I press my forehead against the cool glass. “There have been moments where I can see him imagining a different life. Something normal and safe and...”

“And you think that’s enough to build a future on? Moments and maybes?”

Her skepticism stings, but I understand it. From the outside, my situation looks insane—falling in love with a man who kidnapped me and carrying the child of someone whose world operates on violence and fear. She still doesn’t know about the kidnapping though. She just thinks he’s a powerful, dangerous man, with whom I spent four impulsive days before learning the full truth.

“He’s been different lately,” I say, turning away from the window to pace the length of the sunroom. “More thoughtful. Like when we went baby shopping, he didn’t just buy everything I touched. He watched me with this look, like he was memorizing the moment. And the way he talks about our daughter...” I pause, remembering the wonder in his voice during our last ultrasound appointment. “It’s like Elizabeth has already changed him somehow.”

She’s quiet for a moment before sighing slowly and loudly. “Change is good, but it takes time. Real change, the kind that sticks, doesn’t happen overnight.”

I nod as I fold two tiny socks together, realizing my hands have been idle while we’ve been talking. “I know, but what if this is the beginning? What if having a family is exactly what he needs to want something different?”

Jessie’s silence stretches long enough that I wonder if the call dropped. Finally, she speaks, her voice gentler than before. “What exactly are you thinking of asking him?”

I sink back onto the couch, pulling a soft pink blanket into my lap. “I want to know if he’s willing to leave his business behind. Completely. Not just delegate more or step

back gradually but actually walk away from all of it.”

“And if he says no?”

The question I’ve been avoiding hits me square in the chest. “Then I’ll raise our daughter alone, and he can be the kind of father who sees her on weekends and holidays.”

“You’d really walk away from him?” She makes no attempt to hide her doubt.

I close my eyes, trying to imagine a life without Nikandr’s solid presence, or the way he makes me feel protected and cherished and completely seen. The thought makes my chest ache, but I force myself to face it. “I’d have to. I won’t raise my child in a world where violence is always lurking around the corner, where every knock at the door could be a threat.” I open my eyes and stare at the carefully organized baby clothes. “She deserves better than that. We both do.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“God, Sabrina. When you put it like that...”

“I know it sounds impossible. I know the odds are against us, but what if they’re not? What if he really is ready to choose us over everything else he’s built?”

“Then you’d have your fairy tale ending.”

The wistful note in her voice makes me smile despite the weight of what I’m contemplating. “Not a fairy tale. Just a chance at something real and normal and safe.”

“Safety comes first,” she says, echoing the same words she’s said dozens of times since this all began. “Promise me you won’t compromise on that, no matter how much you love him.”

The casual way she says love makes my breath catch. I haven’t admitted that to anyone, barely even to myself, but hearing it spoken aloud makes it impossible to deny. “I promise,” I whisper, meaning it completely.

“Okay. Then I support whatever decision you make. Just...be careful how you approach this conversation. Men like him don’t respond well to ultimatums.”

I scowl instinctively. “It’s not an ultimatum. It’s just honesty about what I need to feel safe building a life with him.”

She scoffs. “There’s a difference?”

I consider that, running my fingers over the soft fabric in my lap. “I think so. An ultimatum is about control and manipulation. This is about giving him the information he needs to make his own choice about what he wants our future to look like.”

“And if he chooses wrong?”

I hesitate before sighing. “At least I’ll know where I stand.”

We talk for a few more minutes about practical things—her work schedule, plans for the nursery, and the latest cravings that have me mixing hot sauce with chocolate ice cream—but I can tell she’s still worried about the conversation I’m planning to have with Nikandr.

After we hang up, I sit in the quiet sunroom, surrounded by reminders of the life I’m hoping to build. The baby clothes represent innocence and possibility. The rocking chair in the nursery speaks to quiet moments of comfort and connection. The ultrasound photos propped on the side table in most rooms of the house show our daughter’s perfect profile, captured in stunning detail.

Everything whispers of a future I want so desperately I can taste it.

I’m still lost in thought when footsteps in the hallway announce someone’s approach. The cadence is too light to be Nikandr, and sure enough, Maksim appears in the doorway, carrying a tablet and wearing his usual expression of controlled professionalism.

“Sabrina.” He nods politely. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Not at all. I’m just folding baby clothes and overthinking everything.”

Something that might be a smile flickers across his face. “A dangerous combination.”

I gesture to the chair across from me. “Want to sit? Or are you looking for Nikandr? He’s in his office working on something involving spreadsheets and financial projections.”

Maksim settles into the chair, setting aside his tablet. “Actually, I was hoping to speak with you.”

The serious tone makes me straighten. “Is everything okay? Is there a threat?—”

“No threats,” he assures me quickly. “Nothing like that. I just...” He pauses, seeming to choose his words carefully. “I overheard part of your phone conversation as I was walking by. Not intentionally, but the acoustics in this house...”

Heat floods my cheeks. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know you’re planning to have a serious conversation with Nikandr about his future in the organization.”

I cross my arms, feeling suddenly defensive. “And you have opinions about that?”

“I have observations.” He leans forward slightly, his expression more serious than I’ve ever seen it. “Nikandr isn’t the same man he was six months ago. Hell, he’s not the same man he was six weeks ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s been making changes. Quietly and carefully, but substantive changes to how he operates, what he prioritizes, and where he focuses his attention.”

My pulse quickens. “What kind of changes?”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

He studies me for a long moment, clearly debating how much to reveal. “The kind that suggest he’s already thinking about the conversation you want to have with him.”

“Are you saying?—?”

“I’m saying don’t give up on him before you give him a chance to surprise you.” He picks up his tablet, signaling the end of our conversation. “Maybe trust he loves you and your daughter more than you realize.”

Before I can respond, he’s on his feet and heading for the door. I call after him, desperate for more information. “Maksim, wait. What aren’t you telling me?”

He pauses in the doorway, looking back with something that might be sympathy. “That’s a conversation you need to have with him, not me, but...” He waits until I meet his gaze. “Some questions answer themselves if you’re patient enough to let them.”

Then he’s gone, leaving me alone with my racing thoughts and a heart full of hope I’m afraid to fully embrace. Maybe Maksim is right and some questions answer themselves. Maybe I just need to be brave enough to ask the right ones.

22

Nikandr

The knock on my office door interrupts my review of the latest liquidation reports. I look up to find Maksim standing in the doorway, but instead of his usual all-business

demeanor, he's wearing an expression I recognize, the one he gets when he's about to tell me something I need to hear but probably don't want to.

"Come in," I say, setting aside the financial projections that have been consuming my afternoon.

He closes the door behind him and takes the chair across from my desk but doesn't immediately speak. The silence stretches long enough that I lean back in my chair and wait him out.

"You need to talk to Sabrina," he finally says.

"About what specifically? We talk every day."

He rolls his eyes. "About what you're planning. The exit strategy, the succession...everything." He gestures toward the papers scattered across my desk. "She's getting ready to have a serious conversation with you about your future, and she deserves to know you're already three steps ahead of her."

Something cold settles in my stomach. "What do you mean she's getting ready?"

"I overheard part of a phone conversation she was having with her friend. She's planning to ask you to leave the organization completely." He pauses. "And if you're not willing, she's prepared to walk away and raise your daughter alone."

The words stun me. The idea of Sabrina leaving, of raising our child without me, makes my chest constrict with something close to panic. "She said that?"

"She's scared of bringing a child into a world where violence is always lurking around the corner. She wants commitment—not co-parenting arrangements, but an actual future together. 'Marriage, family, and growing old together,' to quote her."

I stare at the ultrasound photo on my desk, thinking about the conversation we've been avoiding for weeks. "You think I should tell her about the plans we've been making?"

"I think she deserves to know the man she's falling in love with is already choosing her and Elizabeth over everything else." He leans forward. "Don't make her issue ultimatums when you could just give her the answers she needs."

His words settle over me as I consider what he's suggesting. Sabrina has been growing more comfortable here, more open, but I still see the tension she carries when she thinks I'm not looking, and the way she sometimes pauses before speaking, like she's choosing her words carefully to avoid conflict. "Where is she now?"

"Sunroom. She's been organizing baby clothes all afternoon."

I stand and straighten my shirt, suddenly nervous in a way I haven't felt since I was a teenager working up the courage to ask a girl to dance. "How much detail should I give her?"

"Enough to convince her that you're serious about walking away from this life completely. She doesn't need to know about every financial transfer or legal document, but she needs to understand you're already committed to the choice she's hoping you'll make."

I nod, gathering my thoughts as I head for the door. "Maksim? Thank you."

"Just don't fuck it up," he says with a smile.

I find Sabrina exactly where Maksim said she'd be, surrounded by neat piles of baby clothes in every conceivable size and color. She's holding a tiny white dress with delicate lace trim, and the sight of her imagining our daughter wearing it makes my

chest ache with tenderness.

“Planning our child’s entire wardrobe?” I ask from the doorway.

She looks up with a smile that transforms her entire face. “Just organizing what we already have. We might have gone a little overboard at the boutique.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to go overboard when it comes to our daughter.” The easy way the possessive pronoun slips out surprises me. Sabrina must notice it too because her smile relaxes into something warmer.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:47 am

“Come sit with me,” she says, patting the couch beside her.

I settle next to her, close enough that our thighs touch, and pick up a pair of impossibly small socks. “How is it possible that feet can be this tiny?”

“I know. Sometimes I can’t believe there’s actually a whole person growing inside me.” She rests her hand on the curve of her belly. “A person we made together.”

The wonder in her voice makes me turn to study her profile. There’s something different about her today, like a sense of purpose or determination I haven’t seen before. It occurs to me Maksim was right about the conversation she’s planning to have. “Sabrina, there’s something I need to tell you.”

She sets down the dress and turns to face me fully, her expression becoming serious. “Actually, there’s something I need to tell you too. Something important.”

“You first,” I say, though every instinct tells me to take control of this conversation before it goes somewhere I can’t navigate.

She takes a breath, gathering her thoughts, and I can see her steeling herself for whatever she’s about to say. “I’ve been thinking a lot about our future, what kind of life I want for our daughter, and what I need to feel safe building that life with you.”

The careful way she phrases it tells me she’s rehearsed this and thought through every word. I force myself to remain still and let her speak, even though part of me wants to interrupt and give her the answers she’s seeking.

“I love you,” she says simply, and the words are sweet and daunting at the same time. “I’m in love with you, completely and probably foolishly, but there it is. I love you, and I want to build a real life together. Not just co-parenting or keeping things civil for the baby’s sake, but everything together.”

My heart pounds as I process what she’s telling me. She loves me. After everything I’ve put her through, everything I’ve dragged her into, she’s choosing to love me anyway.

“But,” she continues, and I hear the determination in her voice, “I need to know you’re willing to leave your business behind. Completely. Not delegate more but actually walk away from all of it.”

The condition doesn’t surprise me, but hearing it spoken aloud makes it real in a way it hasn’t been before. “If I’m not willing?”

Pain flickers across her face, but her voice remains steady. “Then I’ll raise our daughter alone, and you can be the kind of father who sees her if it’s safe to do so.”

The thought of weekend visits and carefully scheduled time with my own child makes something violent and desperate claw at my chest. “You’d really walk away from this? From us?”

“I’d have to.” Her eyes fill with tears, but she doesn’t let them fall. “I won’t raise my child in a world where violence is always lurking around the corner, and every knock at the door could be a threat. She deserves better than that. We both do.”

The raw honesty in her voice undoes me completely. She’s not issuing an ultimatum or trying to manipulate me into compliance. She’s simply telling me what she needs to feel safe and trusting me to decide whether I can give it to her. “What if I told you I’ve already made that choice?”

She blinks, clearly not expecting that response. “What do you mean?”

I reach for her hands, needing the physical connection as I prepare to lay my entire future at her feet. “For the past few weeks, I’ve been systematically dismantling everything I’ve built by transitioning to legitimate businesses when possible, transferring territory, liquidating assets, and setting up succession plans that will let me walk away completely.”

“You have?”

“Maksim is taking over everything. The transition will be complete within a year, and after that, I’ll have no connection to any of it.” I bring her hands to my lips, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. “I’m done, Sabrina. I chose you and our daughter the moment I saw her on that ultrasound screen.”

The tears she’s been holding back finally spill over, and she launches herself into my arms with a force that nearly knocks me backward. I catch her against my chest, holding her tightly while she cries into my shoulder.

“I can’t believe you were already planning this,” she says between sobs. “I was so scared you’d say no.”

“Never.” I stroke her hair, breathing in the familiar scent of her shampoo. “I’ve never wanted anything the way I want this life with you.”

She pulls back to look at me, her face streaked with tears but radiant with something that looks like joy. “You really mean it? You’re really walking away from all of it?”

“I really mean it. No more syndicate, no more territory wars, and no more violence. Just us and our daughter and whatever normal life we can build together.”

“I love you so much,” she whispers, framing my face with her hands. “I love you so much it terrifies me.”

“Don’t be terrified.” I lean my forehead against hers, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what’s happening between us. “Be happy, excited... Anything but terrified.”

“I am happy. I’m so happy I can barely breathe.”

When she kisses me, it’s with all the love and hope and desperate longing that’s been building between us since that first night. Her mouth is soft and warm and tastes like the future we’re finally free to claim.

I should pull away and suggest we continue this conversation to make sure we’ve covered all the practical details that need to be discussed. Instead, when she tangles her fingers in my hair and makes that soft sound of need against my lips, rational thought abandons me entirely.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“Sabrina,” I say against her mouth, her name coming out like a prayer.

“Nikandr,” she whispers back, “Show me what forever looks like.”

The request undoes me completely. I lift her carefully and carry her to our bedroom, mindful of the precious life she’s carrying but desperate to claim her as completely as she’s claiming me.

I set her down beside the bed and take my time undressing her, revealing the body that’s become more beautiful with each passing day of her pregnancy. When I trace my hands over the gentle curve of her belly where our daughter grows, something possessive and protective surges through me.

“You’re perfect,” I say, pressing kisses along the column of her throat. “Absolutely perfect.”

She pulls my shirt over my head with trembling hands, mapping the planes of my chest like she’s memorizing every detail.

I help her out of the soft dress she’s wearing, revealing the body that’s haunted my dreams for weeks. Every curve is lusher, and when I lean down to trace my tongue along the sensitive spot just below her ear, she gasps and presses closer.

I capture her mouth in another kiss, deeper this time, letting her taste the promise of forever. When I find the edge of her panties and slip beneath the silk to touch her, she’s already wet and wanting.

“You’re so ready for me,” I marvel, pressing my forehead against hers as she rocks her pussy against my hand.

“I’m always ready for you. I think I have been since the first moment I saw you.” She flushes with the admission.

I take my time removing her panties, pressing kisses to her inner thighs as I work my way higher. Her skin is impossibly soft, and she trembles under every touch of my lips. When I reach her slit, I pause to look up at her. “Let me worship you,” I say, meaning every word. “Let me show you how much you mean to me.”

She moans and arches her hips in silent acquiescence.

When I finally taste her, she cries out and thrusts upward to meet my mouth. She’s sweet and intoxicating, and I lose myself completely in the sounds she makes as I explore every sensitive fold with my tongue. Her clit is swollen and sensitive, fluttering each time I gently swipe my tongue across it.

“Nikandr, please—” She gasps, fisting her hands in my hair.

I slide one finger inside her while continuing to work her clit with my mouth, and she practically comes apart beneath me. Her walls are tight and hot around my finger, and when I add a second, she rocks against my hand desperately.

“I’m so close. Please don’t stop.”

I curve my fingers inside her, finding the spot that makes her back arch, and work it relentlessly while my tongue continues to stroke her clit. When her orgasm hits, she shouts my name as her whole body convulses with pleasure.

I work her through it gently, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs while she comes

back down to earth. “Beautiful,” I murmur against her skin. “So beautiful when you come for me.”

She reaches for me with shaking hands, helping me out of my remaining clothes. When she wraps her fingers around my shaft, I groan and have to grab her wrist to maintain control.

“Your hands are going to kill me,” I say, letting my head fall back as she strokes me slowly.

“Good,” she says with a wicked smile. “I want you as desperate as you made me.”

“I am. I need to be inside you.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” she asks, lying back against the pillows in invitation.

I position myself carefully between her thighs, hyper-aware of her pregnancy and the need to be gentle despite the fire burning through my veins. I grasp the base to guide in my shaft. When the head of my cock brushes against her entrance, we both shudder at the contact. “Are you ready?”

“I’ve been ready since you told me you chose us.” She reaches down to guide me inside her.

When I push into her slowly, she makes a sound of pure satisfaction that goes straight to my soul. Her pussy is so tight and hot and perfect that I have to stop moving entirely to keep from coming immediately. I brace myself on my forearms above her, struggling for control. “You feel incredible.”

She lifts her hips experimentally, taking me deeper, and the movement sends

shockwaves through both of us. “So good...”

I start to move slowly, pulling almost all the way out before sliding back in. She meets every thrust with enthusiasm, her breasts bouncing with each movement. I can't resist leaning down to capture one nipple in my mouth.

“Yes.” She arches into me. “Just like that.”

I increase the pace gradually, building a rhythm that has her clinging to me desperately. Every thrust brings us closer together, not just physically but emotionally, like we're finally acknowledging what's been building between us all along. The sound of our bodies coming together fills the room, along with her moans and my harsh breathing.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“Touch yourself.” My voice comes out rough with desire.

She slides her hand between us, finding her clit, and her walls flutter around me as she works herself. “That’s it.” I change my angle to hit that spot inside her that makes her cry out. “Let me feel you come.”

She presses harder on her clit and throws back her head, tensing her whole body. Her pussy clamps around me as she comes, coaxing me to come, and with a shout of relief, I let go, spilling myself inside her.

Afterward, we lie tangled together, her head tucked beneath my jaw. What’s just happened settles over us. It’s not just the physical joining, but the emotional commitment we’ve finally made to each other that fills the space between us. “I love you.” The words come easier now, like they’ve been waiting for this moment to finally be spoken. “I love you so much it scares me.”

She tilts her head to look at me, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “Don’t be scared. This is the best thing that’s ever happened to either of us.”

“Even though I kidnapped you?” Shame fills me at the question. I thought she was Irina, and I’m glad she wasn’t. I can’t bring myself to regret taking her though.

“Maybe because you kidnapped me.” She laughs softly. “If you hadn’t, we never would have met. Our daughter never would have existed. Sometimes, the most beautiful things come from the most unlikely beginnings.”

I stroke her hair, marveling at how right this feels. “No more secrets between us. No

more holding back.”

“No more secrets.” She presses a kiss to my chest, directly over my heart. “Just us and our family and whatever comes next.”

“What comes next is a new house. Somewhere with no history and no associations with my old life. Somewhere we can start fresh.”

“I’d like that, and I have been looking at the listings you’ve sent me. None have really screamed ‘this is it’ yet though.” Her voice is growing drowsy, the emotional intensity of the afternoon finally catching up with her. “I want somewhere with a big yard for her to play in. Maybe a garden where we can grow vegetables.”

“Whatever you want. A garden, a swing set, six dogs, and a white picket fence if that’s what makes you happy.”

She laughs sleepily. “I never thought I was a white picket fence kind of girl.”

“You’re whatever kind of girl you want to be. That’s the point of starting over.”

23

Sabrina

The letter arrives on a Tuesday morning while I’m eating breakfast in the sunroom, officially addressed to me in crisp hospital letterhead that makes my stomach clench with familiar dread. For three years, correspondence from Mercy General has meant nothing but bad news with another bill, another collections notice, or another reminder of the crushing debt my mother’s final months left behind.

I set down my orange juice and stare at the envelope, willing myself to open it and

face whatever fresh financial nightmare awaits inside. The baby chooses that moment to kick, a sharp jab against my ribs that makes me wince and place a protective hand over my belly. “It’s okay, little one,” I whisper. “Mama’s just being a coward about opening mail.”

I tear open the envelope with shaking fingers and unfold the single sheet of paper inside. The words swim in front of me as I try to process what I’m reading.

Dear Ms. Clyde,

We are writing to inform you the outstanding balance on account #847291 has been paid in full. As of today’s date, you have no remaining financial obligations to Mercy General Hospital regarding the care provided to Elizabeth Clyde during her treatment period.

Please consider this letter official confirmation that all debts associated with this account have been satisfied.

I read the letter three times before the words finally penetrate the fog of disbelief clouding my thoughts. Paid in full. No remaining obligations. All debts satisfied.

“That’s impossible,” I say aloud, my voice echoing in the empty sunroom. I grab my phone and call the hospital’s billing department, convinced this has to be some kind of mistake. After being transferred twice and placed on hold for what feels like forever, a pleasant woman named Carol confirms what the letter states.

“Yes, Ms. Clyde, the balance was paid on Friday afternoon via a wire transfer for the full amount, including interest and fees. Your account shows a zero balance.”

“But who paid it? There has to be some record.”

“I’m sorry, but payment information is confidential. I can only confirm the debt has been satisfied.”

I hang up and stare at the letter again, my mind racing through possibilities. The total amount was over twelve thousand dollars. I don’t know anyone with that kind of money just lying around, and even if I did, I can’t imagine who would make such a gesture without telling me.

Unless...

The thought steals my breath and makes my heart race simultaneously. There’s only one person in my life now who has the resources to make a debt this size disappear without missing a single meal. It has to be...

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

Nikandr.

I push myself up from the table, clutching the letter in my trembling hand, and make my way through the house toward his office. Each step feels surreal, like I'm walking through a dream where impossible things become reality.

He did this without asking permission, without demanding gratitude, or without using it as leverage to manipulate me into compliance. He simply saw a burden I was carrying and removed it.

The magnitude of the gesture threatens to overwhelm me completely.

I knock on his office door and wait for his gruff invitation to enter before stepping inside. He's seated behind his massive desk, surrounded by financial documents and legal papers that probably represent the dismantling of his empire. The ultrasound photo of our daughter sits prominently in the center of it all, a reminder of what he's choosing over everything else.

When he looks up and sees my face, his expression immediately shifts to concern. "What's wrong? Is it the baby?"

I hold up the letter, my hand still shaking slightly. "The hospital contacted me today."

His body goes very still, and I watch his jaw tighten almost imperceptibly. "About what?"

"My mother's debt. All twelve thousand dollars of it." I move closer to his desk,

studying his face for any sign of guilt or acknowledgment. “It’s been paid in full...by someone who apparently wishes to remain anonymous.”

He doesn’t deny it, deflect, or make excuses. He simply leans back in his chair and watches me with those gray eyes that seem to see straight through to my soul.

“You did this.” It’s not a question.

“Yes.”

The simple admission hits me harder than any elaborate explanation could have. He seems to have no expectation of gratitude. It’s just the quiet acceptance of responsibility for an act of profound kindness.

“Why?”

“Because you shouldn’t have to carry that weight anymore.” He sets aside the document he was reviewing and gives me his full attention. “Watching you stress about money when I have more than I could spend in ten lifetimes seemed wrong.”

I blink back tears. “You could have told me you were planning to do it.”

“Would you have let me?”

We both know the answer. I would have refused. My pride would have demanded I handle my own problems, even if handling them meant drowning slowly in debt I’d never be able to repay. “Probably not.” I sniffle.

“I didn’t want to give you the chance to say no to something that would make your life easier.”

Tears scald my eyes as I grasp what he's done. This isn't about money. It's about seeing me clearly enough to understand what keeps me awake at night and caring enough to fix it without expecting anything in return. "Besides my mom, no one has ever..." I start, then stop, struggling to find words for something I've never experienced before.

He lifts a brow. "Has ever what?"

I sniffle hard, determined not to cry. "Taken care of me like this without wanting something back or making it about what they need or expect from me."

The honesty in my voice seems to affect him more than I expected. He pushes back from his desk and stands, moving around to where I'm standing with careful, deliberate steps. "Come here." His voice is gentler than I've ever heard it.

I move into his arms without hesitation, letting him pull me against his chest while I finally allow myself to really feel the relief of being free from that crushing financial burden. The tears I've been holding back spill over, and I don't try to stop them this time. "Thank you," I whisper against his shirt. "Thank you for caring enough to do something about this."

He tightens his arms around me. "You never have to thank me for taking care of you. That's what I'm here for."

"Is it?"

"For the rest of our lives, if you'll let me."

The promise in his words makes my chest ache with a longing so intense it's almost painful. I pull back to look at his face, seeing something there I've only glimpsed before—complete and utter devotion. He's said he loves me, but I feel it intensely

suddenly.

“I want this,” I say, my voice stronger now. “Not just peaceful co-parenting or keeping things civil for the baby’s sake. I want a real family. A real future. Something that’s ours.”

“So do I.” He cups my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing away the tears on my cheeks.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I cling to him. “Then sit down and let me hold you for a minute. I need to feel like this is real.”

He settles back into his desk chair and guides me onto his lap, arranging me carefully so my belly isn’t compressed. I wrap my arms around his neck and let myself sink into the solid warmth of his body, basking in the certainty this is going to last. “I used to think love was supposed to be hard,” I say quietly. “Complicated and dramatic and full of obstacles you had to overcome to prove it was real. Most times, those obstacles win in my experience.”

He gives me a gentle smile. “And now?”

“I think the best kind of love makes everything else easier.”

His spreads a hand wide over the curve where our daughter grows. “She’s going to be so loved. So protected. She’ll never know what it feels like to want for anything.” His expression grows more serious. “There’s something else we need to talk about that I should have told you before now.”

The change in his tone makes anxiety flutter in my stomach. “What is it?”

“The woman I mistook you for—Irina. She was connected to my brother’s death in ways I didn’t initially understand.”

I shift on his lap to face him more fully. “Connected how?”

“Yaraslov was in love with her and had been for months before he died. She was an

escort, but to him, she was everything.” His jaw tightens with remembered pain. “What I didn’t know then was she was also feeding information to Vadim Morozov about Yaroslav’s movements, his security protocols, and his vulnerabilities.”

The name Vadim makes me shudder. “The man who’s been having me watched?”

“Yes, and the man who killed my brother, using intelligence Irina provided.” His hand stills on my belly. “Yaroslav walked into what he thought was a private meeting with her. Instead, it was a trap.”

“She set him up,” I say with quiet certainty.

“She lured him to an abandoned warehouse where Vadim was waiting. Yaroslav died believing the woman he loved had betrayed him, and she had.”

The pain in his voice cuts through me. I can’t imagine the agony of losing someone you love to such a brutal betrayal, or the rage that must have consumed him afterward. “You want to find her for revenge.”

“Da, and for the chance to look her in the eye and make her understand what her choices cost.” He meets my gaze steadily. “When I found you instead, everything changed.”

“Because you realized I wasn’t her?”

He shakes his head to my surprise. “Because I realized holding onto that much anger was killing me slowly. Some things matter more than revenge.”

“Like what?”

“Like you and our daughter, along with the possibility of building something

beautiful instead of just destroying what's ugly."

I trace the sharp line of his jaw with my fingertips, marveling at how much this man has changed in such a short time. "But Vadim is still out there and still a threat?"

"Yes." His admission is quiet but resolute. "I'll have to deal with him before we can truly be free or I can guarantee our family's safety."

The words send a chill through me, even though I understand the necessity behind them. "What does dealing with him mean?"

He hesitates for a moment. "It means finishing what he started when he took my brother from me. It means making sure he can never threaten you or our daughter. He has to die so we can be free to really live. "

"And after that?"

"After that, we become a family that no one from my old world can ever find or touch."

The promise should comfort me, but instead, it fills me with dread. "What if something goes wrong? What if you don't come back?"

"I will come back." The confidence in his voice leaves no room for doubt. "I have too much to live for now to take unnecessary risks."

I put a hand to his cheek while staring at him. "Promise me."

He presses into my hand. "I promise you I will do everything in my power to come home to you and our daughter. I won't take any chances I don't have to take."

The urge to cry again hits me once more. “That’s not the same thing as promising you’ll be safe.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“No, it’s not. But it’s the only promise I can make honestly.” Regret laces his tone, but it’s clear he won’t risk lying to me by making a promise he can’t keep.

I lean my forehead against his, trying to reconcile the man who just paid off my mother’s debt with the man who’s planning to kill his enemy. They’re the same person, and somehow, that makes perfect sense in a way I never would have understood before falling in love with him. He’s righting wrongs and restoring balance with both acts.

My stomach clenches with dread. “When?”

After a second, he frowns. “Soon. I’m still gathering intelligence and finalizing plans, but soon.”

“Will you tell me before you go?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “Yes. No more secrets between us, remember?”

I nod and settle back against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat while I process everything he’s shared. The knowledge that Vadim is still out there and still a threat should terrify me. Instead, I try to focus on what comes after—the life we’ll build together once this final obstacle is removed.

“I love you.” The words come easier each time I say them. “All of you. Even the parts that scare me.”

His smile is brief but warm. “I love you too, more than I thought I was capable of

loving anyone.”

“When this is over, when Vadim is gone and we’re free, what then?”

His smile lingers longer this time. “We find out what normal looks like to us. We raise our daughter, we grow old together, and we never take a single day of peace for granted.”

I snifle, fighting back another surge of tears. “That sounds perfect.”

He pats my belly gently. “It will be. I’ll make sure of it.”

As I sit in his arms, surrounded by the evidence of his careful planning for our future, I have no trouble believing him. We’ve found something worth fighting for and worth everything.

24

Nikandr

A week later, the call comes at four-thirty in the morning, jolting me from the most peaceful sleep I’ve had in months. Sabrina stirs beside me as I reach for the secure phone on my nightstand, but she doesn’t wake. The soft curve of her back rises and falls in the rhythm I’ve come to find more comforting than any prayer.

I keep my voice low as I slip out of bed and pad toward the hallway. “What is it?”

Maksim’s voice carries the electric tension of a hunter who’s finally cornered his prey. “We found him. Vadim, at a confirmed location with minimal security, and he’s not alone.”

I close the bedroom door silently behind me and make my way to my office.
“Details.”

“He’s in a safehouse outside Fresno. It’s a rural property and isolated, with only two guards that we can identify from surveillance. He’s been there for three days.”

“Who’s with him?”

“Blonde woman, mid-thirties, who matches the physical description of Irina. It could be her, or another escort, but a woman is definitely there.”

My pulse accelerates as I settle behind my desk and open my laptop. In seconds, I’m studying dozens of surveillance photos taken from various angles of a modest ranch house surrounded by farmland, perfect for privacy and terrible for escape routes.
“How reliable is this intelligence?”

“Rock solid. We’ve had eyes on the property for forty-eight hours. Vadim arrived Tuesday evening, and the woman came Wednesday morning. They follow the same routine every day, and guards rotate shifts at six and midnight. There are minimal foot patrols and no electronic surveillance we can detect.”

I study the images, looking for anything that feels wrong or too convenient. After fifteen years in this business, I’ve learned to trust my instincts about when something feels like a trap, but this appears genuine. Vadim looks comfortable, unaware, and completely vulnerable. I lean back in my chair, already planning the approach. “It’s perfect.”

Maksim’s voice sharpens with suspicion. “Too perfect?”

“No. Just perfect.” I continue examining the surveillance photos. “He’s gotten comfortable. Sloppy. He thinks he’s untouchable because he’s been playing games

instead of engaging directly.”

“So we move?”

The question remains unanswered while I consider every angle. This is exactly the opportunity I’ve been waiting for, getting Vadim isolated, exposed, with minimal security, and nowhere to run. If Irina is really there, I can get answers about Yaroslav’s death while ensuring neither of them can ever threaten my family again.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I check the time on my phone. “We move fast and clean. I want a four-man team, full tactical gear, and two escape routes planned.”

“When?”

“Dawn. We hit them when they’re least alert and most likely to make mistakes.” I glance at the clock.

“I’ll have the team ready in thirty minutes.”

After we end the call, I sit in the darkness of my office, staring at the ultrasound photo of my daughter that’s become my North Star through all of this planning. In six hours, this could all be over. Vadim will be dead, Irina neutralized, and the last threat to my family’s safety eliminated forever.

I should wake Sabrina and tell her what’s happening. I promised her no more secrets, and this certainly qualifies as something she deserves to know about, but the thought of watching fear replace the peace that’s finally settled over her features makes my chest tighten with protective instincts I can’t ignore.

She’s been sleeping better lately, eating regularly, laughing at terrible movies, and making plans for the nursery with an enthusiasm that lights up entire rooms. Yesterday, she told me about a dream where our daughter took her first steps in a garden behind a house with yellow shutters and a wraparound porch.

“It felt so real,” she said, resting her hand on her belly. “Like I was seeing our actual future instead of just hoping for it.”

I can give her that future. I can give her the yellow shutters and the garden and the absolute certainty no one from my old life will ever threaten the family we're building together. First, I have to close this final chapter.

When I return to the bedroom, she's exactly where I left her, in a deep sleep. I watch her for a long moment, memorizing the peaceful expression on her face and the way her hand curves protectively over our daughter.

If my plan works, she'll wake in a few hours to a world where Vadim Morozov no longer exists, and the last shadow from my past has been permanently eliminated, with our future stretching ahead without any remaining threats or complications.

I press a soft kiss to her temple and whisper, "I love you. Both of you. This is for us."

Thirty minutes later, I'm seated in the passenger seat of our armored SUV as we speed through the pre-dawn darkness toward Fresno. The tactical gear feels familiar against my skin, but heavier somehow, as though weighed down by the knowledge of what I'm leaving behind and fighting to protect.

Maksim checks his weapon for the third time, his expression grim in the green glow of the dashboard lights. "You're sure about not telling her?"

I adjust my body armor and double-check my sidearm. "I'm sure. This will be over before she wakes up. There's no reason to burden her with worry about something she can't control."

He sets down his weapon and looks at me directly. "This feels rushed, Nikandr. We could wait, gather more intelligence, and make sure this isn't exactly what it looks like."

"Which is?"

He turns in his seat to face me fully. “Too convenient. Too clean. Too fucking perfect. When has Vadim ever made himself this vulnerable? When has he ever operated with minimal security?”

I pause in my equipment check, considering his concerns while watching the dark landscape roll past our windows. “Maybe he’s gotten overconfident. Maybe he thinks I’m too distracted by domestic life to pose a real threat anymore.”

His voice carries the frustration of someone who’s been ignored too many times. “Or maybe he wants you to think that. Don’t let your eagerness to end this make you reckless.”

I glare at him. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting we take another day to verify the intelligence and make sure this isn’t bait designed to draw you out.”

I resume checking my gear with deliberate precision, using the familiar motions to center my thoughts. “We don’t have another day. Every hour we wait is another hour he could disappear again, and another hour my family remains under threat.”

The edge in his voice sharpens as he gestures toward the road ahead. “Your family will remain under threat if you get yourself killed rushing into a trap.”

I look at him more carefully in the dim light. Maksim has been my second-in-command for over a decade, and I’ve learned to trust his instincts about tactical situations, but this time, his caution feels like an obstacle rather than wisdom. “I hear what you’re saying, but I disagree with your assessment.”

He picks up his weapon again, but his attention remains focused on me. “And Sabrina? You’re really going to leave without telling her where you’re going?”

“She’ll understand when I explain it afterward.”

“Will she? From my view, it looks like you’re breaking the promise you made her about no more secrets.”

His words are uncomfortable, making me defensive. The familiar countryside sliding past our windows suddenly feels like a countdown, with each mile taking me farther from the woman I love and closer to a confrontation that could end everything. “This isn’t about keeping secrets. It’s about protecting her from unnecessary worry.”

His professional demeanor finally cracks. “That’s exactly what keeping secrets is about. You told her you were done with this life, that you were walking away clean, and you promised to tell her when you went after Vadim. Yet here you are, suiting up for what could be your last mission, and she doesn’t even know you’re gone.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I check my sidearm one final time and holster it. “When she wakes up, it will be over. Vadim will be dead, the threat will be eliminated, and we can start our new life without any shadows from the past.”

He lets out a sound of frustration. “What if this is a setup, and you don’t come back?”

The question tries to force me to think about things I don’t want to consider. Through the windshield, I see the first faint traces of dawn beginning to lighten the eastern horizon and allow it to distract me. “Nothing will go wrong.”

“You can’t guarantee that, and you know it.” He stares at me with growing concern. “You’re making a mistake, Nikandr. Not just tactically, but personally. She deserves to know.”

I glance at him and then away. “She deserves to wake up free. I’ll tell her everything when I get back, and it’s a done deal with nothing left to worry about.”

Maksim stares at me for a long moment, then shakes his head. “You’re not thinking clearly. It’s personal, and that makes you dangerous to yourself and everyone on this team.”

I scowl at him. “My personal investment doesn’t compromise my judgment.”

He leans back in his seat with resignation heavy in his voice. “Doesn’t it? It seems like you’re so desperate to be the hero who saves his family that you’re willing to take risks you’d never accept from any of your men.”

The accusation stings because there's truth in it. I am desperate to end this, to eliminate the last threat standing between my family and the peaceful future we've planned together, but desperation doesn't necessarily mean recklessness. Rather than punch him for his blunt assessment, I keep my tone calm. "I know what I'm doing."

Maksim turns his attention back to the road ahead. "I hope you're right because if you're wrong, a lot of people are going to pay the price for your certainty."

The rest of the drive passes in tense silence, broken only by radio checks from our support team and the steady hum of the engine. By the time we reach the staging area—a grove of eucalyptus trees half a mile from the target—the sky has lightened enough to reveal the property clearly through binoculars.

I survey the farmhouse one final time, noting the guard positions and confirming everything appears exactly as described in our intelligence reports. "Perimeter guards are exactly where they should be, rotating clockwise every twenty minutes, and currently on the north side."

One of my men adjusts his scope as I ask, "What about interior movement?"

He answers a second later. "Minimal. A kitchen light came on five minutes ago. It's probably someone making coffee or breakfast. The bedroom lights are still off."

We wait until the guards complete their rotation, then move swiftly across the open ground toward the house. Everything proceeds exactly according to plan, with the guards neutralized silently, entry points secured, and the team in position for synchronized breach.

I whisper into my comm. "On my mark. Three, two, one?—"

An instant later, the front door explodes inward under the force of the battering ram,

and we flood into the house with practiced precision. Instead of finding a sleeping household caught off guard, we discover empty rooms and the lingering scent of recently extinguished cigarettes.

The call comes from the back team. “Clear.”

It echoes from upstairs. “Clear.”

I move through the main living area, noting details that clearly indicate recent occupation. There are coffee cups in the sink, still warm to the touch. Newspapers from yesterday are scattered across the coffee table. In the bedroom, women’s clothing is draped over a chair, blonde hair lingers on the pillow, and makeup is scattered across the dresser.

They were here recently, but now they’re gone.

Maksim’s voice comes through the comm, tight with anger. “It’s a setup.”

I’m about to protest they might have just slipped away right before we arrived through some means of obtaining advanced warning, but I hear the first gunshot. The bullet punches through the kitchen window and embeds itself in the wall six inches from my head. I drop to the floor and roll toward cover as automatic weapons fire erupts from multiple positions outside the house.

Someone shouts over the gunfire, “Marksmen in the tree line. At least four shooters.”

Another voice calls out desperately, “Back exit is compromised. They’ve got the rear covered too.”

I press myself against the kitchen island and assess our situation with the cold calculation that’s kept me alive through dozens of similar encounters. We’re pinned

down in an unfamiliar structure, outnumbered by shooters who had time to prepare positions, and our planned escape routes are blocked, but we're not helpless.

I key my comm. "Smoke grenades. Create a screen and move to the vehicles. Suppressive fire on my mark."

The next few minutes blur together in the familiar chaos of combat. Smoke fills the house, automatic weapons chatter backand forth, and we move in coordinated bounds toward the vehicles. I'm halfway to the car when something hot and violent punches into my left side, spinning me around and dropping me to one knee.

Blood soaks through my shirt as I press my hand against the wound, but I can still move, still think, and still fight. Maksim appears beside me, hauling me upright and half-carrying me toward the car.

He shouts over the gunfire. "How bad?"

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I manage to respond despite each breath sending fire through my ribs. "I'll live."

He gets me into the passenger seat, and we accelerate away from the property with bullets sparking off the armor plating. I watch the farmhouse disappear in the rearview mirror behind clouds of smoke and the dark shapes of pursuing vehicles.

Maksim glances at the blood spreading across my shirt. "Hospital?"

I struggle to apply pressure to the wound while fumbling for my phone. "No. The clinic on Maple Street. Dr. Lewis keeps irregular hours, but he'll patch me up without questions."

The world tilts and blurs around the edges as blood loss begins to affect my concentration. I need to call Sabrina, let her know I'm all right, and explain why I'll be late getting home. My fingers feel thick and clumsy as I try to compose a text message.

Running late. Don't worry. Everything fine. Love you.

I stare at the words on the screen, trying to decide if they convey the right message. Too casual? Not reassuring enough? Should I mention I'll explain everything when I get home?

The phone slips from my numb fingers as darkness creeps in from the edges of my vision. The last thing I hear is Maksim calling my name, his voice sharp with concern that feels like it's coming from very far away before everything goes black, and I'm falling into a place where there's no pain, no blood, and no awareness of the promises

I've broken or the woman who's about to wake up to find me gone.

25

Sabrina

I wake to sunlight streaming through the bedroom windows and an empty space beside me where Nikandr should be. The sheets are cold to the touch, which means he has been gone for hours. I roll over and check my phone. The screen displays 8:43 a.m. I listen for sounds of movement elsewhere in the house, but I hear nothing.

A knot of unease forms in my stomach as I pull on a robe and pad barefoot through the hallway. His office is empty, with the desk cleared except for the ultrasound photo that sits in its usual place of honor. The kitchen shows no signs of recent use. There is no coffee cup in the sink and no plate in the dishwasher.

It appears as though he vanished into thin air.

I find one of the guards stationed near the front entrance, a man whose name I have never learned despite weeks of seeing him around the estate. He straightens when he sees me approach.

"Where's Nikandr?"

The guard maintains a neutral expression. "He left early this morning, ma'am. Business meeting."

The vague answer does nothing to ease the growing anxiety clawing at my chest. "What kind of business meeting?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't have those details."

I study his face, looking for tells that might give me more information. He maintains eye contact, but there's something carefully neutral about his expression that makes me think he knows more than he admits. "When did he leave?"

"Around five a.m."

I nod and retreat to the kitchen, though my unease deepens with each passing minute. Five in the morning isn't unusual for Nikandr because he's an early riser, but something about this feels different. Wrong, somehow.

I make coffee and settle at the kitchen island with my phone, checking for missed calls or text messages. There are none. I try calling him directly, but the call goes straight to voicemail after a single ring. The sound of his recorded voice makes my chest tighten. "You've reached Nikandr Belov. Leave a message."

"Hey, it's me. Just wondering where you are and when you'll be home. Call me back when you get this." I hang up and stare at the phone, willing it to ring with his return call. Ten minutes pass, then twenty, then an hour passes without any response.

By noon, the bad feeling has evolved into something closer to panic. I've called three more times, with each call going directly to voicemail. I have texted twice with no response. I have even asked for Maksim's contact information from the guard, only to be told he's "unavailable" as well.

I pace the length of the sunroom with one hand pressed to my belly where our daughter moves restlessly, as if sensing my agitation. Every scenario my mind conjures is worse than the last. Car accidents, rival syndicates, police raids, and ambushes... Each possibility makes my heart race faster.

"It's okay, baby girl," I whisper, though I am not sure I believe it myself. "Daddy's just busy with work."

Work. A week ago, Nikandr told me he was stepping away from the organization permanently. This morning, he disappeared without a word. When my phone finally rings at 2:15 p.m., I lunge for it so quickly I nearly knock over my water glass. “Nikandr?”

Maksim’s voice is carefully controlled, which immediately sets off alarm bells in my head. “It’s Maksim.”

“Where is he? Is he okay?”

“He’s alive. He was injured during an operation this morning, but he’s going to be fine.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

The words stun me, stealing my breath and making the room spin around me. Injured. Operation. This morning. “What kind of operation?” I sound far more composed—and less angry—than I feel.

“He went after Vadim, but it was a trap. Vadim wasn’t there, but his people were waiting. Nikandr took a bullet to the side during the extraction.”

I sink onto the couch because my legs suddenly can’t support my weight. “How bad?”

“It was a through and through that missed vital organs. He’s getting stitched up at one of our medical facilities now and should be home in a few hours.”

The relief that washes over me is immediately followed by something much darker. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

Maksim is quiet for a long moment. “He asked me not to call you. He didn’t want you to worry about something you couldn’t control, but I figured you’d be wondering where he was.”

I close my eyes and try to process what this means. “I meant why didn’t he tell me about the plan to go after Vadim but thank you for telling me.”

He hesitates for a moment, and his tone gentles. “He loves you, Sabrina. Everything he did today was about protecting you and the baby.”

“Yes, everything but keeping a promise to me.” I end the call and set aside the phone

with hands that shake slightly. For several minutes, I sit in perfect silence, processing what Maksim told me. Nikandr is alive. He's injured but going to be okay. He went after Vadim without telling me, despite promising a week ago there would be no more secrets between us.

The numbness gives way to something much worse. A burning sense of betrayal starts in my chest and spreads through my entire body like poison.

He lied to me.

After everything we have shared, after all the promises and plans and declarations of love, he looked me in the eye and lied. Not directly, maybe, but through omission. He went after Vadim and chose not to tell me after swearing to me he'd let me know before he went to that final confrontation with Vadim, the one that was supposed to set us free and start our new future. Instead, it's the demise of every fledgling dream.

I push myself up from the couch and begin pacing again, this time with purpose rather than aimless anxiety. Each step helps clarify the rage building inside me, sharpening it into something I can use.

The betrayal cuts deeper than any physical wound could. It's not just that he lied. He obviously never intended to keep his promise in the first place. All those conversations about stepping away from the organization, about building a peaceful life together, and choosing our family over everything else... How much of it was real, and how much was just telling me what I wanted to hear?

I stop pacing and wrap my arms around my belly, trying to provide comfort to the daughter who has been kicking restlessly for the past hour. She can probably sense my emotional turmoil, and the thought makes me feel guilty on top of everything else.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. Mommy’s just figuring out some things.”

By the time I hear the front door open a little after four, I’ve been rehearsing this conversation for over two hours. I know exactly what I am going to say and how I am going to handle his explanations and excuses. I’m ready.

What I am not prepared for is the sight of him limping through the foyer. His face is pale with exhaustion, and his left side is carefully protected by the way he holds his arm. There’s dried blood on his shirt collar, and the careful way he moves tells me he’s in more pain than he wants to admit.

For a split second, every argument I’ve prepared dissolves into relief that he’s alive and home. Then I remember why he is injured in the first place, and the anger comes flooding back twice as strong. I cross my arms and study his face. “How was your...businessmeeting?” I ask with heavy irony.

He stops in the doorway, and his expression shifts as he realizes I know exactly what happened. “Sabrina?—”

I hold up a hand to stop whatever explanation he plans to offer. “Don’t lie to me again. I already know about Vadim, the trap, and you getting shot. Maksim called me.”

His jaw tightens with what might be frustration or anger. “I told him not to?—”

I snap the words, “I’m glad he did. Otherwise, I would have spent the entire day wondering if you were dead in a ditch somewhere.” I glare at him. “He was a better partner to me than you were today, which means you should be ashamed of the choices you’ve made.”

He takes a careful step forward, wincing slightly. “I was going to tell you when I got

home.”

“After the fact.” I throw up my hands in disgust. “After you’d already risked everything without giving me a chance to—” I stop myself before saying something I can’t take back. “You promised me no more secrets.”

“This wasn’t about keeping secrets. It was about protecting you from?—”

I feel my voice rise with each word. “From what? From knowing the man I love is still choosing violence over safety? From understanding all those promises about stepping away from this life were complete bullshit?”

The accusation hangs between us. I watch his face cycle through several emotions, including guilt, frustration, and something that might be the shame he should be feeling.

He shifts his weight carefully. “I told you I had to deal with Vadim before we could be truly free.”

“You also promised you’d tell me when you were planning to go after him. You gave me your word we wouldn’t have any more secrets between us.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“I knew you’d try to stop me.”

The admission is like a slap across the face. “So you decided to lie instead?”

He grunts. “I decided to handle it myself so you wouldn’t have to worry about something you couldn’t control.”

“I knew you had to go after him, but you were supposed to warn me.” I stare at him, trying to reconcile this man with the one who held me while promising me a future built on trust and honesty over the past few weeks. “Do you even hear yourself right now?”

He moves closer, though I can see the effort it costs him. “Sabrina, please?—”

I turn away from him because I can’t look at his face without feeling the urge to either scream or cry. “No. I can’t do this anymore.”

“What do you mean?” His voice trembles slightly.

I face him again, drawing strength from the anger burning in my chest. “I mean I can’t raise a child with a man who lies to me about the risks he’s taking and expects me to just accept it.”

“It was one mission,” he says with a hint of anger. “One final mission to eliminate the last threat to our family.”

I snort. “And the next time? When another enemy emerges or another crisis demands

your attention? What happens then? Do you just disappear again and expect me to sit here without knowing what's happening to you?"

He doesn't answer immediately, which tells me everything I need to know.

"I want to go home." The words come out steadier than I feel, but I mean them completely. I can't stay here anymore, surrounded by reminders of promises that were apparently meaningless from the moment they were made.

He straightens despite the obvious pain. "This is your home."

"No, it's not. This is your fortress. My home is the apartment I share with Jessie, where no one lies to me about midnight raids or gets shot defending territory."

His voice carries an edge of command that makes my spine stiffen with rebellion. "You can't leave."

I glare at him. "Watch me." I move toward the staircase, intending to pack a bag and call Jessie to pick me up. He follows, clearly struggling with the injury but determined not to let me out of his sight.

"Sabrina, stop. You're not thinking clearly."

I whirl around at the top of the stairs. "I'm thinking more clearly than I have in weeks. This is exactly what I was afraid of. I fell for a man who says all the right things but can't actually change who he is."

He looks torn between anger and frustration, and it bleeds through his voice. "I am changing. I told you about the succession plans, about stepping away from the organization, and warned you I had to deal with Vadim."

“You also told me you’d be honest about when that happened, but then you sneaked out at dawn to get into a gunfight. Do you see the contradiction there?”

He reaches for me, but I step back despite the many steps between us. The gesture feels too much like manipulation, like he’s trying to use our physical connection to distract me from the very real betrayal that brought us to this point. “Don’t touch me right now.”

He drops his hand. “Please just calm down and think about this rationally.”

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my voice steady and suppress the creeping anger. “I am being rational. I’m protecting myself and our daughter from a man who apparently can’t keep his word about the most basic requirements for our relationship.”

He grimaces with pain, though I don’t know if it’s physical or emotional. “I kept my word about everything that matters.”

I snort softly. “Honesty matters. Trust matters. You just proved I can’t rely on you for either one.” I continue toward the bedroom, with him following slowly behind. Each step feels like progress toward reclaiming some control over my life and my future. I speak without turning around. “You can’t control me, and I won’t stay somewhere I don’t feel safe.”

“You’re safe here.”

I hesitate at the bedroom doorway, turning to face him. “I’m safe from outside threats, but I’m not safe from you making unilateral decisions about our lives and expecting me to just accept whatever consequences follow.”

I move deeper into the room as he lingers in the hallway to pull a suitcase from the

closet and begin throwing clothes into it without much regard for organization. The physical activity helps channel some of the emotional energy burning through my system.

He leans against the doorframe, watching me pack with an expression I can't quite read. "Where will you go?"

"Back to my apartment. Back to my life." I toss in a handful of maternity underwear. "I'll see if Jessie is ready to come home too."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“What about the baby?” His voice breaks slightly.

The question stops me cold as I turn to face him with one hand instinctively moving to my belly. “What about her?”

“She’s my daughter too.”

I nod. “Of course, and you can see her per whatever schedule we work out, as long as you can guarantee her safety, but I won’t raise her in a world where violence is always lurking around the corner.”

“This was the last of it. With Vadim gone?—”

“Vadim isn’t gone. You said it was a trap, and he wasn’t there. So now what? Another mission? Another secret operation you’ll lie to me about?”

He does not have an answer for that, which confirms my worst fears about what our future would actually look like. I zip the suitcase closed and set it on the floor. “I need you to arrange transportation back to my apartment.”

He studies my face for a long moment. “Sabrina?—”

The word comes out softer than I intended, but I don’t have the energy for more fighting. “Please. I need some time to think, and I can’t do that here.”

I think I see something break behind his eyes. “If you leave now, I might lose you forever.”

I keep my expression as impassive as I can. “You lost me the moment you decided to lie to me about something this important.”

“I never meant to hurt you.” Hurt bleeds through every word.

It makes it hard to breathe as I share that pain with him for a moment, though for different reasons. “I believe you, but you did. The worst part is you chose to hurt me instead of trusting me with the truth.”

He nods slowly, and defeat settles over his features like a heavy blanket. “I’ll have Maksim drive you.”

“Thank you.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m seated in the back of an armored SUV with my suitcase beside me and two guards following in a separate vehicle. As we pull away from the estate, I refuse to lookback even though I’m certain Nikandr is watching from one of the windows.

The image of him limping through the foyer keeps replaying in my mind. Pale, injured, and trying to minimize his pain while explaining why he had risked everything without bothering to include me in the decision. Each time I remember the blood on his shirt or the careful way he moved, my resolve wavers slightly.

Until I remind myself one day, he might not come home at all, and I refuse to raise our daughter in a world where that possibility hangs over us like a constant threat, especially when I can’t be sure he’ll tell me what he’s doing before it happens.

I press my hand to my belly and whisper, “It’s going to be okay, baby girl. Mommy’s going to figure this out.”

I call Jessie and ask her to meet me at the apartment before falling into silence. As the familiar streets of my old neighborhood come into view, I'm not sure I believe that promise any more than I believed his desperate attempts to placate me this afternoon.

26

Sabrina

A week has passed since I left the estate, and I'm still heartbroken over what feels like the end of everything I'd started to believe in. Jessie returned to the apartment the same night I did, taking one look at my tear-stained face before dropping her bags and marching straight to the kitchen.

"We need ice cream." She'd said, opening the freezer and emerging with an armload of ice cream containers and two spoons, settling beside me on the couch like she was preparing for battle. "Okay, start from the beginning. Tell me exactly what that lying bastard did, and then we'll figure out how to make him pay."

That first night blurred together in a haze of tears, ice cream, and Jessie's increasingly creative suggestions for revenge. She's spent the past seven days alternating between bringing me comfort food and devising outrageous plans to get back at Nikandr.

"We could put itching powder in his holster," she suggests from her position sprawled across the living room floor, surrounded by takeout containers and crumpled tissues. She's polished and ready to report to work in a little while, but she's still hanging out with me. "Or better yet, we could replace all his expensive suits with knock-offs from that discount store on Fifth Street."

The mental image of Nikandr discovering his custom-tailored wardrobe has been swapped for polyester blend makes me laugh despite the hollow ache in my chest. "You're terrible."

She grins and tosses a piece of popcorn at me. “I’m creative. There’s a difference.” She stands in her high heels and counts off on her fingers. “We could also sign him up for every spam mailing list on the internet, order pizza deliveries to his house every hour on the hour or hire a mariachi band to serenade him at inappropriate times.”

“A mariachi band?”

“Picture it,” she says, gesturing dramatically. “He’s in the middle of some serious crime boss meeting, and suddenly, there’s a full mariachi band outside his window playing ‘La Cucaracha’ at maximum volume.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I catch the popcorn she threw and eat it, grateful for her presence even though nothing she does can fill the space Nikandr left behind. The apartment feels smaller somehow, like I've outgrown it during my time at the estate. Everything here belongs to the version of me who thought her biggest problems involved choosing between Thai food and pizza for dinner.

“You know what we should really do?” Jessie continues, warming to her theme. “We should send him anonymous letters written in ransom-note style. Cut letters out of magazines and spell out messages like ‘Your lies have consequences’ and ‘Honesty is sexy, but you wouldn’t know.’”

I smile. “That might actually scare him.”

She nods, and her coiffed updo doesn't move. “Good. He should be scared. He should wake up every morning wondering if today's the day his deception catches up with him.”

I miss him in ways that surprise me with their intensity. I miss the safety of his arms when I couldn't sleep, the way he made my coffee in the mornings with exactly the right amount of cream, and those quiet moments when he'd rest his hand on my belly to feel the baby kick. I miss the way he'd read news articles aloud to me while I got ready in the morning, commenting on political developments with insights that made me understand how intelligent he really is.

Most of all, I miss the version of our future we planned together. The house with the garden, the nursery we were designing, and the life we were going to build away from violence and secrets all feel impossibly distant now, like ephemeral dreams

ripped to shreds.

Nikandr has respected my request for space, which somehow makes everything worse. He's made no forced visits, issued no command to return, or made angry phone calls demanding I come to my senses. Instead, there's just silence punctuated by daily deliveries that arrive without explanation or accompanying notes.

Yesterday, it was a baby mobile with delicate wooden birds painted in soft pastels, making me think of the soft elephant mobile hanging in the nursery in his home. The craftsmanship was exquisite, with tiny details carved into each bird's feathers, and a musical mechanism that plays a lullaby. The day before, it was a cashmere blanket so soft it felt like holding a cloud, in the exact shade of cream I'd mentioned wanting for the nursery.

Today's delivery was a box of pregnancy-safe tea blends and a book about preparing for natural childbirth. The tea selection included every flavor I'd tried and enjoyed during my time with him, plus several new ones with handwritten notes about their benefits for pregnancy symptoms. The book was a first edition, signed by the author, with several passages already highlighted in a color that matched the pen he always used for important documents.

Each gift makes my heart clench with longing and fury in equal measure. He's trying to take care of me from a distance, showing me he remembers every small detail about my preferences and needs. It would be sweet if he hadn't destroyed my trust by lying about something so fundamental to our relationship.

"Maybe I should send them back," I say now, several hours after the latest delivery, while running my fingers over the spine of the childbirth book. The leather binding is soft and expensive, and I can smell the faint scent of his cologne clinging to the pages.

Jessie shakes her head. “Are you crazy? Keep the gifts and sell them online. Use the money to buy baby stuff from someone who doesn’t lie to you about secret military operations.”

I chuckle softly. “They weren’t military operations.”

“Potato, po-tah-to. The point is, he went behind your back to do something dangerous after promising he wouldn’t.” She waves her hand dismissively. “Besides, selling his guilt gifts would be perfect revenge. He spent all that time picking out meaningful presents, and you turn around and hawk them on eBay to strangers. It’s diabolical.”

I set aside the book and shift on the couch, trying to find a position that doesn’t put pressure on my lower back. At twenty-four weeks, without that amazing bed and super comfortable furniture at the Belov estate, everything hurts in new and creative ways, and the stress of the past week hasn’t helped with the discomfort. My ankles are swollen, my hips ache constantly, and I’ve developed a new appreciation for how difficult it is to get comfortable when there’s a tiny person using my ribcage as a jungle gym.

“I keep wondering if I overreacted,” I say quietly.

Jessie walks closer, hands on her hips as she stares at me with an expression that could freeze water. “You did not overreact. You set a very reasonable boundary about honesty in your relationship, and he trampled all over it the first chance he got.”

I sigh. “But what if he really was trying to protect me?”

“From what? From being worried about someone you love? From having a say in decisions that affect your future?” She stamps her foot, and the heel of her shoe clicking echoes through the quiet apartment. “Babe, protection that comes at the cost

of your autonomy isn't protection. It's control dressed up in pretty words."

Her bluntness cuts through the fog of confusion that's been clouding my judgment for days. She's right, and I know she's right, but knowing something intellectually and feeling it emotionally are two different things entirely. "I still love him," I whisper.

"I know you do. That's what makes this so hard." Jessie moves to sit beside me on the couch, careful not to wrinkle her dress, since she has to work tonight. She turns to face me fully. "Loving someone doesn't mean accepting behavior that makes you feel unsafe or unheard."

"What if I'm making a mistake? What if I'm throwing away something real because I'm too scared to trust him?" I blink back tears, not wanting to cry yet again. It feels like that's all I've done for days.

"What if you're protecting yourself and your daughter from a pattern of behavior that will only get worse over time?" She takes my hand and squeezes gently. "You don't have to decide anything right now. You're allowed to take as much time as you need to figure out what you want."

The permission to be uncertain feels like a relief. I've been pressuring myself to have answers I don't possess, so it feels nice to have a sort of permission to take a respite and just breathe. The baby chooses that moment to deliver a particularly strong kick to my ribs, making me wince and press my hand to my side. "My daughter has opinions about this conversation."

"She's probably telling you to dump his ass and move on with your life."

I laugh, and it sounds a bit watery from the tears I'm suppressing, but I'm amused. "Or she's telling me I'm being stubborn and should call him."

“Babies don’t have that kind of judgment yet. She’s definitely on team ‘dump his ass.’”

I laugh again despite everything, grateful for Jessie’s ability to make me smile even when I want to cry. “I think I’ll take a bath. My back is killing me.”

“Want me to run it for you before I leave for work? I bought some of those fancy bath salts that are supposed to help with pregnancy aches.” She’s already standing before I can answer, heading toward the bathroom with purpose. “ I’ll light those candles you like, the ones that smell like vanilla and sandalwood.”

“That sounds perfect.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

Twenty minutes later, I'm soaking in lavender-scented water that's just hot enough to ease the constant ache in my lower back. Before she rushed off to work, Jessie added Epsom salts and a few drops of essential oil that makes the whole bathroom smell like a spa. The water laps gently against the sides of the tub.

This apartment feels simultaneously like home and like a place I've outgrown. The walls are covered with photos from college and pictures of Jessie and me at various bars and restaurants around the city. There's a stack of romance novels on the bathroom counter that I used to read religiously, back when my biggest relationship problems involved men who didn't text back fast enough or who forgot to call when they said they would.

Now I'm pregnant with the child of a man who runs a criminal organization, hiding from threats I don't fully understand, and trying to decide whether love is enough to build a future when that future might include more lies and more midnight disappearances.

I lean back, letting the water slowly cool as my thoughts wander. About forty minutes later, my phone buzzes on the counter beside the tub, and I lean over to check the caller ID. Eli's name appears on the screen, which is unusual enough to make me immediately concerned. Why would the bartender be calling me when I don't work there anymore?

I answer on the third ring. "Hey, Eli. What's up?"

His voice is panicked and rushed, barely recognizable as the laid-back guy I've known for years. "Sabrina, thank God. Something happened to Jessie at work tonight.

There was an accident with some broken glass, and she had to be rushed to the emergency room.”

The bottom drops out of my world as I scramble to sit up in the tub, water sloshing everywhere and soaking the bathmat. “What? Is she okay? Which hospital?”

“She’s conscious but they’re still working on her. She lost a lot of blood from cuts on her arms and needed stitches. The ambulance took her a while ago, and I thought you should know.”

My chest tightens with panic as worst-case scenarios flood my mind. “Which hospital, Eli.”

“Jurgen Medical Center on Industrial Boulevard. The EMT said it was the closest Level Two Trauma Center near us. She kept asking for you before they took her in the ambulance.”

I’m not familiar with Jurgen Medical Center, so I repeat the name in my mind while reaching for a towel, already planning the fastest route to Industrial Boulevard from my apartment. “I’m leaving in a few minutes. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Just get there as soon as you can. The doctors said the next few hours are critical.” He sounds shaky. “I saw a shard of glass protruding from her thigh. Maybe her femoral artery...” He trails off before speaking again. “I have to get back to work but keep us updated.”

The line goes dead, leaving me staring at my phone with wet hands and a heart that’s beating so fast it makes me dizzy. The thought of Jessie seriously injured, rushed to the nearest emergency room while asking for me, makes my stomach clench with dread. I need to get to her immediately.

I climb out of the tub and dry off as quickly as possible, pulling on the first clothes I can find. I've chosen non-maternity jeans that barely fit over my growing belly, a sweater that's soft enough to be comforting, and shoes I can slip on without bending over too far.

The apartment feels too quiet as I grab my keys and wallet, checking my phone one more time to make sure I didn't miss any additional calls from Eli. There's a moment where I consider calling Nikandr. He'd want to know what happened, and part of me craves the comfort of his voice during a crisis like this.

No, it's late, and every second feels heavier than the last. I don't want to waste time arguing about security protocols or having him insist on sending a team to escort me. Jessie needs me now, and I can handle a drive to the hospital by myself.

I lock the apartment behind me and hurry toward the parking lot, my mind already focused on navigating traffic. It's only as I reach my car that I remember the guards who have been discreetly following me everywhere since I left the estate.

They're parked across the street in a black SUV, trying to look inconspicuous and failing spectacularly. When they see me heading for my car at this hour, one of them gets out and starts walking toward me with purpose. "Ma'am, if you're going somewhere, we'd prefer to drive you."

I shake my head and unlock my car door. "I'm going to the hospital. My best friend was injured, and I don't have time to explain the situation or wait for you to clear it with whoever you need to clear it with."

He looks unhappy but doesn't try to stop me. "Then we'll follow behind you. For safety."

I shrug. "Fine. Whatever. Just don't slow me down."

I climb into my car and start the engine, pulling out of the parking lot with the SUV following. The streets are mostly empty at this hour, which makes it easier to navigate toward Industrial Boulevard and the hospital where Jessie is fighting for her life.

It's only when I've been driving for twenty minutes through increasingly industrial areas that doubt begins to creep in. I haven't seen any signs for Jurgen Medical Center, which I've never heard of, and the neighborhoods I'm passing don't look like places where a major hospital would be located. The buildings are mostly warehouses and manufacturing facilities, with very few streetlights and no foot traffic.

Maybe I took a wrong turn. Maybe Eli gave me the wrong address in his panic. Maybe I misheard him because I was in the bathtub and the sound was distorted.

I slow down and pull into an empty parking lot beside a warehouse, intending to call Eli back and get better directions. The guards' SUV pulls in behind me, and I see them talking on their radio, probably checking in with whoever is monitoring my movements.

My phone shows no missed calls and no text messages with additional information. I'm about to dial Eli's number when I see headlights approaching fast from the direction I just came.

Too fast.

A black van speeds toward the guards' SUV and slams into the side with enough force to send it spinning across the asphalt. The sound of metal crushing metal fills the air, followed by the hiss of steam from a damaged radiator.

Before I can process what I'm seeing, another van races toward my car from the opposite direction.

The realization crashes over me with crystal clarity. This isn't an accident or a coincidence. I've been lured here deliberately, led away from safety and witnesses to a location where no one will hear me scream.

It's a trap.

27

Nikandr

I've been a wreck for the past week, and I'm not hiding it well. Every morning I wake up reaching for Sabrina's warmth only to find cold sheets and the bitter reminder that she's gone. The estate feels like a mausoleum without her laughter echoing through the hallways, without the sound of her humming while she organizes baby clothes in the sunroom.

Maksim found me this morning sitting in the nursery we'd started planning together, staring at paint samples scattered across the floor like fallen leaves. He didn't say anything about the empty whiskey bottle on the windowsill or that I was still wearing yesterday's clothes. He just handed me a cup of coffee and sat down beside me among the chaos of our unfinished dreams.

"The surveillance team reports she's doing well," he said quietly. "Jessie came home the same night. They're taking care of each other."

I nodded without looking at him, running my fingers over a fabric swatch in the exact shade of yellow Sabrina had chosen for the curtains. "Good. That's good."

"You could call her."

I shake my head. "She asked for space. I'm giving her space."

“You’re giving her silence. There’s a difference.”

Maybe he’s right, but I won’t force my way back into her life until I can sense she’s ready to talk things out. I won’t be another man who refuses to respect her boundaries, even if honoring them is slowly killing me. So instead, I send gifts. They’re just small things that let her know I’m thinking about her and our daughter without demanding any response or acknowledgment.

Among my favorites was a baby mobile I had commissioned from an artisan in Vermont, each wooden bird hand-carved and painted in the colors we discussed for the nursery. There was a cashmere blanket soft enough for newborn skin, in the cream shade she’d mentioned wanting. Then smaller, more generic gifts, like books about pregnancy and childbirth and tea blends formulated specifically for expectant mothers. Just anything that catches my fancy and might bring her comfort without crossing the line into manipulation.

I know she receives them because the surveillance team confirms the deliveries, but she never calls to thank me or tell me to stop. The silence cuts deeper than any angry words could.

I’m in my study pretending I’m reviewing financial reports with the attention span of a goldfish when Maksim bursts through the door without knocking, holding a burner phone in his hand and wearing an expression I know too well. It’s the look he gets when something has gone catastrophically wrong, and the carefully constructed walls of our world have been breached by forces beyond our control.

He doesn’t speak. He just holds up the phone so I can see the screen.

The video is short, maybe thirty seconds, but it destroys me completely. Sabrina is unconscious and slumped forward in a chair with her hands bound behind her back. There’s blood on her left temple, creating a dark stain against her pale skin that

makes my vision blur with rage. She's wearing jeans and a soft sweater that emphasizes the curve of her belly where my daughter grows.

The warehouse around her is industrial, with concrete walls and exposed pipes running along the ceiling. There are no windows visible in the frame, and no identifying markers that might give away the location. Just my pregnant girlfriend tied to a chair, unconscious and bleeding, while our enemies prepare to use her as leverage against me.

Rage ignites in my chest before fear can register. White-hot fury burns away rational thought and replaces it with the cold, calculating violence that made me dangerous long before I inherited this organization. Someone has taken what belongs to me. Someone has hurt the woman carrying my child.

Someone is going to die for this.

I don't speak. I simply grab my gun from the desk drawer and stand up with movements that feel unnaturally calm given the storm brewing inside me. "Every available man. Full tactical gear. Now."

Maksim is already moving toward the door, pulling out his regular phone to start making calls. "How many teams?"

"All of them. I want every soldier we have on the street in the next twenty minutes."

"What about?—"

"I don't care about territory disputes or ongoing operations. Drop everything. This is the only priority that matters now."

He nods and steps into the hallway to begin coordinating, his voice carrying the

urgency that comes with crisis management. I can hear him barking orders about weapons checks and vehicle assignments, but the words fade into background noise as I focus on the phone still playing that damned video on repeat.

There's a message attached to the video. Text appeared while I was processing the image of Sabrina's unconscious form. The words are simple, taunting, and designed to provoke exactly the reaction I'm having: She walked right into our trap, concerned about her friend's safety. How touching. We'll be in touch about terms.

Her friend. They used Jessie to lure her out, probably with a fake emergency call that triggered every protective instinct Sabrina possesses. She thought she was rushing to help someone she loves, and instead, she drove straight into an ambush designed specifically to exploit her compassion.

My hands shake slightly as I pocket the phone and move toward the armory, not from fear, but from the effort required to contain the violence building inside me like pressure in a sealed container. I want to tear this city apart brick by brick until I find her. I want to burn down every building where they might be holding her and salt the earth afterward.

I need information first. Location, numbers, and a tactical assessment. Rage without intelligence is just destruction, and destruction won't bring Sabrina home safely.

Maksim finds me loading magazines in the armory, my movements mechanical and precise despite the chaos in my head. "One of the guards survived the attack."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I look up from the ammunition for the first time since seeing that video. “Where is he?”

“Dr. Lewis is treating him at the clinic. He has a concussion and broken ribs, but he’s conscious and talking.”

“What did he see?”

“Two vans in a coordinated attack. They took out his vehicle first, then went for Sabrina’s car. It was a professional operation, not random street crime.”

I finish loading the magazine and slam it into my weapon with more force than necessary. “Did he get a look at any of the attackers?”

“Negative. They were wearing masks and tactical gear, but he confirmed how they got her out of the apartment.” Maksim leans against the workbench, his expression grim. “There was a phone call telling her Jessie was in an accident and en route to Jurgen Medical Center on Industrial Boulevard.”

“There is no Jurgen Medical Center on Industrial Boulevard.”

He nods. “No, there isn’t, but she didn’t know that. She just heard her best friend was hurt and needed her.”

They didn’t just take her randomly or wait for an opportunity to present itself. They studied her, learned about her relationships and vulnerabilities, then crafted a lie specifically designed to make her abandon caution and rush into danger. “I want

every tool at our disposal. All resources.” I holster my weapon and grab a tactical vest from the equipment rack. “Do we have any eyes on this? Satellite surveillance? Facial recognition? Traffic cameras?”

“Teams are already pulling feeds from every camera in a five-mile radius of the abduction site. If they’re using one of Vadim’s known properties, we’ll have coordinates within the hour.”

Vadim. This has his signature all over it—the careful planning, the psychological manipulation, and the use of an innocent as bait. He’s been planning this since the failed raid on his safehouse when his people didn’t kill me as planned. He’s probably waited for the perfect opportunity to make me desperate and off-balance.

“Pull every file we have on his operations and look for anywhere he might take her for an extended stay.”

Maksim nods. “Already in progress. I’ve got teams checking every location we know about and several we only suspect.”

My phone buzzes with an incoming call from one of our surveillance specialists. I answer without pleasantries. “What do you have?”

“Got a hit from a traffic camera six blocks from the abduction site has a hit. The vehicle’s registered to a shell company we’ve linked to Vadim’s network before.”

“Plates?”

He has an immediate answer. “Stolen, but we tracked the route. They headed south toward the warehouse district.”

“How long ago?”

“Timestamp shows forty-three minutes. They had a significant head start, but we’re narrowing the search area.”

I end the call and turn to Maksim, who’s been monitoring radio chatter from our field teams. “Is there anything from the ground units?”

“Two possible locations tentatively identified. There’s an abandoned textile factory on Pier Street and a storage facility off Highway Nine. Both properties have connections to Vadim’s organization.”

I nod. “Split the teams. Hit both simultaneously.”

He hesitates fractionally. “What if she’s not at either location?”

I barely glance at him as I stuff several magazines in my vest. “We keep looking until we find her and Elizabeth.”

A new call comes in from our tech specialist, and I answer on the first ring. “Talk to me.”

“Coordinates are confirmed. There are heat signatures detected at the storage facility indicating multiple occupants.”

The information sends adrenaline coursing through my system with the intensity of an electric shock. They found her. After less than an hour of searching, we have a location and confirmation that she’s alive. “How many hostiles?”

“Best estimate is four to six individuals. Thermal imaging shows defensive positions around the perimeter.”

“Weak points in their setup?” I ask quickly.

He's already answering before I finish the last word. "The loading dock on the east side appears to be their blind spot. It has a single guard rotation with minimal coverage."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I memorize the details while pulling on my tactical gear. Loading dock, east side, minimal coverage. The information burns itself into my consciousness like a brand.

“ETA to target?”

“Eighteen minutes,” he says.

“Make it twelve.”

I shove the phone into my pocket and slide into the passenger seat of the lead convoy vehicle without hesitation. Maksim climbs behind the wheel, his movements as controlled and purposeful as mine despite the urgency of our mission.

This isn't a rescue operation. It's a reckoning.

Vadim made a mistake when he took Sabrina. He miscalculated my response, underestimated the lengths I'll go to protect what's mine. He thought he could use her as leverage, force me into negotiations or concessions that would give him some advantage in our ongoing war.

What he doesn't understand is negotiation requires both parties to believe they have something to lose. I don't negotiate when it comes to Sabrina and our daughter. I don't make deals or consider compromise. I eliminate threats.

“Rules of engagement?” Maksim asks as we speed through empty streets toward the warehouse district.

“No prisoners. Clean sweep.”

“And Vadim?”

“Is mine.”

He nods before saying, “Does this feel too easy, like the safe house? A single guard rotation...”

I mull it over. “I’ve considered that, but I have to follow every lead.”

He doesn’t argue as he continues driving. The storage facility comes into view as we round the final corner, a sprawling complex of interconnected buildings surrounded by chain-link fence and razor wire.

I check my weapon one final time as our convoy spreads out to surround the facility. The familiar weight of the gun in my hands feels like coming home, like returning to the person I was before I started playing at being civilized and domestic.

If Vadim has hurt her beyond what I saw in that video, if he’s laid another hand on her while she’s been in his custody, I won’t just kill him. I’ll make him beg for death long before I grant it.

First, I’m bringing Sabrina home. Everything else is just cleanup.

28

Sabrina

I wake up with my head pounding and the taste of copper in my mouth. Everything feels wrong, from the position of my body to the rough texture against my back, and

the way my arms ache behind me. I try to move and discover my wrists are bound to what feels like a metal chair. The rope cuts into my skin, already raw and burning from whatever struggle happened while I was unconscious.

I blink against the low, buzzing light overhead that makes everything look sickly and yellow. The warehouse around me is exactly what I expected from the video calls I've seen in crime dramas, with concrete walls, exposed pipes running along the ceiling, and the kind of industrial emptiness that swallows sound and hope in equal measure.

My stomach churns with nausea that might be from the head injury or from the terror creeping up my throat like acid. The baby. I focus on the familiar weight low in my belly and gentle pressure that tells me she's still there and still moving. I'm only twenty-four weeks. That's still too early, still so vulnerable, but she would have a good chance of surviving now. I think about that micro-preemie onesie I saw in the baby boutique and silently tell her to hang on and stay inside longer. I try to shift my weight and feel her respond with a small kick against my ribs, and the relief nearly makes me sob.

"Finally awake."

The voice comes from my left, and I turn my head carefully to see a woman standing near a stack of wooden crates. She's blonde and elegant in the way that comes from expensive clothes and careful maintenance. Even in this hellhole, her hair is perfectly styled, and her makeup looks like it was applied by a professional. She's wearing a baby pink cashmere sweater and designer jeans that fit her like they were made specifically for her body.

I know who she is before she introduces herself. The bone structure, the height, and the way she carries herself with predatory confidence give it away. This is the woman Nikandr spent years hunting, who led his brother into a trap that cost Yaraslov his

life.

“Irina?” I croak out, my voice rough from being unconscious.

She smiles, and it’s like looking into a funhouse mirror version of myself. “The resemblance really is striking, isn’t it? When Vadim first showed me your picture, I thought it was some kind of joke, but seeing you in person...” She tilts her head, studying me like I’m an interesting piece of art. “It’s almost uncanny.”

I study her face more carefully, seeing the similarities that made Nikandr mistake me for her that night in the club. We have the same basic bone structure hair color, general height, and build, but where my features are softer, hers are sharp. Where I have freckles across my nose, her skin is porcelain perfect. Where my eyes show whatever emotion I’m feeling, hers are calculating and cold.

She moves closer, circling my chair with fluid grace. “I would never be careless enough to get knocked up, especially by someone in thebratva. It’s a crazy risk, bringing a child into this world. It makes you vulnerable in ways you can’t even imagine.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

The casual cruelty in her voice makes my chest tighten with protective fury. “Maybe some things are worth the risk.”

“Like what? Love?” She laughs, and the sound is sharp and bitter. “Love is a weakness that gets you killed. Look where it got you.”

“Did you ever love Yaraslov at all?” The question comes out before I can stop myself, but I need to know for Nikandr’s sake, and the closure he’s been seeking, I need to understand whether his brother died believing in something real or something fabricated.

Irina’s expression flickers for just a moment with surprise, or maybe guilt, making her look almost human, before the mask slides back into place. She drums her perfectly manicured fingers against her thigh, and she looks away from me for the first time since I woke up. “Yaraslov was...” She starts to speak, then stops herself. “He was different than I expected.”

“Different how?”

“Gentler. Kinder. He brought me flowers every time we met and always asked about my day like he actually cared about the answer.” Her voice grows quieter, almost wistful. “He had this way of looking at me like I was something precious instead of something to be used despite paying for my time.”

“But you betrayed him anyway.” I can’t hide my disgust.

“I did my job.” The words come out sharp and defensive. “That’s what I was paid to

do.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

She opens her mouth to respond, but footsteps echo through the warehouse before she can speak.

“I told you she could be your twin.” The voice belongs to a man who enters the space like he owns it, moving with the fluid confidence of a predator who’s already fed. He’s older than Nikandr, maybe fifty, with silver threading through dark hair and scars along his jawline that suggest a violent history.

Everything about him radiates controlled menace, from his expensive suit to the way his hands rest casually near weapons I can’t see but know are there. This has to be Vadim Morozov, the man who killed Yaraslov, been hunting Nikandr, and orchestrated my kidnapping with surgical precision.

He’s followed by two other men who are younger and broader, with the kind of casual violence that comes from years of following orders without question. One of them carries a tactical bag that clanks when he sets it down, probably full of weapons or surveillance equipment. The other has dried blood on his knuckles and a fresh cut across his cheek that suggests he was in the van that hit my guards.

“Though the resemblance is stronger in photographs,” Vadim says, studying me with clinical interest. “In person, there are obvious differences. The way she holds herself, and the expression in her eyes... Irina, you project danger. This one...” He gestures toward me dismissively. “Projects vulnerability.”

Irina sniffs and examines her perfectly manicured nails. “She has a surface resemblance but lacks my elegance.”

I meet her gaze directly, letting her see the disgust I feel. “And your cold heart.”

Vadim laughs. “Maybe you’re more interesting than I thought. That makes this so much more interesting.”

He begins circling my chair like a shark testing the water, and I force myself not to flinch away from his presence. Fear is what he wants because it gives him power. I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing how terrified I am for my daughter.

“Tell me,” he says conversationally, “What do you know about your boyfriend’s business operations?”

I keep staring ahead. “I know he’s trying to get out of them.”

“Is he? Or is that just what he told you to keep you compliant?” Vadim stops directly in front of me, leaning down so his face is level with mine. “Men like Nikandr don’t retire, little fool. They die in the life, or they die trying to escape it.”

I meet his gaze, managing not to flinch. “He’s not like you.”

He laughs again, though it holds no amusement. “No? What makes you so certain?”

I think about Nikandr’s gentle hands on my belly, the way he reads pregnancy books, and the careful way he’s been dismantling his empire piece by piece to build us a different future. “Because he knows what he’s fighting for.” I’m more inclined to be forgiving of him not telling me about his last mission beforehand despite breaking a promise to me now that I see the man he’s fighting against. He was clearly trying to protect me, though he did break his word.

He arches a brow. “And what’s that?”

“Our family.”

Vadim straightens up, his expression shifting to something that might be amusement or contempt. “Your family. How sweet. Your boyfriend should be arriving soon to rescue his precious family.”

I frown. Why would Vadim tell me Nikandr’s on the way? “What do you mean?”

“We’ve given him coordinates to a lovely abandoned textile factory about fifteen miles from here. My men made sure to leave plenty of evidence that you’re being held there, including heat signatures and movement patterns—all the little details that make surveillance specialists feel confident about their intelligence.”

The casual way he describes the deception makes my blood run cold. “He’ll figure it out.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“Maybe, but probably not until after the explosion.” He sounds neutral about that.

The word makes me gasp. Explosion. Bomb. They’re not just sending Nikandr to the wrong location but into a trap designed to kill him and anyone following him into the building.

“There’s a bomb waiting there,” Vadim confirms, reading the horror on my face with obvious satisfaction. “Remote detonation, of course. We’ll wait until he’s inside with his entire strike team, then...” He makes a small gesture with his hands, mimicking an explosion. “No more Nikandr Belov. No more organization. Just a very sad story about a crime boss who died trying to rescue his pregnant girlfriend after forgetting one of the tenants of the very v. zakone is to have no familial ties.”

One of the men near the door pulls out a tablet and shows Vadim the screen. “Thermal surveillance confirms multiple vehicles approaching the factory, boss. ETA four minutes.”

My heart pounds so hard I can feel it in my throat. Nikandr has four minutes before they detonate the bomb and kill him along with everyone who followed him into danger. “This is my fault,” I whisper.

“Yes, it is,” Vadim agrees cheerfully. “Your stupid, reckless choice to rush out of the apartment without thinking, and your desperation to help your friend let us use you perfectly. We played you like a violin, exploiting your compassion and your trust and your pathetic need to protect everyone around you. Your friend Eli sold you out for a hundred dollars.” He sneers in contempt.

The words are designed to break me, to make me collapse into guilt and self-recrimination, but instead of breaking, something shifts inside me, crystallizing into cold determination that burns away the panic and despair. “Eli isn’t my friend,” I say as my thoughts keep working. Allowing this plan to come to fruition is my fault, because I don’t think like a ruthless criminal, but wallowing in guilt won’t save Nikandr or our daughter.

I start scanning the room, taking inventory of every detail that might be useful, noting every bolt in the concrete walls, every pipe running along the ceiling, and every sharp edge that could cut rope or be used as a weapon. The chair I’m tied to is industrial metal with welded joints that create rough edges where the back support meets the armrests. There’s a toolbox visible near one of the support pillars, probably left behind by whoever used this space before it was abandoned.

My wrists are bleeding where the restraints have rubbed them raw, and my whole body is trembling with adrenaline and fear, but my mind feels clear, focused with the kind of laser precision that comes when everything is on the line.

If Nikandr doesn’t save me in time—if he’s already walking into that trap and is already dead even if I don’t know it yet—I’m going to save myself. I’m going to save Elizabeth. I won’t let my daughter die before she ever has a chance to live because her mother was too naïve to recognize a setup, and too angry with her father to stay where it was safe.

“You’re very quiet,” says Vadim, stopping his predatory circling to study my face. “Most people in your situation spend a lot more time begging or crying or demanding to know what we want.”

I meet his gaze steadily. “What’s the point? You’ve already decided what you’re going to do.”

“True, but the process is usually more entertaining.” He seems disappointed. “Irina, perhaps you could encourage our guest to be more interactive?”

Irina moves closer to my chair, and I catch the scent of expensive perfume mixed with something that might be cocaine. Her pupils are slightly dilated, and there’s a manic energy in her movements that suggests she’s high on something stronger than adrenaline.

“What would you like to know?” she asks, her voice sing-song and mocking. “How it felt to watch Yaraslov die believing I loved him? How satisfying it was to see the light go out of his eyes when he realized I’d been lying the entire time?”

The words are designed to hurt, to break something inside me that will make me scream or cry or give them the emotional display they’re looking for, but I just study her more carefully. My emotions are still present but pushed back, since they can’t be allowed to dominate right now. I have to remain as dispassionate as possible. I observe the way she holds her shoulders, the slight tremor in her hands, and the way her voice catches on Yaraslov’s name despite her attempts at casual cruelty.

“You did love him,” I say quietly. “That’s why you look guilty when you talk about it.”

Her hand moves so fast I don’t see it coming until her palm cracks across my cheek with enough force to snap my head to the side. The taste of blood fills my mouth, and my ear rings from the impact.

“I don’t feel guilty about anything,” she hisses. “Yaraslov was a mark. A job. A means to an end.” Her voice wavers on the last sentence, and I know I’m right.

Whatever else happened, whatever led her to betray him, there was something real between them. She loved him, and that love is eating her alive even now. “Then why

do you look like you're about to cry?"

This time I see the slap coming and brace for impact, but Vadim catches her wrist before she can follow through.

"Enough," he says calmly. "Save your energy for more important things."

He releases her arm and checks an expensive watch on his wrist. The man with the tablet approaches him again, holding the screen so I can see thermal imaging that shows multiple figures moving through what must be the factory building.

"They're inside," says the man.

My stomach clenches as Vadim pulls out a phone and speed-dials a number. This is it. They're going to detonate the bomb while Nikandr is inside the building, probably while he's searching room by room for any trace of me.

"Nikandr should be approaching the main warehouse space right about now," Vadim says conversationally while the phone rings. "I think it's time we made that call."

As he waits for someone to answer, I notice something that gives me the first real hope I've felt since waking up in this chair. His expression isn't the confident satisfaction of a man whose plan is proceeding perfectly. It's tense and focused, like someone who's trying to coordinate a complex operation with multiple moving parts. Which means there are multiple moving parts, and things could go wrong.

I test the ropes around my wrists again, more carefully this time. If I can create enough friction with the chair's rough edges while they're distracted with their phone calls and explosions, I might be able to weaken the binding enough to slip free.

It will hurt. The rope is already cutting into my skin and working it against metal will

make the wounds deeper, but pain is temporary. Death is permanent, and I refuse to let my daughter die because I was too scared to fight for her life.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

Nikandr

The storage facility looks exactly like our intelligence suggested it would, with a chain-link fence, razor wire, and industrial buildings sprawling across several acres of cracked asphalt. Yet the moment I step inside the main warehouse, unease crawls up my spine because something is fundamentally wrong with this picture.

It's too quiet. It's not the kind of quiet that comes from good noise discipline or professional operations, but the hollow silence of a place that's been abandoned for months or years. The air smells like dust and rust and old motor oil, though there's no trace of recent human occupation. There's no cigarette smoke, no food odors, and no lingering scent of fear or sweat that always accompanies a hostage situation.

I speak into my comm while scanning the empty space around me. "Alpha team, report."

Dmitri's voice crackles back through the radio. "East wing clear. Nothing but empty storage units and debris."

"Beta team?"

"West wing clear. Found some old furniture and shipping crates, but no signs of recent activity."

Maksim appears at my shoulder with his weapon trained on the shadows between support columns. "This doesn't feel right."

I nod without taking my attention off the warehouse interior because every instinct I've developed over fifteen years in this business is screaming that we've been led into a trap, though not the kind I was expecting. This isn't an ambush waiting to happen but misdirection designed to waste our time and resources...unless it's more than that. I recall the last trap he set for us, springing it once we were in a vulnerable position, and having his marksmen fire on us. This feels delayed, not just like a delay.

Not ignoring my instincts, but pressing on with business for the moment, I say, "Gamma team, status report."

A voice answers a moment later. "The basement level clear. We found what looks like old surveillance equipment, but it's been offline for a long time."

I key my comm again. "Delta team, talk to me."

Silence stretches through the radio frequency, followed by more silence that feels ominous. "Delta team, respond."

Antov's voice cuts through the interference, tight with urgency. "It's dead here, but I have a bad feeli—" The transmission cuts off just as a distant explosion rocks the ground beneath my feet, and the sound rolls across the industrial complex like thunder, followed immediately by a wail of car alarms and the distinct crackle of burning debris.

I'm already running toward the exit before I finish speaking. "Delta team, respond. Pavel, what's your status?"

Raw, agonized screams that turn my stomach and send adrenaline flooding through my system echo through my earpiece while someone shouts about structural collapse. In the background, I hear the roar of flames and the groan of twisted metal that tells me we've lost people.

I sprint outside and immediately see the black smoke rising from what used to be the south entrance to the complex. The section of the building that housed Delta team's entry point is partially collapsed, with debris scattered across a hundred-yard radius.

I grab Pavel, from the Gamma team, by the shoulder as he stumbles away from the destruction with blood streaming from a cut across his forehead. "How many?"

He looks at me with a stunned expression. "There were four men on the Delta team, all inside when it went off. We got three out, but Sergei..." He shakes his head. "Didn't make it."

The words strike me like bullets to the chest because Sergei Volkov was twenty-three years old, married for six months, with a baby daughter on the way. Now he's gone because I followed false intelligence into a carefully orchestrated trap.

Dmitri approaches with a tablet in his hands and a grim expression. "Sir, we've detected drone surveillance over the blast site. Someone's been watching our response."

I grab the tablet and study the real-time feed. "How long has it been active?"

"At least twenty minutes and maybe longer."

"Can you trace the signal?"

"I have our tech people working on it, boss. The drone's transmitting to a relay station about two miles southeast of here, but the actual control signal is coming from..." He pauses to check his readings. "A warehouse complex approximately one mile from our current position."

Maksim leans over my shoulder to look at the screen. "Show me the exact

coordinates.”

The tech specialist brings up a satellite map with GPS markers indicating the drone’s flight path and control signal origin, and the moment I see the location, recognition strikes me like a fist to the gut.

It’s the same building where we found Yaraslov’s body ten years ago. The same concrete floor where my brother bled out while Vadim and his people made their escape, with the same loading dock where I knelt beside his corpse and swore an oath of vengeance that shaped every decision I’ve made since.

As I stare at the screen, it fuzzes out before a message appears: Plan B.

“He knows his first attempt failed, so he’s...inviting me to the fallback location,” I say softly.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

Maksim grunts after reading the message. “Bastard always did like a fallback plan.”

I nod and hand the tablet back to Dmitri before turning toward our vehicles while calculating our tactical options. “How many men do we have operational?”

Maksim spends a moment check in with the team through the headsets before answering. “Twelve.”

“Weapons and equipment status?”

After another minute, he says, “Full tactical load, minus whatever we lost in the explosion.”

It’s not enough because against a prepared position with unknown numbers of defenders, twelve men is barely adequate for reconnaissance, let alone a full assault. The smart play would be to call for backup, wait for additional teams to arrive, and conduct proper surveillance before committing to action, but smart isn’t an option when every minute we spend regrouping is another minute Sabrina remains in Vadim’s hands.

I check my weapon and adjust my tactical vest. “Maksim, load everyone who can still fight into the vehicles. We’re moving now.”

He doesn’t argue, which tells me he understands the calculus as well as I do. “No backup? No additional support?”

“No time. If we wait for reinforcements, she’ll be dead before they arrive. Call for

them, but they'll either be cleaning up behind us...or Vadim."

He scowls. "What if it's another trap?"

Part of me thinks it is, but I can't wait. "We'll deal with it when we get there."

I climb into the passenger seat of the lead vehicle while Maksim coordinates the rapid deployment of our remaining personnel, and through the windshield, I see smoke still rising from the destroyed warehouse. I think of Sergei and vow to avenge him.

As we speed away from the storage facility toward the real location where Sabrina is being held moments later, I force myself to think like the predator I was before I started.

Maksim navigates through industrial streets toward our destination. "ETA six minutes."

Six minutes to cover the distance between where we are and where Sabrina is being held, to plan an assault against unknown defensive positions, and figure out how to extract her safely from whatever death trap Vadim has prepared.

"What do we know about the target building?"

Maksim glances at me while taking a sharp turn. "Warehouse complex, multiple entrances, good sight lines for defensive positions. Three stories, reinforced concrete construction."

"The same building where?—"

"Yeah. Same building."

I close my eyes and reconstruct the layout from memory because I've been to this warehouse more times than I can count over the past ten years. There's a loading dock on the east side, office complex on the second floor, warehouse space occupying most of the ground level, and multiple stairwells providing access between floors with plenty of places to establish chokepoints or fallback positions. It's a defender's paradise and an attacker's nightmare.

"Approach vector?"

"Multiple options. We could split the team and hit from different angles or concentrate our force on a single entry point."

I consider the tactical options. We don't have time for splitting our forces. "Single entry point. We hit fast and hard through the main loading dock. No subtlety or complex coordination. Just overwhelming violence applied with surgical precision."

He grimaces. "That's a hell of a risk."

I sound calmer than I feel. "Everything about this is a risk. At least this way, we control the variables."

My phone chimes, indicating an incoming call from an unknown number, and I answer without hesitation because I know exactly who it will be.

Vadim's voice is smooth and conversational, like we're old friends catching up after a long absence. "Nikandr, I'm disappointed you escaped the storage facility."

Rage builds in my chest like pressure in a boiler, but I keep my voice level though I don't engage in the conversation he seems to want. "Where is she?"

"Safe for now. She's not quite what I expected. She's much more spirited than her

photographs suggested, though not half as interesting as Irina, who is here with me now.”

I absorb that information but don’t respond. He wants to unsettle me or distract me with the temptation of getting revenge. My focus remains on Sabrina. “If you’ve hurt her?—”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“You’ll what? Storm my position with your remaining men? Hunt me down and make me pay?” He laughs, and the sound grates against my nerves like fingernails on concrete. “You’re welcome to try, but you should know any aggressive action on your part will result in immediate consequences for your lovely girlfriend and your unborn child.”

The threat hangs in the air between us like a blade. “What do you want?”

“What I’ve always wanted. Justice for what you and your family have done to mine.”

I shake my head. “You’re out of your mind. You’re the one who went after Yaraslov for our territory. This is between us, Vadim. Let her go, and we’ll settle it however you want.”

“Oh, but she’s already settled it by being here. You see, Nikandr, the woman you love is going to watch you die, just like I had to watch your brother kill my nephew twelve years ago.”

The connection ends, leaving me staring at my phone with hands that shake slightly from suppressed fury because Vadim isn’t just planning to kill me. He’s planning to make Sabrina watch, to traumatize her so completely that she’ll never recover from witnessing my death unless I kill him first.

His words filter through my rage, and I want to deny what he’s claiming, but maybe there’s some truth to it. Yaraslov was always...coy about the dispute with Vadim, claiming it was over territory, but maybe there was a more personal component he never shared. If my brother killed Vadim’s nephew, it would explain why he went to

the such lengths to draw Yaraslov out using Irina so he could kill him.

I think about Sabrina tied to a chair somewhere in that building, probably terrified but trying to stay strong for our daughter's sake, the nursery we'll never finish if I fail here tonight, and Sergei's wife, who doesn't yet know she's a widow because her husband followed me into a trap.

It's suddenly clear. Vadim's reasons don't matter. Even if my brother killed his nephew, he already had his revenge ten years ago. Sabrina has nothing to do with any of this, and I'm determined to kill Vadim and Irina before the night is through.

All of it comes down to the next ten minutes.

I check my weapon one final time as we pull up to the warehouse entrance. "Maksim, if something happens to me in there?—"

"Nothing's going to happen to you."

I give him a quelling look, not wanting empty reassurance right now. "If it does, make sure she knows I died trying to get her home."

He nods grimly as we prepare to breach the building where this all began, where my brother died, and where it's finally going to end forever.

30

Sabrina

The moment Vadim and Irina leave the room, I shift my focus entirely to the rope binding my wrists. The guard they've left behind to watch me is young, maybe early twenties, with nervous energy that keeps him pacing near the door rather than paying

close attention to my movements. He checks his phone every few minutes and keeps glancing toward the hallway like he's expecting someone to return at any moment.

Perfect.

I work the rope against the sharp edge of the chair's metal frame with slow, deliberate movements that won't draw his attention. The metal cuts into the fibers gradually, strand by strand, while also slicing deeper into my already raw wrists. Blood makes the rope slippery, which actually helps the process, though the pain is becoming harder to ignore with each twist of my hands.

The baby moves restlessly in my belly, responding to my elevated heart rate and the stress hormones flooding my system. I try to project calm thoughts toward her while continuing to saw through my restraints, silently promising we're both going to survive this night.

Twenty minutes pass before the rope gives way enough that I might be able to slip my hands free. The guard is still pacing, checking his phone, and completely unaware his prisoner is systematically destroying her bonds. I test the looseness carefully, making sure I can actually get free when the moment comes.

Then I hear footsteps in the hallway outside, and my window of opportunity suddenly becomes much smaller.

I take a deep breath and make my decision. If I'm going to escape, it has to be now, while there's only one guard between me and freedom. Once Vadim and Irina return, my chances will drop to zero.

I slip my hands free from the loosened rope and immediately begin working on the restraints around my ankles. These are tighter, newer, and harder to manipulate, but I have both hands available now and can work more efficiently. The guard is still

facing away from me, absorbed in whatever he's reading on his phone.

The ankle restraints give way just as I hear voices approaching from down the hallway. Vadim's voice, low and commanding, giving orders to someone I can't see. They'll be back in the room within minutes, maybe seconds.

I need a distraction.

I take another deep breath and let my body go completely limp, allowing myself to fall sideways off the chair and hit the concrete floor with a convincing thud. The impact jars my shoulder and sends pain shooting through my ribs, but I force myself to remain motionless while making my breathing shallow and irregular.

"Help," I whisper, just loud enough for the guard to hear. "Something's wrong with the baby."

The guard spins around and sees me collapsed on the floor, apparently unconscious or in medical distress. The panic in his expression tells me he wasn't prepared for this possibility and wasn't given instructions on what to do if the pregnant hostage had a medical emergency.

He rushes over, kneeling beside me and reaching for my wrist to check my pulse. The moment he's close enough, I strike fast and hard, slamming the heel of my palm into his temple with all the force I can generate from my position on the floor.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

The blow catches him completely off guard, and he staggers backward with a dazed expression but it's not enough to drop him and only makes him unsteady on his feet while he tries to process what just happened.

I roll away from him and grab the metal chair I was tied to, using my legs to swing it in a wide arc that connects with his skull. This time, the impact is solid and devastating, and he collapses immediately, blood pooling beneath his head on the concrete floor.

I don't stick around to check if he's dead or just unconscious because either way, he's no longer a threat. I grab the knife from his belt and quickly cut away the remaining pieces of rope around my ankles, then take his gun despite having no real familiarity with firearms beyond what I've seen in movies.

The weapon feels heavier than I expected, foreign and dangerous in my hands, but it's better than being completely defenseless. I check to make sure there's a round in the chamber—at least I think that's what I'm checking—and then move toward the door as quietly as possible.

The hallway outside is dimly lit and stretches in both directions, with multiple doors leading to rooms I can't identify. I choose the direction that leads away from the voices I heard earlier, hoping to find an exit before anyone discovers the guard's unconscious or dead body.

I make it maybe fifty feet down the corridor before I hear footsteps echoing from behind me, moving fast and getting closer. There's nowhere to hide in this sterile hallway with no alcoves or doorways that might provide cover. In desperation, I

shove the gun into the waistband of my jeans at the small of my back, pulling my sweater down to cover the grip just as a steel door slams shut directly behind me.

The metallic clang echoes through the warehouse like a gunshot, and I spin around to find Vadim stepping out of the shadows behind me with Irina close at his heels.

He's no longer wearing the expensive suit from earlier, having changed into tactical gear that makes him look even more dangerous. There's a pistol in his right hand, pointed casually in my direction, and his expression carries the cold satisfaction of a predator who's just cornered wounded prey.

"Going somewhere?" he asks conversationally, as if we're discussing weekend plans rather than my attempted escape.

I raise my empty hands, trying to look defeated and helpless. "I was looking for a bathroom."

He laughs, a sound devoid of any warmth or humor. "I noticed you left quite a mess back in that room."

I shrug as much as I can with my hands held aloft. "He tried to assault me. I defended myself."

He snorts but seems amused. "Of course, you did, but now I need to relocate you to more secure accommodations where such unfortunate incidents won't happen again."

He moves closer, and he doesn't bother to search me for weapons, probably assuming I just panicked and fled after striking down the guard. His overconfidence might be the advantage I need later.

"The storage facility exploded as planned," he says, watching my reaction carefully.

“Your boyfriend and his entire team are dead. They were blown to pieces while searching for you in an empty building.”

The words hit me hard, stealing my breath and making the world tilt around me. If Nikandr is dead, if he died trying to rescue me from a trap I walked into through my own stupidity, then nothing else matters. Our daughter will grow up without a father, and I'll spend the rest of my life knowing my reckless choices got the man I love killed.

My knees buckle, and I have to put one hand against the wall to keep from falling completely. Grief and guilt crash into me all at once, threatening to drag me under entirely.

But then I catch sight of Irina's expression from where she's standing behind Vadim, and something in her face betrays the lie. There's no satisfaction there, no cruel pleasure at delivering devastating news. Instead, she looks almost uncomfortable, like someone who's been forced to participate in deception she doesn't fully support.

If Nikandr were really dead, Irina would be gloating. She'd be savoring every moment of my pain because causing suffering seems to be one of her few genuine pleasures. The fact that she keeps looking away from me tells me more than any words could.

He's not dead. The explosion happened, and people probably died, but Nikandr survived. I can feel it in the connection that's existed between us since the night we met, the invisible thread that tells me when he's near and when he's in danger.

I let the hope settle into my bones while keeping my expression devastated, not wanting Vadim to realize I've seen through his psychological manipulation.

“Now that your lover is dead,” he says, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from

the wall, “I need to decide what to do with you. Killing you immediately would be merciful, but mercy isn’t something your family has earned.”

He drags me down the hallway toward another room, his grip tight enough to bruise but not quite painful enough to make me cry out. Irina follows behind us almost nervously.

I let him move me without resistance while my mind races through possibilities. If he really believed Nikandr was dead, there would be no urgency to relocate me. He’d take his time, maybe even celebrate his victory before deciding my fate. The fact that he’s hustling me to what he called “more secure accommodations” suggests he knows perfectly well Nikandr is still alive and probably coming for me.

I’m not a burden to be disposed of but bait. As long as I’m useful as bait, I have value that will keep me alive at least a little longer.

The room he takes me to is smaller than the first one, with concrete walls that seem to press in from all sides and fluorescent lights that emit an electrical hum. There’s no windows and only one entrance. A single chair sits in the center, newer than the last one and made of solid steel without the convenient sharp edges that helped me escape.

When he forces me to sit down, the metal is cold through my jeans, and the gun pressed against my back is going to be extremely uncomfortable, but I don’t dare adjust my position in a way that might reveal its presence. If I move, he might want to tie me up again, and even the most incompetent guard would notice the gun then.

“Much better,” Vadim says, stepping back to survey his handiwork. He runs his hand along the wall like he’s admiring the craftsmanship. “This room is designed to hold prisoners who might have more fight in them than expected.”

Irina positions herself near the door, shifting her weight from one foot to the other while avoiding eye contact. She pulls out her phone and stares at the screen without really reading it, her perfectly manicured fingers drumming against the case.

“You seem nervous,” I say, looking directly at her.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

She finally meets my gaze, and there's something almost defensive in her expression. "I'm not nervous. I'm bored."

"Bored enough to keep checking your phone every thirty seconds?"

Vadim glances between us with amusement. "Irina doesn't enjoy the waiting portions of our operations. She prefers more immediate gratification, and she won't get paid for her part until I decide it's over. Then we'll settle on her perks and compensation."

Irina looks unhappy, and I realize she's probably not here on a strictly voluntary basis. Vadim might have recruited her to throw Nikandr off-balance, or maybe he has another purpose in mind for her, but she didn't go to him. I'm convinced he's been looking for her and just found her before Nikandr.

"Like watching people die?" I ask, trying to hide my thoughts. "She seems the type who likes that."

Irina's jaw tightens. "Like getting paid and moving on to the next job."

"Is that what Yaraslov was to you? Just another job?"

"Don't." Her voice comes out sharper than she probably intended. "Don't pretend you understand anything about what happened between us."

Vadim holds up a hand to stop the conversation. "Ladies, as entertaining as this is, we have more pressing concerns."

I lean forward slightly, so the gun isn't digging so forcefully into my back. "So, what happens now? You kill me and hope that brings you peace?"

Vadim checks his watch with the air of someone managing a complex schedule. "Now we wait. Your boyfriend may be dead, but his organization isn't, and they'll want to recover your body for burial. When they come for you, we'll be ready."

The slip confirms what I already suspected, and I decide to push him further. "You're lying about the explosion."

"Am I?" He tilts his head with mock curiosity.

"If Nikandr were really dead, you'd be celebrating. You'd be making toasts and planning your next move, not standing over me in a more secure room."

Irina shifts uncomfortably near the door, and his smile falters for just a moment before returning full force. "You're very perceptive for someone in your position."

"My position is temporary."

"Your position," he says, moving closer to my chair, "Is exactly where I want you. Pregnant, helpless, and completely dependent on a man who makes terrible decisions when his emotions are involved."

I meet his gaze steadily. "You don't know him as well as you think you do."

"I know he'll come for you. He'll bring every available man and weapon because he can't bear the thought of losing another person he loves. Desperation makes even the smartest men stupid."

The way he says it makes my stomach clench because there's truth in his assessment.

Nikandr will come for me, and he'll risk everything to get me back safely. That's exactly what Vadim is counting on. His words reveal another truth too—Nikandr survived the blast.

This entire setup is designed to draw him into another trap, using me as the bait that will make him abandon caution and rush into danger, but this time, I won't be a helpless victim waiting to be rescued. This time, I'll be ready to fight back when the moment comes.

The gun pressed against my back reminds me I have options beyond hoping for rescue. When the shooting starts, and Vadim's attention is focused on the threat coming through the door, I'll have a chance to even the odds.

I just have to stay alive long enough to take it.

31

Nikandr

The warehouse erupts into chaos the moment we breach the loading dock. Gunfire echoes off concrete walls as Vadim's men resist our advance with the kind of desperation that comes from knowing there's no escape. Muzzle flashes illuminate the industrial space in strobing bursts while my team spreads out to secure the perimeter and eliminate threats.

I press forward through the smoke and debris, my weapon raised as I bark orders into my comm. "Alpha team, secure the east wing. Beta team, take the stairwells. Watch for secondary positions."

Maksim appears at my shoulder, weapon raised as he scans for targets. Blood streams from a cut above his left eyebrow, but his movements are steady and controlled. "Six

hostiles down, but there's got to be more. This place is too big for a skeleton crew."

The sound of automatic weapons fire intensifies from somewhere above us, punctuated by shouts and the crash of overturned equipment. My men are meeting organized resistance, which means Vadim prepared for this assault in his "Plan B" in case the bomb didn't take us out at the storage facility.

Dmitri's voice crackles through the radio with barely controlled urgency. "There's movement on the second floor with multiple shooters in defensive positions."

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

I duck behind a concrete pillar as bullets chip away pieces of the support beam inches from my head. “Engage and neutralize. Keep pushing forward.”

The firefight continues around me, but I follow a hunch that’s been nagging at me since we entered the building. While my team engages the obvious threats, I head toward the back corridor, where the warehouse connects to what used to be administrative offices. If Vadim is holding Sabrina here, he’ll want her somewhere he can control access, with limited entry points that make rescue attempts more difficult.

The hallway stretches ahead of me, dimly lit by emergency lighting. Most of the rooms I pass are empty, filled with nothing but dust and the detritus of whatever legitimate business operated here before Vadim turned it into his base of operations. The air smells like rust and decay, with an underlying chemical odor that makes my throat burn.

At the end of the corridor, I find a reinforced door with fresh scratches around the lock mechanism and heavy steel construction built for security rather than privacy. There’s light bleeding underneath the door, and I hear voices inside, though the words are muffled by the thick metal.

I test the handle and find it locked, which only confirms my suspicions. I step back and kick the door just below the deadbolt, putting all my weight behind the blow. The door remains intact, but the frame splinters with a sharp crack, and the door swings open to reveal the room beyond.

There she is.

Sabrina sits in a metal chair in the center of a small, windowless room. The sight of rope burns around her wrists and dried blood on her temple enrages me, but relief supersedes it, hitting me so intensely it nearly buckles my knees. Immediately, the rage rises again, fueled by what they've done to her. She's alive, she's conscious, and she's looking at me with an expression that's more determined than afraid.

Vadim stands behind her chair with a pistol pressed to the back of her head, his expression calm and controlled despite the gunfire echoing through the warehouse around us. He's changed out of his expensive suit into tactical gear, but his silver hair is still perfectly styled, and his eyes hold the cold satisfaction of a man whose plan is proceeding exactly as intended.

He tilts his head slightly, as if greeting a dinner guest who's arrived precisely on time. "Nikandr, so good of you to join us. You're earlier than expected."

Off to the side, near what appears to be the room's only other exit, Irina watches our confrontation with nervous energy. She keeps shifting her weight from one foot to the other, and her perfectly manicured fingers drum against her thigh in a rapid pattern that betrays anxiety despite her composed expression.

I keep my weapon trained on Vadim while calculating angles and distances, looking for any opportunity to take a clean shot that won't risk hitting Sabrina. "Let her go. This is between us."

Vadim adjusts his grip on the pistol, making sure I can see exactly where it's pointed, with the barrel pressed against Sabrina's skull in deliberate menace. "It's been between us for twelve years, ever since your brother killed my nephew, starting this blood feud, but I thought she should be here to witness the end of our story."

Sabrina meets my gaze, and I see strength there instead of fear. I can see she's scared from the slight tremor in her hands and the way she keeps taking careful, controlled

breaths, but she's not broken. Whatever she's endured since they took her, it hasn't destroyed her.

I need to know how badly she's been damaged, both for tactical reasons and because the not knowing is killing me. "Are you hurt?"

Her voice is steady, though I hear exhaustion underneath. "I'm okay. The baby's okay too."

Vadim's mouth curves into something that might be a smile if it held any warmth whatsoever. "How touching. A family reunion. Unfortunately, it's also a farewell."

The gunfire from the rest of the warehouse is becoming more sporadic, which means my team is winning the fight against his men. Soon, they'll come looking for me, and Vadim's window of opportunity will close. If he's going to make his move, it has to be now.

I lower my weapon slightly, making the gesture deliberate and obvious while maintaining eye contact with him. "You want me? Here I am. Let her go, and we'll finish this the way it was always meant to be finished."

Vadim's eyes narrow as he considers the offer, and I can practically see the calculations running through his mind. "Drop your weapon."

I shake my head slowly, keeping my movements non-threatening but firm. "You first."

His grip tightens on the pistol, and for a moment, I think he's going to pull the trigger just to prove he can. "I'm not the one making demands."

I spread my hands slightly, weapon still pointed toward the floor but ready to raise if

necessary. “Neither am I. I’m offering you a chance to kill me face to face, without hiding behind innocent people or elaborate traps.”

For a long moment, we stare at each other across the small room while the sounds of battle continue to echo from the warehouse beyond. He’s weighing his options, likely calculating whether he can trust me to honor whatever agreement we make. Sweat beads on his forehead despite the cool air, and there’s something almost hungry in his expression as he considers the possibility of finally getting his hands on me.

Finally, he steps away from Sabrina’s chair, moving with deliberate slowness while keeping the gun trained on her until the last possible second. Then he tosses his pistol to the far corner of the room, where it clatters against the concrete wall. “There. Now you.”

I drop my weapon and kick it away, keeping my hands visible while maintaining eye contact. I hate giving up my gun, but this is what needs to happen to keep Sabrina and Elizabeth safe. “Just you and me.”

He rolls his shoulders like a fighter preparing for the ring, and there’s anticipation building in his posture. “Just you and me.” His voice carries the satisfaction of a man who’s about to get everything he’s ever wanted.

We circle each other in the confined space, both of us looking for openings and advantages. Vadim is older than me, maybe fifty, but he moves with the fluid grace of someone who’s stayed in fighting shape. There are scars on his knuckles and forearms showing he’s done this before, probably more times than I have. His gaze never leaves mine as we move, and there’s a predatory patience in his movements that tells me he’s confident about how this is going to end.

He strikes first and faster than I expected, with a quick jab aimed at my throat that I barely manage to block with my forearm. The impact sends pain shooting up to my

shoulder, but I don't have time to process it because his follow-up comes immediately—a hook to my ribs that connects hard enough to drive the air from my lungs and send fire shooting through my torso.

I stagger backward, gasping for breath, but manage to respond with an uppercut that catches him under the chin. His head snaps back with the impact, opening a cut on his lower lip that immediately starts bleeding. The blood streams down his chin and drips onto his tactical vest, but he doesn't seem to notice as he presses his attack with renewed fury.

We fight like animals, brutal and raw, with years of hatred and vengeance driving every blow. He's faster than I expected and also more skilled, but I have rage on my side from what he did to my brother and what he's put Sabrina through.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

His fist connects with my cheekbone, splitting the skin and filling my vision with stars. I taste blood in my mouth as I swing wildly, catching him with a solid right cross that staggers him backward into the wall. The concrete makes a hollow sound as his body hits it, and I follow up immediately with a knee to his solar plexus that doubles him over.

He recovers quickly, grabbing a handful of my shirt and using my momentum to throw me sideways into the concrete wall. Stars explode across my vision as my head connects with the rough surface, and the taste of blood in my mouth becomes stronger. My legs feel unsteady, and for a moment, the room spins around me like I'm drunk.

Vadim presses his advantage, landing a series of punches to my kidneys that make my legs weak and my balance uncertain. Each blow sends lightning through my lower back, and my strength starts to ebb as the damage accumulates.

I've been in enough fights to know desperation can overcome technique, and I have more to lose than he does. I drive my elbow backward into his ribs, feeling something crack under the impact. It's either cartilage or bone, but I can't tell which. He grunts with pain and his grip loosens just enough for me to pivot and grab him by the throat.

We crash to the floor together, rolling and grappling for position while trying to land devastating blows. He's stronger than his age would suggest, but I'm fighting for my family's future while he's only fighting for revenge that won't bring back the dead.

I manage to get on top of him and wrap my hands around his throat, squeezing with everything I have while he claws at my wrists and tries to buck me off. He rakes his

fingernails across my skin, drawing blood, but I maintain my grip as his face turns red, then purple, as I cut off his air supply and watch the life start to fade from his eyes.

His struggles become weaker, more desperate, and for a second, I think it's over. Just as his eyes start to roll back, I see movement from the corner of my eye that makes my blood freeze.

Irina has produced a small pistol from somewhere in her clothes and is raising it toward me with obvious intent to kill. Her hands are steady despite everything that's happened, and there's cold determination in her expression that tells me she won't miss from this range.

Sabrina moves faster than I would have thought possible. She lunges forward, the metal legs scraping against concrete as she propels herself into motion, knocking over the chair as she reaches behind her back.

A second later, she also has a gun that she aims at Irina with shaking hands. Her face is pale with concentration as she tries to line up the shot, but her whole body is trembling from adrenaline and fear.

The sound of her pulling the trigger fills the small room, but nothing happens. The safety is still on, but the distraction is enough for me to roll away from Vadim and out of Irina's line of fire just as she pulls her own trigger. The bullet gouges concrete where my head was a second before, sending chips of stone flying through the air and filling the room with the acrid smell of gunpowder.

Irina jerks her weapon toward Sabrina with predatory focus, clearly intending to eliminate the threat before returning her attention to me, but as she adjusts her aim, I hear the distinctive click of a safety being disengaged.

Sabrina's voice is steady and cold as ice. "Don't."

This time, when Sabrina fires, the gun functions exactly as designed. The bullet catches Irina center mass, spinning her around and slamming her back against the wall with enough force to crack the concrete. She slides down to the floor, leaving a trail of blood on the rough surface, her expensive clothes now ruined, and her perfectly styled hair matted with sweat and gore. Her eyes are already glassy with approaching death, and the small pistol falls from her nerveless fingers to clatter on the floor.

Vadim tries to take advantage of my distraction, his survival instincts overriding the oxygen deprivation that was about to kill him. He reaches for the knife on his belt with desperate fingers, managing to get it partially free before I'm on him again. The blade is military issue, serrated on one edge, and designed to do maximum damage.

We struggle for control of the weapon, rolling across the floor while he tries to drive it into my chest, and I fight to turn it back on him. His strength is returning as oxygen flows back to his brain, and for a terrifying instant, I worry he might actually overpower me, but rage at nearly losing everything that matters to me because of this man's obsession with revenge gives me the edge I need.

The knife goes into his torso just below the ribcage, sliding between bones to find his heart. The blade penetrates with surprising ease, parting flesh and muscle like they're made of paper. His eyes widen with shock and pain as blood begins to bubble from his lips, but he's not dead yet. He's just wounded and growing weaker by the second.

I pull myself to my feet, breathing hard and tasting blood in my mouth. Looking down at him bleeding on the concrete floor, the same floor where my brother died ten years ago, there's poetic justice in the symmetry. More importantly, there's finally an end to the violence.

He tries to speak, and blood froths at the corners of his mouth, but whatever he wants to say is lost in the gurgling sound of damaged lungs.

His death is taking too long, even now, so I step hard on the knife blade, driving it deeper into his chest and severing whatever vital structures were still keeping him alive. The metal grinds against bone as it penetrates deeper, and he convulses once, his mouth opening as if to speak, then goes still.

Vadim Morozov is dead. The man who killed my brother, terrorized the woman I love, and turned my life into a constant battle for survival, is finally gone.

I turn away from his corpse and rush to Sabrina, dropping to my knees beside her chair. She's still holding the gun, her knuckles white with tension, but her hands have stopped shaking. There's something different in her eyes now. It's a hardness that wasn't there before, and I hope it will soon fade. I don't want this to scar her for life, though it will inevitably change her.

I pull her into my arms and hold her like I'll never let her go again, feeling the solid warmth of her body against mine and the gentle movement of our daughter between us. I whisper into her hair, breathing in the familiar scent that means home and safety and everything worth fighting for. "It's over. It's finally over."

32

Sabrina

The silence after the gunshots feels deafening. My ears ring from the sound of my own weapon firing, and the acrid smell of gunpowder burns my nostrils. Irina's body lies crumpled against the wall, blood pooling beneath her in a dark stain that spreads across the concrete floor. I killed her. I actually pulled the trigger and ended another human being's life.

My hands shake as I lower the gun, the weight of it suddenly feeling impossible to bear. Nikandr kneels beside me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders with gentle pressure. His face is battered and bloody from the fight with Vadim, with cuts across his cheek and forehead that will need medical attention.

“You did what you had to do.” His voice is rough, hoarse from the violence, though his touch remains impossibly gentle. “She would have killed me.”

He’s right. Irina raised her weapon with clear intent to murder the man I love, and I stopped her the only way I could. The logical part of my mind understands the necessity of what I did, recognizes it as self-defense and protection of the people I care about.

The rest of me feels like I’m drowning.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

He helps me to my feet, his movements careful and deliberate as he checks me for injuries. His hands run over my arms and shoulders, cataloging the rope burns and bruises while avoiding any pressure that might cause additional pain. “Are you hurt anywhere else? Did they?—”

“I’m okay. Sore, scared, but okay.” I lean into his touch, drawing strength from his presence after hours of believing I might never see him again. “The baby’s been moving, so I think she’s okay too.”

Relief floods his features, transforming his battered face into something that looks almost peaceful. He presses his forehead against mine, and I feel him trembling with the aftershock of everything that’s happened. “I thought I lost you. When I saw that video, when they said?—”

“I knew you’d come.” The certainty surprises even me with its strength. “Even when Vadim told me you were dead, I knew it was a lie.”

He frowns. “How?”

“I can feel you. I don’t know how to explain it, but there’s this connection between us.” I touch his face, fingers tracing the cut on his cheek with careful pressure. “I could still feel you and knew you were alive. It gave me hope.”

Multiple sets of footsteps echo in the hallway outside, moving fast and getting closer. Nikandr immediately positions himself between me and the door, reaching for a weapon that’s no longer there. The tension in his shoulders eases when Maksim’s voice carries through the destroyed doorframe.

“Nikandr? Status report.”

“Secure. Targets neutralized.” Nikandr doesn’t move away from me as his second-in-command enters the room with two other men I recognize from the estate. “Sabrina needs medical attention.”

Maksim takes in the scene. His eyes dance over Vadim’s body with the knife protruding from his chest, Irina dead against the wall, the scattered weapons, and evidence of brutal hand-to-hand combat. His gaze lingers on me for a moment, and I see something that might be approval in his expression. Could he have possibly pieced together what happened just from observation?

“The building is secure. We lost two men, but the rest of Vadim’s people are either dead or fled.” He gestures toward the hallway. “Dr. Lewis is standing by with the vehicles. We should move before local law enforcement arrives.”

Nikandr nods and starts to guide me toward the exit with one arm around my waist for support. Each step sends pain through muscles I didn’t know I’d strained during my escape attempt and the subsequent violence. The adrenaline that kept me functional during the crisis is fading, leaving behind exhaustion and the kind of bone-deep weariness that comes from surviving something traumatic.

“Wait.” I stop walking and look back at the room where everything changed. “The guard I hit with the chair. Is he?—”

“Dead.” Maksim’s tone is matter-of-fact, neither approving nor condemning. “Skull fracture. Quick and clean.”

I killed two people tonight. I’m not sure how to feel about that as I try to take each breath and put one foot in front of the other.

Nikandr must sense my distress because he stops walking and turns to face me fully. “Look at me. You survived. You protected yourself and our daughter when no one else could. That’s what matters.”

I nod, but my voice is still shaky. “I’ve never killed anyone before.”

“I know. I wish you’d never had to.” He brushes his thumb across my cheek, and I realize tears are falling without my permission. “That’s one of the things I love about you—your heart, your compassion, and the way you see good in people even when they don’t deserve it.”

“What if it changes me? What if I’m not the same person you fell in love with?” The question unsettles me while gunpowder residue clings to my hands and the metallic smell of blood fills my nostrils. Our daughter moves restlessly in my belly, responding to my elevated stress levels with kicks and turns that remind me of everything I was fighting to protect.

Nikandr cups my face in both hands, forcing me to meet his eyes. “You think killing Vadim didn’t change me? You think the violence I’ve done over the years hasn’t left marks on who I am?”

I shake my head. “That’s different. You chose this life.”

“Choice is relative when you’re born into an organization like mine. The point is, I understand what you’re feeling right now—the guilt, the questions about who you are and of what you’re capable.” His voice is calm but firm. “The fact that you’re worried about how it might change you is how I know your heart is still intact.”

Maksim clears his throat diplomatically. “Dr. Lewis needs to check her over, and we’re running out of time before this place gets complicated.”

Nikandr nods and guides me toward the exit, though he keeps his pace slow and careful. The hallway outside the room looks different now, less threatening and more like what it actually is—a run-down corridor in an abandoned building. “What happens now?” I ask as we walk. “With Vadim dead and his organization?”

“Now we go home. We finish the nursery, we prepare for our daughter to be born, and we build the life we planned together.” Nikandr’s voice carries certainty that I wish I could feel. “The threat is over. You’re safe.”

“What about the people who worked for him? Won’t they want revenge?”

Maksim answers from behind us. “Vadim’s organization was held together by fear and personal loyalty to him. With him dead, it’ll fragment within weeks. The smart ones will disappear or try to make deals with other groups. The stupid ones will get themselves killed fighting over scraps.”

The practical assessment is reassuring. It’s finally over. We reach the warehouse’s main floor, where the evidence of the battle is scattered across concrete in the form of bullet holes and bloodstains. Bodies lie where they fell, now covered with tarps while Nikandr’s people finish securing the scene.

“The weapons we used...?” I start to ask.

Nikandr anticipates my concern. “Will disappear along with any other evidence that might complicate things. By the time police investigate this, it’ll look like a dispute between rival criminal organizations that escalated beyond anyone’s control.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“Which is essentially what it was.”

He cracks a smile that causes a cut at the corner of his mouth to start bleeding again.

“Essentially.”

Outside, the night air feels impossibly clean after the stale atmosphere of the warehouse. Three black SUVs wait in the parking lot, engines running and ready for immediate departure. An older man I assume is Dr. Lewis approaches us, though he’s clearly more accustomed to treating gunshot wounds than pregnant women who’ve been through traumatic stress. “Any pain or unusual symptoms? Cramping, bleeding, anything that might indicate distress to the baby?”

“Some cramping earlier, but there’s been a lot of stress and physical exertion.” I submit to his examination in the back of an SUV while Nikandr hovers nearby, clearly wanting to be closer though respecting the doctor’s need for space. “She’s been moving normally though.”

“Pulse is elevated though that’s expected given the circumstances. Blood pressure is higher than ideal for this stage of pregnancy, but again, not surprising.” He checks my pupils with a small flashlight. “Any head trauma? You’ve got some blood here.”

“I was hit during the kidnapping. Knocked unconscious.”

He clicks his tongue. “Concussion is possible though your responses seem normal. We’ll want a full evaluation at the clinic, including an ultrasound to make sure the baby wasn’t affected by the stress.”

Nikandr moves closer, his presence immediately calming despite the cuts and bruises covering his face. “How long before we know if there’s any damage?”

“Babies are remarkably robust, especially at this stage of development. The amniotic fluid provides excellent protection from external trauma, and maternal stress, while not ideal, rarely causes direct harm to the fetus.” Dr. Lewis packs his equipment with efficient movements. “Still, given what she’s been through, monitoring is advisable.”

Before I know it, he ushers me to the back seat, Dr. Lewis takes up the front spot beside a man I don’t know but recognize from the estate, since Maksim remains behind to coordinate the clean-up, and we’re soon at the clinic. The doctor does a more detailed exam and ultrasound before declaring I need rest and can go home.

Relief washes over Nikandr’s features, transforming his expression from barely controlled worry to something approaching peace. We leave the clinic, and he helps me into the vehicle, settling beside me with careful movements that favor his injured ribs.

“Home?” he asks.

“Home.” The word feels like a promise, like safety and warmth and everything that’s been missing from my life for the past several hours. “I want to see the nursery again. I want to remember what we’re building together.”

As our convoy pulls away from the clinic, I press my hand to my belly, feeling our daughter’s movement beneath my palm. She’s safe, we’re both safe, and the threats that have shadowed our relationship since the beginning are finally eliminated. We might actually get our happy ending.

Sabrina

During the ride home, Maksim calls with an update, and also news that Jessie was never in danger. She's at the club working her shift, unaware that Eli is currently getting the beating of his life after being dragged out through the employee entrance. "I can kill him," he offers hopefully.

I consider it for a second but shake my head, though he can't see it. "No, that's okay. Just teach him a lesson he won't forget." There's been enough death tonight.

Later, when we're home, we go straight through to the bathroom, past Eugenie who seems poised to fuss but lets us pass without speaking. The hot water runs over us in steady streams, washing away the blood and gunpowder residue and the lingering scent of violence that clings to our skin. Nikandr's hands are gentle as he helps me clean the cuts on my wrists, his touch careful and reverent despite the exhaustion weighing down both our movements.

We're both too drained by everything that's happened to make love, though the need to touch and be touched runs deeper than desire. This is about reassurance, about confirming we're both alive and safe and together again. His fingers trace the bruises on my arms with the kind of tenderness that makes my chest tight with emotion.

"I thought I'd lost you," he murmurs against my temple while the steam rises around us.

"We're both here." I press my palm against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my hand. "That's what matters now."

He wraps his arms around me, careful of my injured wrists, and holds me like I might disappear if he loosens his grip. The shower beats down on us while we stand there clinging to each other, processing the reality that it's finally over.

Later, we collapse into his bed—the same bed I left when his lies shattered my trust. The sheets smell like him, like safety and home, and I curl into his side with my head on his shoulder while our daughter moves restlessly between us. His hand rests on my belly, fingers spread wide as if he can protect her through touch alone.

Sleep comes in fits and starts, interrupted by dreams of gunfire and the weight of Irina's lifeless body sliding down the wall. Each time I jolt awake, Nikandr is there, his voice soft in the darkness as he reminds me where I am and that the danger has passed.

We wake early the next morning to pale sunlight filtering through the bedroom windows. My body aches in places I'd forgotten existed, and the events of last night feel both impossibly distant and brutally immediate. Nikandr is already awake, watching me with an expression I can't quite read.

I slip out of bed and pad to the bathroom, needing a few minutes alone to process everything that's changed. When I walk back into the bedroom, he's sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for me, fully dressed despite the early hour.

The adrenaline that carried me through the rescue has faded completely, leaving behind clarity and the kind of emotional honesty that comes after surviving something traumatic. We can't go back to the way things were before. Too much has happened for us to pretend last night didn't fundamentally alter who we are.

He looks up at me, and I see guilt written across his features like a map of every mistake he's made. "I need to apologize for not keeping my promise. I was wrong to lie to you about going after Vadim."

I settle across from him, wrapping a robe around myself while considering his words. "Part of it was to protect me?"

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

“Part of it, yes. I didn’t want you to worry about something you couldn’t control.” He seems lost for a moment. “The other part was I was afraid you’d ask me not to go, not to eliminate Vadim when I had the chance, and I would have agreed despite ten years of pursuing vengeance.”

The admission is like a confession. He was afraid I had enough influence over him to derail his plans for revenge, and afraid he loved me more than he hated his enemies. “You would have stayed if I asked you to?”

“Yes. That’s what terrified me. I’d spent a decade planning Vadim’s death, and all it would have taken was you asking me to choose between vengeance and staying safe with our family.” His voice carries awareness of finally understanding his own motivations. “I couldn’t risk that choice because I knew what I’d pick.”

The honesty in his voice makes something crack open in my chest. He lied to me because he was afraid of how much power I had over his decisions, afraid of choosing love over the violence that had defined his life for so long. “You would’ve stayed for me even after everything. That means more than I can explain.”

He tentatively reaches for my hand, as if he’s not sure he’s allowed the comfort. I lace our fingers together anyway. “I don’t want to be the reason you don’t do what you think is right, but I also don’t want to be someone you lie to because you’re afraid I’ll change your mind.”

He nods slowly. It’s that honesty and terrifying capacity for love that makes me think about Irina, and how different their choices were versus our choices. Wanting to share my insight, knowing he’s been looking for answers for a decade, I say, “I

learned something about Irina last night, from her actions more than her words.”

I think about the woman who shot me that defiant look before I pulled the trigger, remembering the guilt in her expression when she spoke about Yaraslov. “I think part of her loved your brother. Maybe she wasn’t evil. Just a narcissist obsessed with self-preservation. She would betray anyone to save herself, but I think she cared about him as much as she could.”

He stiffens. “I don’t know if that makes her betrayal worse or better.” He falls silent for a moment. “Does that change how you feel about killing her?”

“No. She would have murdered you without hesitation. I have no regrets about stopping her, though it might give me nightmares for a while.” The certainty in my voice surprises me. “She made her choices, and I made mine.”

Nikandr nods, understanding flickering in his eyes. “The syndicate belongs to Maksim now. There are a few loose ends I’ll need to tie up over the next year, with obligations and territories that need to be transferred properly, though I pressed on with the succession plan even after you left.”

Even when he thought he might have lost me forever, he continued dismantling his empire to build us a different future. The knowledge makes tears slip down my cheeks without permission.

“After that’s finished, the only people I answer to are you and our daughter.”

I listen to his words while emotions cycle through me like weather systems with relief, love, residual anger, and hope all competing for space in my chest. “I still love you too. I was angry, furious actually, though I still shouldn’t have left where it was safe.”

“You had every right to be angry. I broke my word about the most important thing in our relationship.” He squirms. “I should have offered to leave so you would stay here where it was safe.”

“It wouldn’t have worked. I’m too stubborn sometimes, and I was determined to leave.” I lean closer, pressing a kiss to his shoulder. “I promise not to leave again if you promise to keep your word.”

“I promise. No more lies, no more secrets, and no more unilateral decisions about our lives.” He extends his hand toward me like we’re sealing a business deal rather than rebuilding our relationship. “Partners in everything.”

I take his hand and let him pull me toward the bed. “Partners in everything.”

The kiss that follows seals our agreement, though it quickly becomes something much deeper. His mouth moves against mine with careful intensity, like he’s trying to memorize the taste of forgiveness and new beginnings. I feel the tremor in his hands as they frame my face, and the way his breath deepens when I open my mouth to him.

“I still loved you even when I hated you,” I whisper against his lips. “Especially then.”

He responds by kissing me without hesitation, framing my face with reverence that makes my heart race. This kiss is slow and about more than just desire. It’s about belonging, recognition, and coming home. His tongue traces the seam of my lips before delving deeper, and I melt into him completely.

The robe falls away as he worships me like I’m the answer to every brutal question he’s ever asked. His mouth traces the line of my collarbone with infinite patience, finding the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder that makes me gasp and arch against him. Each press of his lips against my skin feels like a brand, marking me

as his in ways that have nothing to do with possession and everything to do with devotion.

“I need you,” he murmurs against my skin, his voice rough with want and something deeper that makes my pulse stutter. “I need to feel you and know this is real.”

“Show me.”

His hands become reverent as they explore my changing body, fingers tracing every curve with the kind of attention that makes me feel adored. When he reaches the swell of my belly, he pauses to press his palm flat against my skin, feeling for movement that comes immediately in response to his touch.

“She knows her daddy’s voice,” I say, watching his expression transform with wonder.

“Both my girls,” he whispers, leaning down to press gentle kisses across my stomach. “My whole world.”

His mouth continues its journey downward, kissing and nipping at my hip bones before settling between my thighs with purposeful intent. The first touch of his tongue makes me cry out, arching my back off the mattress as sensation floods my system. He’s always been skilled with his mouth, though this morning feels more intense and emotional, like he’s trying to pour all his love and regret and promises into every stroke.

“God, Nikandr, please?—”

“Shh, beautiful,” he whispers against my pussy. “Let me take care of you. Let me show you how sorry I am, how much you mean to me.” He works me with patient devotion, using his tongue and lips and the gentle scrape of his teeth to drive me

steadily toward madness. When he finds that perfect rhythm that makes my thighs tremble, he maintains it relentlessly, one hand pressed flat against my belly while the other grips my hip to hold me in place.

The pressure builds and builds until I'm gasping his name, twisting my fingers in his hair as I fight against the overwhelming sensations. When he sucks firmly on my clit, I shatter completely, crying out as pleasure shoots through me.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

He doesn't stop or give me time to recover. Instead, he continues his gentle assault until I'm shaking and sobbing, my body hypersensitive and desperate for more. Only when I'm completely wrung out does he finally lift his head, his lips glistening as he moves up my body with predatory grace.

"You're so beautiful when you come," he whispers against my throat, his voice rough with barely contained need.

"I need you inside me. I need to feel you."

When he finally positions himself between my thighs, we both go still for a moment. The head of his cock presses against my entrance, and I can feel how much control he's exerting to go slowly.

"Please," I whisper, wrapping my legs around his waist to pull him closer.

He slides inside me inch by inch, his jaw clenched with restraint. I'm still sensitive from his mouth, and the feeling of him filling my pussy makes me gasp and dig my nails into his shoulders. When he's fully seated, we both breathe heavily, overwhelmed by the intensity of being connected again.

"I love you," he whispers against my ear as he begins to move with slow, deliberate strokes. "I love you so much it terrifies me."

"I love you too. Always, even when I wanted to strangle you."

We move together with desperate tenderness, each thrust a promise and an apology

and a claim of ownership that goes both ways. His cock fills me completely, stretching me in ways that make me gasp and cling to his shoulders for anchor points. The rhythm we find is unhurried, focused more on connection than release, though the pleasure builds steadily between us.

He shifts the angle slightly, and I cry out. “Right there,” I say, arching to meet him. “Don’t stop.”

“Never.” He maintains that perfect rhythm while his mouth finds mine again. “I’ll never stop loving you, never stop protecting you, and never stop choosing you over everything else.”

The words push me closer to the edge, though it’s the emotion behind them that threatens to undo me completely. This isn’t just sex. It’s a claiming and a promise of forever sealed with sweat and breath and the perfect friction of our bodies moving together.

When my climax builds again, he watches my face with fascination, like he’s memorizing every expression that crosses my features. His own control is starting to fray, and I see the effort it takes for him to maintain the slow pace when his body is demanding more.

“Let go,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his throat. “I want to feel you lose control.”

His rhythm falters, becoming more urgent as he thrusts harder and faster. The change in pace sends me spiraling toward my own climax, and when he reaches between us to touch my clit, it takes only a couple of strokes before I shatter around him with a cry.

“That’s it. So beautiful.” He grunts and continues thrusting.

The orgasm tears through me with enough force to make me see stars, and my inner muscles clench around his cock as pleasure touches every nerve ending. He follows me over the edge seconds later, going rigid as he spills his seed inside me with a groan.

Afterward, we lie tangled together while our breathing slowly returns to normal. I trace the scar on his shoulder from an old bullet wound, then map the fresh bruises on his ribs from his fight with Vadim. Each mark tells a story of violence and survival, of a life lived on the edge of danger. “I’ve never felt safer than I do right now,” I whisper against his chest.

He tightens his arms around me, careful of my tender spots though his grip is possessive. “This life is ours now. No more *bratva*, no more threats, and no more looking over our shoulders. Just a family.”

“Exactly.” I press my palm against my belly, and Elizabeth kicks in response to the sound of her father’s voice.

The promise settles into my bones like truth, hope, and the foundation for the future we’re going to build together. Outside, the world continues its complicated dance of violence and politics and power struggles, though inside these walls, we’ve created something untouchable.

34

Nikandr

The next day, I make it official. The papers are spread across my desk like the blueprint for a new life—transfer documents, bank account signatures, and legal contracts that will sever my connection to the organization that’s defined my existence for fifteen years. Maksim sits across from me, reviewing each page with

razor-sharp attention.

“You’re certain about this?” He looks up from the financial statements, his expression serious despite the magnitude of what we’re accomplishing. “Once these are signed, there’s no going back. The Belov name won’t carry the same weight in certain circles.”

I pick up the pen and sign my name with steady strokes, each signature feeling like shedding skin I’ve outgrown. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life. The only weight I want my name to carry is the promise I made to my family.”

The transfer of power is remarkably simple for something that represents decades of accumulated influence and territory. Everything passes to Maksim with the stroke of a pen and the understanding that this transition needs to be seamless.

“What about the men who’ve been loyal to you personally?” he asks while witnessing my final signature. “Some of them have been with your family since before your father died.”

“They’ll follow you because you’ve earned their respect, and because I’m asking them to. The ones who won’t adjust to new leadership were never truly loyal anyway.” I close the folder containing the last of the paperwork and slide it across the desk. “You’re the only man I trust to bury the past without dragging it into the future.”

He nods and shakes my hand, the gesture one of brotherhood forged through years of shared violence and mutual dependence. “Congratulations. You’re officially a civilian.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

For the first time in years, I breathe without weight on my chest. The constant pressure of maintaining territory, managing competing interests, and staying ahead of rivals who would kill me given the opportunity lifts from my shoulders like a physical burden I've been carrying for so long I'd forgotten what freedom felt like.

I find Sabrina in the nursery, surrounded by boxes of baby clothes and furniture that arrived while we were dealing with Vadim. "How did it go?" She looks hopeful though with a tinge of anxiety that's become her default since the warehouse.

"It's done. Maksim officially controls everything as of this afternoon aside from a bit of consulting I might have to do, but even then, it will be with Maksim, who will relay the information to...clients." I settle on the floor beside her, picking up a box with a nightlight in it. "I'm officially unemployed."

"How does it feel?"

"Terrifying, liberating, and like jumping off a cliff and discovering I can fly." I grin. "What about you? Any regrets about being with an ex-crime boss?"

She smiles and reaches for my hand, intertwining our fingers with gentle pressure. "I fell in love with a man who was brave enough to change his entire life for his family. The crime boss part was never what I wanted anyway."

We spend the afternoon transforming the nursery from an empty room into something that looks like hope made tangible. She directs while I follow her instructions, hanging curtains in the soft yellow she selected weeks ago and assembling the crib that will hold our daughter in just a few months.

That night, I read parenting books while Sabrina sleeps beside me, resting her hand on her belly where our daughter moves with increasing frequency. The books are intimidating in their thoroughness, covering everything from feeding schedules to developmental milestones to emergency medical procedures that I pray we'll never need.

"What to Expect the First Year" becomes my bedtime reading, though the information feels overwhelming rather than reassuring. How do I prepare for something I've never experienced, that will fundamentally change who I am and how I move through the world?

"You're overthinking it," she murmurs without opening her eyes, somehow sensing my anxiety despite my attempts to read quietly. "Parenting isn't something you can master through research. You learn by doing."

"I want to be prepared. I want to know what I'm doing when she arrives."

"You'll figure it out. We both will." She shifts to face me, her expression soft with sleep and something that might be amusement. "Besides, babies don't come with instruction manuals. Every child is different."

I set aside the book and settle down beside her, careful not to jostle her too much as I find my position. "I've spent my entire adult life managing situations through preparation and contingency planning. The idea of winging it with something this important feels reckless."

"Prepare for the things you can control and trust yourself to handle the rest." She takes my hand and places it on her belly, where I immediately feel our daughter's response to my touch. "She already knows you. She already trusts you. That's the most important foundation you can have."

The movement under my palm fills me with wonder and responsibility in equal measure. This tiny person is depending on me to provide safety, guidance, and love—things I understand intellectually though have limited experience providing in a domestic context.

Over the following weeks, we settle into routines that feel remarkably normal despite how recently our lives were defined by uncertainty. We're still looking for a new house to make our permanent home, somewhere without the defensive features and hidden rooms that made this estate necessary during my criminal career.

"I want a house with a front porch, and yellow shutters" Sabrina says, alluding to her long-ago dream, while reviewing real estatelisting on her laptop. "And a backyard where she can play safely without armed guards watching from the trees."

"What about a white picket fence?" I ask, only half-joking. "Complete the whole suburban fantasy?"

"Don't mock the suburban fantasy. After everything we've been through, boring sounds perfect."

For the first time since we've been together, this house feels warm. It's no longer just a fortress designed to withstand assault, but a home where we're building something beautiful together. It remains what it was, and Maksim plans to buy it from me after we find a place that's really home, without all the security features, but it feels more welcoming than it ever has before. If we don't find the perfect place right away, we're content to stay here for now.

The men who once answered to me now report to Maksim, though the transition has been smoother than I expected. Most of them understood that my departure was inevitable once Sabrina became pregnant, and those who didn't adjust to new leadership weren't worth keeping anyway.

I don't look back. There's nothing in that life worth missing. Everything I need is in this house, in the curve of Sabrina's growing belly, and in the future we're building one day at a time.

"What do you think about painting an accent wall in here?" Sabrina stands in the nursery doorway, considering color options with serious concentration. "Something cheerful though not overwhelming."

"Whatever you want. This is your domain."

"Our domain. She's going to be both of ours, and this house belongs to both of us." She moves to the window and adjusts the curtains we hung together, letting in just the right amount of afternoon sunlight. "I want you to have opinions about decorating choices if we're still living here, or if we're in our new place, and feeding schedules, and all the details that make up family life."

The word 'family' still sounds foreign sometimes, being associated with obligations and blood feuds rather than the domestic tranquility we're creating. Learning to think of myself as a father and husband rather than a crime boss and vengeful brother requires conscious effort, though the adjustment becomes easier each day.

"I have opinions. I want her to feel safe and loved and free to become whoever she's meant to be." I join Sabrina at the window, wrapping my arms around her from behind while our daughter kicks against my hands. "I want her to grow up never knowing fear."

"She won't. That life is over, and this one is just beginning."

The promise settles into my bones. We've found our way home, and I'm never letting us lose it again.

Sabrina

Fourteen weeks later, my life is unrecognizable in the best possible way. I wake early in our new bedroom to sunlight through windows that aren't bulletproof, in a house that sprawls across three acres of manicured lawn without a single guard tower or defensive position in sight. The morning air smells like the lavender I planted along the front walkway instead of gunpowder and fear.

This house is huge and sprawling, with enough rooms for our growing family and guests who might actually visit for pleasure rather than business meetings. The exterior is a cheerful white, and one of the first things we did was higher painters to make the shutters bright yellow. The kitchen has an island the size of my old apartment, and there's a reading nook by the bay window where I can already picture myself nursing our daughter while watching her father work in the garden we're planning.

I pad downstairs in my robe, moving carefully around the bulk of my belly at thirty-eight weeks pregnant. Every step feels deliberate now with my center of gravity shifted so dramatically that I have to think about simple movements that used to be automatic. The baby seems to be running out of room, and her kicks are stronger as she prepares for her arrival.

Coffee is off the menu right now, so I settle for herbal tea while checking emails on my phone. It's mostly spam, but there's a message from Dr. Price confirming my appointment for later this week.

Nikandr's voice carries from his office down the hall, talking to someone about

square footage and zoning permits rather than territory disputes or ammunition supplies. “The inspection is scheduled for Friday, and I want everything perfect before the tenants move in,” he says into the phone. “This property represents our reputation in the market.”

Our reputation. The words make me smile because they represent everything we’ve built together over the past few months. Nikandr’s real estate investments have become a full-time occupation as he manages residential and commercial properties with the same attention to detail he once applied to criminal operations.

I make breakfast while listening to him conduct business, fixing scrambled eggs with cheese, toast with the strawberry jam Jessie brought from the farmers market, and fresh avocado from our own tree. The domestic routine feels surreal after everything we’ve survived, though I’m grateful for every peaceful moment.

We eat together as we do most mornings before he returns to his office for a bit. Jessie arrives just as I’m finishing the dishes, letting herself in through the front door with arms full of grocery bags and energy levels suggesting she’s been caffeinating since dawn.

“How are we feeling today?” She sets the bags on the counter and immediately places both hands on my belly, checking for movement with the familiarity of someone who’s been tracking my pregnancy almost as closely as I have. “Any signs that little miss is ready to make her appearance?”

“I can’t speak for her, but I’m restless, uncomfortable, and so ready for her to meet her parents.” I lean against the kitchen island, grateful for the support. “Dr. Price says any day now, though first babies are notorious for being fashionably late, and I have two weeks to go officially.”

“Good thing, because I brought enough food to last through a siege.” She begins

unpacking groceries. “I have healthy frozen meals, snacks for the hospital, and that ice cream you’ve been craving.”

The care package represents weeks of planning and is her way of ensuring I don’t have to worry about mundane concerns when labor begins. She’s been at my side throughout this pregnancy, especially when I told her she is going to be Elizabeth’s godmother.

“You don’t have to take care of me like this.”

She grins. “Yes, I do. You’re my best friend, you’re about to become a mother.” She pauses in her unpacking to meet my eyes. “Besides, someone needs to make sure you eat actual vegetables instead of living on ice cream and pregnancy cravings.”

Before I can respond, there’s a knock at the front door. Nikandr emerges from his office to answer it, greeting Maksim with the kind of casual warmth that’s developed between them since the transition of power. They embrace like old friends, and I’m struck by how normal the interaction appears.

“I have paperwork for the downtown property that somehow got mixed up in the...other portfolio,” Maksim says, handing over a manila envelope. Maksim grins and nods toward me. “How’s the expectant mother?”

“Ready to not be pregnant anymore,” I say, shifting position to relieve pressure on my lower back. “I suppose that’s normal at this stage.”

“My sister said the same thing during her last month. Then she missed being pregnant almost the moment her daughter arrived. That might be why she has four daughters.” He checks his watch and moves toward the door. “I should let you rest. Call if you need anything before the baby comes.”

The easy interaction fills me with contentment because it represents the kind of relationships we can build now. Maksim stops by because he cares about our wellbeing, not because he needs approval for criminal operations.

After lunch, I settle in the living room with a book about infant sleep schedules, though concentration proves difficult when the baby seems determined to practice gymnastics against my ribs. The pressure in my lower back has been building all morning, becoming a dull ache that makes sitting uncomfortable and standing worse.

I shift position on the couch, trying to find relief, when the first real contraction rolls through me like a wave. It starts as pressure, builds to genuine discomfort, then fades gradually while leaving me breathless and slightly panicked.

Labor. This is actually happening.

The next contraction comes twelve minutes later, strong enough to make me lean forward and grip the arm of the couch. I breathe through it the way we practiced in childbirth class, counting slowly until the intensity peaks and begins to subside.

By the time the third contraction hits, I know this isn't Braxton Hicks. This is our daughter announcing her intention to join the world today, ready or not. "Nikandr," I call toward his office, trying to keep my voice steady despite the mounting excitement and fear. "I think it's time."

He appears in the doorway immediately, takes one look at my face, and transitions into the kind of focused calm that used to terrify his enemies. He shows no panic or rushed movements. Just purposeful action guided by weeks of preparation. "How far apart are the contractions?"

"About ten minutes. This is the third one." When he walks closer, I grip his hand as another wave begins to build. "They're getting stronger and closer together."

He helps me to my feet and guides me toward the hall closet, where our hospital bag has been packed and waiting for weeks. Everything we need is organized and ready. There are clothes for me and the baby, important documents, phone chargers, an expensive camera, and snacks for what could be a very long day.

“Should we call Dr. Price?” he asks.

“Let’s wait until they’re closer together. She said to come in when they’re five minutes apart or my water breaks.” I lean against him as another contraction builds, this one strong enough to make me close my eyes and focus entirely on breathing. “Though at this rate, that might not take long.”

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

We time the contractions while gathering last-minute items, and sure enough, they intensify and move closer together with remarkable speed. By the time we're ready to leave for the hospital, they're coming every seven minutes and strong enough to make conversation difficult.

The drive to the hospital feels surreal after months of being driven everywhere in armored vehicles with armed escorts. Nikandr is behind the wheel of our family car with no security detail following us. We're just two people heading to the hospital to welcome their first child. It's normal, domestic, and exactly what I dreamed of during the darkest moments of our relationship.

"Are you nervous?" I ask between contractions, watching his profile as he navigates traffic with careful attention.

"Terrified. Excited. Anxious to meet our daughter." He reaches over to squeeze my hand. "You?"

"All of that, plus wondering if I'm actually ready to be someone's mother." I have some doubt about squeezing out a baby too, but I don't burden him with that.

"You've been ready since the moment you found out you were pregnant. I've watched you prepare for this, plan for every possibility, and love her before you've even met her." His voice carries absolute certainty. "She's lucky to have you as a mother."

The hospital feels welcoming rather than threatening, with cheerful nurses who guide us through admission paperwork and preparation for what could be a long labor. They

settle me into a private room with windows overlooking the city, and for the first time in years, I'm in a medical facility because something wonderful is happening rather than because someone I love is dying, or someone tried to kill us.

Labor progresses steadily though not quickly, with contractions that build in intensity while never quite becoming unbearable. Nikandr stays beside me through every wave, offering water and encouragement and the kind of steady presence that makes me feel safe even when the pain becomes overwhelming.

Hours pass in a blur of breathing exercises, position changes, and medical monitoring that confirms our daughter is handling the stress of birth beautifully. The sun sets outside our window, and we wait, working together toward the moment when our family will finally be complete.

When the pushing stage finally arrives, everything happens quickly. After hours of gradual progress, suddenly there's urgency and purpose and the incredible sensation of our daughter moving through my body toward her first breath.

"I can see her head," Dr. Price says with professional excitement. "One more good push, Sabrina."

I bear down with everything I have, and suddenly she's here. She's slippery, perfect, and screaming with healthy indignation at being evicted from her warm, dark home. The room goes still for a moment as everyone processes the miracle of new life.

A girl, as expected. Healthy and strong, with dark hair like her father and lungs that announce her displeasure at being born. "Elizabeth Claire," I whisper as they place her on my chest, skin to skin, her tiny body warm and impossibly real against mine. "Hello, beautiful girl."

I hold my daughter against my chest, exhausted and trembling with emotion and the

aftermath of birth. She's perfect in everyway that matters—ten fingers, ten toes, a button nose, and the kind of fierce expression that suggests she inherited my determination along with his coloring.

Nikandr stands beside the bed watching us both, and I've never seen him look so stunned or completely overwhelmed by emotion. He doesn't say much as he reaches out to stroke her tiny cheek with one finger while tears stream down his face. "She's beautiful," he finally manages, his voice rough with wonder. "Absolutely perfect."

"Do you want to hold her?"

He nods and carefully takes our daughter in his arms, supporting her head with the kind of reverence usually reserved for priceless artifacts. Elizabeth settles immediately against his chest, as she recognizes his voice from months of hearing it through my belly.

Looking at them together, this is the happiest I've ever been.

EPILOGUE

Nikandr

The ceremony is small and intimate in the way I never thought I'd want but now can't imagine any other way. We rented an estate in the countryside outside Modesto, which is all rolling hills dotted with oak trees and wildflowers that stretch toward mountains in the distance. It's the kind of place where the only sounds are wind through grass and the occasional call of birds overhead.

We have no security detail, weapons checks, or bulletproof vehicles hidden behind the barn. There are just twenty people who matter to us, gathered to witness something I never thought I'd live long enough to experience.

Jessie stands at the makeshift altar holding our daughter, her role as maid-of-honor complicated by Elizabeth refusing to let anyone else but her or us hold her for more than a few minutes at a time. At thirteen months old, our daughter has developed strong opinions about most things, especially about who she trusts with her care.

Maksim adjusts his tie beside me, clearly uncomfortable in a tux, though he'd never complain about standing as my best man. The transition from lieutenant to friend has been smoother than either of us expected, and I'm grateful he agreed to be here for this moment.

"You ready for this?" he asks quietly while we wait for the music to begin.

"I've been ready since the night I met her."

He smiles.

The string quartet begins playing something classical and beautiful that Sabrina selected weeks ago, though I only have ears for the rustle of movement behind me as she prepares to walk down the aisle. When I turn to watch her approach, everything else fades into background noise.

She walks toward me in a simple ivory dress that skims her ankles, her hair pinned back in an elegant updo with a feathered fascinator that showcases the delicate earrings I gave her this morning. She wears no veil, and there's no elaborate train or anything that might suggest she needs to be hidden or protected from the world. Just Sabrina, radiant and confident and choosing to spend her life with a man who used to solve problems with violence.

She meets my gaze and doesn't look away, her smile soft and certain as she closes the distance between us. Each step feels deliberate and meaningful, like she's walking not just down an aisle but into a future we've built together from the wreckage of

everything I used to be.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 5:48 am

When she reaches me, I take her hands and feel the familiar rightness of her touch. No rings yet—those come after the vows—but the promise between us is already unbreakable. The officiant begins speaking about love and commitment and the sacred bond between two people, though I barely hear the words. All my attention is focused on the woman in front of me.

“Do you, Nikandr, take Sabrina to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do.” The words come without hesitation, carrying the weight of every choice that brought us to this moment.

“Do you, Sabrina, take Nikandr to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.” Her voice is clear and strong, with no doubt or reservation coloring her response.

When the officiant tells us to exchange vows, I don’t hesitate. I didn’t prepare a long speech full of elaborate promises that might sound hollow given my history. I just speak the truth, delivered with the kind of honesty that’s become the foundation of our relationship.

“I promise to choose you every day for the rest of my life, to protect what we’ve built without sacrificing who you are, to be the man our daughter sees when she looks at her father, and the partner you deserve in whatever comes next.” I take a breath, steadying myself. “I love you.”

Tears glisten in her eyes, though her smile remains strong. “I promise to trust you

with our future, to build something beautiful with you that our daughter can be proud of, and to love you not despite who you were, but because of who you chose to become.” Her voice catches slightly. “You saved me in every way a person can be saved, and I’ll spend the rest of my life showing you what that means. I love you too.”

The ring exchange feels surreal as I slide the simple gold band onto her finger before she does the same for me. “By the power vested in me by the state of California, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

I cup her face in my hands and kiss her with all the love and passion and gratitude I feel for this woman who saw something worth saving in a man who’d given up on redemption. When we break apart, the small gathering erupts in applause and cheers. Elizabeth claps her hands from Jessie’s arms, babbling something that might be congratulations or might just be excitement about the general celebration happening around her.

We’re married. Actually, legally, and permanently married. The reality feels both unreal and absolutely inevitable.

Dinner is served outside as the late summer evening settles around us. Elizabeth toddles between laps with the fearless confidence of a child who’s never known anything but love and safety. She charms everyone, babbling in her own language and offering bites of her dinner to anyone within reach. Watching her interact with our guests fills me with the kind of pride I never knew existed.

“She’s going to be trouble,” Jessie says while Elizabeth attempts to feed mashed potatoes to Maksim’s date. “Look at that determination.”

“She gets that from both sides,” Sabrina says, watching our daughter with obvious adoration. “Heaven help us when she’s old enough to really assert her independence.”

The evening passes in a blur of conversation, laughter, and toasts from people who've watched us build this life together from literally nothing. There's no mention of the syndicate or violence. It's just a celebration of love and family and the future we're creating together.

When the last guests finally depart and the catering staff finishes cleaning up, we're alone for the first time all day. Elizabeth fell asleep an hour ago, carried upstairs by Jessie, who volunteered to handle bedtime duties so we could have a few minutes to ourselves.

I pull Sabrina close under the string lights, swaying to music that exists only in my memory. Her head rests against my shoulder, and I feel her contentment in the way she melts into my embrace. "No regrets?" I ask quietly.

"About marrying an ex-crime boss? Not a single one." She lifts her head to meet my eyes. "What about you? Any second thoughts about giving up your empire for domestic bliss?"

"This is my empire now." I brush a strand of hair from her face. "Everything else was just preparation for this."

She reaches up to kiss me. "This is just the beginning. We're a family now forever."

Forever. The word used to terrify me, being associated with blood oaths and obligations that lasted until death. Now it feels like hope, safety, and the best possible future I could imagine.

For the first time in my life, I feel completely at peace. Even more than that, I'm happy.