



Claimed and Bred By the Bratva

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: He's twice my age, built for war, and obsessed with putting his baby in me.

I should run—but all I want is more.

DIMITRI:

One look at her, and I lose twenty years of discipline. Amani is light—young, untouched, and completely unaware that her laugh just hooked a Bratva boss.

I watch her. Protect her. Obsess over her.

And when desire becomes unbearable?

I take her. Surround her in luxury. Make her mine in every filthy way.

She'll give me everything—her body, her future, her womb.

AMANI:

The brooding billionaire with the tattoos, scars and accent keeps showing up at my coffee shop like I already belong to him.

When I learn the truth—about the obsession, the surveillance, the twisted devotion—I should walk away.

But I don't.

I let him claim me.

Worship me.

Fill me.

Now I live in a fantasy built just for me—where the rules are his, the pleasure is endless... and the only way out is to beg for more.

Claimed and Bred by the Bratva is a standalone book in the Bred by The Bratva Series. It is a short, dark, instalust read that ends with a guranteed HEA.

Total Pages (Source): 25

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:37 pm

Dimitri

The coffeeshop reeks of burnt espresso and broken dreams. Fitting, since I'm here conducting business that ends with someone's kneecaps shattered.

Viktor slides the flash drive across the sticky table between us. "Payment records. Every transaction Kozlov made with the Italians." I pocket the drive without looking. My attention snags on something else entirely—something that makes my chest tighten in a way I haven't experienced in twenty years.

She's laughing.

The sound cuts through the ambient noise like a blade through silk. Pure. Unguarded. The kind of laugh that belongs to someone who still believes the world contains more good than evil. She's behind the counter, wiping down the espresso machine while chatting with her coworker, a girl with purple hair and enough piercings to set off metal detectors. But this one... Christ. This one glows like she's been lit from within.

Warm mahogany-brown skin catches the late afternoon light streaming through grimy windows. Her hair is pulled back in a messy puff that reveals the elegant curve of her neck. When she tilts her head back to laugh, I catch sight of bee-sting lips painted in soft cinnamon, and something primitive unfurls in my gut.

Mine.

The thought slams into me with the force of a freight train. I don't even know her name, but every cell in my body is screaming the same word. Mine. Mine. Mine.

"Dimitri?" Viktor's voice sounds like it's coming from underwater. "We need to move on Kozlov tonight."

I don't respond. Can't. Because she's walking toward our table now, coffeepot in hand, and I'm drowning in dark espresso eyes shot through with gold flecks that seem to dance when she moves.

"More coffee?" Her voice is warm honey over gravel, sweet with just enough rasp to make a man think sinful thoughts. I manage a curt nod. She leans across the table to refill my cup, and I catch a hint of vanilla and something uniquely her. The scent brands itself into my memory banks. Up close, she's even more devastating. High, satin-smooth cheeks frame a smile broad enough to light the dimmest room. There's a barely-there beauty mark near her jawline that makes my fingers itch to trace its outline.

"You know," she says, straightening up but not moving away, "I've seen you in here a few times, and I don't think you've smiled once. Not even a little upturn of the lips." The casual observation should annoy me. Instead, it sends electricity crackling down my spine. When was the last time someone paid enough attention to my expressions to comment on them? When was the last time anyone dared?

"Maybe you haven't given me a reason to," I reply, my voice rougher than intended.

Her grin widens, completely undeterred by my ice-cold tone. If anything, she seems charmed by my bluntness. "Challenge accepted." She taps the table with one finger—short nails painted a cheerful coral—and winks. Actually winks. At me. Dimitri Ismailov, the man who's tortured grown men into catatonic states just for looking at him wrong. "I'm Amani, by the way. And you are?"

The question hangs between us like a loaded gun. I should give her a fake name. Should lie, deflect, disappear. Instead, I say, "Dimitri."

"Dimitri." She rolls my name around on her tongue like she's tasting fine wine. "I like it. Strong. Classic. Suits you."

Then she does something that stops my heart completely. She smiles at me. Not the practiced, calculated smiles I'm used to from women who want something from me. Not the fear-tinged grimaces of those who know what I'm capable of. This smile is pure sunshine. Golden light radiating from someone who sees a brooding stranger in an expensive suit and thinks, I want to make this person happy.

The last person who smiled at me like that was my sister Katya. Right before they put a bullet in her head and dumped her body in the Moskva River. The memory hits like a physical blow. Katya, barely sixteen, laughing at something stupid I'd said while Mama braided her hair. Both of them gone because of my father's enemies. Because I wasn't strong enough, smart enough, ruthless enough to protect them.

I haven't smiled back at anyone in twenty years. Haven't had a reason to.

But looking at Amani—sweet, oblivious Amani who has no idea she's flirting with a monster—something long-dormant stirs in my chest. It's been so long, I can't identify the fluffy feeling. Is it hope? What the fuck? If Viktor notices the exchange, I'll have to kill him—and I like Viktor. But no one can know the way this woman, a girl really, is breaking something inside me. Shit, and I haven't even touched her... yet.

"I'll work on that smile," she says with mock seriousness, then bounces away to help another customer. I watch her go, mesmerized by the natural sway of her hips and the musical cadence of her voice as she greets the next patron. Everything about her radiates life, light, and innocent joy. Everything I've spent two decades systematically destroying in myself.

Viktor clears his throat. "We should go."

Right. Business. The reason I'm here. Except now all I can think about is finding out Amani's last name. Where she lives. What makes her laugh. Whether she'd still smile at me if she knew I've killed more men than she's probably met in her entire life. I leave cash on the table—enough to cover the coffee and a tip that will make her remember me—and follow Viktor toward the exit. At the door, I risk one last look back.

She's already watching me, that sunbeam smile still playing at the corners of her mouth. She raises her hand in a little wave, and something cracks open inside my ribs. Twenty years of carefully constructed walls. Twenty years of ice-cold control.

Shattered by one smile from a coffee shop angel who doesn't know she just sealed her fate.

Because when I want something. I take it.

And I want her.

Twenty-four hours later, I'm in my home office staring at multiple screens that shouldn't exist.

Amani Greene. Twenty-one years old. Scholarship student at the local university, majoring in early childhood education. Works part-time at Bean There, Done That to supplement her financial aid. Lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment six blocks from campus—a neighborhood that makes my security team twitchy.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:37 pm

My fingers hover over the keyboard. The cameras were installed during her afternoon classes by a contractor who thinks he wired a rich man's paranoid surveillance of his own property. He has no idea he just gave me a window into heaven.

I shouldn't turn them on. There's a line here, invisible but concrete, and crossing it makes me something worse than what I already am. But my hand moves anyway, clicking the feed labeled "Living Room."

The screen flickers to life, and there she is.

Amani stands in the middle of her tiny apartment wearing paint-splattered leggings and an oversized university sweatshirt that swallows her whole. Her hair is down now, thick golden-brown braids cascading past her shoulders in waves that catch the lamplight. She's cleaning—dancing, really—moving to music I can't hear through the video feed.

She spins with a bottle of surface cleaner in one hand, using it as a microphone as she lip-syncs to whatever's playing through her earbuds. Her hips sway with unconscious sensuality, and that smile—that damned sunshine smile—never leaves her face.

Dammit. Is that all she ever does? Smile like the world hasn't tried to crush the hope out of her yet?

It's like she knows I'm watching. Like she's performing just for me.

But she can't know. No one knows, not even Viktor. I went outside the brotherhood for this job, paid a freelancer triple his usual rate, and enough hush money to ensure

his silence. Because she's mine. Mine alone.

On screen, Amani finishes her impromptu concert and starts actually cleaning. She hums as she works, completely unselfconscious, completely unaware that a predator is cataloging every movement, every expression, and gesture.

She bends to pick up books scattered on the floor, and the sweatshirt rides up just enough to reveal a strip of warm brown skin above her waistband. My mouth goes dry. When she straightens, she stretches her arms above her head, arching her back in a way that makes the fabric pull tight across her breasts. Full, perfect handfuls that dwarf her small frame. My fingers curl, imagining their weight and how they'd fit in my palms like they were made for me.

My hand drifts south without conscious thought, palm pressing against the growing hardness behind my zipper.

Stop.

The word echoes in my head, but my body doesn't listen. Can't listen. Not when she's moving like liquid sex incarnate and smiling like an angel who doesn't know she's dancing for the devil.

She disappears into what must be the bathroom, and I curse under my breath. The camera doesn't cover that space—a small mercy that probably saved me from crossing an even worse line tonight. But she's back within minutes, face scrubbed clean of the light makeup she wore to work. Without it, she looks younger than her twenty-one years. Vulnerable in a way that should make me feel like the monster I am. Instead, it makes me harder.

She pads to her kitchenette—bare feet silent on worn hardwood—and starts making tea. Its domesticity wallops me. When was the last time I watched someone do

something so normal, so peacefully mundane? Everything in my world involves blood, money, or violence. Usually, all three.

But Amani exists in a pocket of pure normalcy, a haven where people make tea, dance while cleaning, and smile at surly strangers in coffee shops. Do I want to change that? She settles on her secondhand couch with her mug, tucking her legs beneath her as she opens a textbook. Even studying, she looks content. Happy.

I palm myself through my pants, stroking slowly as I watch her read. She bites her lower lip when she concentrates, a tiny gesture that waves fire through my veins. What would that lip feel like between my teeth? What sounds would she make if I—

Stop. Stop this now.

But I can't. My hand works faster, grip tightening as I imagine those bee-sting lips wrapped around something else entirely. Imagine her dark eyes looking up at me with trust instead of terror, which would be more appropriate.

She shifts position, and the movement draws my attention to her shirt's V-neck. The fabric gapes just enough to hint at the curve of her breasts and the shadows between them. I want to bury my face there. Want to taste every inch of that golden-brown skin, map every sensitive spot with my tongue until she's writhing beneath me, chanting my name like a prayer.

The fantasy builds, vivid and wrong and absolutely consuming. I picture her in my bed, hair spread across black silk sheets like spilled honey. Picture her looking up at me with those trusting eyes as I claim every part of her, mark her so thoroughly that no other man would ever dare touch what's mine.

My climax hits without warning, violent and intense and completely silent. I bite back the groan that wants to tear from my throat, shoulders rigid as I spill into my

hand like a teenager who's never learned control. The shame comes immediately after. Hot and acidic and well-deserved.

What the hell am I doing?

On screen, Amani yawns and stretches, apparently finishing her study session. She moves around the apartment, turning off lights and checking locks, performing the small rituals of someone who feels safe in their own space. Someone who has no idea that safety is an illusion. Someone who doesn't know she's being hunted by a man who just masturbated to watching her read a textbook.

I should delete the feeds, destroy the hard drives, and pretend this never happened. Should leave her alone to live her bright, normal life without the shadow of my obsession darkening her world.

But instead, my eyes dart to the next camera as she disappears down the hallway into the bedroom. Her bed is too damn small. How will I fit? I won't—just like I won't fit with the life she has planned. But it doesn't matter. Because twenty years of careful control just shattered against the force of one smile. Because I haven't wanted anything this much since I was a boy who still believed in happy endings.

Because she's already mine, even if she doesn't know it yet.

I close the laptop and head upstairs to my bedroom, but sleep won't come. Instead, I stare at the ceiling and plan.

Tomorrow, I'll go back to the coffee shop. I'll learn more about Amani Greene's life, schedule, and vulnerabilities. I'll figure out how to make her mine without destroying everything that makes her worth having. But tonight, I'll dream of sunshine smiles, brick red lips, and the way she says my name like it's something precious.

Tonight, I'll pretend I'm still the kind of man who deserves a woman like her.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:37 pm

Even though I know it's a lie.

Amani

I can't stop thinking about him.

Three hours since our latest coffee shop encounter, and Dimitri's face keeps flashing through my mind at random moments. During Professor Martinez's lecture on child development theories. While I'm restocking sugar packets. Even now, as I trudge up the stairs to my apartment with arms full of groceries, my brain conjures those bronze-flecked eyes and that perfectly controlled mouth that never quite curves into a smile. The man is gorgeous in a dangerous, untouchable way, like a blade wrapped in expensive silk. And he looked at me like I was the only thing worth seeing in that crowded coffee shop.

My keys jangle as I fumble with the lock, grocery bags cutting into my forearms. The hallway smells like Mrs. Chen's cooking—garlic and ginger that makes my stomach growl even though I grabbed a sandwich between classes. Finally, the door swings open to my tiny apartment. Home sweet home. All four hundred square feet of thrift store furniture and clearance-rack decorations. But it's mine. The first space that ever belonged to just me. I dump the groceries on my microscopic kitchen counter and stretch my arms above my head, working out the kinks from carrying textbooks all day.

The motion pulls my sweater tight across my chest, and for some reason, I think of how Dimitri's gaze lingered there for a moment before snapping back to my face. Heat pools low in my belly, and my core weeps. I've never had a man look at me like

that—like he wanted to devour me whole. Most guys my age are still figuring out how to unhook a bra without fumbling. But there was something predatory in Dimitri's stare. Something that whispered he knew exactly what to do with a woman's body.

Stop it, Amani. The man didn't even smile at you.

But that's what makes it interesting. Most men are so easy to read. They grin and flirt and stumble over themselves trying to impress. Dimitri just... watched. Intense and unblinking, like he was memorizing every detail of my face.

I shake my head and start putting away groceries. I have bigger problems than obsessing over a stranger who probably forgot my name the second he walked out the door. Josh Brennan is coming over in an hour for tutoring, and I'd rather eat glass than spend two hours explaining basic psychology concepts to someone who thinks Freud is pronounced "fraud." When I tell him the difference, he jokes that "fraud" is appropriate.

The kid's not technically stupid—just lazy and entitled. His parents are paying me twenty-five dollars an hour to help him pass Introduction to Psychology, which is more than I make at the coffee shop. Money I desperately need if I want to avoid taking on more student loans. So, I'll smile, be patient, and pretend I don't notice how he stares at my breasts when he thinks I'm not looking.

My phone buzzes with a text from Zara.

How's the tutoring gig going? Still want to murder the rich boy?

I type back.

Ask me in three hours. May need bail money.

LOL. I got you, that's what BFFs are for. At least he's paying well. Use that money for something fun. When's the last time you bought yourself anything that wasn't textbooks or ramen?;

I wish. I still haven't bought my Soc textbook. Two hundred freaking dollars is why I'm sticking it out.

Ugh, textbooks are such a scam. But girl, you need to get laid. Great sex relieves all stress. How's tall, dark, and grumpy today? Did he stopby? Did your panties slide right off when you filled his coffee? Did you offer him your cream?

I laugh despite myself, heat rising to my cheeks.

It's not like that.

Of course it is. Why do you think he keeps coming back? And only during your shift?

I ignore that because she might have a point I'm not ready to examine.

Girl, you need to have some fun. Live and love a little. Especially LOVE.

She has a point about the fun part, though. When did I become so serious? I used to laugh more and dream bigger. Now, I spend most of my time working or studying, trying to prove I deserve the scholarship that brought me here. Maybe that's why Dimitri fascinates me so much—that, and how damn gorgeous he is. He looks like he's never doubted his place in the world for a single second—like he takes what he wants and doesn't apologize for it. What would that feel like? To want something and just... reach for it?

A knock at the door interrupts my wandering thoughts. Josh, right on time. I check my reflection in the hallway mirror—hair pulled back in a neat ponytail, oversized

cardigan buttoned all the way up, zero makeup except for lip balm. The picture of harmless respectability.

I open the door to find Josh leaning against the frame with what I'm sure he thinks is a charming smile. Blond hair artfully mussed, designer clothes that cost more than my rent, and the kind of confidence that comes from never hearing the word "no."

"Hey, beautiful," he says, brushing past me without invitation. "Miss me?"

I close the door and count to three. "Ready to tackle Chapter 12?"

"Actually, I was thinking we could take a different approach tonight." He settles onto my couch like he owns it, spreading his arms across the back cushions. "You know, get to know each other better. Build some... rapport."

The way he draws out that last word makes my skin crawl. "Josh, you're paying me to help you study. Let's get to it."

"Come on, Amani. Don't be so uptight." His gaze travels down my body with obvious intent. "We could have some fun first. I brought wine."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:37 pm

He produces a bottle from his backpack—expensive-looking label that probably costs more than my monthly grocery budget. As if alcohol will magically make me interested in his wandering hands and entitled attitude.

"I don't drink during tutoring sessions," I say firmly, moving to the kitchen table where I've laid out textbooks and notes. "We have a lot to cover if you want to pass the midterm."

Josh doesn't follow. Instead, he stays sprawled on my couch, studying me with a lazy smile. "You know what your problem is? You're too wound up. Too focused on all this academic stuff." He waves dismissively at my carefully organized study materials. "You need someone to help you relax."

The condescension in his voice makes my teeth clench. "And your problem is that you're failing a class that most students pass in their sleep. Now, do you want my help or not?"

Something shifts in his expression. The easy charm disappears, replaced by something harder. Uglier. "I'm trying to be nice here, Amani. The least you could do is meet me halfway."

"Nice would be respecting the boundaries I've set. This is a tutoring session, not a date."

"Maybe it could be both." He stands and takes a step toward me. Then another. "You can't tell me you haven't thought about it. A smart, beautiful girl like you... stuck in this tiny apartment, working minimum-wage jobs. I could change all that."

My heart starts beating faster, but not from attraction. It's from the instinctive recognition of danger, the way he's positioning himself between me and the door, and the calculating look in his eyes as he evaluates my reaction.

"I think you should leave," I say, proud that my voice stays steady.

"Don't be like that." Another step closer. "I'm offering you an upgrade. Designer clothes, nice dinners, maybe help with those student loans. All you have to do is be... friendly."

The word drips with implication, and my stomach churns. This was never about tutoring. He saw a working-class girl struggling to make ends meet and decided I'd be grateful for his attention. Available for the right price.

"Get out." The words come out sharper than I intended, but I don't care. "Get out of my apartment. Now."

Josh's face darkens. The mask of civility finally slips completely. "You know what? Forget it. You're not even that pretty. Just another mid bitch who doesn't know her place." He moves toward the door, and I exhale, relaxing my shoulders. But instead of leaving, he stops and turns the deadbolt lock with a cruel smile.

"Maybe you're the one who needs to learn a lesson. Learn how to be more... accommodating. I've met girls like you before. Ones who needed to be taught what they need."

Then he lunges. His hands grab my shoulders, pushing me backward against the kitchen counter. His mouth crashes against mine—wet, demanding, tasting like arrogance and rage. I twist away, but he's stronger, heavier, pinning me with his body weight.

"Stop fighting," he pants against my ear. "Just let it happen. You know you want this."

Terror and fury war in my chest. But underneath both emotions, something else rises. Something fierce and unbreakable that my grandmother planted in me years ago. Never let anyone make you smaller than you are, baby girl. You've got fire in your blood. Use it. I bring my knee up hard and fast. Josh doubles over with a strangled cry, hands cupping himself as he stumbles backward. The expression on his face cycles through pain, shock, and rabid fury in rapid succession.

"You bitch!" he snarls. "You have no idea who you're messing with. My father—"

"Can kiss my ass along with you," I snap, adrenaline making me bold. "Touch me again and I'll do worse than bruise your ego."

For a moment, we stare at each other across my tiny kitchen. Josh's breath comes in sharp pants, his face flushed with humiliation and anger. I grab my grandma's cast-iron skillet, heart hammering, and raise it like a sword.

Finally, he straightens and adjusts his clothes with shaking hands. "This isn't over," he says quietly. Too quietly. "You think you're so smart, so independent. We'll see how long that lasts." Then he leaves, slamming the door hard enough to rattle the windows.

I stand frozen for several heartbeats, waiting for my legs to stop shaking. When they finally cooperate, I rush to lock the deadbolt and slide the chain into place. Then I sink onto my couch and bury my face in my hands. I handled it. I protected myself. Josh got the message loud and clear.

So why do I still feel like something's crawling under my skin? I grab my phone and scroll through my contacts, thumb hovering over my mother's number. But what

would I tell her? That I'm fine? That I can take care of myself? She already worries enough about me being so far from home.

Instead, I text Zara:

Tutoringcanceled. Josh turned out to be a creep. I'm fine, but need ice cream and bad movies.

Her response comes back immediately:

OMG what happened? Want me to come over? Want me to track him down with a meat cleaver?

Tomorrow. Tonight I just want to be alone.

Okay but call if you need anything. And Mani? Proud of you for standing up for yourself. You're stronger than you know.

I smile despite everything. Zara always knows exactly what to say.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:37 pm

The rest of the evening passes in a blur of mindless Netflix and stress-eating leftover Chinese takeout. I try not to think about Josh's threat, the coldness in his eyes, or how easily he could make my life difficult if he wanted to.

Instead, I think about bronze-flecked eyes and controlled power and the way Dimitri looked at me like I was something precious, something worth protecting. Which is ridiculous because I barely know the man. Besides, I just protected myself just fine, thank you very much.

But as I finally drift off to sleep, I can't shake the feeling that someone's watching over me. That somewhere in the darkness, a guardian angel with dangerous eyes is making sure I'm safe.

It should terrify me.

Instead, I sleep better than I have in weeks.

Dimitri

I watch it happen through the cameras.

Every. Fucking. Second.

The little piece of shit forcing himself on my Amani. She's fucking mine, now. I've held off because I know she deserves better. But fuck that shit. Where was her better man when she was fighting off scum? When that asshole had his hands on her body. His mouth where mine should be. The way she fought—brave, fierce,

magnificent—and the terror in her eyes when he locked the door.

My coffee mug explodes against the office wall, ceramic shards embedding in Italian leather and imported wood. The screens blur red around the edges as something primal and murderous unfurls in my chest.

Josh Brennan.

I have his full name, address, class schedule, and social security number within minutes. The benefits of owning people in very useful places.

By the time Amani is deadbolting her door and sliding the chain into place, I'm already moving. Gun in my shoulder holster. Knife at my ankle. Brass knuckles in my jacket pocket.

Tonight, he'll learn what happens when you touch something that belongs to Dimitri Ismailov.

The Brennan family estate sits on twelve acres of manicured perfection in the hills above the city. Old money. The kind that thinks it can buy absolution for any sin. They're about to discover how wrong they are. Josh's Mercedes is parked in the circular drive. He stumbles up the front steps, probably drunk on adrenaline and rage from being denied what he thought he deserved. Stupid boy. If he'd succeeded in taking what's mine, I would have skinned him alive.

Since he failed, I'll settle for something more... educational.

The security system is expensive but predictable. Old-school pressure sensors and motion detectors that a competent ten-year-old could bypass. I'm inside within three minutes, moving through hallways lined with family portraits and false gentility. Josh is in his bedroom, pacing like a caged animal while talking on his phone. His voice

carries through the partially open door.

"—told you, she's just another whore who doesn't know her place. But don't worry, I'll figure out another way to—" The words die in his throat when I enter.

He's younger than I expected. Maybe twenty-one, with the soft features of someone who's never faced real consequences. Blond hair mussed from running his hands through it. Still wearing the same clothes he had on when he put his hands on my woman. The phone slips from his fingers, clattering to the hardwood floor.

"Who—how did you get in here?" His voice cracks on the question. "This is private property. I'm calling security."

"Please do." I close the door behind me with a soft click. "I'd enjoy meeting them."

Something in my tone must penetrate his pathetic brain because he takes a step backward. Then another. His gaze darts to the window, calculating distance and angles like prey sensing a predator. Smart boy. Too bad it won't save him.

"Look, I don't know who you are, but—"

"I'm someone who doesn't appreciate watching little boys put their hands on women without permission."

The color drains from his face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Amani Greene."

His mouth opens and closes like a fish gasping for water. The confirmation I needed, written all over his guilty face. "That—that was a misunderstanding. She invited me over, and then she—"

My fist connects with his jaw before he can finish the lie. The impact sends him sprawling across his perfectly made bed, blood streaming from his split lip. "Try again," I suggest conversationally, pulling on black leather gloves. "And this time, tell me what really happened."

Josh scrambles backward until his spine hits the headboard, eyes wide with the dawning realization that Daddy's money won't buy his way out of this. "Please, I don't—she attacked me! I was just trying to—"

The second punch catches him in the solar plexus, doubling him over as he fights for breath. When he finally manages to wheeze air back into his lungs, I'm standing directly in front of him. "Here's what's going to happen," I say, voice calm as still water. "You're going to tell me exactly what you did to her. Every word. Every touch. Every thought that went through your fucked up excuse for a brain."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:37 pm

"I didn't—"

The knife appears in my hand faster than his eyes can track. The blade hovers an inch from his left pinky finger, and understanding dawns across his bruised features. "Please," he whispers. "Please, I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything."

And he does.

Every disgusting detail spills out of him like pus from an infected wound. How he used tutoring to target her. He saw her financial struggles as a weakness to exploit. He thought he could buy her body with the promise of paying her loans. Then, he planned to film it for his friends.

By the time he finishes confessing, my hands are remarkably steady. Twenty years of practice controlling homicidal impulses. Twenty years of learning to channel rage into precise, methodical action. "Thank you for your honesty," I tell him sincerely. "Now, you went there for tutoring. Here's your lesson."

The first fingertip comes off clean. Pinky on his left hand, severed at the knuckle with surgical precision. Josh's scream echoes off the walls of his privileged childhood bedroom, but the house is large, and he's in his own wing.

"This one's for thinking you could buy her," I explain after wrapping the wound with gauze I brought specifically for this purpose. Can't have him bleeding out before we're finished. The second finger, ring finger, same hand, follows thirty seconds later.

"This one's for putting your hands on her."

By the fourth finger, Josh has passed out from the pain. I wait patiently for him to come around, occasionally pressing pressure points to keep him from slipping too deep into shock. We have more work to do. When his eyes flutter open, I show him the plastic bag containing his severed digits. "Six more to go. Would you like to continue?"

He manages to shake his head, tears and snot streaming down his face. His pants wet with urine, and his sheets with vomit. "Please... please stop. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry isn't enough." The fifth fingertip—middle finger, left hand—parts from his body with a wet snap. "But it's a start."

We work our way through his remaining fingers methodically. Each amputation accompanied by a lesson about consent, respect, and the consequences of touching things that don't belong to you.

By the time I finish with his thumbs, Josh Brennan is a broken shell of entitled privilege, sobbing and begging for death.

"You're going to live," I inform him, cleaning my knife on his expensive sheets. "But you're going to remember this night every time you try to use your hands. Every time you see a woman and think she owes you something."

I lean down until my mouth is next to his ear. "And if you ever—ever—come near Amani Greene again, I'll come back and finish what I started. With a blowtorch. You don't report this to the police. You don't file insurance claims. You tell no one what really happened here tonight. Because if Amani gets stressed about this situation, I'll hold you responsible. Got it, kid?"

His eyes roll back in his head, unconsciousness claiming him again. I check his pulse—rapid but steady—and adjust the tourniquets to ensure he won't bleed out

before morning.

On his nightstand, I arrange his ten severed fingertips in a neat row. Ten reminders of what happens when someone touches my property. Then I call 911. By the time the authorities arrive, I'll be long gone.

But my message will remain.

The next day kills me.

Every hour that passes without seeing her, without confirming she's safe and whole, gnaws at my control like acid. I pace my office like a caged predator, checking the cameras obsessively, watching her move through her apartment with that careful, guarded way that makes me want to hunt down Josh Brennan and finish what I started.

Three times I catch myself reaching for my keys, ready to drive to her building and simply take her. Bring her home where she belongs, where I can protect her properly.

But that would terrify her. And I need her trust more than I need my own peace of mind.

So I wait until her shift is almost over before I walk into Bean There, Done That. The coffee shop smells the same—burnt espresso and broken dreams. But when I scan the room for Amani, something's wrong.

She's behind the counter, mechanically wiping down already clean surfaces. But her usual light has dimmed to a barely flickering candle. Her smile is smaller, forced, and pale, a weak imitation of the sunshine that stopped my heart two weeks ago. The urge

to return to Josh Brennan's house with a hacksaw nearly overwhelms me.

I approach the counter with measured steps, studying every detail of her posture. Her shoulders curve inward, as if she's trying to make herself smaller. She maintains a careful distance from male customers. She won't quite meet anyone's eyes. "Coffee?" she asks without looking up, her voice flat and professional.

"What's wrong?"

The question makes her freeze mid-wipe. When she finally glances up, I catch a glimpse of something fragile and wounded before she looks away again. "Nothing. Just... tired. Long week."

I don't respond. Just stand there, letting my presence fill the space between us until she's forced to acknowledge it. When she looks up again, her dark eyes are bright with unshed tears.

"You need to sit down." My voice comes out harder than intended, edged with frustration at her pain and my inability to simply fix it.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:37 pm

"I can't. I'm working."

"You need to sit down," I repeat, voice sharp with barely controlled irritation. "Now."

She shakes her head, forcing that brittle smile back into place. "Really, I'm fine. I just—"

"How much?"

The question stops her mid-sentence. "What?"

"How much do they pay you per hour? I'll cover your shift."

Her entire demeanor changes in an instant. The fragile vulnerability disappears, replaced by a flash of anger that would make me proud if it weren't directed at me.

"Excuse me?" She straightens to her full height, chin lifted in defiance. "What is wrong with men? You can't just buy women."

I give her my coolest stare—the one that's made grown men piss themselves in terror. But Amani doesn't back down. If anything, her spine gets straighter.

When she finally takes a breath, I speak quietly. "In my world, women are often for sale. But that's not what I meant."

The anger flickers, uncertainty replacing it.

"I apologize," I continue. "I only wanted you comfortable, because I miss your beautiful smile."

The words work like magic. Her expression softens, and for a moment, something like her real smile appears. But it's a flawed copy. Still dimmed by whatever's eating at her.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "That's still not right."

She blinks, confused. "Let me take you out of here." I keep my voice low, intimate. "We can go to dinner, and you can tell me what's wrong."

"I..." She glances around the coffee shop, then back at me. "I don't even know you."

I lean forward slightly, letting her feel the full weight of my attention. "You know me. You trust me, or you wouldn't be standing here talking to me."

The truth of it settles between us like a living thing. She does trust me, even if she can't explain why. Even if every logical part of her brain is screaming warnings.

After a long moment, she nods slowly. "Okay. But I need to finish my shift first."

"Take off your apron."

"But—"

"I'll handle it."

I walk to the manager's office in the back—a thin man with nervous eyes who clearly recognizes expensive trouble when he sees it. The conversation takes thirty seconds and costs me five hundred dollars—I would have paid five thousand.

When I return, Amani is standing exactly where I left her, apron clutched in her hands like a security blanket.

"Ready?" I ask.

She looks at me for a long moment, something unreadable flickering in those dark eyes. Then she nods.

"Ready."

Amani

The car waiting outside the coffee shop isn't what I expected.

I'm not sure of its exact model, but even I recognize that distinctive logo on the front—two R's intertwined like a promise of luxury I've only seen in movies. The black SUV gleams under the streetlights, windows so dark I can't see inside. A driver in an expensive suit holds the back door open, face blank and professional.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

"This is yours?" I ask Dimitri, scrubbing my palms down my worn jeans and wiping my hands over my faded black concert t-shirt, as if I can wipe away the grunge like a fairy godmother's wand.

"One of them." He places his hand on the small of my back, guiding me toward the car with gentle pressure. "Don't overthink it."

Too late. I'm already overthinking everything. The way his touch burns through the thin fabric of my shirt. The casual mention of multiple luxury vehicles. The fact that I just agreed to dinner with a man who somehow convinced my manager to let me leave early, though I have no idea what he said or did. What am I doing?

But his hand is warm and steady against my spine, and when I glance up at his profile, something settles in my chest. Those bronze-flecked eyes aren't calculating or predatory. They're... protective. Like he's already cataloging every potential threat between here and wherever we're going.

The car's interior smells like leather and something expensive I can't identify. Dimitri settles beside me, close enough that his thigh brushes mine every time we turn a corner. Close enough that I catch hints of his cologne—cedar and something darker that makes my pulse quicken.

"Where are we going?" I ask as the city blurs past outside.

"My home."

Something flutters in my stomach. Nervousness? Anticipation? Both? "You cook?"

"Among other things." His mouth curves in what might almost be a smile. "I want you at ease. Restaurants have too many... variables."

The way he says it makes me think he's not talking about food allergies or dietary restrictions. But before I can ask what he means, the car turns through massive iron gates that swing open at our approach. The house beyond takes my breath away. It's not a house—it's a fortress. Three stories of stone and steel rise from manicured grounds stretching forever. Security cameras track our progress up the winding drive. Motion-sensor lights illuminate the path with military precision. "Dimitri," I breathe. "What do you do for a living?"

"Import-export."

The answer comes too quickly, too smoothly. Rehearsed. But then we're pulling up to the front entrance, and I don't have time to analyze his evasion because the driver is opening my door, and Dimitri is offering his hand to help me out. The moment my fingers touch his, electricity shoots up my arm. He must feel it too, because his grip tightens for a second before releasing me. The front door opens before we reach it, revealing a woman in her sixties with steel-gray hair and eyes that miss nothing. She nods respectfully to Dimitri but studies me with open curiosity.

"Mila, this is Amani," Dimitri says. "She'll be joining me for dinner."

"Of course, sir. I've prepared the private dining room as requested."

Private dining room. Because apparently, this fortress has multiple dining rooms. I follow them through hallways lined with artwork that probably costs more than my education, trying not to gawk like the small-town girl I am. The private dining room is intimate—a table for two set with crystal and silver that catches the light from a chandelier overhead. French doors open onto a terrace overlooking gardens that disappear into darkness.

"Wine?" Dimitri asks, already moving toward a sidebar laden with bottles I'm sure I can't pronounce.

"I don't really drink."

He pauses, bottle halfway to his hand. "Water? Juice? Whatever you want."

"Water's fine."

He surprises me by setting a crystal glass of water with ice and a twist of lemon in front of me, and another one for himself. Something tells me he doesn't usually drink water at dinner, but he's matching me, and the gesture does something warm and fluttery to my chest.

"Sit," he says, pulling out my chair. "Tell me about your day."

I settle into the chair, with leather so soft it might as well be butter. He takes the seat across from me. "My day was... fine." I take a sip of my water. How much do I want to share? "Last night was the problem."

He waits, not pushing, just giving me space to decide if I want to continue.

"My tutoring client turned out to be a creep," I finally say. "Thought he could proposition me. When I refused, he got... aggressive."

Dimitri's grip on his glass tightens almost imperceptibly, but his voice stays calm. "What happened?"

"I handled it. Knee to the groin, threatened him with my grandmother's cast iron skillet."

"Good girl."

The approval in his voice makes me laugh despite everything. "My grandma would think so."

"She sounds wonderful. I hope to meet her someday."

The casual comment gives me pause. Someday? What is he saying? I'm so far out of my depth here, sitting in this palatial dining room with a man who talks about meeting my family like we're... what? Dating? In a relationship? Before I can process that thought too deeply, Mila appears with the first course—something that smells like heaven and probably tastes even better.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

We eat in companionable silence for a while, the food extraordinary and the wine he's not drinking probably worth more than my monthly rent. He asks about my classes, my dreams, and my family. I tell him things I've never shared with anyone—how I sometimes feel like I'm drowning in the weight of everyone's expectations, how I worry I'm not smart enough or strong enough to make it through school.

"I admire your strength," he says quietly. "Your grit. You don't give up, even though I'm sure it's difficult working and going to school."

"Some days I wonder if it's worth it."

"If I could do anything for you, I'd make life easy."

The words should sound creepy—they're almost exactly what Josh said earlier. But when Dimitri says them, they sound concerned. Caring. "Are you really that nice of a guy?"

He does a double-take and laughs—actually laughs. "No one but you would say that."

But I'm in shock for an entirely different reason. I finally see his smile, and it's magnificent. The transformation is complete—the hard lines of his face soften, his fawn-colored eyes crinkle at the corners, and suddenly he's not the intimidating stranger from the coffee shop. He's just... beautiful.

"Finally," I breathe.

He immediately tries to school his expression back to neutral, but I reach across the

table before I can stop myself, placing my fingers against his lips. "No, don't stop," I say quickly. "I love it." My fingertips rest against the firm warmth of his mouth, and something shifts in his eyes. He catches my wrist gently, holding my hand to his lips as his gaze locks with mine. Then he's kissing my palm, soft and deliberate, and my breath catches. His lips trail to the sensitive skin of my wrist, then back to my palm, where his teeth nip lightly at the flesh. My next breath stutters, the quiet hitch louder than any words as he draws my index finger into his mouth, tongue swirling around the digit in a way that makes me think of things I've only read about.

I can't look away. Can't even breathe properly as he moves to the next finger, then the next, each touch deliberate, possessive, and devastating.

When he finally releases my hand, I'm trembling.

"What are you doing?" I whisper. "What do you want from me?"

Instead of answering, he turns the question back on me. "What do you want from me?"

The honest answer tumbles out before I can stop it. "I'm tired."

"Tired?"

"Tired of being the good girl. Tired of waiting for love." The words come faster now, like a dam bursting. "My grandmother was a godly woman who instilled certain values in me. But I'm tired of looking for Mr. Right."

"Don't you believe in true love anymore?"

"No." The admission feels like sacrilege, but it's true. "Instead, I'm starting to believe in rightnow. Josh showed me that maybe love doesn't exist. Only transactions. Only

taking what you want and damn the consequences. Damn the future."

"Is that what made you sad? Coming to that realization?"

I nod, tears threatening. "Yes."

"That's called growing up," he says softly. "That moment when you realize you can't plan or predict the future. You can only control right here and right now. That's why you should always go for it."

"Is that what you believe? No thought of the future?"

Something passes across his face—pain so raw it takes my breath away. "My future was stolen from me a long time ago. When my mother and sister were murdered."

The casual way he says it shocks me into silence. Murdered. Not died—murdered.

"Don't look at me like that," he says, voice gentle but firm. "Don't be sad for me. That's when I learned that when I see what I want, I can't waste a minute."

"What do you want?"

His deep brown eyes burn into mine. "You."

The word hangs between us like a challenge. Like a promise. Like the answer to every question I didn't know I was asking.

I reach across the table and take his hand. "I want you too."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

His bedroom is everything I expected and nothing I was prepared for.

A massive bed with black silk sheets, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the gardens, and a fireplace crackling with warm light—everything masculine, elegant, and intimidating as hell. Oh God, am I doing this? What am I doing? A riot of butterflies just took over my stomach. I wanted him the first time I looked into his fathomless eyes. His face was a stone mask, but inside was the sweetest sadness. Darkness and light calling to me—claiming me. It can't be one-sided.

"I'm nervous," I admit, standing just inside the doorway.

"Don't be." He approaches slowly, giving me time to change my mind. "You've been so brave tonight. Be brave now."

"What if I regret it?"

"You won't." His hands frame my face, thumbs brushing across my cheekbones. "I swear to you, Amani. You won't regret this."

"I won't," I agree, and I mean it.

Then he's kissing me, and every rational thought disappears. His mouth is firm and demanding, coaxing responses from me I didn't know I was capable of. When his tongue traces the seam of my lips, I open for him without hesitation. The kiss deepens, and his control slips just enough for me to feel the hunger beneath his careful restraint.

"God," he breathes against my mouth. "I've wanted you since the moment I first laid eyes on you. Since that first smile."

His confession sends fire racing through my veins. This man—this powerful, dangerous, beautiful man—wants me. Not some idealized version of me, but me. The works-too-hard girl with the faded jeans and dreams.

I promised myself I'd learn to live in the moment. I would teach myself to be as brave as Dimitri believed I was. My insides felt like I was wrestling wildcats, but I ignored the frenetic chaos and looked into his eyes.

"Show me," I whisper...

Dimitri

"Show me," she whispers, and the words slam into me, wrecking me.

I've imagined this moment for weeks. Fantasized about it while watching her through cameras, while listening to her laugh in the coffee shop, while lying awake at night with my hand wrapped around my cock. But nothing prepared me for the reality of having her here, willing, looking at me with those dark espresso eyes. My hands shake—actually fucking shake—as I frame her face. Twenty years of steady hands through torture, murder, and dismemberment, and this bit of a girl makes them tremble. Her warm mahogany-brown skin glows in the firelight, catching the dancing shadows in ways that make my chest constrict.

"If I make you mine," I say, voice rougher than gravel on broken glass, "you're fucking mine. I don't cheat or share. There'll be no open relationship. Once that door closes, so does any possibility of you belonging to anyone else."

Her thick, feathery lashes briefly sweep toward her high, satin-smooth cheeks. But

she doesn't look away. Doesn't flinch. "Are you trying to scare me?"

I shrug, the gesture more honest than any words I could offer. "To a lot of people, I'm a scary man. But you have no reason to fear me."

The lie tastes bitter on my tongue. She has every reason to fear me. I'm the monster who watches her sleep, who cut off a man's fingers for touching her, who's about to ruin her for any other man who might have given her normal, safe love.

But she holds my gaze for a long moment, something shifting in those beautiful eyes. A decision is being made. Then she backs toward the bedroom door with deliberate steps, never breaking eye contact, and closes it with a soft click.

The sound echoes through my bones.

My eyes narrow as understanding crashes over me. She doesn't really comprehend what she's done—the finality of that gesture, the claiming it represents. But it's too late now. That door closing is a key turning in a lock she'll never find the key to again.

"Amani." Her name comes out as a growl. "Come here."

She approaches slowly, and I catalog every detail like evidence at a crime scene. The way her long golden-brown braids cascade past her shoulders, each strand catching firelight like it's been dipped in amber. The nervous flutter of her pulse at the hollow of her throat—rabbit-quick and visible even from here. The way her bee-sting lips, painted in soft cinnamon, part slightly as her breathing quickens.

When she's close enough to touch, I slide my hands beneath the hem of her faded concert t-shirt. The first contact of skin on skin makes us both shudder. She's silk and fire, softness over strength, and I have to clench my jaw hard enough to crack teeth to

maintain any semblance of control.

The shirt comes off in one smooth motion, and then she's standing before me in just her bra and jeans, and I forget how to breathe.

God. She's perfect.

The cameras didn't do her justice. Nothing could. Her breasts strain against simple cotton—practical, like everything about her—but on her body, it might as well be the finest lingerie. I can see her nipples peaking beneath the fabric, and my mouth waters. "Don't look at me like that," she whispers, arms moving to cover herself.

I catch her wrists gently. "Like what?"

"Like you want to eat me alive."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

"But I do." The admission rumbles from somewhere deep in my chest. "I want to devour every inch of you. Want to consume you until there's no telling where I end and you begin."

Her pupils dilate, swallowing her eyes until they are pure midnight. "That sounds..."

"Terrifying?"

"Exactly what I want."

Fuck. This girl will be my undoing.

I release her wrists to unhook her bra with practiced ease. It falls away, and I have to lock my knees to stay upright. Her breasts are full and high, the deep brown nipples already tight with arousal. Art. She's fucking art, and I'm about to desecrate a masterpiece with my bloodstained hands.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I breathe, unable to stop my hands from reaching for her. They fit my palms perfectly, like they were made for me. "So perfect it hurts to look at you."

She gasps when my thumbs brush over her nipples, back arching in an unconscious offering that nearly breaks my control. "Dimitri..."

"I know, little angel. I know."

I lower my head to taste her, tongue swirling around one dark peak before drawing it

into my mouth. She cries out, fingers tangling in my hair hard enough to hurt, and the pain grounds me. Reminds me to go slow. To savor this. I switch to her other breast, sucking and nipping until she's writhing against me, making these soft, desperate sounds that go straight to my cock. Her skin tastes like vanilla and sunshine, like everything good in this world that I've been denied.

"Please," she whimpers. "I need... I don't know what I need."

"I do." I lift my head to meet her gaze, noting the way her lips are swollen from biting them. "I know exactly what you need."

I walk her backward until her legs hit the bed, then lower her onto the black silk sheets with more care than I've shown anything in two decades. She looks like a goddess against the dark fabric—all that warm brown skin glowing, those braids spread out like a halo, that barely-there beauty mark near her jawline that I've fantasized about kissing.

I strip off my shirt, and her eyes go wide. Not at the muscles or the body I've honed into a weapon, but at the scars. The roadmap of violence etched into my skin. She reaches out tentatively, fingertips ghosting over a particularly brutal mark near my shoulder—a gift from a rival who thought he could take what was mine. The bullet had gone clean through, but the exit wound left a crater of puckered flesh.

"Does it hurt?" she asks softly.

"Not anymore." I catch her hand, pressing her palm flat against my chest where my heart hammers like a caged beast. "Nothing hurts when you touch me." It's the truth. For the first time in years, the constant ache of loss and rage quiets under her touch. I make quick work of the rest of my clothes, watching her face as she takes in all of me. Her eyes go comically wide at the sight of my cock, and fresh worry flickers across her features.

"That's... you're..." She swallows hard. "Will it fit?"

A laugh rumbles from my chest—the second time she's pulled genuine laughter from me. "We'll make it fit, angel. Your body was made for mine."

I help her out of her jeans and simple cotton panties, trying not to rush despite the urgency pounding through my veins. When she's finally naked, spread out before me like an offering to a god I stopped praying to, I pause just to memorize the sight.

Every curve. Every hollow. The way her chest rises and falls with quick, nervous breaths. The way her hands flutter at her sides, not quite covering herself but clearly fighting the urge.

"Don't hide from me," I murmur, settling between her legs. "Never hide from me."

Her scent hits me like a physical force—vanilla and arousal and something uniquely Amani that makes my mouth water. When I press the first kiss to her inner thigh, she nearly levitates off the bed.

"Oh God," she gasps. "Dimitri, what are you—"

"Shh." I look up at her from between her thighs, letting her see the hunger in my eyes. "Let me worship you properly. Let me show you how a man treats his woman."

The first swipe of my tongue has her crying out, hands fisting in the sheets hard enough to pull them loose. She tastes like heaven and sin, like everything I never knew I was starving for. I use my tongue and lips and teeth to map every sensitive spot, learning what makes her gasp, what makes her moan, what makes those thick lashes flutter shut in bliss. When I slide one finger inside her tight heat, she nearly comes off the bed.

"So fucking tight," I growl against her clit. "Like a damn glove."

I work her slowly, carefully, adding a second finger when she starts moving against my hand. Her body resists at first, muscles clenching against the intrusion, but I'm patient. I've waited this long; I can wait a little longer. "Relax, angel," I murmur between long licks. "Let me in. Let me make you feel good." She whimpers, thighs trembling on either side of my head, but gradually her body accepts the gentle invasion. I curl my fingers, searching for that spot that will—

"Dimitri!" She screams my name, back bowing off the bed. "Oh God, what was that?"

"That's what I'm going to hit with my cock," I tell her bluntly, pumping my fingers against that spot again. "Over and over until you can't remember your own name." Her inner muscles flutter around my fingers, and I know she's close. I seal my mouth over her clit, sucking hard while working her with my fingers, and she explodes.

The sound she makes—half scream, half sob, all mine—nearly makes me come untouched. Her body convulses, clenching rhythmically around my fingers, damn near breaking my fingers off. I ignore the irony and work her through it until she's begging me to stop. But I'm not done with her yet. I crawl up her body, settling between her thighs as she comes down from her high. My cock throbs against her slick entrance, and I have to grit my teeth against the urge to slam inside her. Every instinct screams at me to claim, to take, to breed. To plant my seed in her womb and care for it as it blooms.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

"This might hurt at first," I warn, even as my control frays like rope under too much strain. "But I'll be gentle."

She nods, dark eyes glazed and luminous. "I know. I trust you."

Those three words shatter what's left of my control—trust, when she has no reason to. No one in my life has believed in my goodness for decades. Nobody put energy into making me smile. Ismailovs don't need to smile. We need to take control, seize power, and defeat enemies. What else matters? She said I was a good man. I'm not. That I have her in my bed when it's the last place she should be is proof of that. But I'm not letting her go. No. The fact that I need one person to believe in me, to see some good in me, surprises me. I don't deserve her. I've earned hell. And I'll accept my place when it's my time. But until then, I'm keeping this bit of heaven.

I try to enter her slowly. I swear on my mother's grave, I try. But she's so tight, so snug, and when her heat envelopes the head of my cock, something primitive takes over. The civilized man disappears, leaving only the beast. I drive forward in one brutal thrust, tearing through her innocence and burying myself to the hilt. Her scream pierces the air—not pleasure this time, but pure pain—and reality crashes back with the force of a sledgehammer. I freeze, horrified by my loss of control, by the tears streaming down her cheeks, by the way her whole body has gone rigid beneath me.

"Fuck. Amani, I'm sorry."

I start to pull out, but her hands grip my shoulders with surprising strength. "Don't," she whispers through her tears. "Don't leave me."

"I hurt you."

"It's okay." She blinks, sending fresh tears trailing down her temples. "I knew it would hurt the first time. But I wanted it to be you. From the very first moment, it had to be you. Just... give me a minute."

But it's not okay. Nothing about this is okay. I was supposed to be gentle with her, supposed to make her first time something beautiful. Instead, I took her like the animal I am. Like she's just another body instead of the only light in my darkness. I sit perfectly still, letting her body adjust to the invasion. All while wrestling the monster roaring inside me to claim her. I press soft kisses to her face until her breathing evens out. Each tear that falls is another nail in my coffin, another reminder that I destroy everything I touch.

"Talk to me," she pants. "Tell me something. Anything. Just... distract me."

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I murmur against her temple. "The first time you smiled at me, it was like seeing the sun after twenty years of darkness. I went home that night and couldn't sleep. Couldn't think about anything but that smile."

Her body relaxes incrementally. "Really?"

"Really. I came back every day after that. Learned your schedule. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday shifts. Always the morning shift on Saturdays, afternoon on the others."

A watery laugh escapes her. "That's a little stalkerish."

"You have no idea," I mutter, then kiss her before she can question it.

When she finally relaxes completely, I move, slow, careful strokes that have her

gasping. But it's not right. She's not enjoying this the way she should. I can see it in her eyes, feel it in the tension of her body. She's enduring rather than experiencing pleasure. The knowledge guts me. I reach between us, finding her clit with my thumb, rubbing slow circles as I move inside her. "Come for me again, angel. Let me feel you."

"I can't," she whimpers. "It's too much."

"You can. Relax. Breathe. Come for me, Amani. Come on my cock like a good girl."

She shakes her head back and forth on the pillow, telling me she can't. But I know she fucking can. I scoop her juices onto my fingers and press firmly on her clit, massaging the soft spot on the other side of her wall. Her body tightens, inner muscles start fluttering, and I increase the pressure until she's gasping my name. "That's it," I growl. "That's my girl. Come for me. Show me who you belong to." She shatters with a cry, body clenching around me so tight I see stars. The rhythmic squeeze of her orgasm nearly rips the beast free. I pull back and slam into her. Her pussy clings to me with each withdrawal, snagging me, but I fight it. Retreating and surging in a wild frenzy. She's chanting something over and over. Hell, she might be praying, but I don't care. Can't care. I press her thighs to her breasts, spreading her legs wider. I have to get deeper. Have to get all of her. More and more, I'm a freight train without brakes. And the entire time I'm pile-driving, her sweet pussy holds on for dear life and hugs me tighter. Tighter until I don't know if she's clenching and sealing us together or I am. Doesn't matter. The rhythm is gone. I've flown off the tracks and I'm lost until I bury myself deep and come flooding her unprotected womb.

The thought of it—of my child possibly taking root inside her at this very moment—sends aftershocks of pleasure through me so intense I have to lock my arms to keep from crushing her.

When it's over, when I can think past the haze of possession and satisfaction, I realize

she's crying again. Silver tears she's trying to hide by turning her face into the pillow. "Hey," I say, turning her face back to me. "Talk to me."

"I'm okay," she whispers. "Just overwhelmed. That was..."

"Not how it should have been," I finish grimly. "Let me take care of you."

I carry her to the bathroom, her weight nothing in my arms. The en-suite is ridiculous—I know this. A bathroom the size of most people's apartments with a tub that could host a small party. But right now, I'm grateful for the excess as I run hot water and add salts that will soothe her soreness.

She doesn't protest as I settle us both in the warm water, her back against my chest. I wash her gently, reverently, paying special attention to the places where I was too rough. Amani winces—just slightly—and fresh guilt crashes over me.

"I'm sorry," I tell her again, lips pressed to her temple. "I lost control. It won't happen again." I promise her, even though I know it's a lie. Her pussy wrecked me once. I know it will again.

She's quiet for a long moment, then surprises me by turning in my arms to face me. Water sloshes over the edge of the tub, but neither of us cares. "Before was better," she whispers with a shy smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "When you were touching me... tasting me. Before..."

The simple words hit me like brass knuckles to the sternum. Before, when I was using my mouth and hands to bring her pleasure. When I focused on her needs instead of my desperate hunger to claim. "It can be better during," I promise her, cupping her face in my hands. "Let me show you. Please."

She searches my eyes for a long moment, then nods. I slowly worship her body with

my hands and mouth until she's trembling with need, until she's begging for me again. But not this time. She's so fucking responsive. But I ignore her pleas and instead I map every sensitive spot, every place that makes her gasp or moan or rake my shoulders. Kissing the spot just behind her ear makes her shiver. Dragging my teeth along her collarbone makes her arch against me. She's ticklish on her ribs but sensitive on her hips. She makes the most beautiful sound when I suck her nipples—a kind of keening whimper that goes straight to my cock.

By the time I work my way back between her legs, she's practically vibrating with need.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

"Please," she gasps as I tease her entrance with just the tip of my cock. Rotating my dick in circles until she's begging. "Dimitri, please. I need you."

"Tell me," I demand, holding myself back by sheer force of will. "Tell me who you belong to."

"You," she sobs. "I belong to you." I enter her slowly this time. So slowly that every sweet inch tortures us. Her body accepts me now, loosened by the warm water and relentless teasing. This time, she welcomes the intrusion as pleasure rather than pain. When I'm fully seated inside her, we both have to pause just to breathe.

"Oh," she gasps, eyes wide with wonder. "Oh, it's so different. So much better."

I give her one of my rare grins. "This is how it should be," I tell her, moving in long, deep strokes. "This is how I'll fuck you every time. Until you crave it. Until you need my cock like you need air." Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper, and I have to fight not to lose myself in the wonder of her body. She's so tight, so hot, so absolutely perfect that it's like fucking pure heaven.

"You're mine now," I growl against her throat as she tightens around me. "Mine to protect. Mine to pleasure and fill with children." The words spill out before I can stop them—the truth I've barely even admitted to myself. But instead of being frightened, she clings to me.

"Yes," she sobs, nails digging into my shoulders. "Yours. Always yours."

"Going to fill this tight little pussy with my cum," I say. "Going to breed you until

your belly swells with my child. Would you like that, angel? Would you like to carry my baby?"

"Yes!" She screams the word as her orgasm crashes over her. "Yes, Dimitri, yes!"

Her inner muscles milk my release from me, and I come with a roar of her name, pumping stream after stream of cum deep inside her. The orgasm lasts forever, my body determined to give her every drop, to make sure my seed takes root. The thought should terrify me. I've always used protection, never taken risks, never left myself vulnerable. But when I collapse beside her, gathering her trembling body against mine, all I feel is savage satisfaction. She will carry my baby. She'll be round and full with my child. And I can't fucking wait. "Better?" I ask softly when our breathing slows.

"Perfect," she murmurs against my chest, pressing a kiss over my heart. "Though I might not walk tomorrow."

"Good. Then I won't have to make up an excuse to keep you in bed with me." I stroke her hair, marveling at the silk of her braids between my fingers. "Besides, I like the thought of you feeling me with every step."

She laughs softly, the sound pure music. "Caveman."

"You have no idea how caveman I can be."

We lie in comfortable silence, the water rippling around us. The frantic waves have finally died down. We made a mess of the floor and I don't regret a fucking thing. I don't want to move, not with her body curved perfectly against mine like she was made to fit there. But her skin is already wrinkling, and I'm determined to always take care of her. I should feel guilty about what comes next—about the plans already in motion, about the life I'm about to upend. But all I feel is anticipation. "Sleep," I

murmur, lifting her from the tub and drying her off. "You're exhausted."

"Mmm." She's already drifting off, melting against me. "Dimitri?"

"Yes, angel?"

"I'm glad it was you. I'm glad you were my first."

The words arrow straight through my chest, lodging somewhere near my heart. "Sleep," I say again, because if I try to respond, I might say something insane. Like how she'll be my last. Like how I've already decided she's never leaving this house. Like how I'm going to keep her barefoot and pregnant for the next decade if she'll let me. Tomorrow, she'll wake up in my world completely—her belongings already here, her old life packed away and eliminated. Tomorrow, I'll tell her that this is her home now, that there's nothing for her back in that cramped building.

Tomorrow, she'll understand that she doesn't just belong to me—she is me. My missing piece. The part of my soul that got carved out twenty years ago when they took my family.

But tonight, I hold my angel close and listen to her breathe. Tonight, I'm just a man who's received a miracle he doesn't deserve.

And I'll burn the whole fucking world down before I let her go.

Amani

Dimitri's mouth between my thighs pulls me from sleep, his tongue making my back arch off the silk sheets before I'm even fully conscious.

"Good morning, angel," he murmurs against my sensitive flesh, and the vibration of

his words sends shockwaves through my body. What follows is twenty minutes of him proving that last night wasn't a fluke—that he really can make me scream his name like a prayer, make me forget everything but the feel of him inside me. By the time he's done with me, I'm boneless and breathless, watching through heavy lids as he stands beside the bed like some kind of dark god.

"Shower," he commands softly, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "Then we'll get breakfast."

My legs shake when I try to stand, and his smile turns predatory. His smile. I marvel at it. Was I the only thing he needed to be happy? "Need help?" He asks, breaking me out of my trance.

"I can manage," I insist, though we both know I'm lying.

The bathroom is just as ridiculous in daylight—marble everything, a shower that could fit ten people, and enough counter space to host a party. But what stops me cold isn't the luxury.

It's my toothbrush sitting in the holder next to his.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

My heart races as I scan the counter. My face wash, my moisturizer, and the special hair products I use for my braids are all arranged like they've always been here. I yank open a drawer—my makeup, organized better than I ever managed in my tiny bathroom. Another drawer reveals my hair tools. The medicine cabinet holds my vitamins, my prescription allergy medication, and even the specific brand of tampons I use.

"What the hell?"

I stumble back into the bedroom, towel clutched around me, to find Dimitri calmly getting dressed. He glances up at my expression and raises one dark brow. "Problem?"

"My stuff is in your bathroom."

"Ourbathroom," he corrects. "And yes."

"How—when—" I sputter, trying to form a coherent question. "My things were in my apartment last night."

"Not anymore." He buttons his shirt with methodical precision, watching me with those bronze-flecked eyes. "You said you're mine. This is what that means."

"I didn't mean—" I swallow hard. "We didn't... That was just pillow talk."

He's across the room before I can finish, crushing his mouth to mine in a kiss that steals every thought from my head. His hands tangle in my braids, tilting my head

back to deepen the angle, and suddenly I'm pressed against the wall with his body caging me in.

"Say it," he growls against my lips. "Tell me who you belong to. And don't blame it on a fucking pillow. Because this is real and hear me well, there's no going back on it."

"Dimitri—"

His hand drops to where I'm already embarrassingly wet again, fingers finding my clit with devastating accuracy. "Say it, Amani. Let me hear those pretty lips tell me the truth."

"I'm yours," I gasp as he works me with expert precision. "I belong to you."

"Good girl."

Then he's lifting me, pressing me harder against the wall as he frees himself from his pants. The towel is long gone, and when he drives into me, I can only cling to his shoulders and hold on. This coupling is different from last night—harder, more possessive, like he's trying to brand himself onto my very soul. Each thrust pushes me up the wall, and I know I'll have bruises on my back, but I don't care. Can't care when he's hitting that spot inside me that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

"Did you think I'd ever walk away from this?" He pants against my throat, teeth scraping over my pulse. "You're mine, Amani. You belong to me."

His hand slides between us to rest low on my belly, and his next words freeze my blood. "So will this, when it happens."

"What?" I gasp, but he's already moving again, driving thought from my mind.

Only after—after he's wrung two more orgasms from me, after he's filled me again with his release, after we're both breathing hard and tangled together on the bed—do his words fully register.

"About last night," I say carefully. "I'm not on the pill. We should probably use protection."

He props himself up on one elbow, studying me with an expression I can't read. "The only thing needing protection is you. And our baby, when she's here."

My mouth falls open. "Our—what? Dimitri, I'm twenty-one years old!"

"I'm aware." His hand returns to my stomach, palm warm and possessive. "I'm not some horny kid who got carried away, angel. The moment I saw you, I knew I wanted you. And I knew I wanted my baby growing inside you."

"That's insane," I whisper. "You can't just decide—"

"I told you last night," he interrupts calmly. "Asked if you'd like carrying my child. You screamed yes."

Heat floods my cheeks as the memory surfaces. "That was during—I wasn't thinking clearly!"

"You were thinking perfectly clearly." He leans down to kiss my belly, right where his hand rests. "Your body knows the truth even if your mind's still catching up."

"I'm a student," I protest weakly. "I have school, a job, a life—"

"You had a job," he corrects. "Your life is with me now. I'll allow you to continue school as long as you're safe and happy, but our family will always come first. For

both of us."

The casual way he's rearranged my entire existence makes my head spin. "You can't just—"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

"Get dressed." He rises from the bed, magnificent in his casual nudity. "I'm taking you shopping. You need clothes. Why not make them new? Everything you ever wanted, ask and it's yours."

I want to argue more, but something in his eyes stops me. Not a threat, exactly, but absolute certainty. Like my protests are just temporary obstacles he'll overcome through sheer force of will.

Maybe he's right. Maybe my body does know something my mind doesn't. Because despite everything—the insanity of this situation, the way he's completely claimed my life in one night—I don't run for the door.

Instead, I get dressed.

A week later, I'm sitting in my Advanced Psychology lecture trying to process the whirlwind my life has become. The shopping trips—plural now—have been overwhelming. Dimitri buys me things I couldn't afford in a lifetime, ignoring my protests about price tags, his hand possessive on my lower back as he guides me through stores I'd only window-shopped before.

Today, I'm wearing a designer dress that costs more than my former rent, trying to focus on Professor Williams' lecture on behavioral conditioning while my body still aches in places that make me shift uncomfortably in my seat.

"Did you hear about Josh Brennan?"

The whispered conversation behind me makes my blood freeze.

"The rich kid from Sigma Delta? What about him?"

"Girl, he's in the hospital. Someone cut off all his fingertips. Every. Single. One."

My pen slips from nerveless fingers, clattering to the floor. The girls behind me don't notice, too caught up in their gossip.

"Holy shit. When?"

"I'm not sure. I just found out yesterday. His parents are trying to keep it quiet, but my cousin works at the hospital. She said he was delirious, kept babbling about learning lessons and consent or something."

She's not sure of the date, but I am. It was the night Josh assaulted me. The night I told no one about except...

Oh God.

The rest of the lecture passes in a blur. My mind races, connecting dots I don't want to connect. Dimitri's perfect timing at the coffee shop the next day. The way he knew something was wrong. His absolute certainty that I belonged to him. By the time class ends, I'm practically vibrating with a mixture of fear and fury. The car Dimitri insisted on having pick me up is waiting outside. I try to wave the driver off.

"I'll take the bus today," I tell him, already backing away.

The driver—Marcus, I think—just smiles. "Take it easy on me, Miss Greene. Mr. Ismailov would cut my head off if I returned without you."

"I don't need—"

"I have orders to take you anywhere you want to go," he continues, still smiling but firm. "But I have to take you. Boss's orders."

The way he says it—polite but absolute—tells me arguing is pointless. I slide into the backseat, my mind still reeling from what I've learned. Josh's fingers. The breeding. All of it planned, calculated, and orchestrated by a man who saw what he wanted and simply took it. By the time I storm through the front door, I'm ready for war.

"Dimitri," I shout, not caring who hears. "Dimitri, where are you?"

"In my office," his calm voice carries from down the hall.

I find him behind a massive desk, looking completely unruffled by my obvious fury. If anything, he seems amused.

"Did you do it?" I demand tossing my designer bag on his desk. "Did you cut off Josh's fingers?"

He sets down his pen and leans back in his chair, studying me with those predator eyes. The silence stretches between us, heavy and suffocating. I shift my weight from foot to foot, my teeth finding my lower lip as he continues to watch me without speaking. The way he looks at me—like he's dissecting every thought, every emotion flickering across my face—makes my skin prickle. I force myself to straighten my spine, to meet his gaze without flinching. Finally, when I think I might scream just to break the tension, he speaks.

"Yes."

The simple admission knocks me off-balance all over again. I expected deflection,

denial, something other than calm acknowledgment. "You—how did you even know? Unless..." The final piece clicks into place. "You have cameras in my apartment."

"Had," he corrects. "They've been removed now that you're here."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

"You've been watching me?" My voice rises with each word. "For how long?"

"Since the day you smiled at me."

The casual admission of stalking should terrify me more than it does. Instead, I feel a confusing mix of violation and... something else. Something dark and possessive that mirrors the look in his eyes. "You watched him attack me," I say slowly. "You saw everything."

"Every second." His voice drops to a growl. "Watched him put his hands on what's mine. Watched you fight him off like the fierce little warrior you are. Do you have any idea what that did to me?" I shake my head, but he doesn't wait for my answer. It fucking killed me. Took my insides and shredded them. I couldn't get there fast enough. Couldn't fucking save you. You had to save yourself. That's fucking unacceptable. That damn near broke me. That asshole is lucky to be alive. Lucky to escape with a warning." Dimitri takes a deep breath and brushes imaginary dust from his desk. "So yes, when I was sure you were okay, I paid him a visit."

"You tortured him."

"I taught him a lesson." Dimitri rises from his chair, moving around the desk with predatory grace. "About consent. About consequences. About what happens when someone touches what belongs to me."

"I don't belong to you." The protest sounds weak even to my ears. "You can't just—"

"I could have killed him," he interrupts, stopping inches from me. "Could have made

him disappear, and no one would ever have found his body. But I didn't want that stain on you. So I made him suffer a bit instead. Now he'll never touch you again. Consider it a compromise."

"A compromise?" I laugh, but it's borderline hysterical. "You cut off his fingers!"

"And left him breathing." His hand cups my face with surprising gentleness. "That's my version of mercy, angel. For you."

"I'm scared," I whisper, the admission torn from somewhere deep. "Scared of staying with you."

His thumb brushes over my cheekbone. "No. Don't be." He gives me a baby-soft kiss. "You never have to be afraid to stay." He deepens the kiss before whispering, "Be afraid to leave."

The words should send me running. Should have me screaming for help, calling the police, doing something other than standing here, letting him touch me like I'm something precious.

But I don't run.

I don't scream.

Instead, I whisper, "What have you done to me?"

"Nothing you didn't want," he murmurs, lowering his head until his lips brush mine. "Nothing your body hasn't been begging for since that first smile."

"This is insane."

"Yes," he agrees. "Beautifully, perfectly insane."

Then he's kissing me, and I'm kissing him back, and everything I should be feeling—horror, disgust, fear—gets swallowed by the dark hunger he's awakened in me.

When we finally break apart, I'm clinging to his shirt, and my knees are weak. "I should run," I tell him. "Any sane person would run."

"But you won't." It's not a question. "Because you know the truth, even if you're not ready to admit it."

"What truth?"

His smile is dark and sweetly cruel. "That you're exactly where you belong."

I want to deny it. Want to rage and storm and declare my independence. Instead, I turn and walk toward the door, needing space to think, to process, to figure out how my life became this. I make it three steps before his voice stops me. "Don't forget, Amani. You closed the door that first night. You had your one chance to escape. Your only chance—because now there's nowhere you can run, or hide. You're mine—which is exactly what you wanted."

My hand freezes on the doorknob. He's right. I could leave right now. Call the police, report everything, try to reclaim my old life. But that life feels like a costume that no longer fits. Like trying to squeeze back into clothes I've outgrown.

"I need time," I say without turning around. "To think."

"Take all the time you need," he says. "I'll be right here."

I leave, but only to the gardens visible from his office windows. I sit on a stone bench, surrounded by roses I can't smell through my turmoil, and try to make sense of what I'm feeling.

He's been watching me for weeks.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

He wants to breed me like some kind of possession.

He cut off a man's fingers for touching me.

And despite all of that—or maybe because of it—I've never felt safer or more wanted in my entire life. What the hell does that say about me? More importantly, what am I going to do about it? The answer terrifies me almost as much as the question. Because deep down, in the dark parts of myself I don't like to examine, I know I'm not going anywhere.

I'm already his.

The only question now is whether I'm brave enough to admit it.

Dimitri

She's been sitting in my garden for three hours.

I watch from my office window as twilight paints her skin in shades of amber and shadow. Her long golden-brown braids catch the dying light like spun metal, and even from here, I can see the war playing out across her expressive features. The way she bites that full lower lip when she's thinking. The way her hands flutter like birds that can't decide whether to land or take flight.

She's trying to talk herself into leaving.

The thought sends something sharp and violent through my chest. My fingers drum

against the windowsill—a nervous habit I haven't indulged in for an eternity. But then, she's awakened all sorts of things I thought were dead. When she finally stands and walks back toward the house, I'm already moving. By the time she reaches the foyer, I'm waiting at the base of the stairs. "Figured it out yet?" I ask, noting how she startles at my presence.

Her chin lifts in that defiant way that makes me want to pin her against the nearest wall. "I'm leaving."

"No."

The word drops like a stone in still water. Her dark eyes widen, gold flecks catching the light from the chandelier overhead. "Excuse me?"

"I said no." I move closer, watching the pulse flutter at the base of her throat. "You're not leaving."

"You can't—"

"It's for your own safety."

She laughs, but there's no humor in it. "My safety? From what? You?"

"From everyone who isn't me." I close the distance between us until I can smell her vanilla-and-sunshine scent. "I'm a very rich and powerful man, Amani. By now, everyone in my world will have discovered what you mean to me."

"Which is?"

"Everything."

It's a confession at gunpoint—the absolute truth. Her mouth opens, closes, opens again. For once, she's not smiling, not even a hint of one in her eyes. The absence slays me. "I don't understand," she whispers finally.

"You will." I step back before I do something stupid like throw her over my shoulder and carry her to bed. "The guest room is prepared for you. Adjoining mine, but with a lock on your side. You'll be free to take as much time as you need."

"But not free to leave," she says again, but it's not a question.

"Do you really know so little about yourself? You don't want to leave any more than I'd ever let you."

"You'd keep me here by force?"

"Only if forcing you to scream my name and come over and over counts."

She studies me for a long moment, and I let her look. Let her see the monster barely leashed behind my controlled facade. Finally, she nods. "One night," she says. "I'll stay one night while I figure things out."

We both know she's lying, but I let her have the illusion. "One night."

The connecting door between our rooms mocks me. I've been staring at it for two hours now, listening to her toss and turn on the other side. Every rustle of sheets, every soft sigh, drives another nail into my self-control. The moonlight streaming through my windows turns everything silver and shadow, but all my mind sees is Amani. The way she looked spread across my bed that first night. The sounds she made when I burrowed inside her. The perfect fit of her body against mine, like she

was carved from my rib. A soft thud from her room has me sitting up. Another rustle, the distinct sound of her getting out of bed. Pacing.

She can't sleep either.

The thought sends something primitive through me. She's restless without me. Her body knows where it belongs, even if her mind is still catching up. I swing my legs out of bed before I can think better of it. The connecting door is locked from her side—I checked—but there are other ways. A balcony runs along this wing of the house connecting our rooms. The night air hits my bare chest, but I barely feel it. I'm too focused on the French doors of her room, cracked open to let in the spring breeze. Careless girl. Anyone could climb in. I'm over the railing and onto her balcony in seconds, moving with the silence that's kept me alive in this business on too many occasions. Through the gauzy curtains, I see her silhouette, standing by the bed in one of my t-shirts that swallows her whole. I open the doors without a sound. She doesn't notice me until I'm halfway across the room.

"Oh my God!" She presses a hand to her chest, eyes wide with shock. "Dimitri? Did you—did you climb across the balcony?"

"You couldn't sleep."

"That's so dangerous," she screeches. "You could have fallen. Would you risk your life for me?"

The genuine concern in her voice does something to my chest. When was the last time someone worried about my safety? Cared if I lived or died beyond what I could do for them?

"Yes," I say simply. "Don't you get that?"

"Get what?"

"That I would risk anything for you. Fight armies. Burn cities. Crossing a balcony is nothing."

"This is too much," she whispers, wrapping her arms around herself. "All of this. It's too intense, too fast, too—"

I sit on the edge of her bed, patting the spot beside me. "Come here. Let me hold you."

She blinks at the sudden shift. "What?"

"You were having trouble sleeping. So was I." I keep my voice gentle, coaxing. "Let me hold you. Nothing more."

She approaches slowly, like a deer deciding whether to trust the hunter. When she finally sits beside me, maintaining careful distance, I have to clench my jaw against the urge to grab her.

"Can you really do that?" she asks, searching my face in the moonlight. "Hold me all night without trying anything?"

I catch her chin between my fingers, tilting her face up to mine. "No," I say. "I can't." Her plump lips part automatically, and I take it as the invitation it is, crushing my mouth to hers in a kiss that's all hunger and possession and desperate need. When I finally let her breathe, we're both panting.

Her laugh is shaky but real. "At least you're honest about it."

"I'm trying to be gentle with you," I tell her, thumb brushing over her swollen lower

lip. "But you have to understand something, angel. When you tried to leave today, when you were outside for three hours contemplating walking away from me..." My voice drops to a growl. "It made me realize I haven't claimed you thoroughly enough."

"Dimitri—"

"Every part of you," I continue, pushing her back onto the bed with careful pressure. "Every inch, every sound, every thought. I want it all. Need it all."

The moonlight does incredible things to her warm mahogany-brown skin, turning it into burnished silver. Her braids fan across the white sheets like spilled ink, and those dark chocolate eyes are wide saucers.

"You're scaring me," she whispers.

"Good." I settle over her, caging her in with my body. "A little fear will keep you safe. Keep you mine."

"I don't understand what you want from me."

"Everything," I repeat, lowering my head to her throat. "Your body, obviously. But also your thoughts, your dreams, your future. I want you to wake up thinking of me and fall asleep in my arms. I want my child growing in your belly, my ring on your finger, and my name replacing yours."

Kisses and nips punctuate each word along her throat, making her shiver beneath me. The t-shirt she's wearing—my t-shirt—rides up her thighs, and her heat seeps through my sleep pants.

"That's not normal," she gasps as my teeth find that sensitive spot where her neck

meets her shoulder.

"Nothing about us is normal." I pull back to look at her, letting her see the possession written across my features. "Normal men don't install cameras to watch their obsessions sleep. Normal men don't cut off fingers for unwanted touches. Normal men don't plan to breed women they've just met."

"When you put it like that—"

"But I'm not claiming to be normal," I interrupt. "I'm claiming you. Claiming to be your protector, your lover, your future. The question is whether you're claiming me in return."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

She opens her mouth to protest, question, or deny what we both know is inevitable, and her rejection snaps something inside me. Did she really think I was going to let her go? After everything?

No fucking way.

I crush my mouth to hers before she can voice whatever doubt is forming behind those dark eyes. The kiss is punishment and possession, a brutal claiming that has nothing to do with gentleness. She makes a sound—surprise, maybe protest—but I swallow it down, taking everything she might say and replacing it with my tongue in her mouth. When I finally let her breathe, she's gasping. Those cinnamon-painted lips swollen and red.

"Dimitri—"

"No." My hand fists in her braids, tilting her head back until she's forced to meet my eyes. "No more questions. No more doubts. You want to know what it means to be mine? I'll fucking show you."

I don't give her time to respond. Can't risk another attempt at logic or reason or any of the bullshit that might take her away from me. Instead, I show her with my body what words can't adequately express.

That she's mine. Only mine. Forever mine.

The t-shirt blocking me from her body gets torn away with enough force to pop seams. Her gasp of shock turns into something else when my mouth finds her breast,

when my teeth close around her nipple, clamping down to ride the line between pleasure and pain.

"You thought you could walk away," I growl against her skin, moving to give the other breast the same treatment. "Thought you could talk yourself into leaving me."

My hand slides between her thighs, finding her already wet despite her protests. Or maybe because of them. My angel likes her darkness, whether she admits it or not. "I should have taken you harder that first night," I continue, working her with fingers that have memorized how to drive her wild. "Should have fucked you so thoroughly you couldn't walk, couldn't think, couldn't imagine a life without my cock inside you."

She whimpers, hips moving despite herself, chasing the pleasure I'm giving and withholding in equal measure. "But I was trying to be gentle." I bite the words against her throat. "Trying to be the man you deserved instead of the monster I am." I bite again, purposefully leaving my mark, "My mistake."

I pull my fingers away before she crests, ignoring her cry of frustration. "Tell me," I demand, hovering over her with my weight on my forearms. "Tell me you'll never try to leave again."

Her eyes are wild in the moonlight, pupils blown wide with desire and something that might be fear. Good. She should fear this thing between us. Should understand that there's no escape from what we are together. "Tell me," I repeat when she doesn't answer fast enough.

"I—" She gasps when I notch myself at her entrance, but don't push forward. "Dimitri, please—"

"Wrong answer."

What follows is a claiming unlike anything we've shared before. I take her with desperate hunger that borders on violence, each thrust designed to brand myself so deep inside her that she'll never wash me out. She cries out with each movement, nails raking down my back hard enough to draw blood, and the pain only fuels my need to possess every part of her.

"Mine," I snarl against her throat. "Every inch of you belongs to me. This mouth"—I claim her lips in another bruising kiss—"this body"—a particularly deep thrust that has her arching off the bed—"this soul. All mine."

By the time she comes apart beneath me, she's sobbing my name like a prayer, like a plea, like complete surrender. I follow her over the edge with a roar that probably wakes half the house, filling her with everything I am, everything I have, everything she'll ever need. We lie tangled together afterward, both breathing hard, bodies slick with sweat and satisfaction. She's trembling against me, and I pull her closer, some of my anger finally dissipating now that she's thoroughly claimed.

"Don't ever try to leave me again," I murmur against her temple. "I won't be gentle next time."

She nods against my chest, and I feel the wetness of tears against my skin. But when she speaks, her voice is steady. "I won't. I promise."

"Good girl." I press a kiss to the top of her head, the need to retake her already stirring in my blood. "My good, perfect girl."

Because she is mine. Completely, utterly, irrevocably mine.

And after tonight, she'll never forget it.

Hours later, I wake to her soft breathing against my chest, her body curved perfectly against mine in the darkness. The moon has shifted, casting new shadows across the room, and my body is already stirring with fresh need. Twenty years of perfect control, shattered by one woman. I shift carefully, not wanting to wake her yet, but my cock has other ideas. The warmth of her pressed against me, the scent of our earlier coupling still heavy in the air, has me hard and aching again. My hand moves without conscious thought, wrapping around my length in slow strokes. I try to be quiet, but a low groan escapes when I think about how she looked beneath me earlier, how she surrendered completely.

"Dimitri?" Her voice is soft with sleep, confused. "What's wrong?"

"Need you," I growl, without pretense or pretty words. "Need your mouth on me."

Even in the darkness, I feel her tense. My innocent angel is still so new to all the ways I plan to claim her. "I don't... I've never..."

"I'll teach you." I guide her hand to wrap around me, showing her the rhythm I like. "Start with your tongue. Taste what you do to me."

She's tentative at first, her inexperience obvious but sweet. The first touch of her tongue to my tip has me gripping the sheets, fighting the urge to thrust into that perfect mouth. "That's it, angel," I encourage, threading my fingers through her braids. "Take more. You can do it."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

She grows bolder, finding her rhythm. My hand trails down her body. She's already getting wet again, her body responding to the act of pleasuring me. When my fingers find her slick heat, she moans around my cock, and the vibration nearly ends me.

"Don't stop," I command when my finger trails lower, exploring uncharted territory. She tenses at the unfamiliar touch, but I hold her steady with my other hand. "Keep that pretty mouth working while I play with you."

She whimpers but obeys, taking me deeper as I force her head down. I drag her juice from one entry to the other, my fingers teasing both. She winces as I teach her body new sensations. Widening her back passage for the day I take her. My cock hits the back of her throat and I forget my play. "Breathe, angel. Breathe through it. Don't stop. You feel so fucking perfect." She gags and I pull back but she chases me, sliding down my poleto deep throat me. "So good for me," I rasp. "Such a good girl, taking what I give you. Learning what I like."

When I can't stand it anymore, I pull her up, flipping her onto her stomach before she can protest. "Hands and knees," I order, and she complies with a soft whimper that goes straight to my cock. I slam inside. This time when I enter her, it's with the knowledge that she's mine completely. No more doubts, no more thoughts of leaving. My angel, taking everything I have to give.

"Perfect," I growl, setting a rhythm that has her crying out into the pillows. "Made for me. Only me." I slap against her ass, my sack hitting her entrance like a fighter hitting a speed bag. I use her waist to push her forward and back, in and out. Ruthlessly using her. Taking everything she has, her resistance, her will. The claiming is thorough, possessive, leaving no doubt about who she belongs to. By the time we

both shatter, she's sobbing my name like a mantra, like the only word she knows.

Afterward, I gather her trembling form against me, pressing gentle kisses to her forehead, her temples, her tear-stained cheeks. "My good girl," I repeat, stroking her back as she comes down from the high. "My perfect, beautiful girl. You did so well." She burrows closer, seeking comfort after the intensity of what we shared. I give it freely, wrapping her in my arms like I can keep the world at bay through sheer will alone.

"Sleep now," I whisper against her hair. "I've got you."

And I do. Now and always.

Whether she fully understands that yet or not.

Amani

The campus quad buzzes with its usual chaos—students rushing between classes, the coffee cart doing steady business, someone's speaker playing music that competes with the construction noise from the new library wing. Normal Tuesday afternoon energy that used to feel like home. Now it feels foreign. Like I'm visiting a life that belonged to someone else.

I adjust my Hermès bag, because Dimitri insists his woman carries only the best, and check my phone. Marcus will pick me up in twenty minutes. Just enough time to grab notes from Zara before my afternoon disappears into whatever Dimitri has planned.

"Amani."

The voice behind me makes my blood freeze. I turn slowly, already knowing what I'll find. Josh Brennan stands ten feet away, hands shoved deep in his jacket pockets. He

looks smaller than I remember. Thinner. The confident swagger that used to announce his presence is gone, replaced by something bitter and broken. But it's his hands that make my stomach clench. Even buried in his pockets, I can see something's wrong with the way he holds them. Stiff. Careful. Like they hurt.

"Josh." I keep my voice steady. "You shouldn't be here."

"Shouldn't I?" He steps closer, and I catch Marcus moving in my peripheral vision. Three other men in expensive suits appear at strategic points around the quad, all watching Josh with the kind of attention that ends badly for the person being watched. "This is my school too. My campus. Just because you're fucking a monster doesn't mean you own everything."

The word—monster—pierces the shields I've learned to raise against stares and whispers. Not because it hurts, but because of how automatically my spine straightens in defense. How the protective fury rises in my chest before I can stop it.

"Watch your mouth," I warn softly.

Josh laughs, but there's no humor in it. Only pain and bitterness. I almost pity him. Almost. "You have no idea what kind of man you're with, do you? What he's capable of."

He pulls his hands from his pockets, and my breath catches. The fingertips are gone—ten perfect amputations, healed but never forgotten. The surgical scars gleam pale against his skin.

"He did this to me," Josh continues, holding up his mutilated hands for everyone to see. Students nearby notice, and chatter stops as the drama unfolds. "Cut them off one by one, while he warned me about touching you. Your boyfriend is a fucking psychopath."

Marcus moves closer, hand inside his jacket, but I raise my palm to stop him. This is mine to handle.

"He warned you about trapping me. Huge difference," I snarl at his audacity. "And he's not my boyfriend," I say, stepping toward Josh instead of away. "He's the man I love. The man who protects me from rich little boys who think they can buy whoever they want."

Josh's face twists into something uglier than the scars on his hands. "Love? You think that sick fuck loves you? He's obsessed with you, Amani. There's a difference. He's probably got cameras watching you right now. Probably knows every move you make, every breath you take. That's not love—that's insanity."

The crowd around us is growing, phones recording, voices murmuring. In a few hours, this will be all over social media. By tomorrow, everyone will know exactly who I am and who I belong to. The thought should terrify me. Instead, it fills me with a strange sense of peace.

"You're right," I tell Josh, loud enough for the cameras to catch. "He is obsessed with me. He does watch my every move. He is possessive and dangerous and probably a little psychotic." Josh's eyes widen with something like victory, thinking he's getting through to me. "But here's what you don't understand," I continue, stepping even closer. "He's MY monster. MY obsession. MY dangerous, possessive, psychotic man. And I'm not going anywhere." The words ring across the quad with absolute finality. I can see the moment they hit Josh—the way his face crumbles, and his shoulders slump.

"You're sick," he whispers. "Both of you. You deserve each other."

"Yes," I agree simply. "We do."

Marcus appears at my elbow, professional and polite. "Miss Greene? Mr. Ismailov is expecting you."

I nod, then look back at Josh one last time. "Stay away from me, Josh. Not because I'm afraid of you, but because I'm afraid for you."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

Then I turn and walk away, leaving him standing there with his ruined hands and bitter words, surrounded by a crowd that's already forgotten him in favor of the next piece of campusdrama. But I don't forget the feeling of claiming Dimitri publicly. Of choosing him in front of everyone, consequences be damned.

The realization hits me like lightning: I love him.

Not just want him, not just need him, not just accept what we have.

I. Love. Him.

I'm barely through the front door when Dimitri appears, moving with that deadly grace that means someone is about to die. "He's a dead man." The words are ground glass and barely controlled violence. "That fucking piece of shit had the balls to approach you on campus? I should have killed him when I had the chance." His bronze-flecked eyes are wild with protective fury, and I can see the moment he makes the decision to hunt Josh down and finish what he started.

"Dimitri, stop." I step into his space, placing my hands on his chest. "It's handled."

"Handled?" He grips my shoulders with quaking hands. "Angel, that little bastard could have hurt you. Could have—"

"But he didn't." I reach up to cup his face, forcing him to look at me instead of planning Josh's murder. "I handled it."

Some of the rage fades from his eyes, replaced by something vulnerable and desperate. "The guards told me what happened. What you said. But I need..." He swallows hard, and I've never seen him look so uncertain. "I need to hear it from you. Your words, not theirs."

"What do you need to hear?"

His hands frame my face with infinite gentleness, despite the violence still humming through his body. "Tell me you meant it. When you called me yours. When you said you weren't going anywhere."

The raw need in his voice breaks something open in my chest. This man—this powerful, dangerous, feared man—needs my words like oxygen.

"I meant every word," I tell him, pouring everything I feel into my voice. "You're mine, Dimitri. My monster, my obsession, my everything. And I love you. All of you. Especially the parts that should scare me."

The sound he makes is half growl, half plea. "Say it again."

"I love you."

"Again."

"I love you, Dimitri Ismailov. I love your darkness and your light and everything in between. I love how you protect me, how you possess me, how you look at me like I'm your entire world."

That's when he erupts, his emotional walls crumbling as he crushes his mouth to mine in a kiss that tastes like desperation, relief, and pure joy.

"I love you, too," he breathes against my lips. "Damn, Amani, I love you so fucking much it terrifies me. You're my heart, my soul, my reason for breathing."

Then he's lifting me, spinning me around the foyer like we're in some romantic movie, both of us laughing and crying and drunk on finally saying the words we've been dancing around for weeks. But the spinning motion makes my stomach lurch, and I have to grip his shoulders as nausea washes over me. "Put me down," I gasp. "I think I'm going to be sick."

He sets me down immediately, concern replacing joy. "What's wrong? Are you hurt? Did that little shit—"

"No, it's not that." I press a hand to my stomach, trying to steady myself. "I just feel... off. Nauseous. It's probably nothing."

But even as I say it, a different kind of realization creeps in. When was my last period? I've been so caught up in Dimitri's world, so consumed by our intensity, that I haven't been paying attention to my body's rhythms. Oh boy, I knew it could happen. But didn't really think... Holy shit, if people think he's crazy now...

Dimitri goes very still beside me, and when I look up, his eyes are locked on my face with predatory focus. "How long?" he asks, whipping the words out.

"How long what?"

"How long since your last period?"

The blunt question makes me flush, but I think back. Six weeks? Seven? "I... I'm not sure. I haven't been keeping track."

Something fierce and primitive flashes across his features. "We need to know. Now."

"Dimitri, I don't have a test—"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

He's already moving, striding toward his office. I follow, confused, until he opens a cabinet I've never paid attention to before. Inside are at least twenty pregnancy tests. Different brands, different types, lined up like an arsenal. "What the hell?" I stare at the collection in shock. "Why do you have all these?"

He shrugs, but there's color in his cheeks. "If it were up to me, I'd have you tested every single day."

"You're insane," I tell him, but I'm already reaching for one.

"Crazy about you," he agrees. "Now go. I need to know."

The next five minutes are the longest of my life. I sit on the closed toilet seat, staring at the plastic stick in my hands, while Dimitri paces the bedroom like a caged animal. When the timer on my phone goes off, my hands are shaking so badly I can barely pick up the test. Two pink lines. Clear as day.

"Dimitri," I call, my voice barely above a whisper.

He's in the bathroom doorway before I finish saying his name, eyes immediately going to the test in my hands.

For a moment, neither of us breathes. Then he's on his knees in front of me, hands coming up to frame my still-flat belly with reverent care. "You're pregnant," he says, voice thick with emotion. "You're carrying my child."

That's when the tears start. Not sad tears—tears of overwhelming joy, disbelief, and

something that might be destiny finally clicking into place. "Are you happy?" I ask through my tears, suddenly needing his reaction more than air. He looks up at me, and his eyes are wet too—the first time I've ever seen Dimitri Ismailov cry.

"Happy?" He presses his forehead against my stomach, shoulders shaking. "Angel, you've made me so fucking grateful I don't know how to contain it."

His confession comes in broken pieces, muffled against my belly. "After my mother and sister were killed, I shut my heart off completely. Thought I was dead inside. Thought I'd never feel anything real again." He pulls back to look at me, tears tracking down his cheeks without shame. "But you opened it. Opened it and took a man who didn't even know he was alone and gave him a home." His hand spreads wide across my stomach. "A family."

"Dimitri..."

"You're my whole fucking everything," he continues, voice fierce with conviction. "And it's a good thing you love me, because I'm going to wrap you in cotton and surround you with more protection than the Queen of England. Nothing happens to you. Nothing happens to our baby. If you don't survive, neither does this world."

The intensity of his promise should frighten me. Instead, it makes me laugh through my tears. "I feel the same way," I admit. "I've been around you too much. I'm getting just as possessive and crazy."

We both laugh then, holding each other in the marble bathroom where everything changed, and I think this might be what happiness feels like. Not the fleeting kind, but the bone-deep certainty that you're exactly where you belong.

Later, after he's made love to me with a tenderness that bordered on worship, after he's kissed every inch of my belly, his tongue washed away sweat and sex as he whispered promises to our unborn child, we lie tangled in his black silk sheets. I'm tracing patterns on his chest, marveling at how peaceful he looks when I remember something that needs to be addressed.

"Dimitri?"

"Mmm?" His hand strokes through my braids, contentment radiating from him like warm sunlight.

"I have a request."

"Anything."

"Don't kill Josh."

The hand in my hair stills. "No," he growls. "That fucker is a dead man. I gave him a warning, and he ignored it. He approached you, upset you, made a scene—"

"Please." I look up at him, batting my lashes and giving him my sweetest smile. "For me?"

He stares down at me for a long moment, jaw clenched from the battle between his protective instincts and his inability to deny me anything. Finally, he asks, "Do you think you'll be able to wrap me around your little finger with a kiss and a smile?"

I don't answer. Don't have to. His laugh rumbles through his chest. "You're so fucking right."

He captures my mouth in a kiss that tastes like surrender and promises and forever.

"Fine," he murmurs against my lips. "Josh Brennan lives. But if he comes near you again—"

"He won't." I settle back against his chest, completely certain. "He got the message today. We both did."

"What message?"

"That this is real. That we're real. That I chose you and I'll keep choosing you, no matter what the world thinks about it."

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

His arms tighten around me, and I feel his smile against the top of my head. "My fierce little angel. Mother of my child. Queen of my world."

"Yours," I agree sleepily. "Always yours."

As I drift off to sleep in his arms, one hand resting on my belly where our future is growing, I think about how far we've come from that first smile in a coffee shop. He was right—I did belong to him from that very first moment. I just needed time to realize it.

Now I have forever to show him exactly what that means.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Zara's head pops up as Dimitri and I push through the entrance of Bean There, Done That, baby Aleksandr balanced on my hip and his designer diaper bag slung over Dimitri's shoulder. The familiar scent of espresso hits my nose—this place looks exactly the same, but I'm not the girl who used to work behind that counter.

"Finally!" Zara's voice cuts through my thoughts as she abandons the espresso machine. "I was starting to think you forgot about Aunty Zara time."

She's around the counter in seconds, purple hair now streaked with pink, arms reaching for Aleksandr, who immediately starts babbling excitedly at seeing his favorite person, who isn't Mama or Papa.

"Hello, gorgeous," she coos, settling him on her hip like she's done hundreds of times before. "Look how big you're getting! Those eyes—your daddy's for sure. You're going to be breaking hearts like him."

"We're late for the zoo," I explain, settling into our usual corner table. "Someone wouldn't leave the house until he made sure Sandy had everything a six-month-old could possibly want for a two-hour outing."

"Don't call my son Sandy," Dimitri mutters, scanning the coffee shop with those predatory eyes that never stop cataloging threats.

I roll my eyes at Zara. "He packed three changes of clothes, four different snacks, six toys, two blankets, and enough diapers for a week."

"First-time dad," Zara laughs, bouncing Aleksandr, who giggles at her animated expressions. "Remember when you used to stress about having enough money for textbooks? Now your husband stress-packs like he's preparing for the apocalypse."

"Speaking of stress," I glance around the coffee shop. You look exhausted. Are you still pulling double shifts?"

"Triple, actually. Professor Williams is still assigning papers like we don't have other classes, my car needs new brakes, and rent went up again." She sighs, then brightens. "But enough about my broke student life. Tell me about the mansion drama. Any new security upgrades? Secret passages? Underground tunnels?"

Before I can answer, Dimitri's attention snaps to a corner table. "There's my cousin," he says. "Angel, I need five minutes with Nikolai. Family business."

I follow his gaze to where a man sits with an open laptop and a coffee cup beside him. Even from here, I can see the family resemblance—thick waves of obsidian hair,

controlled stillness, the same dangerous edge that marks all the Ismailov men.

"Is that the guy who's been camping out here for hours?" Zara asks, shifting Aleksandr to her other hip. "He ordered one blackcoffee at nine this morning and hasn't moved since. Super weird behavior, even for your family's standards."

Dimitri's mouth twitches. "He's been waiting for me. My apologies for the delay."

He strides across the coffee shop with that lethal grace, and I watch the two men exchange quiet words. Whatever folder or information changes hands happens quickly, but what catches my attention is how Nikolai's gaze keeps drifting to Zara, even while conducting business with the head of their family.

After a few minutes, both men approach our table.

"Nikolai," Dimitri says, "this is my wife Amani, and her best friend Zara. Ladies, my cousin Nikolai Ismailov."

Nikolai steps forward, and I catch the moment his bronze-flecked eyes lock on Zara. Something deeper than casual attraction flickers there—recognition, though I'm certain they've never met.

"A pleasure," Nikolai says, his accent thicker than Dimitri's, voice like aged whiskey. When he takes Zara's free hand to shake it, her breath catches.

"Nice to meet you," she manages, suddenly flustered in a way I've never seen before. "Sorry about the camping comment. I just... you've been here for hours without ordering food or talking to anyone. It's unusual."

"I was waiting for something important," Nikolai replies, eyes never leaving her face. "But the wait was... more pleasant than I expected."

The way he says it—like he's been watching her work, like she was the entertainment—makes heat rise to Zara's cheeks.

"Well," she says, bouncing Aleksandr nervously, "glad we could provide some... atmosphere."

Something passes between Dimitri and his cousin—understanding, perhaps warning. I can't tell which.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

"I need to go," Nikolai says finally, though he seems reluctant. "Duty calls. Zara, it was a pleasure meeting you." He takes her hand again, this time lifting it to his lips, making her dark eyes widen. The kiss is brief and proper, but I catch how his thumb brushes across her knuckles before he releases her. "I hope to see you again... soon." Then he's gone, moving through the coffee shop with controlled power, leaving Zara staring after him with obvious confusion.

"Well," she says finally, turning back to us with forced brightness. "That was... intense. Is everyone in your family that dramatically romantic?"

Dimitri and I exchange glances. "You have no idea," I say..

"The zoo closes at five," Dimitri taps my back, checking his watch. "Someone promised to show Aleksandr the lions."

"The lions are going to eat him up," Zara coos to the baby, who gurgles a smile. "Just like your daddy did to your mama."

"Zara!" I protest, but I'm laughing.

"What? It's true! One look in this coffee shop and boom—married with a baby and living in a fortress. Beauty and the Beast style."

As I take Aleksandr back and Dimitri loads the stroller, I catch Zara glancing toward the door where Nikolai disappeared.

"Hey," I say quietly while Dimitri adjusts the diaper bag. "Be careful, okay? The

Ismailov men are... intense."

She looks at me with curious eyes. "Speaking from experience?"

I glance at my husband, who's arguing with a six-month-old about which toy is appropriate for public outings, and smile. "The best kind."

"Noted," she says, but I can see her mind working. "Though I doubt I'll see him again. Men like that don't slum it with broke college students."

Oh, sweet Zara. If only she knew that men like Nikolai Ismailov don't give up once they've decided they want something—or someone.

"Ready, angel?" Dimitri asks, one hand on the stroller, the other already reaching for me.

"Ready," I confirm, letting him guide me toward the door.

But I catch Zara's eye again, noting how her gaze drifts to the empty corner table where Nikolai waited for hours and watched her work.

"Dimitri," I whisper as we step outside. "Nikolai seemed... interested in Zara."

His mouth curves in a smile that's equal parts amused and knowing. "The Ismailov men have a weakness for strong women who don't know their own power."

"Should I be worried about her?"

He stops walking, turning to face me with that serious expression. "Do you trust me, Amani?"

"With everything."

"Then trust me when I say Nikolai is honorable. If he's interested in Zara, his intentions are serious. We don't play games with matters of the heart."

I think about cameras and severed fingers and the intensity that brought us together. My life changed completely the day I smiled at a dangerous stranger in this coffee shop. "Maybe that's exactly what she needs," I murmur, watching through the window as Zara returns to work, completely unaware that her life might be about to change forever.

Dimitri's laugh is low and dangerous. "Careful, angel. Keep talking like that and people will think you're as devious as I am."

I rise on my toes to kiss him while Aleksandr babbles happily between us. "Maybe I am. Maybe that's what makes us perfect."

"Always and forever," he agrees, pressing his forehead to mine.

As we walk toward the car, I can't help but smile. Poor Zara has no idea that Nikolai Ismailov just decided she's worth waiting for.

Nikolai

I don't believe in love at first sight—until I see her laughing behind the counter of that coffee shop, purple hair catching the light like spun amethyst. Zara Williams. The broke college student has no idea she's caught the attention of the most patient predator in the Bratva.

One month. That's all it takes for me to learn everything about her. Her schedule, her dreams, her desperate wish for a family she can't afford. While my cousin Dimitri

claimed his woman with brutal efficiency, I prefer a more... methodical approach.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:38 pm

When Zara finally decides to investigate IVF to have the baby she's always wanted, I strike with surgical precision.

One forged signature. One substituted sample. One perfect deception.

Now the woman who thinks she's carrying a stranger's child is growing my heir. I'm exactly where I want to be—close enough to protect what's mine, patient enough to let her fall for me naturally, ruthless enough to eliminate anyone who threatens our future.

ZARA

I've always dreamed of being a mother, but dreams don't pay for fertility treatments. Working double shifts at the coffee shop barely covers rent, let alone the thousands I need for IVF. Then suddenly, everything changes—an anonymous benefactor covers my entire treatment, and I'm finally getting the family I've always wanted.

The timing couldn't be more perfect. I'm two months from graduation. I'm pregnant with the baby I've dreamed of, and I've met someone incredible. Nikolai is everything I never knew I needed—protective, generous, and patient with my chaotic life. He appeared right when I needed him most, like some kind of guardian angel.

I should have known angels don't come with neck tattoos and hands that have clearly seen violence.

I should have questioned the coincidences, the perfect timing, the way he always knows exactly what I need before I ask.

But when you're drowning, you don't question the lifeline. You grab on and hold tight.

Now I'm living a fairy tale—financial security, a loving partner, and a baby growing inside me. I have everything I've ever wanted.

Until I discover that my mysterious benefactor and perfect boyfriend are the same man.

"Sometimes the best gifts come wrapped in beautiful lies."