







# One of Them

**Author:** *Lina Beck*

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

**Description:** Taya

Orphan. Assassin. A force of nature.

Taya clawed her way to the top, securing her place among the most feared players in the underworld. Fierce and untouchable, she thrives in a world that never cared if she survived. The same allies who helped her rise are tightening their grip. Staying free might cost her everything, including secrets best left buried.

An unexpected bond forces her to face emotions she never wanted: Trust. Friendship. Maybe even devotion. If she's reckless enough to reach for them.

Taya would sooner dismantle the system than let it control her.

Maxim

Bratva enforcer. A man built for battle.

Maxim has fought in the trenches, but the real war has always been in his mind. With his sister tying the Galkins to the Pakhan, he has no choice but to obey, even as the protector in him rages at what he's forced to witness.

Danger doesn't scare him. He is danger. Until Taya appears, turning his world upside down.

She might be the answer to questions he never dared to ask. Yet the same side of the coin can't exist as one.

He'll watch her destroy his world just to see her break the chains meant to hold her.

In the darkness of their world, can anything real survive?

Tropes: Age-gap, feminine rage, assassin FMC & Bratva MMC, found family, plot & spice, fast-paced, and more.

One of Them kicks off the Beyond Ties series, a multi-book world of messy alliances, intense drama, and unforgettable couples. Each dual POV book follows a different pair, with stories that intertwine.

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Fear consumed the girl entirely. Unease crept through her, a foreign sensation she had never known before.

She remained hidden in the room, her breath shallow as she waited for something, anything, to break the eerie silence. A sign. An indication of what was happening.

The fluorescent light blurred over the unshed tears in her eyes, reminding her of the endless rainy days she had spent wishing for a ray of sunshine to free her from the house's captivity. Now, she'd rather roam the house than stay in this small, cramped room meant for moments like this.

Her legs shook the same way they did when she sat at the dinner table, wiggling under the tablecloth. A gut feeling deep within told her something bad was about to happen, prompted by Mom's nervous glances toward the front door during their meal.

Was she expecting someone?

The girl never understood, no matter how hard she tried. She couldn't recall anyone other than the two of them crossing the threshold.

Was it a stranger bringing trouble to their door? Or a friend? Her mom could use one of those. She could, too.

They were what people called "total loners." She'd heard about them on TV, the ones who barely left the house and minimized contact with the outside world. The description matched her family perfectly. Everything was brought to them. Occasionally, she was allowed to play in the backyard, but even then, her mom

watched closely through the kitchen window.

Always close. Never too far out of reach. Those words summed up her childhood in this suburban house.

At first, the girl believed she was special. Why else would they protect her this much? She wasn't a princess, that much she knew, or she wouldn't be allowed to get so filthy. Dirt covered her up to her ears whenever she played, building walls out of wet sand. The higher they reached, almost knee level, the prouder she felt. But when the rain came, she watched her creation wash away, crumbling back into grains.

Still, she kept rebuilding.

With each birthday, more questions arose, but no amount of begging would bring her answers. Since she couldn't stand seeing her mom upset, time allowed her to let the curiosity go.

This way of life became the norm, their norm of no visitors, no peers to play with.

Perhaps Mom had an unpleasant experience, a past event leaving her unprepared to get back out. The world overflowed with bad people, or so they preached on the news. That bit of information convinced the girl it was for the best if they didn't put themselves out there.

After all, Mom was her everything, a best friend, the only one she ever knew. The bubble was her comfort zone, no matter how unconventional it was.

Dinner time was by far her favorite part of the day. The dining room transformed into a brighter space with laughter and stories about pizza topping combinations they'd use during their annual bake-offs. It took a while to find a winner, but she strongly suspected her luck was turning. The next victory would be hers. Guaranteed.

Not tonight. Tonight, a strange vibe lingered. Mom was distant, barely eating.

The girl observed her single parent from the opposite seat at the table. She even attempted to ask questions to ease the tension, but nothing helped.

Was she the reason for her mother's worry?

Finished with her soup, the dirty bowl in hand, the girl made her way to the kitchen. Time was nearing eight o'clock, meaning the psychologist's show she obsessed over was about to air.

Before she loaded the dishwasher, a knock on the door echoed through the otherwise silent house. Strange, she thought. Deliveries never came this late.

Was this the cause of her unsettlement?

Remembering the few times her mom struggled with delivery drivers and the unease those interactions brought, she thought little of the irregularity.

She settled on the couch, letting the adult handle the officialities. The show host greeted today's guests, but their names were drowned out by the intense knocking. A fist pounded against the reinforced door, the aggressive pattern demanding attention.

Mom made no move, never rising from the dining table, but calmly turned her blonde head, looked her daughter in the eye, and whispered, "Taya, it's time to play."

The child understood the code and quickly stood up. She ran upstairs, her TV show completely forgotten. The carpet softened her fall as she lowered herself and patted the wall for the familiar opening her mom had shown her at an early age. Behind it, a space known only as the panic room awaited her, its purpose shrouded in secrecy. It resembled something out of an action movie, except smaller and with fewer tech

gadgets.

To this day, no situation had forced them to use the safety it offered. It was only for training or playtime when she was younger. She never fully understood the true meaning behind the name, or why a suburban house would have one. There had been no real danger to hide from back then. Now, though, the word “panic” seemed fitting.

The room’s sensor detected motion, and the emergency lights flickered on, guiding her forward. With her head tucked in, she hugged her bruised knees close, trying to make herself as small as possible. Her breath came in heavy puffs, but she focused all her energy on calming her racing heart. For many minutes, she sat there, counting heartbeats.

It wasn’t long before the front door unlocked. The sound echoed through the house every time the entry opened. Mom insisted on not oiling the hinges, so though it wasn’t heard often, the squeaking noise was a familiar sound in their household.

With her head pressed against the wall, she tried to listen, hoping to understand what was happening. Beyond the buzzing sound above her, all she heard was a jumble of voices. When her mother’s voice registered through the noise, the girl let out a heavy breath, the familiarity of the sound offering a small comfort. Still, she couldn’t calm down, no matter how hard she tried.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

What was she saying? Who was she speaking to? She couldn't make out the words. Not because of the distance, but because they were foreign to her ears.

The space felt suffocating, her eyes blinking rapidly in rhythm with her pulse. Despite everything, she obediently waited until her body couldn't stay still anymore.

Worst-case scenarios flooded her mind. Her imagination had a tendency to wander far beyond any sane limit.

Her mom was out there, on her own.

The thought struck her, bringing a wave of panic. For the first time, she felt utterly alone, completely separated from the constant of her life. The situation was so unnatural, she could hardly stand the thought of it. Tonight forced her to confront feelings she never knew existed, and the one person who could calm the unknown was nowhere near.

Before another thought poisoned her mind with worry, she pushed the red button and crawled out on all fours, ignoring everything her mom had taught her. There would be time for forgiveness later.

On silent feet, she crept toward the top of the staircase. That's when she heard it. A gunshot. Her first time hearing one quickly became her second.

A loud thump reached her ears before the house fell silent. Gone were the voices, her mother's included.



Over the wooden railing, the child peeked downstairs, where her mother stood above two unmoving bodies, men lying face down in the hallway.

Smoke was rising from the weapon her mother still held. The image seared into her mind, raising immediate alarms. She knew that the dangerous object her mother gripped had always been locked away in the first drawer of the cabinet, never making an appearance.

Instinctively, the girl ran toward the woman she loved so deeply, but up close, her eyes were distant, unfamiliar, as they stared down at the intruders. With an outstretched hand, she called for her mother's attention, feeling a rush of relief when her eyes immediately softened at the sight. But instead of warmth, they started to glisten.

Before she could speak, her mother wiped away the evidence with the back of her palm. Her focus returned to her daughter as she said, "Listen to me, Taya. There is much you don't know, but it will all make sense. I promise. We don't have time. This is where we part, kotyonok."

Words weren't registering, even when she listened closely. Part ways?

"Mom, what's happening?" The girl frantically clung to her mother's arms, pleading. "I don't understand."

"There's a blue backpack under the staircase. Get it."

Her attention was quickly diverted by the instructions. She didn't dare to look around, walking a straight line to the closet. Once it was in her hands, she wondered whose it was. It wasn't theirs. She knew this house inside and out.

When she returned, her mother grabbed the backpack and strapped it onto her back.

“Everything you need is in here.”

The girl’s hands shot to the straps, gripping them in a deadly hold, as if her mother had just given her a parachute before she was pushed into the unknown.

A kiss to both cheeks stopped the tears from falling, offering the familiar comfort of a loving touch, a comfort only a mother could give. The same touch she had grown up with.

“Go where life takes you and never forget where you came from. You hear me?” Mother’s words stirred up a whirlwind of emotions. The girl bit the inside of her cheek, holding the storm at bay for just a little longer.

“I wish I could explain. Just stay strong and don’t let them find out.”

A single tear rolled down her cheek, unchecked now, betraying the state of her mind. The girl wished nothing more than to stop time or even reverse it to return to the only normal she had ever known.

“I love you so much. You are the best thing that ever happened to me.”

In her mother’s embrace, she soaked in the feeling of safety and home. And when the moment reached its expiry, clearing her throat, she asked the painful question, “Mom, where are you going?”

“We’ll see each other again. Go out the back door. A taxi will be waiting. Don’t be scared. All will be well.”

That was the last time the girl saw her mother. The last words a loved one would speak to her.

Life had taught her its first lesson: the people who claimed to love you might've been the ones lying all along.

Taya's life would never be the same after she looked inside the backpack. As the house she grew up in faded away, the bubble she had lived within shattered into a million broken pieces.

Pieces she didn't bother to pick up, for it wasn't repairable.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

The fear previously occupying her brain disappeared. If anything, she was feeling a strange sense of thrill. A pulsing under her skin that got her blood pumping. As if there was an adventure awaiting ahead.

Maybe it was her imagination running wild; she knew it often did. But in this instance, she possessed what she lacked before: a purpose.

She loved to daydream. In the darkest moments of the day, the girl would imagine herself being more than an orphaned teenager, but the road ahead had too many holes. Holes she had to patch up to move forward.

Her mother was gone.

Alone in the safety of the apartment she now occupied, the girl watched the news. A picture of a house on fire stared back, and all she could think about was how unfamiliar the structure looked from the front, the street the reporter stood at.

Grief and anger stirred inside her, but the tears refused to come. Too many nights she'd spent crying, exhausting herself to the point of passing out.

Many possibilities flashed in her brain during the endless hours of the night. Calling the police. Accepting help. Nothing ever felt right.

Maybe she felt like she owed it to her mother to keep her word.

Maybe part of her had something to prove. Or maybe she was already too lost.

She shut off the TV and crawled back to bed.

Taya was the girl's name. The one who fixes. She briefly recalled the stories of a girl who healed wounds buried deep. Fairy tales in a foreign language her mother knew but never spoke aloud or taught her.

It made no difference.

No cure was strong enough to patch the emptiness within her. No force could fight the poison spreading through her. Nowhere to hide from the darkness of the world she'd entered.

In society's eyes, she never existed. But Taya refused to see herself as a nobody. Under the darkness of the night, with only the quiet driver for a witness, she vowed in the yellow taxi that she'd become somebody. Somebody who wouldn't cross paths with fear ever again.

With money and a place to stay, she'd remain focused on one thing and one thing only: becoming the best version of herself.

She only needed to figure out what that meant first.

Would it be my choice? This damn city wouldn't even crack the top places to live. There had to be better opportunities out there, but I wouldn't know.

Here I was, in NYC. They call it the city that never sleeps. When would it, with crime lurking around every corner?

Four years I've spent as a ghost, walking the same streets as the riffraff, blending in just enough to fly under the radar. To say it was a dangerous place for a teenager would be a fucking understatement.

A handful of reasons kept me around. Oddly enough, it was this twisted sense of belonging in a city drowning in criminals and wannabe gangsters.

For my first big girl purchase I got a computer at a pawn shop in midtown. It took months to figure it out, but once I did, I was unstoppable. A whole universe was at my fingertips, waiting to be discovered.

I worked hard to make sense of the new world I'd entered. I came close to cracking the code on society's divisions and where I fit in. There were a lot of things I wondered about, but it was really the danger I wanted to understand.

To learn everything there was to know about the very thing my mother warned me about.

To understand the world, you had to be ready to face the ugly reality offered. To navigate it? The best way was to jump headfirst, become a part of it, and accept the consequences.

A simple concept, once you identify the power figures, except I had no intention of joining in.

Society split into groups based on affiliations. Everybody was on someone's payroll. Some were born into their roles; others chose them based on heritage. Most were recruited or pushed into this life, desperate to survive. For the rest? Postcodes stripped them of their choices.

The territory was owned and divided by the biggest players. Powerful men fell so others could rise. The dynamics shifted quickly. You lost as fast as you gained in a full domino effect.

A mobster's mentality formed at a young age. A code everyone respected and abided

by. The saying: Snitches end up in ditches? In this world, they ended up carved up into pieces, shipped back to their families wrapped as Christmas presents. Don't ask me how I know. The video would remain a vivid image, playing on the screen of my mind.

Punishments were both ordered and executed by their own people. Disobedience wasn't tolerated. You had the strong, the weak, and the patsies, a term for the collaterals. Those caught in between.

There was no justice among criminals. Natural selection had sorted out the weak and kept giving to the strong. The ones who dared to take.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Law enforcement got generously paid to look the other way. Hell, for the right monthly contribution? They didn't even bother to show up.

It was the right decision to never approach anyone for help. Who knows where I would have ended up.

It took me some time and a whiteboard to fully understand the hierarchy. I was no longer the girl who'd been dropped off at an unknown location downtown with nothing but a backpack full of questions.

I quickly realized what a sheltered life I'd lived. The simplest things like navigating public transport or going to the grocery store were things I'd only briefly understood.

I cursed everything that had led me to this point. It felt like learning to walk again, except I had no one to lean on.

I wasn't talking about regular teenage troubles, like what clothes I fancy or which hairstyle suits me, but what to do with my life and how to move forward.

The only thing childhood prepared me for was the solitary lifestyle. With no hobbies and barely any skills, I spent months trying and learning everything until I found something I was good at.

Thirteen-year-old me would never have guessed I was an adrenaline junkie, or that I had a particular talent for sneaking into places where I had no business being.

At first, rage filled me, and unanswered questions plagued the day. All I could focus



on was the panic that overtook me, the paralyzing fear I felt.

My brain wouldn't stop spinning with thoughts when I just wanted to turn it off. For the stupid organ to shut the fuck up and leave me alone.

I was a hormonal teenager with no one to talk to and no way to vent. Emptiness had settled within me. I was chasing the same rush I'd experienced years ago, just to face it head-on this time. With basic needs covered, everything else became unimportant.

I lived for a sole purpose: to show the world who I could be. Who I will be.

A sweaty MMA gym was a place I visited daily, where we all gathered to deal with problems the only way we knew how: by throwing punches until exhaustion overtook us.

Fighting might have been a group activity, but I was utterly alone.

No matter how interested I might have been, approaching anyone was out of the question. Not that I was afraid. Week after week, I watched the men spar in the cage, proving what I'd long known: I had my work cut out for me.

All this time, I dodged questions, kept to myself, and avoided any attention. A big portion of my brain was still paranoid, playing Mother's words on repeat.

"Do not let them find you." If only I knew who she was referring to.

The more I learned about my past and the secrets well buried, the angrier they made me. This wasn't a revenge path I was on, but one of self-discovery, with a future full of possibilities in mind. Distant future, I thought.

I finished my regular session at the gym, packed my bag, and was about to head

home. The usually active place was quite deserted, probably something to do with the recent trail of deaths showing up all over the city.

The search engine I developed alerted me every time the number grew, popping notifications on the screen like it was the Fourth of July. Shit was going down, and I wasn't anywhere close to being ready. The plan remained the same: continue watching from a safe distance.

The changing room's door was left open, but I stopped at the threshold. The entire room spun as I found myself in a standoff. A tall man stood in the middle, surrounded by three mean-looking men I'd never seen here before. I recognized the tall man, but there was no sign of the crew he usually surrounded himself with.

His name began with I. Whenever his buds spoke it, I convinced myself it was "Lia." But the name didn't roll off my tongue the same way it did theirs.

Images of bodies lying on the ground flashed through my mind as I stared at the scene with a blank expression.

The logical step would be to use the advantage of my unannounced presence and backtrack to where I came from. Content with the decision, I was about to take the first step back when his eyes flicked to me. Given the lack of anything interesting around, the other pairs followed.

Confused about how he sensed my presence, certain I wasn't even breathing, I eyed the tall man cautiously, but it was the stranger closest to me who approached first. My head snapped to the older man, assessing the level of danger, before his voice registered.

"Who do we have here?" He waved me over. "Come over here, doll."

A shrug might have escaped me at the sleazy comment, but I was too busy calculating the possibilities. Any hesitation on my part could be my last move.

I remained still, fingernails digging into my palms as I controlled each breath, willing every twitch of my muscles into submission. My gaze locked on the sole man in the group I recognized, seeking the familiarity of his eyes, but whatever they tried to communicate got lost in translation.

The turmoil of thoughts was still stirring when a slow-motion nod kicked my ass into gear. Now I understood. Between the two of us, our chances of leaving unharmed increased.

I allowed myself a second of panic to filter out the adrenaline, then launched at the one closest to me. The others were too wrapped up in each other, just as I needed them to be.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

In seconds, I grabbed the gun he pulled, the handle warm from his touch. In a reverse move I didn't know I was capable of, I pointed the tip at him. The old man never saw me coming. His underestimation was my advantage.

Fingers wrapped around the metal, I factored in the gun's weight, making sure my breath was steady. In a blink, I was transported back to the house, imagining myself in the very spot my mother stood. The gray walls of the gym suddenly turned yellow.

I remembered Mom picking the color, insisting the sun should be visible from even the darkest corners. The memory of paintbrushes and smudges that took ages to scrub off my fingers granted me the last bit of strength I lacked. Without hesitation, I pulled the trigger.

Bang.

The fallback from the shot didn't faze me. Hours spent at the gun range had ensured that.

The man fell to his knees before crumpling to the floor, his body outstretched on the mat. A trail of blood gushed from the hole between his eyes, sliding down his forehead, and I followed the movement until the drop disappeared down his neck. Blood spots formed on the collar of his shirt, staining the white linen.

How strange, I thought, to witness life leave his body and see his vacant eyes locked on mine. Who was he? What sort of life had he led? Did I just turn someone into a widow? An orphan, like me?

He stared, long gone, but beyond the emptiness hid a look of shock. He spent his last seconds staring at his executioner.

A little girl. A useless woman. A weakling. I've made peace with the perceptions that followed me. Has he made peace with death? Accepted the higher probability that comes with the lifestyle?

Strong arms snatched me by the shoulders, snapping me out of the trance. Eyes narrowing at the intruder, I hissed the best response I could manage, then swatted his hands away.

I couldn't recall a time when someone had touched me without my notice.

"We need to get out of here. My guys will handle the rest," he said, his tone blunt. Before I could reply, I was shoved out the door and into the SUV parked outside.

Despite the season, the air inside the car was surprisingly warm. The leather-covered seats invited me to touch the soothing texture, and I did, drawing circles under my knees, enjoying the comfort it brought. A driver's license wasn't high on the priority list. The handful of instances I've spent in a vehicle were in single digits. Still, I wished to experience the freedom.

Aware of the lack of shaking or any reaction that would signify what transpired, I stared ahead, far too calmly. I killed a man. A dangerous individual. But was he?

"Who were they?" I addressed the stranger beside me for the very first time.

"She speaks." He chuckled, his accent catching my attention, the melodic sound strangely familiar.

"Yeah. I just asked you a question," I yelled back, my voice rising an octave with

every word.

“They were there to cause trouble. You possibly just saved my life.” With his hand on the wheel, he turned to the passenger’s seat, looking me dead in the eye. “The better question is: who are you?”

His gaze called to me, but I ignored the intensity and faced the window instead. My shoulders slumped at the untrue words about to leave my mouth. “No one.”

“Right.” He scoffed, not buying it.

“Who do you run with?” he asked casually, as though no one could be without an association. To his credit, it was unusual in this city. You were at least a low-ranked somebody.

“Nobody,” I repeated, louder this time.

He shot me a sharp look. “You do now.”

His words didn’t sit well with me, alarm bells sounding in my mind. “I don’t think so. Did you not hear me?”

I knew I was pushing it, but there was something about his tone that made me dig my heels in.

He refused to budge. “I did. But you just saved my life. And that comes with consequences.”

“I’m pretty sure you’d do just fine. I’ve seen you fight.” Far too many times.

“Probably,” he smirked. “But you’ve got skills I’m interested in. And what you just

did? In my world, people get rewarded for that shit.”

“I’m not interested in whatever it is you’re offering.”

His gaze didn’t waver, shifting between the streets and me in the passenger seat. “At least hear me out. You might wanna lie low until my guys clean up the mess.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I mentally slapped myself for not even thinking about the bodies and the evidence we left behind.

“Your guys?” I chuckled, trying to keep the disbelief in check. “Are you from the higher ranks?”

The man shrugged with casual indifference. “You could say that.”

“How high?” I pressed, attempting to piece together a profile that matched what I knew.

“Like, the highest.”

“Fuuuck,” I muttered under my breath. The connection clicked into place, his face completing the puzzle.

Ilya Aistov, the Pakhan of the Russian Bratva.

He was young, having just taken over after his father’s death, whose reign had been one of the shortest in history. Now it all made sense. How naive of me not to see the connection. Hours spent behind the computer, researching, only for me to waltz right under their noses. I had a long way to go, I thought.

I gathered Ilya was someone important from the number of bodies constantly surrounding him like a shield, but I’d pictured the boss working out somewhere private, not in a bustling downtown gym.



I observed the way his hands rested on the steering wheel, silently wondering how many lives they'd taken. For the first time, I came close to the danger I'd been chasing, getting a literal front-row seat.

But when I glanced at my hands next, they were clean, not a speck of dirt in sight. Where his knuckles were busted, bruising covering the skin, mine were pale, healed thanks to the miracle cream I bought in Chinatown.

I wondered what the lady behind the counter had for healing the mind, for it seemed my recent actions only left a mark there.

When the car drove out of the city, panic hit me, my throat closing too quickly. I had long forgotten the kill; this was about survival. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. Everything got too real, too fast. I needed more time. So much more time.

I motioned to the sidewalk as we drove and turned to the driver. "You can drop me off here." Desperate to escape the situation, I yanked on the door handle.

Ilya refused, shaking his head. "I don't think so. Let's take this to my place," he insisted. His words only fed my growing irritation. My head spun towards him, hands flying in the air between us.

"What is there to talk about?"

"About your potential," he raised his voice, making his point final.

"It's happening. Stop fighting it." A grunt formed in my throat, but I swallowed it this time. His tone, though commanding, wasn't the main reason behind my compliance.

Let's just say if I were a cat, I'd be dead.

Soon, we were approaching an iron gate at the edge of the city. The driveway itself could have its own postcode. That's how far it stretched from the road. The quality of the road shifted, the familiar crunch of tires fading as we neared.

Money and wealth never impressed me, but if they did, this would've had me wowing. The house stood tall in the distance, its white bricks, towering columns, and endless windows looking out over the grounds. The vibe screamed old money with modern touches, its leadership etched into the very walls.

Ilya didn't reach for a remote or button to open the entrance. Instead, he pulled up close to a structure on the left. The automatic light flickered on, and three men emerged, dressed in black tactical gear. Splitting up, two of them circled the car, their movements visible in the wing mirror as they peered through the tinted windows, scanning the vehicle.

The third man leaned in on Ilya's side. His head appeared in the lowered window, filling the interior with the thick smoke of a hand-rolled cigarette. The gun strapped to his chest was well concealed but still made its presence known.

A guard post.

I highly doubt the postal carrier delivered to the Bratva daily. If they did, kudos for their courage and athletic form.

Ilya waited as the lead guard checked in with his colleagues, then signaled for us to proceed. Once past the massive gate, my mind raced to figure out what I had gotten myself into. Or rather, how I was going to get out.

The car stopped in front of the main entrance, where a grandiose double door was tended by a butler. He had it wide open before we even set foot on the ground, no doubt informed by the guards of his employer's arrival. The crisp air I enjoyed

touching my face during this season didn't even reach me when I got out of the car. We walked from warmth to warmth without effort.

"My guys," I remembered Ilya calling them. One for everything.

The interior was everything you'd expect a home of the wealthy and powerful to be, but I didn't dwell. I scanned the space for an exit, looking for anything to help me escape the situation.

Ilya walked down the hall to what appeared to be his office, heading for a plush chair tucked behind a mahogany desk. Without guidance from the host, I settled on the nearest couch. The man appeared comfortable in my presence, his feet outstretched as he leaned over the desk, pressing a button on the phone. Instantly, another person entered the room and headed directly for Ilya. He whispered something I was not to overhear, allowing me to study them, starting with the newcomer, a raven-haired man in casual clothes.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

On the street, he would blend right in, but here, between the tactical gear, guns, and suits, he stood out. With the secrets spilled, the raven-haired guy found comfort on the opposite sofa. The second his ass hit the cushion, he gawked at me.

And I stared right back.

Never lower your gaze. It's a sign of submission and weakness. The notes I collected reminded me.

No one spoke for what felt like a while. I studied the room from corner to corner, noting every detail. Comfortable in the silence, Ilya got up, heading to the bar tucked in the corner. He poured amber liquid over ice, the faint clinking filling the room. Not offering us any, he returned to his spot. The first sip drew a deliberate sigh of delight, and only when the glass emptied did he finally speak.

"I want you to work for me."

His words hit me like a slap, shock flashing across my face before I could stop it. My attempt to erase the emotion came too late; they noticed. Like hawks, their heads tilted, their blinks too far apart.

"What could I possibly help you with? I told you, I'm not interested in joining the Bratva," I replied, forcing the bubble in my throat down.

"What's your name?" The other man's voice cut in, his heavy accent sharpening the question. I focused on him, mimicking his expression.

“What’s yours?” I shot back.

“Malek.”

“Taya.”

One for one, in a fair trade.

“Your full name?” Malek pressed, his voice firm.

“That’s all you’ll be getting. Nothing more.”

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of Ilya’s mouth, a shadow of approval that felt more like amusement. “You’re cautious. Good. You’ll need that if you’re going to survive.”

“Are you American?” Malek cut in again, his accent even thicker now, like he wanted the question to land differently. His gaze lingered, sharp and deliberate, as if he were picking apart my answers before I’d even given them.

I turned my head to the window, watching the guards outside as they moved across the ground. Some of them stayed behind, forming a line on the lawn. Their shadows cast darkness into the room, silhouettes forming against the back walls. A silent threat.

His protection was my warning.

I smiled at the thought. Somewhere deep down, a string of pride awoke, braiding into the mix.

When I faced the room again, Malek still awaited confirmation.

Information is power.

I owed them no answers. Unless they wanted to try torture, all I'd feed them were crumbs.

Either they recognized my resolve or decided not to waste their time because they accepted the silence and moved on.

“Fair enough. Look, Taya, I saw you today, and I assume this was your first kill.” Ilya nodded slightly, as if confirming his own words. “Thinking back to my first, believe me, it was nowhere near this calculated. By now, I expected you to be retching on the floor.”

Malek let out a quiet hum, his eyes narrowing. “She’s not. That says something, doesn’t it?” His tone carried a weight, as if he was storing the observation for later.

The thought of retching hadn’t even crossed my mind. I should feel remorse for killing a man, disgust at how easy it was to take a life. I should fear what I’m capable of. Reaching deep inside, I felt... empty. Unmoved, as if the gun never fired.

What did that make me?

Their words registered as a compliment in my mind. The corner of my lips lifted briefly before I schooled my expression back to indifference. “Umm, thanks. I guess.”

“This life isn’t for everybody. I get it. But I don’t think you would’ve done all that if you weren’t curious.”

Is he referring to...? Angry that I didn’t notice anyone on my tail, I spat, “Have you been following me?”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Let’s just say I like to keep an eye on those who come to my gym and their activities,” Ilya confirmed.

“I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t done my homework.”

“What happened today, then?” I deadpanned.

Malek chuckled under his breath, clarifying the dynamics between them and the lack of rank enforcement. They must be close for him to feel comfortable enough to disrespect the Pakhan in the presence of others.

“You got me there,” Ilya muttered. “Sometimes, shit slips through the cracks.”

His words sobered my confidence. Years, that’s what they had on me. Experience. Resources. I could go on and on about why it wasn’t my time. At least not yet.

“I’m just a kid playing vigilante.” I downplayed my abilities. “Self-taught. No way I can go against trained killers.”

“Everybody’s got to start somewhere. If this is what you want, I’ll help you.”

Not enough time passed for me to consider his proposition, and while curiosity nudged me, reason forced me to ask. “Why?”

Ilya looked at me, confusion flickering in his eyes. “Why what?”

“Why would you do that? What do you want from me?”

Acts of kindness come at a cost.

“I want to help you like someone should’ve helped me when I was in your shoes,” Ilya said, his answer straight but edged with something I couldn’t quite place. Whether truthful, how am I to know?

Needing a moment to think it over, I stood up and moved to the window. A handful of guards in matching uniforms tensed at my proximity, hands raising to their weapons.

Just look at them. All so dedicated to a group that sees them as numbers.

Willing to die for people they only see in passing.

This isn’t who I want to become: a head, an extra set of hands.

Negotiate the terms to benefit you.

“I have conditions.”

The two men shared a look, silently communicating, but it was Ilya who spoke first. “I’m listening.”

Leaning against the window, I laid out my terms. “If I do this, I don’t want to be affiliated with the Bratva. Or any other organization,” I paused, making sure my point hit home. “That’s a deal breaker. I want to be on my own, a freelancer, or whatever you call it.”

“What does it mean to you?” Still seated on the couch, Malek questioned my understanding of the concept.



I wasn't sure I had one. If anything, I knew my non-negotiable and made sure to include it.

"Freedom," I replied. "The one thing I won't give up." Something I had just recently gotten my first taste of. "Look, I can work with you. But I refuse to work for you."

Ilya remained deep in thought while I turned my attention back to the guards.

"Okay."

"Okay."

A handshake between the three of us marked the moment my life's journey truly began.

I had no idea what I was agreeing to, but the truth was, I had nothing else to live for. From that point on, Malek, Ilya, and I worked together.

The night I killed for the first time solidified the future.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I was a ruthless killer. An assassin for hire.

I walked the line between black and white with swaying steps, stuck somewhere in the gray area, growing cloudier with each day. As the sun set, the body count soon reached three digits.

There were lines I never dared to cross. Despite everything, I wasn't a villain in my eyes. I ate, slept, fucked, and lived like any other human being.

The secrets of the blue backpack remained buried in a dusty, jammed-up drawer at the back of my mind, where they slept soundly.

I wanted to play the game. Who said I had to play by their rules?

The crossfire created a steady beat. Broken voices and screams of agony filled the air, burning into memory like a song my mind couldn't shake.

I couldn't tune out the noise, so I added my own. I roared, draining my lungs, until my voice cracked. When the adrenaline faded, my focus snapped back to the task.

Bullets flew from the machine gun, casings littering the ground. I glanced at the pile, wondering how many other halves had ended a life today.

Didn't bother counting. Instinct took over. Reload, fire, repeat.

This unit worked on one setting: clear out. House after house, street after street. We cleared villages, securing them before moving on. The sun could set, darkness

consuming the clouds, and we'd still be going.

I took a drag from the hand-rolled cigarette, letting the burn seep into my lungs, poison sliding down my throat. Pulling off my helmet, I ran my hand through the tangled mess of curls. A buzz cut wasn't looking like such a bad idea now. Layers of filth coated me, the uniform sticking like a second skin. I itched to take it off but made no move.

Red-dirt-covered boots came into view at the bottom of the steps. I lifted my gaze to Orest, the last man from the alpha team besides me. He was the only one I knew by name.

The two of us had pushed through the first weeks, nights spent on the front porch of this wooden shed. The cheap finish had worn away where we sat. A jar of buds rested on the makeshift table. On good nights, we scored a bottle of vodka to pass the time.

He sat beside me, voicing the same question. "How far?"

I took a drag, calculating. "Sixteen miles."

He nodded, turning toward the expanse. Together, we scanned the outskirts of camp. It wasn't our turn to guard, but we did it anyway.

Orest twisted the cap off the bottle, gulping it down until tears gushed from his eyes. I watched him battle the burn in my peripheral vision, a chuckle forming in my throat. He was so damn young. If you didn't know better, you'd mistake him for a pirate. And he sure behaved like one. No wonder we bonded.

Cloudless nights like tonight were the most peaceful, but silence had a way of creeping up on you. When everything quieted, the endless sounds of agony kept playing in your head. Voices whispering from all directions.

A natural state for me. I looked at my hands, seeing the blood they carried long before I stepped foot on this continent.

Out of all the traps you could land in, I knew it was the anticipation that really got to you if you let it. It corrupted your mind with ideas, with visions of what's to come. But in this godforsaken land, the dust swallowed every useless prediction. Each day, it threw a new dust ball at you until you were coughing blood. It pushed you until you became one with the land.

I shook off the thoughts, accepting the alcohol Orest passed me.

This late into the mission, I lost count of how many bodies we shipped out. How many locals we buried. The more soldiers they sent, the more messages I typed out.

There came a time when we stopped using names, only referring to ourselves by numbers. A single file in the main office held the key to our identities, its edges smudged with dirty fingerprints.

All except for mine. I had no name. No home address. No point of contact.

Dawn was nearing when I stood up from the porch. Orest dozed off sometime after losing his third card game. He was a hell of a sore loser. A non-believer in my winning streak. His bruised chin rested against the bulletproof vest, and I flicked his nose like I did every morning.

The camp stirred awake, embracing another day. Soldiers awaited the drivers by the buggies loaded at the gate.

Every morning, we carved the same path of footprints, only for the wind to erase them by the time we returned. All of us locked in a dangerous guessing game, unsure which step would be our last.

“How far?” Orest asked again at the end of the day.

“Ten miles.”

I could already sense the next question when he lowered his head.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“And then?”

The answer was the same as it had been from the start, but he needed to hear it again.

“Then we reach the coast and go home.”

“What’s home for you?” the youngster asked. His eyes searched my face, waiting for a reaction.

During the endless hours we shared, I never once spoke about the civilian world.

Home was family, but family was also the organization we belonged to. Yet here I was, in the middle of nowhere, punishing myself.

To enhance the weapon, you have to calibrate it. That’s what the Bratva did with me. They shipped me off, hoping for a long-term return on their investment.

You can’t teach an old mutt new tricks, but you can convince it to keep learning.

Well, they didn’t have to convince me twice. I jumped at the opportunity, eager to let the thoughts and impulses roam free.

I could be their monster. Here or there, it didn’t matter.

There was no end, only more tasks. No escaping the brotherhood. No escaping the war. No escaping anything.

I ground my teeth, answering Orest’s question. “It’s the same.”

The slam of the door behind me echoed through the camp. That night, I stayed inside, bracing myself for the last day.

A wave of resistance traveled through my body when the dry desert air dampened. Seagulls circled above, navigating the orange hue from the smoke rising in the sky.

The coastline wasn't welcoming. The sea was rough, beating against the rocks.

I sat down in full gear, closing my eyes for a moment. My fingers trailed through the sand, grabbing a handful of grains and crushing them with all the strength I had. The deep cuts from constant reloading burned as the particles entered them. I squeezed even harder until my fingers met my palm, and the sand slipped through, returning to its original form.

A chuckle escaped my mouth. Before I knew it, I was rolling on the beach, each laugh growing more manic.

I strived to be uncrushable, like the sand, but the last stretch proved me so fucking wrong.

Each muscle ached. Each move hurt. But it was the never-ending burn at the back of my neck that seared, not just from the pain but from the actions that led to it.

I resisted touching the spot, wary of infections. I'd give that fucker a month or two to heal before visiting a friend in Jersey. About time I added to the collection of art.

"This is it." Orest joined the shitshow, interrupting my thoughts.

I nodded, focusing on the seagulls above.

We sat on the beach for a good while, comfortable in shared silence as we did on any

other night, until the rotor blades interrupted the moment.

“I fear worse things await me there,” Orest whispered, his head turning toward the helicopter heading our way.

I slowly stood, pressing my shoe into the sand to bury the blood I left behind.

“Stop fearing, and they won’t,” I shared my wisdom, patting his back as we walked toward the group.

I didn’t fear danger. Danger and I had an understanding. I became it before I let others take it.

Responsibility awaited me at home instead. My older brother had called with the news long ago. Father retired to Russia. It was our turn.

I was allowed this one time. A rare chance to escape life as I knew it. But it was ending.

For sixteen months, I’d exchanged one hell for another.

But the true hell of my mind? I’d never escape.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Ringtone I was far too familiar with rang through the office. The device buzzed against my thigh, sending vibrations down my body. Any other time, I would've welcomed the sensation. Now, it was all I could focus on.

Our regular meetups were constantly interrupted by that annoying sound.

I narrowed my eyes at the man behind me. Malek stood in his full glory, too wrapped up in pleasure to acknowledge the noise. His jeans hung low at his hips, just enough to spare us the time. I wiggled out of his grip, intent on cutting the phone from his pocket.

Crash it against the wall. Drown it in the whiskey cup. Anything to silence it.

When he continued without notice, my patience ran out. I reached for the phone, smashed it on the table, and put it on speaker to rile him up. Hushed words filtered through the device. While I now spoke fluent Russian, the dialect was entirely unfamiliar to me.

Malek's arm wrapped around me from behind, pulling me close. With surprising gentleness, he cupped my chin, forcing me to look up at him. His thumb brushed over my lower lip, eyes burning with something darker than just desire.

"Focus," he murmured. But his eyes never left mine as he picked up the phone, listening intently to the call. I studied him, noting the tension in his jaw and the way his grip stayed firm around my chin. The subtle possessiveness was his signature move, but I refused to analyze the reasons.

There was only one use outside of work I had for the man, and my intentions had been clear since day one.

When he finally spoke to whoever was on the phone, I laughed at his secretiveness. I didn't care who he was talking to. Another woman or Bratva business, it was all just noise to me.

What I cared for was his attention for the short time I allowed him close.

"If we can't even fuck in peace, we're nothing," I threatened, ready to give up the little we had, loud enough for the caller to hear. I'd grown tired of the interruptions.

Malek didn't respond right away, his gaze flicking over me as if calculating something. When he finally hung up, he released my chin with an almost reluctant sigh.

"I'm leaving for Russia today," he announced, his voice thick with the weight of the decision.

He tucked himself in, placed a kiss on my forehead. And when he turned to leave, it hit me. Seeing his back didn't bother me. I hadn't craved his presence, only the adrenaline, the high. One side was more dependent than the other. The terms of our arrangement had blurred somewhere in between the moans and rushed decisions.

"This is it, Malek. I'm calling it," I shouted after him, making my seriousness clear.

There was no acknowledgment, no sign of understanding in the subtle smile he gave me.

"Later, solnishko," he replied, shutting the door behind him on his way out.

Damn that unfit name. There was nothing bright about me. When I shined, it was the light that led you straight to the depths of hell.

Alone in the room, I looked around, wondering why I'd come early. Ilya had summoned me for a meeting, but it wasn't for another hour.

Files were scattered across the floor, all wiped away in a moment of impatience. I stood over the papers, ignoring the photos peeking from each file.

What hadn't landed in my inbox was not my problem to solve.

I sneaked downstairs into Ilya's office, avoiding any interaction along the way. The same couches from all those years ago still stood in the space, so I sat in the same spot, waiting. I stared directly across, recalling the first time I met the two of them.

Much had changed since then. We all changed.

Malek was still a member of Bratva, Ilya's second in command, but things were far from ideal since he'd gained quite the popularity. The man worked his way up the ranks faster than anyone, immediately earning respect from his fellow members. He went from a foot soldier, a nobody, to the highest position an outsider could hold.

The kind of attention he was attracting was dangerous. Ilya knew it, but we still hadn't addressed the claims. To complicate matters, Malek and I had this little thing going. Ilya was aware, but he never brought it up.

Long before his advances, and well past our first meeting, Malek had been visiting the States regularly after Ilya tasked him with overseeing business operations in Russia in Pakhan's name.

Don't get me wrong, there were plenty of attractive men in the underground groups. I

sought them out whenever the urge hit, sparing myself the guilt of bringing someone from the outside. These guys made their own choices. They joined the ranks and accepted the consequences, along with the dangers. I had nothing to do with it.

Malek was my first selfish decision. One that led to a night or two of passion or more like rough fucking we both needed. I told myself I'd stop so many times that I lost count.

Perhaps it was the initial pull or just the familiarity I clung to. We got the attraction out of our systems. It was time to move on.

No longer the girl who feared the world. An orphan turned assassin, hanging out and fucking with well-known criminals. That's what my life had become. Mother would be proud. NOT.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I chuckled at the thought as I sat there, but the weight remained on my shoulders, pressing down in the right spots.

\*\*\*

“I’m getting married,” Ilya greeted me with a bombshell the moment he entered. Straight to the point was very much his style, but this? This was not.

“You’re what?” I stood up from the couch, facing him.

“I said I’m getting married,” he repeated slowly, as if I needed it spelled out.

“I heard you. It’s just not registering.”

“Let’s hope it does, because it’s happening.”

I walked toward his desk, looking at him like he’d grown a second head overnight. Which, frankly, seemed more likely than this.

“Hold on. I’m so lost. Where did you even find somebody?”

“Thanks,” Ilya snickered, clearly offended by my bluntness. I didn’t mean for my words to come across as an attack. I’d never seen him with a woman, let alone someone worth marrying.

“Did you kidnap her? Please tell me there isn’t a girl tied up in your bedroom. I’m not dealing with that.”

“It’s an arranged marriage,” he announced, the words slipping from his mouth so naturally.

Now, the first option seemed like the better choice.

“What?” I snapped, my hands landing on the edge of the desk.

“Why are you shouting?” Ilya asked, far too calmly.

I gestured at his head. “Because you’ve lost your marbles.”

“Possibly. But it’s set.”

“Did she agree?”

“Yes,” he assured me. “Her brothers aren’t happy, but it’s agreed.” When words escaped me, Ilya added, “I need to get married and think about the future.”

The future?

My face must’ve shown what I was feeling because Ilya read me like a book.

“It’s no big deal, Taya,” he brushed off my concerns.

“When is this all happening?” I asked, still trying to wrap my head around the sudden shift.

“The announcement will go out in a month.”

“Not beating around the bush,” I muttered, crossing my arms.

Ilya simply nodded. “You might say that.”

“What’s going on? You know you can tell me,” I pressed, voicing the question we’d all been avoiding. “Does this have something to do with Malek rising to power?”

Ilya’s face remained unreadable as he dismissed my words as if they hadn’t been spoken.

“Can I count on you?” he asked instead.

“Of course. Getting married,” I puffed out the words with a dry laugh. “Who would’ve thought?”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Maybe you’ll be next,” Ilya joked, pushing my buttons, his gaze lingering as he waited for a reaction.

The warning I threw his way was nothing short of deadly. “You know my opinion on that topic.”

The concept of marriage, even romantic relationships, was foreign to me. I’d never witnessed it firsthand at home, and the people around me weren’t much better. I knew it brought along problems I wasn’t interested in. Not only did I have secrets to protect, but I also wasn’t sold on the idea of sharing my life with some stranger. I was yet to meet anyone worth considering going down that path for.

“If you say so.”

“Tell me about the lucky maiden.” I wiggled my eyebrows.

Ilya groaned at the action. “Can you not make her sound like a seventeen-year-old?”

“I have nothing to go off, do I? How old is she?”

“Twenty-six, I believe. She has three brothers, all underbosses in Bratva. Their family was one of the founding ones.”

“Do you like her?” I questioned, hoping for a better understanding of where they stood.

“What is this? The eighth grade?” He shivered. “She’s an attractive woman. As far as



I can tell.”

“This is honestly painful to listen to,” I retorted. “But I’ll be there.”

“Good.” Ilya appeared pleased with my answer, his head inclining just an inch.

We moved on to the other topics we needed to discuss as if his entire world wasn’t changing, but the thoughts still lingered when I left his office and walked out of the compound.

Over the years, Ilya had expanded the place exponentially. The area now occupied so much land that one could easily get lost, but that didn’t stop him from buying up all the surrounding plots.

With necessities like a brand-new gym, armory, and a hacking lab built onsite, everything was within reach, saving the members time and distance.

Ilya had insisted I move into the lines of houses forming what we called ‘the village,’ where those closest to him lived. I turned him down, unprepared to commit to him or the Bratva. I certainly hadn’t worked this hard just to be beneath someone. While Ilya and the others hired me as a contractor, none of them were above me.

Never owned, never restrained.

Based out of the same apartment downtown, I commuted whenever I got called. The door clicked shut behind me, and the silence of the apartment swallowed me whole. It was untouched, everything in place, from the sleek furniture to the polished floors. The air still held the faint scent of fresh paint.

I didn’t bother making it home. It was just a place to sleep, nothing more.

Takeout was my go-to since cooking reminded me of things I'd rather forget. I ate in silence, staring out the window at the people below, feeling distant from them all. The city was a blur, just like everything else in my life.

I had something going for me, I reminded myself, and I wouldn't jeopardize it by dwelling on the past. Still, in my weakest moments, I would daydream of a life where the wrongs had been righted. But who would do that?

Justice was a laughable concept. There most certainly was no fairness among those who lived in this city. It was grab-and-go. And those in power never had enough, no matter how much they took.

That night, I lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Nothing kept me up; it was just how this body operated now. A fault of my own. I had trained my system to survive on limited supplies, sleep included.

At night was perhaps the only time I allowed myself a moment to remember her. Out of respect, not longing. A loving face that had been dissolving in memory. Guilt lived somewhere deep inside me.

If I had asked more questions, maybe we could have prevented all that happened. Who was I to be worth losing their life over?

They say you should give forgiveness, but I had no one to give it to. Their choices had stripped me of my family and left me paranoid and full of anger. Even with a backpack full of baggage I had been dragging everywhere, the sun still rises, and I get up and let the past go for a while longer.

Engagement parties were a new concept, but I was no stranger to mafia meetings. They were the same thing, except one required more flower arrangements.

Only a handful of instances brought the various criminal organizations together. Weddings were one of them. Funerals were a close second.

All gathered here, bound by duty to pay their respects and present a unified front among those aligned. The intentions stretched beyond their circles as the rest of the criminal underworld watched closely, eager to identify a weak spot, an opportunity to prey upon.

Though not allowed through the door, information still found its way to rival families. Guaranteed to be used.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Somewhere along the way, out of fear or simply to exercise their egos, these events became more of a show. Just another excuse to display wealth, influence, and power. To parade under everyone's noses.

Today was no different.

The party took place in a Bratva-owned hotel. A buzz of activity drew attention to the entrance, where expensive cars dropped off guests straight onto the red carpet. Legit, I kid you not, a red carpet cushioned the dirty sidewalk, intentionally laid out for the superficial vultures to parade on, preserving their pristine designer shoes.

A photographer greeted the guests, no doubt hired by the couple. What a thoughtful idea to keep a digital memory of their celebration. Wrong. I saw it for what it was: a perfect opportunity to gather evidence, keep a guest book, and, if you got lucky, collect a little blackmail material on the side. Yet no one dared to question the innocence of the photographer. After all, this was an event celebrating the Pakhan, their beloved leader.

Feet dragging painfully slow, the guests made their way down the carpet, flashing perfect smiles at the camera, occasionally waving to passing pedestrians. Leadership shut down the hotel for the event, allowing only invited guests inside.

A handful of Ilya's men, ones I recognized from the compound, stood at the door on high alert while staff members requested each name upon entry to double-check against the guest list. Once again, the simplest actions presented yet another opportunity to pull out your status card and flash your importance. Sure enough, many expected their names to be recognized by simply showing their faces. Some

even dared to act insulted if the staff couldn't identify them. Their big mouths shrank quickly when there was no option but to introduce themselves.

Rolling my eyes at the entitlement, I skipped to the front, not bothering to spend a second among the movie-star wannabes. Years among people like them and I still wasn't used to the game of politics.

The photographer stayed away after an accidental nudge on my part when he aimed the camera my way. Stating my first name, the security guard held the giant door open as I stepped in. While they monitored every move, none were brave enough to submit me to a pat-down.

Since the hotel was the primary location for all events of importance, the rooms were grand, built to accommodate enormous crowds. Velvety curtains and dark wooden furniture greeted you, staff attending to all needs. The higher you placed, the looser the morality. For a few crisp bills, the options stretched far beyond their job's responsibilities.

Bratva members mingled with representatives from the Italians. As a sign of respect, they now attended each other's events. According to the peace agreement, weapons weren't permitted past the reception area, but there was no doubt they all had at least one gun hidden in their tailored suits. Me included.

Life prepares you for even the strangest of circumstances. Being unprepared equals being an easy target. Soon you're carrying a gun or two, a couple of knives. You're a light sleeper, noticing every exit when you enter a room. Strategically positioning yourself with your back to the wall becomes a default setting.

You never look at life the same after you've experienced danger.

I threw my hair over my shoulder, straightening my back. If there was one thing I

cared about, it was dressing up. Even on the job, I made sure to look my best, no matter the situation. Caring about appearances felt like my way of controlling who I was and how people saw me. Though I wasn't referring to the clowns outside, but rather those with real importance.

The number of times people underestimated me, especially as a woman in this profession, was laughable. Mainly men, but women alike. They all possessed the same false confidence until they were on their knees, begging for their lives. Rough were the beginnings, navigating as a young adult thrown into the arena with wolves. But I wasn't a nobody anymore. Though a reminder every now and then was still needed.

In the main salon, I got the usual stares from the wives, no doubt for my scandalous choice of color, and the occasional nod of respect from the men, mixed with looks their wives wouldn't appreciate. The truth was, everybody slept around. Married or unmarried, it made little difference.

I was a far cry from the girl in pigtails. I'd trained my body into solid muscle, and with long, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes, I'd grown into what many considered an attractive woman. Add in the confidence and it wasn't uncommon for people to take notice. Not that I had any interest in any of them. Although I couldn't say for certain what attracted them more: my looks or the gossip that always seemed to follow me around.

Not in the mood for any propositions, I advanced deeper into the lavish room. At the bar, I spotted Enzo, another man of importance.

Lorenzo 'Enzo' Artuso led the Sicilian Mafia and his level of crazy matched mine. The Sicilians had their territory and businesses, but the scale of their operations didn't allow full independence, making Enzo the Underboss within the Cosa Nostra. Whether they agreed or not, they still answered to the Don of the Italian Mafia, the

highest man, a position Enzo often had to step into, given their current leader wasn't one for public appearances.

"Aren't you exquisite?" He greeted me with a kiss on both cheeks, his words dripping with Italian charm.

Guests passed us by, women walking purposely slow, desperate to catch the gaze of the chocolate eyes set on me.

"You're not bad yourself. But you already know that," I grinned, well aware of our surroundings.

He smiled. A rare Enzo smile that made women weak in the knees. To me? It was the closest public display of loyalty I'd known. Or that this world allowed.

When I sat down, joining him at the bar, Enzo immediately used the moment to point out the obvious. "Am I the only one who thinks this was a bad idea?"

"What?" I let out a soft laugh. "All these gangsters under the same roof or Ilya getting married?"

"Both."

"Trust me, you're not the only one." I had tried to talk to Ilya about his reasons, but he shut me down every time.

"His life," Enzo concluded, raising his glass.

Drinks in hand, we saluted instead of clinking glasses. Vodka for me, whiskey for him. Though we both knew he was a wine lover.

Not here. Not among them.

As the liquid burned a familiar path down my throat, I turned to him. “What now? Is there a guide for these things?”



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Enzo's glass hit the bar with a soft clink. "You drink until you forget and try not to start any drama."

I leveled him with a look. "Aren't you here to represent?"

Unhappy with the regularity, Enzo shrugged. "Apparently."

"Don't be making an appearance?" I asked, despite already knowing the answer.

I'd worked with these men for years, Italians included, completing countless tasks for them, but I was yet to meet their leader. Unlike the gossip suggested, he wasn't a ghost, though he might as well have been, with his rare, almost nonexistent appearances.

"That's why I won't stir anything," Enzo admitted, finishing his drink.

A soft chuckle left me. "Good luck with that."

From what I'd heard, Enzo wasn't happy with the alignment between the Cosa Nostra and the Bratva. He was either bruised from the past or didn't see the need. His duty to attend these events only fueled his frustration. One thing was certain: if the Sicilians held a higher position, or one of their own, I highly doubt they'd submit themselves to this show.

As if he followed my train of thought, the Pakhan, Ilya, found us at the bar half an hour later. How many drinks had I consumed? I lost count. My cheeks were slightly flushed.

The two men acknowledged each other with a nod. I laughed internally. Typical.

Beyond the initial greeting, Ilya paid no attention to Enzo and focused solely on me.

“We’ll do an official introduction and discuss details,” Ilya informed me. “Privately,” he emphasized the word.

“So proper, Aistov,” Enzo didn’t miss the opportunity to insert himself. “Does your young wife already have you by the balls?”

“Artuso,” Ilya greeted the Sicilian. “What a pleasure to listen to your bullshit,” he shot back.

Like a ping-pong match, you watch all these men interact, shooting words back and forth, always the same story. Every so often, these exchanges get heated, and that’s when the real fun starts.

The last time Bratva held a meeting with mixed members, the wall crumbled under the weight of bullet holes, and hostages had to be exchanged by the end of the event. There was nothing like team bonding.

And Enzo and Ilya? There was no love lost between the two. Somehow, they coexisted, never missing an opportunity to poke one another. Verbally, so far.

I gathered my things quicker than expected, cutting the conversation short. Clutching the purse under my arm, I threw my drinking partner a warning glance.

“Better not get drunk without me.”

“You might need to run, or Pakhan will pop that vein on his forehead.” Enzo flashed me a grin. “We can’t have that,” he said, and something told me that’s exactly what

he would want.

When I turned around, sure enough, Ilya stood halfway down the room, looking quite impatient. In long strides, I caught up to him, my heels clicking with each step.

“I don’t understand why you need me there,” I questioned, unaware of any changes. I hadn’t been present in Bratva’s meetings outside the discussions concerning my contracted missions.

“Her brothers will work with us closely after the wedding.” Ilya brought me up to speed as we moved away from the crowd.

Here’s where those hacking skills came in handy. Had I researched them all before we even met? What kind of friend would I be if I hadn’t?

It was standard practice to know everything about a person, especially if you were about to interact with them.

Knowledge is power.

Ilya and I were close enough that I wouldn’t let him marry into a family with skeletons of their own.

The Galkin siblings came from a long line of Bratva members. Their genealogy traced back centuries, with branches filled with prominent Russian socialites. Never the rulers themselves, but always close to power.

Currently operating out of Philadelphia, they’d been running the city since their parents retired a few years back, leaving them in charge.

Andrei, in particular. The oldest and head of their family. Their ticket to the Pakhan.

Or he was, until the whole marriage thing came along. He was the only sibling out of the four with a family of his own, his wife Mila. Marriages in the underworld followed a basic pattern. The unions rarely stepped outside the circle, and theirs was no exception.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Maxim was the second oldest. I sure had fun researching his ass. The man had a track record you could read like a list, and I couldn't resist doing just that. Despite having years on me, he still fell short of my numbers. Missions, rescues, military operations. His name kept appearing, report after report. I swore he had a hand in everything. Some records even dated back to an era I'd only read about.

Then there was Luka, the youngest of the brothers. On paper, he was the genius of the family. The mastermind securing Bratva the dough for their bread.

Alisa, their only sister. The bride-to-be. Her record? Squeaky clean. A picture and basic information. Nothing beyond that. No mentions of her involvement in whatever her brothers had been cooking.

Without her name and access to the school database, connecting Alisa to the rest would've been nearly impossible. It looked like someone had deliberately erased all traces.

But once you spotted the connection, it wasn't hard to see. They were unmistakably siblings. Golden brown hair. Green eyes. Similar features. Though each, especially the brothers, had a distinct style.

I didn't have time to sift through the hundreds of pictures buried in the depths of the internet, so I relied on IDs.

Thank you, dear government. Forever grateful for your stupidity, and mostly for the lack of security.

My only sister was getting married. The thought alone made me damn trigger-happy.

The longer I stared at these idiots, the more the urge to snap grew. My brothers, Andrei, Luka, and I, did everything we could to keep her away from this world. She wasn't supposed to be part of it, not in any way.

Yet here we were, at an engagement party between my youngest sibling and Ilya motherfucking Aistov, the Pakhan of the Bratva, our boss.

Just how badly had our plan backfired? From protecting her to handing her off to the highest-ranked bastard.

Every time I got a glimpse of him, I wanted to smash his face in and keep going until even his mother wouldn't recognize him. Which she wouldn't because she was dead.

I laughed to myself, replaying all the names I'd been called.

The unstable one. Unable to control his impulses.

With aggressive tendencies. One without a filter.

The joker. The one who actively seeks danger.

Enjoys bloodshed.

Your honor, I plead guilty to all of the above.

Despite my foolishness, or maybe because of it, I've earned quite the reputation among the rest of the crew. It is these events, the Bratva gatherings, that often make me recall the beginnings.

Sworn in at sixteen, I've been a member for over two decades and then some. I've lived through many leadership changes, accepting orders from both old men and young kids. When they need someone to do the dirty work, I volunteer. I've never been one to stand in the shadows while others work for me. No, the hands-on approach has always been more my style.

Life in Bratva can be tough. Still, not a single member of the Galkin family stepped away. They were either carried out feet first or remained kicking.

We came from a bloodline of loyal members, the descendants of the original founding families, something we spoke about proudly. Especially our parents. While we grew up in the US, both mother and father were born and raised in Russia.

I swear they made each kid with a purpose in mind, to be put through the system and serve a role. Since the age of six, my father had put us to work. While Andrei was always meant to be the leader and Luka the numbers guy, I was the enforcer. Built to carry out the brutal tasks, whatever the brotherhood needed.

The path was pretty much set, and I accepted it, not knowing anything else. It wasn't hard to fall in line.

Military, prison, illegal fights, you name it, I've done it. Been stabbed, shot, kidnapped, starved, tortured, and used in too many ways. Yet here I was, stronger than ever.

Physically, sure. Mentally? Eh, some screws were loose, some had fallen out, but I was making the most with what I had.

Father might have had ambitions once upon a time, but when Andrei took over the family, they got brushed under the carpet. Not everybody was power-hungry, not in the same way. We ruled Philly and ran wide operations, accumulating Bratva the

biggest stash of money in the US. Mostly thanks to my brother Luka's genius. The man had business in his blood, layered under booze, cards, women, and attitude.

The organization profited through the import and export of guns and other merchandise. Ilya knew he needed us. How did he find out we had a sister? A mystery they both refused to comment on.

When we asked Alisa, she brushed the questions off like it was nothing. And that's how I ended up here, at this open bar, getting drunk on unlimited vodka with my siblings. We didn't belong in this fancy establishment, nor did we want to be here.

Twisting the white flower decor between my tattooed fingers, I focused on the contrast of the colors. No fancy suits and expensive watches could hide the blood on our hands. The black and red ink covering my body served as a reminder of what I've done and what's been done to me.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Although among the other invitees, I was just another face in a line of gangsters. We were all sinners, killers, or psychopaths. All the above and more, depending on the case.

Innocence was a rare trait most of us didn't get to possess for long.

Which is precisely why we went to all lengths to protect our sister. We've seen ourselves as sworn protectors since the moment she joined this family, a little bundle with a pink bow in her fair hair. Until the very end, no matter who her husband ends up being.

Pakhan or not, I wouldn't hesitate to rid the world of him. A tiny slip on his side would be enough to kickstart me into action.

"Andrei, you need to cheer up. You're staring," Alisa's voice forced me to pay attention.

"Observing," our oldest brother corrected, his voice dripping with irritation. His usual broody self.

"Can you observe with less of a snare?"

Luka, my younger brother, clapped Andrei on the back, grinning. "A couple more shots should do the trick," he said, already flagging down the bartender for a refill.

Andrei immediately protested with a grunt. "We need to stay alert."

Being the oldest meant you got stuck with responsibilities you never asked for.

“Chill, man. We get it,” Luka teased, a playful glint in his eyes as he poked at Andrei.

“Where’s the groom? Shouldn’t he be here?” I asked, looking for any excuse to throw Ilya under the bus.

“He’s here,” Andrei stated, sounding more informed. “He called me earlier, requesting a meeting.”

A grin took over my features. Interesting turn of events. I expected to run into Ilya and use the moment to speak my mind, but a better opportunity just presented itself.

“Meeting, you say?” Eagerness mixed with excitement rang in my voice, and given our close bond, my siblings had no trouble picking up on it.

Alisa immediately reacted, her gaze sharp as she read my expression. “No fights and no shooting. You especially, Maxim,” she pointed at me for emphasis.

I raised one eyebrow in question. “Why me?”

Patting me on the shoulder, Alisa spoke her mind. “Brat, it’s simple. You make impulsive decisions, while the rest of us are more likely to ask questions before we shoot.”

Yeah, that sounds like me. With a confident smile, I corrected her. “If I’m shooting, there are no questions left to ask.”

“I might have one. Who’s that?”

All heads turned to our brother, attempting to figure out who or what had caught his

attention. When Luka nonchalantly gestured toward the back of the room, we all followed in perfect sequence, discretion be damned.

A woman stood tall with the groom-to-be, deep in conversation. With no security in sight, she leaned close to Ilya with such confidence that I questioned her position.

The dress she wore resembled the crimson liquid we were all too familiar with. I should know, since that very color filled my body inside and out. A bold choice for someone's wedding party, let alone the Pakhan's. The stranger earned an unimportant plus in my book, a token of respect.

I could spend a minute trying to find the intent. There might be none, for obviously, there were other reasons behind the decision. If anything, the way the material hugged her curves was probably the main one. Even from a distance, I could tell the match was undeniable.

They walked out of the room toward the back before I had a chance to analyze further. She didn't seem like anyone I recognized, and since I was pretty good with faces, I'd remember her, her style, her posture, the subtle combination of daring and elegant.

Then again, I didn't pay much attention to women these days.

When the duo disappeared, my older brother answered the question hanging in the air.

"Someone whose radar you don't want to end up on," Andrei clarified.

I flashed him a wicked smile. "Now I'm even more interested."

"Your funeral, stronzo." A dark-haired man seated at the left side of the bar pitched

in. His deep voice silenced us all. He clearly fucking eavesdropped on our entire conversation.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

My eyes flickered to him, sitting there with an empty whiskey glass. His feet crossed under the stool, and the man made no effort to elaborate, too busy staring at the bottom of his glass in concentration, as if expecting it to refill if he waited long enough.

The bar's surface served as my slide when I approached the stranger. "You two know each other," I pointed out.

He sized me up, granting me a far too judgmental look. "Hence the warning that you're so blindly ignoring."

I chuckled. "They say I'm impulsive."

An eye twitch flickered in his left eye. "Impulsiveness gets you killed. So does she."

"Who is she?" I puffed out. "The Black Widow?"

A legend among those who had something to hide. A scary tale whispered to naughty children at night. To adults, the Bratva enforcer was a literal symbol of justice among criminals. If there ever was an equivalent of a court for Mafia associates, The Black Widow would be the judge handing you over to the executioner. With the death of the Pakhan of her era came her disappearance.

To this day, there are speculations about what could have happened. Most say she swims with the fishes in the Volga River.

"The Black Widow wishes," the man uttered.

To be compared to her was an honor. To be called better than her? That's a bold statement.

I inched closer to the man in another attempt to gain information. "C'mon. Give me something."

Given this guy's interest, I made an educated guess when he didn't react. "Is she with the Italians?"

The asshole just went back to staring. Dismissed? Me? I don't think so. Compulsion took over. Somehow, it felt vital to find out who she was.

It was unusual for a woman to be feared and warned against among this group. Often, despite my protests, the women of this world were only present in the roles of sisters, mothers, or wives. In the mafia ranks? They were a rarity.

While I get how it may sound, given I tried to protect our own sister, I was very much for equal rights. A big difference between making a choice and being told. If this path, the position was chosen and earned? All power to them.

A refill landed in front of him, courtesy of me or rather Ilya, so he finally dropped the creepy staring. I lingered in my spot, determined to wait him out. Patience wasn't my strongest suit, but I could adapt when needed.

The chunky family ring on my pinky tapped a steady rhythm against the glass. The sound, close and constant, would probably drive someone insane after a while. For a fleeting moment, as he remained unmoved, I considered choking the information out of the Italian. But I was spared the effort when he finally caved.

"Her name is Taya."

Torture forgone, I placed my drink down and asked, “Bratva?” One of ours?

“Independent.”

I turned to him in surprise, or as much as I could put on display. “There’s no such thing,” I dismissed his claims.

“There wasn’t. Now there is. You see where this is going?” He gestured toward the exit. “That bus has only one stop with her driving. The final one.”

I smirked at the added drama. “Incredibly poetic.”

“Liquor brings that out of me,” he admitted with a sigh.

“You care about her,” I stated, more out of observation than as a question.

A low growl rumbled from him, his protectiveness slipping through. “I don’t want her involved.”

I rolled my eyes. Do I have to do all the heavy lifting here? Short on creativity, I asked outright, “Involved in...?”

He looked me up and down, his expression a clear warning. The man might want to work on that.

“Whatever you have going on for you.”

I thought about his words, unsure of where to go from here. We sat silently, aware of each other’s presence, both caught up in our own trains of thought. He downed the rest of his drink in one gulp, his entire demeanor shifting unexpectedly as he followed up with a joke.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Do me a favor. If I dance on any tables, feel free to knock me out.”

I matched his mood. “You can count on me. Can this be a two-way agreement?”

“You’re on. Lorenzo Artuso. Sicilian mafia.”

He held out his hand, and I accepted, shaking it firmly. “Maxim Galkin. Bratva.”

“Right,” he smirked, “the pale eyes and attitude gave you away.”

“Said the hairy one. You were such a hard guess,” I shot back, “with your overuse of the word ‘stronzo’ and those shiny shoes,” I added, pointing to his perfectly polished moccasins.

A quick look at the guy was enough to categorize him. He wasn’t far behind me in that regard.

“Now you’re pushing.”

With a cocky smile and a casual shrug, I admitted, “I love doing that.”

A brief second passed before he surprised me again, this time with an unexpected honesty.

“If we lived in a world where we could be more than just a coexisting party, I might say I like you, Galkin.”



I didn't hold back the laugh that escaped me.

"Can you imagine?"

We shared a look of understanding and left it at that. If we were honest, we probably had a lot in common. Growing up in any of the organizations meant you were hardened into toughness. The things you saw, the actions you witnessed, they shaped you into who you became. Weakness wasn't an option. Friendships? A luxury no one could afford. Not in a world of favors and temporary trusts.

With a double shot of vodka, I left the Italian to his staring contest and rejoined the family. By the time we regrouped, we had reached the designated meeting spot: a formal dining room.

The reality hadn't fully hit me yet. This would be Alisa's life if she married Ilya.

As the Pakhan's wife, she'd be expected to host, plan, and handle whatever else came with these endless meetups. That would be her role.

Alisa, my sister, who stands up to our father and talks back to our mother. The same Alisa who sneaks men into her childhood bedroom when she isn't busy sneaking out herself. Who goes to raves just to live in the moment. It was almost impossible to understand why she agreed to go through with the contract, but it was her choice, and I accepted it for what it was. That didn't mean I understood it, or ever would. Or that I saw it as the right decision.

One look around made it painfully clear that this was no ordinary event. Far from a typical family gathering, no expense had been spared. Only the best for the Pakhan. How he operated reflected on the entire organization, leaving no room for error.

Perfectly ironed napkins, silverware sets, and flowers of every variety filled every

inch of the endless display of wealth. Soon, the table would overflow with food, and gossip would be served alongside the guests' steaks.

Formalities were never my thing. Sure, I wore a tailor-made suit, mainly for how it hugged my body. No complaints there. But stripped bare, I was still me. No hidden truths, no fake persona. What you saw and heard was what you got. If you couldn't handle me, that was your problem. I wouldn't sacrifice a fraction of myself.

Unlike them. The ones who wore masks, presenting a front to cover the shame underneath. They were nothing without the lies they sold.

"He realizes we're part of his organization. Who is there to meet?" Luka asked, trying to make sense of the gathering as we settled in the room.

"I guess we're about to find out," I replied, hoping to settle his unease. Seated at the edge, we all waited for the host. Andrei positioned himself closest to Pakhan, as his role as head of the family dictated.

My eyes narrowed at the set table, fighting the urge to flip the damn thing over. I promised Alisa I'd behave. And I will... try.

The door creaked open, interrupting the inner monologue I was enjoying. Ilya stepped in, the woman in red trailing behind. Her gaze swept across the room, landing on each of us slowly, as if memorizing our faces, matching them to something only she knew.

It took seconds before they made their way to the empty seats. Seconds I used to return the attention she'd given me.

Ilya greeted Alisa with the same enthusiasm you'd expect from a man caught in an arranged marriage or one of his position. A fucking nod. Stoic. Detached.

Okay, we need to have a talk about his manners.

Taya, as I learned from Lorenzo, the fellow bar enthusiast, stepped forward with swift, confident strides, seating herself at Ilya's right. A chair, usually reserved for the second-in-command, Malek, who wasn't present, was now occupied by the blonde woman.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

The details couldn't escape you. They were fragments of importance.

I studied the pair, looking for any signs. Any clues.

Are they related?

As far as I knew, Ilya had no family left. After his parents were murdered in Russia, he took over the Bratva and relocated across the ocean with Malek as his only passenger.

She couldn't rank high in his inner circle without us knowing. Independent. The word had stuck with me since the Italian let it slip.

How does someone stay on good terms with all these gangsters without being forced to swear loyalty, one way or another?

"Who are we waiting for?" Taya broke the silence, drawing everyone's attention, including mine.

"One more person," Ilya answered.

They shared a look filled with a thousand words, and for a brief second, I saw this relationship in a different light. Realization hit me like a bucket of cold water.

Are they involved?

Should that be the case, shit won't fly with me. Alisa won't be someone's second

choice, not if I could help it.

The woman stood up, heading to the compact bar occupying the corner. Perfectly aligned glasses awaited her on a tray, a bottle placed on ice. Taya didn't hesitate to pour herself a drink, ignoring the rest of us. I followed every move from the spot at the edge of the table. The glass rested against her lips, and when she was about to take the first sip, her back straightened. I swear I heard a whisper of prolonged "fuck" under her breath.

The door opened, revealing Malek. The entire table turned to the newcomer as he greeted them in Russian.

I had been aware of him for a couple of years. It would be hard not to since we ran in the same circles, but somehow, probably because of his frequent business trips to Russia, we never met face-to-face.

Until today.

Focused on his face, I noticed the lack of body movement when he stopped midway, searching the room. His gaze locked on Taya, the corner of his lips lifting.

What in the fuck was going on in this messed-up dynamic of theirs? A love triangle of sorts? Why would Ilya invite Malek to this meeting if he knows he's gunning for the position as we speak?

Oh, my fingers were itching to pull that trigger now. The gun strapped to my right ankle burned an outline into my skin.

I both felt and heard Malek's presence before he even reached for the door handle. The stupidest and most useful skill I'd picked up.

As soon as he walked in, I knew something was happening between him and Ilya. Some dick-measuring contest I wanted no part of. The latter avoided the topic like the plague.

For the first time since we had known each other, Ilya purposely withheld information from me.

Ironic, since he knew nothing about my life. This was different. Ilya's choices were going to affect us all, and he seemed set on making all the moves in one night.

"Taya," Malek's voice carried a hint of longing when he spoke the name. My name.

"Malek," I acknowledged his presence from where I sat, fingers wrapped around the delicate flute of champagne the room offered.

"It's been a while," he noted, his heated glances burning my skin.

My tone was polite and professional, given the present company. "Can't say much has changed."

Nothing, in fact.

"I missed you, solnishko," Malek beamed while I tensed at his words, tightening my grip on the glass.

Here? Now? In front of all these people? And who in their right mind uses Russian pet names, meant for private use only, now spoken in front of a bunch of native speakers?

I examined his face, eyeing him curiously. Nothing seemed to have changed either. Malek looked exactly as I remembered him. Tall, with slicked-back raven hair, his

muscular body packed with lean muscles I'd traced with my tongue not long ago.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Every bit the soldier from the street, they described him as.

Despite the initial shock, I can't say his statement surprised me. It was more the timing. I suspected Malek had a harder time moving on from our brief fling than I did.

These fucking men could pretend to be all tough and detached, yet one way or another, they were all hooked. All possessed weaknesses. Had attachments. Feelings in some capacity. Women, addictions, greed, money.

Don't they say everyone can be bought? They can also be hurt just the same.

Malek, walking in with his obsessive declarations, complicated everything. Not in the head, no; my thoughts on the matter were clear. Moreover, he wasn't a man I wanted to be connected to. Especially now.

I could do without the attention his obsession brought along. He was coming for Ilya's position. Or at least had long-term ambitions. I can't be seen as a part of the movement.

If only I possessed the ability to predict the future when I gave myself to him months ago.

Thinking of an appropriate response, given the situation I found myself in, I breathed out, "I..."

"Wow," the man seated furthest spoke, getting everyone's attention. "I didn't know



this meeting came with a show.”

By interrupting me, he certainly saved Malek from the public embarrassment of being turned down. No ‘missed you too’ would come out of my mouth.

Malek’s head snapped toward the direction of the voice, assessing the owner. “You must be Maxim.”

“That’s me. And you are?” With his gaze locked on me, it was painfully obvious Malek wasn’t the one Maxim was interested in getting to know.

Either I amused him, or he was doing his best to get on Malek’s nerves.

My mouth opened a crack before Ilya answered for me. “Taya.”

His insertion ticked me off. I didn’t need him speaking for me.

The rest of the table watched closely, not breathing a sound, while the four of us entertained.

Maxim never dropped his gaze, and I stared right back. A moment passed before he smiled, blinked, and turned his tattooed neck elsewhere.

I swear he just winked at me. Did anyone catch that? Who did I piss off to end up at this table filled with insane men?

Enzo better have a drink waiting for me.

While I brewed, Maxim continued inquiring, “What kind of twisted love triangle do we have going on here?” He motioned between the three of us with his inked hand before finally setting his eyes on Ilya. “And you plan for my sister to fall into this,

how, exactly? Please, do tell.”

His tone wasn’t Pakhan-friendly, but clearly he didn’t care.

Ilya sat up straight, his mouth set in a straight line. “Taya and I are long-term friends,” he clarified, not sparing Alisa a glance. “What’s between her and Malek isn’t my business.”

Maxim zeroed in on me again, awaiting a response. I looked at Malek instead, hoping for his reaction, but it was clear he was glad for the chance to put a label on us.

The entire situation felt very much like a ‘no, you do it’ moment, with everybody pointing at someone else, and I grew more tired with each passing second.

Patience at an ultimate low, I left it all out there. “We fucked.”

Somewhere down the table, a cough sounded, but I didn’t inquire whose.

Intending to stare down Maxim, the current source of my irritation, I expanded on the statement. “You know, that’s when two consenting adults agree to do something that is none of your fucking business.”

A look of approval flashed on his face before he smiled, almost creepily. “Feisty.” The word rolled off his tongue. “I wouldn’t be asking if Romeo here,” he pointed to Malek, seated on the opposite side, “didn’t march in with hearts instead of eyes.”

Point taken.

“We aren’t here for me or Malek.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I turned my attention to the only other woman present. Alisa. I caught a brief glimpse of her earlier. She walked by the bar with such ease, I had to focus on her feet to convince myself she wasn't floating. Born to walk the runway, stuck between strong-headed gangsters. Her dress was a stunning white with lace sleeves. Her golden-brown hair, a family trait, cut shoulder-length, was perfectly styled. The bride looked every bit ready for the occasion.

She appeared well-suited for the role of the wife of their leader, judging by her looks, which is exactly what they did. What we all gathered here for: to judge and deem her worthy of the position.

"Alisa, right? Great to meet you. I'm Taya," I spoke softly, ignoring the eyes on me. "I work with Ilya, but you have nothing to fear."

She seemed to appreciate the change of topic just as much. Alisa revealed her perfect smile, gracefully greeting me back. "Hi, Taya."

When silence filled the dining room, Malek addressed the boss. "Pakhan, you called the meeting."

It was strange to hear the title come from his mouth.

Ilya didn't move, didn't look his way. Instead, he spoke to no one in particular. "With the wedding approaching, I want to go over the changes this union will bring."

"Please," Andrei encouraged him respectfully. The man had class, unlike his brother, who still threw occasional glances my way.

“Now that I’m marrying your sister,” Ilya addressed the Galkins, “Andrei will become my third in command. After Malek.” His eyes flashed to Malek briefly, almost daring him to intercept, before settling on the rest of the Galkin siblings. “Since I’ll need Andrei here, you and your brother will take over the responsibilities in Philadelphia.”

“Gladly,” Luka, the youngest of the men, answered.

“There is also the matter of planning,” Ilya said, moving down the list. “I expect traditions to be upheld. We’ve discussed this, so Alisa knows what needs to be done.”

This version of Ilya was new to me. I first saw him as a friend. I heard his command as a Pakhan. But whoever this was wasn’t him. I wondered if Malek’s presence affected him more than he let on.

Over the years, I learned how to read people. Ilya was the very definition of a brat. Everything fell right into his lap, and it still wasn’t enough.

Despite his position, he questioned himself a lot. The biggest fault was that he wasn’t particularly good at hiding it. It wasn’t my place to say, so I took a mental note and refrained from commenting.

With a silent plea to Ilya for permission to interrupt, Alisa addressed me. “We thought you could help with planning.”

Me? Event planning? What’s next? Knitting?

“I know nothing about weddings,” I admitted.

Alisa’s big green eyes pleaded for the lifeline, but it wasn’t just that which convinced me to agree. A part of me awakened, jumping at the opportunity to do the mundane

tasks I never got to do.

“Okay,” I agreed.

Flexibility. Another thing I was good at. After everything I’d put myself through, I was sure a couple of decisions about food or whatever else the planning entailed wouldn’t break me.

“We would also be honored if you and Maxim agreed to be our witnesses,” Alisa added.

Upon hearing his sister’s words, we both shared a look, equally confused.

Surely, they were more qualified candidates, some even sitting at the table.

On top of that, I wasn’t sure we should even be alone. I already had a couple of sweet moments in mind, imagining myself making his eyes pop out of his head for that wink.

“Why not Malek?” I whispered discreetly to Ilya sitting next to me. As far as I knew, they were closer, if not the closest.

Ilya’s voice was the Pakhan’s order. “This is the way it’s going to be.”

I wasn’t one to let him boss me around, and I certainly wouldn’t bother asking for permission from him or anyone else, but I also knew how to choose my battles.

Since Alisa was the one who asked, I agreed, preventing us from starting on a bad note.

It wasn’t the task, per se, that bothered me. It was more about how the world would

see the move, how the decision would be interpreted. All eyes were on the wedding. Whispers would make the rounds about an outsider this close to the Pakhan.

Soon, they'd surround me like crows, hoping their words would reach higher through me.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Nothing I couldn't handle, but annoying, nevertheless.

This time, I lowered my head and agreed. "Let me know what's expected of me."

"Alisa will fill you in. We'll meet up later to discuss the details. We have a party and an after-party to get to," Ilya reminded us of the plan for the day.

His fiancée took that as a dismissal and was the first to stand from the table.

I happily ignored Malek's attempts to flag me down, following her out of the room, grateful for the meeting to be over.

We settled back at the bar, ordering a round. When the bartender placed the drinks down, I faced the bride.

"You and I will get along just fine. It's the rest of them I worry about." I pointed toward the men, still sitting at the table.

"My brothers tend to be a little extra." Alisa rolled her eyes. "They're overprotective as heck."

Once aware of her slip, she covered her mouth in shock, eyes wide. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I should at least pretend to have some manners."

"Just be yourself. No pretending." I gave her a quick smile. "But I need to know. Are you sure you want to do this? It's not too late to cancel."

She nodded swiftly, almost too fast. “I’m certain, but thank you.”

“In that case, what do you need my help with? I know nothing about weddings. This will be my first.”

Shock crossed her soft features. “You’ve never attended a wedding?”

I swallowed the liquid. “I’m not one for socializing.”

Alisa didn’t pry. Instead, she led the way. “Lucky for you, I have everything planned. I’ve been dreaming about it for years: the dress, the decor, even the venue. Perfection,” she emphasized the word. “I refuse to settle for less. It’ll make all the other weddings look like a carnival compared to mine.”

Sounds easy enough, I thought. “Best first wedding I’ll ever go to,” I said, raising my glass.

“Guaranteed.”

I made my first female friend at the age of twenty-three.

The unofficial part of the engagement party was on schedule for the night. Held at a new location with a significantly reduced guest list, I walked down the block, the city’s sounds blending with the click of my high heels.

After a quick stop at home to change, I was more than ready to enjoy the night.

Neon signs led me to a Bratva-owned nightclub in a more prominent part of town. I knew the layout and the clientele here all too well. I often came for a drink, but mostly to dance.



The combination of the two usually led to heated touches exchanged with strangers.

A safe ground for members and allies, it was where I thrived. My playground.

The space also served as a meeting point for settling business deals.

Bratva's problems were solved upstairs and illuminated downstairs. Everyone knew not to get involved, to keep your mouth shut or face retribution.

As usual, the music blared at full blast, and people scattered across the three-story building as I entered. The VIP area on the upper floor was reserved for the elite. Money didn't guarantee entry; it was a perk of your position. An invitation wasn't enough under normal circumstances. Today, however, the floor was reserved for a select few. With a nod to the bodyguards stationed at the entrance, I made my way up the stairs. There, on huge leather couches, two groups of guests were celebrating.

The mood was surprisingly light, with laughter and the promise of a good time echoing in the air. At the end of the day, we were all just grown-up kids looking for an excuse to party. All eager to escape the ugliness of the day.

I was no exception.

"Stranger," Enzo called out from the bar, and I grinned at the predictability of his location.

He's always been my go-to in crowds, a beacon I followed. We arrived together and often left together, though not always, given Enzo's late-night activities.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Hey,” I greeted him with a kiss on both cheeks and signaled the bartender for my usual. One thing I never had to worry about was my alcohol tolerance.

I faced the room, turning on the back of my heel. “What did I miss? Any good action?” I asked Enzo.

“It’s been surprisingly uneventful.”

My face scrunched at his words. With a group of gangsters with big egos in the same room, something was bound to happen eventually. With alcohol involved, the chances increased. Somehow, we always managed to resolve conflicts without serious consequences. So far. After the first few times, it quickly became more of a laughing matter.

Fine, we occasionally bet on the chances.

“Maybe they’re saving it for the wedding,” Enzo teased.

“I hope not. I’ll be in the direct line of fire.”

A slight gasp escaped him. “He didn’t.”

I turned to him, amused by the reaction. After-work Enzo was in full swing, and I was here for it.

“You’re looking at the maid of honor.” I twirled for dramatic effect, not caring about the childish display.

“Who else?” Enzo asked, spinning his glass in his hand.

“Maxim Galkin,” I said, speaking his name for the first time.

Enzo narrowed his gaze at the man in question, now seated on the couch, chatting with his younger brother Luka.

His legs spread wide, his dress shirt unbuttoned. I had yet to see him in a suit jacket, and though he had the missing piece around, it was never on.

A drink occupied his hand, the transparent liquid invisible in the glass, making the chunky rings on his fingers stand out. He made the rough look appealing in the most delicious way. A thick silver chain hung from his neck. For a brief moment, I imagined what it would feel like to wrap my hand around it and pull, or to hold onto the cold metal.

His eyes followed the thoughts, and he sported a knowing smile when they registered. Pissed at him for catching me, or at myself for not resisting him, I stuck out my tongue. I wasn’t one to back down, and neither was he, since he returned it right back.

Cocky bastard.

When I zoned back in on Enzo, he wore a strange look.

I pointed to his face, circling my finger. “What’s that look?”

“I had a quick chat with him at the bar,” Enzo said, tilting his head toward Maxim. “He seemed... interested.”

“Interested in what?”

“You,” Enzo breathed out the word.

I let out an unhitched laugh. Shared thoughts. They all led to the same resolution.

But I played it cool. “No thank you,” I whistled. “After Malek’s antics, I’m swearing off gangsters for the foreseeable future. They’re all clingy and possessive.”

I shrugged, but Enzo was quick to call me out, nudging me in the shoulder. “Stop lying. You love that shit.”

Did I enjoy giving up control and being possessed in bed? Hell yeah.

Outside? In front of other people? Not so much.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “Ilya certainly didn’t enjoy it. Not a good first impression.”

“What crawled up his ass?” Enzo glanced at Ilya, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“I wish I knew,” I puffed out a breath. “He completely shut me out.” Very unlike him, which worried me about what was coming our way.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Enzo's eyes flickered toward Ilya, then back to me, his tone shifting to something a little more serious. "Let's get past this wedding first."

"One problem at a time."

"One at a time."

Enzo casually slung his arm around my shoulders as we made our way to the seating area, joining the party.

I could see how some might misread our relationship, seeing us as more than friends. The same could be said for Ilya. But honestly, I'd never seen either of them that way. We'd bonded over time, and now it felt natural to have them around.

Here I was, surrounded by so many people. Thirteen-year-old Taya would be happy to know that.

A wedding wasn't a dream of mine, but being surrounded by friends certainly was.

\*\*\*

When I grew tired of the business conversation or the Galkins' intense stares, I climbed over Enzo, who stayed behind, and left the table.

Alisa was blushing by the time I approached her group. She had invited a bunch of her family members I'd never met, all tied to this life by marriage or blood; it didn't matter.

“Hey, Taya. I’m so glad you made it. And thank you so much for offering to help,” she greeted me in a flurry of words. The woman radiated happiness, and I couldn’t help but wonder what the secret behind her permanent smile was.

Sliding beside her on the leather couch, I seized the rare moment of privacy. “Are you ready for this?”

“No turning back now.”

“There’s still time. Should I start the getaway car?”

Her expression sobered at the suggestion. “I can’t think of a place where he wouldn’t find me.”

The words worried me, but there was still too much I didn’t know.

“I can.” Our eyes locked. “Maybe we don’t know each other, but if you’re in trouble, I can get you out,” I paused, “no questions asked.”

“I thought he was your friend,” Alisa protested, almost shocked at my offer.

“He is,” I confirmed. “But even friends make poor decisions I can help prevent.”

“I’m fine,” she reassured me, her hand dismissing any concerns. “It’s happening. I owe him a shot.”

You don’t owe him anything, I thought, but didn’t voice it. All I could do was hope her decisions aligned with what she owed herself.

A playful smile tugged at my usual poker face. “It’s still today. Why don’t we make the most of the night?”

Alisa lit up in excitement at my suggestion. “Yes, please.”

Hand in hand, we walked straight to the dance floor, kickstarting the night.

Ilya put a lot of effort into this place. His personal touch was why the club ranked among the most popular in the area. That and the fact that it was a known Bratva hangout.

The DJs were on fire tonight. When the next song started, Alisa and I lost ourselves in the music. Dancing wasn't something I particularly enjoyed or was good at, but tonight, it felt great to let go. I lifted my hands in the air, swinging my hips to the rhythm. Light reflected off my skin in shades of blue and green, and I traced the rainbows with my fingers.

Being on constant alert was tiring. But here, in this heated crowd, I let loose. Or at least, as much as my deranged mind would allow.

Occasionally, I scanned the upstairs for movement, but there wasn't much to see past the railing. Two or three figures leaned against the metal, glancing downstairs. Enzo never left without saying goodbye, even if he found this evening's entertainment. He was somewhere around, most likely deep in his drink like the rest of them.

It had been a while since I allowed myself to get lost in more than just the music. To a stranger. A flavor of the night.

While I didn't seek relationships, the same didn't apply to sex. I was hooked. Short of an addict. My body and mind were constantly at odds. I wanted to overindulge, to try and keep on trying. Taste everything there was to sample. The logical part of me wanted to reason, but the arguments weren't strong enough.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

There were no stoppers in place. No parents to worry about. No shame to drag me down. For this reason, I was grateful to be an orphan. Combined with the attitude I carried, it was a recipe for disaster. A delicious, hot mess I planned to enjoy.

I scanned the crowd. A few people gazed my way in open invitation, some I even recognized. I was free to pick like a kid in a candy store, and this club was the headquarters of Haribo. Men, women, couples. Point to the right one, and your life would never be the same. Your taste buds would change forever.

The problem? They all carried themselves with pride, but only a few knew how to handle me. Luckily, I'd never had an unsatisfactory experience.

If you possessed something, there was no need to prove the fact. But I enjoyed the game: the teasing, the power play. Easy wasn't the way.

Disguised as prey, I began the manhunt.

But this time? The death I brought with me manifested in repeated orgasms.

Their lucky day.

I wasn't one to turn down a party, but this? My sister's engagement? I came to drink, celebrate, and keep a close eye on the man who might one day be my brother-in-law. If I ever think of him that way. Until then, I'd be breathing down his neck.

Andrei stayed home with his wife, paying his respects by attending the earlier festivities. Date night, they said. Whatever that meant. Just an excuse to sin on all the



furniture in the house...

Since when did I become the one left in charge? First it was the operations, now this? Age wasn't a reflection of maturity, and I was living proof of that.

I spotted the Italian in his usual spot. Bored out of my mind, I headed his way, ready for more forced pleasantries.

"Lorenzo."

The man couldn't be happier to see me again.

"Maxim," he growled my name, sounding just as irritated.

"What are you doing?" I asked, taking in his jaded expression.

He glanced around the room, as if he, too, was wondering the same thing.

"Growing Ilya's tab," he retorted, taking a sip.

"You and me both."

We clinked our shots, then turned to scan the crowd below.

The dance floor was packed, way over the club's capacity, but no one cared.

I almost convinced myself I was scanning the space to keep an eye on my sister. Almost.

While still true, she sure wasn't the one I kept stealing glances at.

Was it wise to seek her? Nope. Did it stop me? Hell no.

A short midnight blue dress hugged her body tightly. It fit even better than the previous one. Her hair was still loose in blonde curls, swinging wildly as she danced next to Alisa. She threw her hands up, sporting a wild smile, mouthing the lyrics to the song.

Fiery things with attitude, my weakness.

Remembering earlier events, I turned to Lorenzo and probed further. “So, her and Malek?”

“Are you here to get more gossip out of me?”

The grin on my face was impossible to disguise. My intention exactly. “Depends on what you got.”

“As shocking as it sounds, we don’t braid each other’s hair and spill our darkest secrets regularly.”

“No? How else do you explain the haircut?” I reached for the ends of his long hair, but he swatted my advances away.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“I get plenty. Don’t you worry about that,” he confidently assured me.

“Oh I don’t doubt that. Chicks love the dark, tall, and handsome combo,” I said, grinning. “Hell, I’d tap it if I swung that way.”

Taken aback, Lorenzo tried to process my words. “Christ. You are quite a character.”

I locked eyes with him, pressing for answers. “Be straight with me. Her and Ilya? It’s my sister I worry about.”

He shook his head, his gaze moving toward Taya, the midnight sky blurred below us. Somehow, she blended in and stood out at the same time. “As far as I know, only Malek ever got to her. But it was never anything outside of sex,” he revealed, still focused on the dance floor. “It never is.”

“For many of us, I guess,” I seconded his words.

“Only a fool would imagine a future in this life. You’re lucky to make it through the day,” he muttered, turning to me. “What do you want with her, anyway?”

His eyes studied me, eager to catch anything I was willing to reveal.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those idiots who want exactly what they can’t have,” he said, shaking his head.

I ignored the obvious answer to his question. I had that in mind. Instead, I gave him a glimpse of the mess in my head. “If only I knew.”

“Just don’t end up like Malek. He’s the kind of moron who thinks that because he got to her first, he’s got some kind of claim. It doesn’t work like that,” he frowned, offering advice I didn’t ask for.

There was no need to tell me twice. Possessive declarations, public acts, whatever Malek was trying to achieve, it was a poor man’s attempt at staking his claim.

“I might obsess temporarily, but I don’t possess permanently.”

Parents sure had tried to get me to settle, tie me down to someone from somewhere. With Andrei now married, the spotlight was on me, the next in line. Mother claimed she was losing sleep over me. Father summed me up in two words: “Lost cause.” He worried I was too complicated for anyone to choose. Too fucked up, inside and out. The level of crazy no sane person picks for themselves.

Whatever they worried about, I had little care for.

Alone was what I was best at. Work kept me occupied, women kept me satisfied, and family kept me fulfilled. What more was there in life?

I turned back to Lorenzo, far too eager to shift the focus.

“There’s no one out there for you?” I asked, watching closely, testing the line between friendship and more. But that line, while thin, seemed set.

Despite the alliance, he wasn’t present in the meeting, so either Taya had confided in him or he’d seen this coming. They were close. It’s the “why” I didn’t understand.

With a sigh, he muttered, “There are too many.”

A laugh, far too loud, escaped me, but the sound was swallowed by the chaos around

us. “Yet here you are.”

“Here we are.”

“Well, it’s not the worst place to be.”

Lorenzo refocused on the group of women, scanning the downstairs as if he, too, struggled to keep his gaze away.

“What’s the story with your sister?”

Unsure about the ground we stood on, I revealed very little. “We sent her to university to get her out, but she’s too stubborn.” I shook my head. “Came back with a degree and an intent to marry.”

Something we never saw coming.

“Why Ilya?” Boss’s first name slipped from the Italian’s mouth, the lack of respect for the man clear.

“Fuck if I know. But it’s her decision, and I’ll support her.”

Lorenzo studied me before answering. “Very not-Bratva of you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“When it comes to my siblings, Bratva is secondary.” I held his gaze.

“Something you can try to use against me if you wish.”

I waited for his reaction, a savage grin tugging at my lips.

To my dissatisfaction, he shut me down. “Stop riling me up.”

I slapped him on the back. “But it’s so fun.”

“Speak for yourself. You realize that mouth will get you killed, right?”

“I’m counting on it.”

Time didn’t matter here. For all I knew, it could’ve been hours. When the crowd thickened, hinting it was already early morning, I stepped aside to grab a drink, needing a moment to breathe.

Alisa poured her heart into the dance, spinning and laughing under the spotlight. So free. It tugged at my lips, forcing a small smile.

It was too easy to forget what was waiting beyond the entrance. For a second, as I watched the bride, I felt light. I’d forgotten the past and didn’t care about the future.

Her green eyes locked on me from the edge of the crowd. I pointed to the VIP section upstairs, silently asking. She shook her head.

“Enjoy,” I mouthed before turning toward the staircase.

The couches upstairs were empty; the guests partied throughout the building, most of them beyond drunk. Open bottles of expensive vodka cluttered the tables. Ilya had told the staff not to clean up. The mess, apparently, was a sign of a good time. I rolled my eyes. Vodka and tea were the two things Russians could consume by the gallon.

I sought out a dark corner of the room, needing to cool down and be alone for a moment. Bow after bow, I untied my heels and kicked them off.

The soft carpet beneath my feet made me curse Ilya for not choosing a stone floor, which I would’ve welcomed more.

Leaning my head back against the wall, I let out a long breath, trying to release the tension and focus on the music. The familiar rhythm brought back memories of all the times I’d used this space as therapy. Still, the cooling effect I hoped for didn’t come. Sighing, I made myself comfortable on the nearest couch.

Laid out flat, glaring at the ceiling, I watched the party lights swirl above me in an explosion of colors. They blurred together, spinning just enough to make my head feel light, maybe even high. But I stared, letting them hypnotize me.

Red. Green. Blue. Purple. Black.

“Do you plan on staring all night?” I asked, my voice cutting through the music like a blade.

Seconds passed before I addressed the man looming above me. I had felt his presence for a while but didn’t move, content to let him reveal his intentions first.

His shadow stretched over me as he leaned closer, his frame teetering dangerously at

the edge of the couch. For a moment, I braced for his body to collapse onto mine. Somehow, he held steady, his weight suspended, trapping me beneath the heavy darkness he cast.

I turned my head, finally facing the intruder who looked even less put together than before.

His light brown hair, once neatly styled, was now a ruffled mess, like someone had dragged their hands through the slightly curly strands one too many times. His shirt hung open, more buttons undone than seemed necessary. The scent of strong cologne tangled with cigarettes carried on the air.

Colored ink teased through the damp fabric of his white dress shirt, tempting my thoughts to spiral. My fingers twitched with the urge to rip the fabric away, to shred it apart and see what lay beneath.

“Depends,” he rasped, his voice thick with something dangerous I couldn’t quite place.

“On what?”

The anticipation hung between us, but my pulse remained steady.

“On how long it’ll take to get my fill of you.”

I eyed him, intrigued. It surprised me how quickly he’d sought me out. I was painfully aware this was our first conversation, drunk, high on adrenaline, and surrounded by the lust that poisoned the room. The smoke the DJ pumped out wasn’t laced with anything, but it sure felt like it was.

The game tugged at me, so I played along. “What if it’s years?”



“Then I pray I have many to come.”

The weight of his words settled in, the darkness he cast over me a familiar feeling.

“You don’t strike me as a believer.”

Bent over the couch, he neared me. “Even sinners can pray if it’s worth asking for.”

Instinctively, my head lifted, drawing close to his.

“And am I?” I rasped. “Worth asking for?” A stupid question. I knew my worth wasn’t something to be measured. It shouldn’t be.

His eyes studied me, seeing too much and revealing just enough.

“It’s me who’s unworthy.”

With a swift motion, he kicked the shoes aside, letting them fall to the floor. The seat beside me cleared before he claimed it.

“It won’t stop me from selfishly taking what I want.”

When my toes brushed the fabric of his dress pants, he effortlessly lifted both feet with one hand. With a slight pull, he placed them in his lap, keeping a firm grip on my ankle.

I let it happen.

Instead, I focused on the tattooed hand that held me. Letters in Cyrillic sprawled across his knuckles, spelling out words I long lost the meaning of.

There wasn't a free spot to be seen on his skin. His entire chest, peeking from the hem of his shirt, was covered in ink. Some even stretched beyond, forming a permanent turtleneck of art.

His gaze never left my face. Like a sunbeam, the intensity of it burned a hole right through my skin.

I couldn't quite place whether it was pure attraction reflected in his eyes, or if he was trying to decode me like a ticking bomb. Enzo mentioned Maxim had asked around, but I didn't think he was interested. Not after he'd witnessed the exchange with Malek earlier.

Any sane man would stay away from me. Even across the street would be too close. If not for my reputation alone, then for my connections.

Locked in this endless battle of wills, we sized each other up. This close, his eyes were magnetic. I'd never seen a shade of green like that before.

Rare was the only word that came close to describing them. Even if you mixed the greenest grass with the deepest blues of the ocean, you still wouldn't come close to the original. No mix of paints could do the shade justice.

He had that going for him. And so much more.

Like all these gangsters, he exuded the same level of confidence and self-assurance, but somehow, he made strength, raw power, look effortless.

I could tell he was tall, probably about 6'4", with broad shoulders packed with

muscle.

He was a force to be reckoned with, no doubt. The number of hits he'd carried out for the Bratva was up there with mine.

Maybe that's what I was after. Someone on my level to keep up with. Even to compete against.

Sure, the shape of his body helped. And that unfiltered mouth.

Fuck.

We were so similar it was almost questionable. If we clashed, the world might never recover. Everybody knows the same side of the coin can't coexist in one.

By this point, though, I was far too gone.

Blame the decision on the mood. The darkness of the night that would hide this sin, swallowing it among the others.

In a sea full of sinners, what's one more drop?

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

There was something he awakened in me. I allowed myself this moment, another selfish decision. I followed the attraction, accepting what was happening.

His gaze lit a fire in my belly, his stare feral, probably matching my own.

Reading the room's mood or my mind in one swift move, Maxim pulled me toward him.

His hands settled on my hips, thumbs digging into my skin. With a firm grip, he lifted me like a rag doll, placing me in his lap.

The action was infuriating, but as his hard-on pressed against where we touched, I couldn't deny the satisfaction I felt from the effect I had on him.

A buildup of pent-up emotions, sexual frustration, and teasing tension swirled inside me.

I was seconds from losing control. But losing the upper hand wasn't an option, so I pulled myself together, asserting control in this fucked-up power play by grabbing hold of his neck.

He upped the stakes when his giant hand tangled in my hair, yanking the waves harshly. The stretch forced me to face him head-on. There was nowhere to hide. Not that I wanted to.

Eyes darting, he studied me, our faces dangerously close. I didn't cave under pressure, meeting his gaze with my own.

“No tongue this time?” he mocked, referencing our previous encounter.

I moistened my bottom lip, provocatively flashing my tongue, swiping it in slow motions. “Saving it for later.”

The man didn’t hesitate, grabbing hold of it and gently pulling before letting go.

Just to fuck with me. Because he can. Because I let him.

I gritted my teeth at the audacity. “I don’t like being played with.”

A sardonic breath escaped him. “I don’t like being lied to.”

The moment stretched, and I resisted the urge to slap him across that charming face. His grip tightened, the strands of my hair wrapped around his fingers, making me groan.

A puff of air escaped me, bouncing off his face. I didn’t get to take another breath before he had me facing backward.

Turned around, I leaned against his chest, my hands secured in his grip. A position I was vulnerable in, one I would never allow myself to be in on any other day. Today, I seemed to let go of everything I’d once deemed important.

Confidence in my abilities made it easier to let things happen, to give up control. Despite the danger, despite being vulnerable, I still believed I was safe. I still felt in charge of the situation. With him, it felt almost natural. I credited the power, the record he held, that placed him above any other.

Maybe it was this damn club casting its spell on me, making me ignore reason every time I entered.

The hardness of his body pressed against mine, and the exposed back of my dress allowed our skin to meet. It wasn't just the heat between us that had me worked up. I wanted him. Wanted him so fucking bad. Right here, right now. I couldn't care about anything but the desire building inside me.

Is someone going to walk in on us? Are there workers behind the bar? Let them watch.

He shoved my thighs apart, moving in sync with me, his knee pressing between them. One hand wrapped around my neck, the other sliding down my chest. His thumb circled my nipple, the lack of a bra? Good choice.

One more circle, then he pinched. Hard.

A jolt shot down my spine, and I fucking reveled in the feeling. His palm dragged lower, rough against the smooth fabric of my dress, making me shiver.

I straightened my spine, my body reacting in the only way it knew how.

Goosebumps rose, inviting his tongue to trace the lines and witness the effect his actions had on me.

He sneaked his hand in, opening the slit of the dress wide. His fingers grazed the skin, while his other hand grabbed me by the neck, turning my head.

Maxim knowingly pushed the boundaries, forcing me to expose all my weak spots.

A chill ran through me, but it quickly dissolved at the feel of his teeth against my bare skin. A gasp escaped me when he bit down, the sting barely there before he swiped his tongue over the spot in hot, wet swings.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

All the while, his other hand unapologetically slid straight into my underwear, if you could even call it that.

What awaited him there drew a deep groan of approval from him.

I was soaked. Dripping for him.

Without hesitation, he thrust two fingers into me, sliding in easily. The stretch was delicious. He moved in and out relentlessly, his thumb pressing against my clit. Even though it was enough, I still pushed for more, matching his rhythm, grinding against him without a hint of shame. To anyone watching, it might have looked like a lap dance. Not the first one given in this place.

“More,” I begged.

“So fucking greedy.” His whisper tickled my ear, so close I could feel the warmth, despite my body temperature reaching scorching levels.

When he didn’t give me what I wanted right away, impatience surged through me, like an addict craving the high.

I adjusted my angle, seeking steadier ground by grabbing his hip. As the movement shifted my hand slightly left, I brushed against cold metal. At first, I thought it was one of his rings, but when the sensation happened again, an idea sparked. Without a second thought, I reached for the holster strapped to his hip.

The sudden weight shift caught his attention, but even aware of it, he didn’t pause. He

kept up the steady rhythm of pleasure, as if nothing had changed.

I was no stranger to weapons, but the gun in my hand felt heavy, no doubt customized to him.

His gun. His problem.

Loaded, I aimed the weapon straight at his manhood, making it clear I wasn't playing around.

The tip pressed against his hardness as I deliberately slid the gun up and down, tracing its length.

“Now!” I commanded, my voice filled with determination.

Not even a flinch.

I could've sworn his cock grew even harder. As I lowered myself, getting a feel, his unhinged expression confirmed my thoughts. Either he was clinically insane, or he was calling my bluff. We didn't get to find out, because my wish was granted.

A third finger slid in, not allowing me a moment to adjust, keeping up with the rhythm.

My eyes lowered to where we were joined.

The dress was pulled up, wrinkled.

Lace panties peeked out, soaked.

A tattooed hand moving in and out of my greedy pussy.



The gun still dangerously close to the entire scene.

It was a sight to behold. A picture worth taking. A painting worth hanging.

But the image it'd sear in my mind would capture the moment.

Somewhere, in a galaxy far away, people were dancing. Music was playing.

It was all muted in the distance.

His fingers curled inside me, finding the spots that had been begging for attention.

I had a plan to pace myself, to hold off, maybe even edge to build the tension. But when his fingers hit the right spot again, his thumb circling my clit, the sensation overwhelmed me.

Clawing at his thighs, I broke apart.

The orgasm hit me like a shock. Maxim never stopped, prolonging the feeling as I rode the waves that crawled up my spine. The beat of my heart pounded in my ears, an orchestra of my creation.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I bit my lip, swallowing the noises building up, selfishly keeping them trapped, perhaps hoping to recall the feeling later.

He didn't need confirmation of a job well done; the wet mess covering his hand was proof enough.

The music slowly reached my ears, and I knew the blissful moment was over.

Maxim brought his fingers to my lips, the firm grip on my neck still in place. "Suck 'em clean."

I obliged, taking in all three, erasing the reminder, and taking longer than necessary. A slight disappointment washed over me at the act, but I didn't let the emotion show.

"Let's get one thing clear," his growl reached me, sending a thrill down my spine.

It quickly made me realize I was ready for the best of three, maybe more. But when the man who had just reinstated my sanity with a simple orgasm spoke next, his words wiped those thoughts away. It was obvious: the darkness cleared, and the front door to reality opened.

"No man who sees you as their sunshine deserves to have you," he whispered low into my ear.

Before the meaning fully registered, Maxim abruptly stood and gently steadied me on my feet. The ground felt uneven, but I kept my balance.

He reached for the gun still in my hand, taking his prized possession back.

Without a second glance, he turned his back on me, an action not many had the privilege of doing, before storming out.

And I flipped him off.

Unlike the tongue gesture, this one went unreturned.

Deep down, I knew something was happening behind the scenes. I tried getting Ilya to talk, but he shut me down fast, ordering me to drop it.

So I did, but the knot in my stomach didn't loosen. The last time I ignored my gut, it brought misery and death to our doorstep.

In the weeks that followed, Alisa and I planned a wedding worthy of a royal couple. But I couldn't shake the thought: who actually stands to gain from this? Ilya, securing his position as Pakhan with a potential heir? Alisa and her family, climbing the ranks, getting closer to power than ever? Or the Bratva, putting on a show for the rest of the world?

The answer didn't add up. Maybe I was looking for a reason when there was only one: love.

According to Alisa's wedding plans, straight from the mind of a twelve-year-old in her long-awaited dreams, the weekend before the event was reserved for family and close friends.

She pulled out an entire to-do list, covered in stars and hearts made of glue and glitter. One look at it, and I knew there wasn't a single item on that list I'd deny her.

The search for a place was slowed by the ridiculous rules her brothers and future husband set, all for our safety, they argued, even though they knew exactly what I did for a living.

While I fumed, Alisa remained calm. She let them hash out the logistics, maintaining the illusion of control they were so sure they had.

The weekend was closing in, and we still didn't have a place to stay. It needed to meet very specific criteria. Luckily, I had one in mind.

Being the maid of honor, I suppose it fell under the role's responsibilities.

Before I had a chance to change my mind, I picked up the phone and called the only person posh enough to buy a house in the Hamptons.

"Pronto?"

A commotion of voices filled the line. Fast Italian fired from all sides, and while I didn't speak the language, I knew Enzo was at work. Since he answered, I didn't let that stop me.

"Do you ever pick up the phone and just say hello?"

His smooth English didn't carry a hint of an accent. "Here's a tip for you. Don't question me when you call for favors."

"How did you know?"

"That's the only reason you call. Calls are for business," Enzo clarified.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“You got me.” Not wasting any time, I spilled the reason for the call. “Do you still have the getaway house?”

“In the Hamptons? I do. Why?”

“Care to share it with me and a couple of crazy Russians?”

A grunt carried over the static. “I don’t like where this is heading.”

“It’s okay to say no. I know the house serves its purpose,” I teased, leaving room for rejection. “Wouldn’t want to expose its unique location or whatever.”

Enzo didn’t take long to agree. “Fine. I don’t have a use for it, anyway.

The staff should be tending to it. I’ll notify them.”

“I owe you. You want to come?”

“With who?”

“Me, Alisa and her brothers, maybe some of her friends? I’ll have to check in with her before finalizing the plans.”

I could almost hear the eyebrow raise in his voice. “That’s an odd mix. Chances I’ll find some quiet to work?”

The hustle didn’t stop just because it was the weekend, but even the toughest needed

a break now and then.

“Zero percent. Only come if you want to unwind. Work can wait a day or two. And please pack at least one pair of jeans,” my voice pleaded.

“The best I can do is a casual sweater.”

“With dress pants?” I rolled my eyes at his poshness. “That doesn’t count.”

“Fine. It better be worth my time. And I expect to be dined and wined.”

I laughed, knowing he was the host. “Promise. But who knows? Maybe a hot, very lost model will wash up on your beach. We might never hear from you again.”

Enzo exhaled a low grunt, clearly unimpressed. “I’ve had enough bodies to deal with this week.”

“That totally killed the mood.”

“I hoped so.”

I could vividly imagine the smirk on his face.

“Pick you up on Friday?”

“You know I employ drivers for that, right?”

“What’s the fun in that?” I pouted.

“I’ll be expecting some decent coffee and snacks.” The Italian in him was unmistakable.

“That’s a given. Thanks again.”

Enzo hung up without a goodbye and went back to work.

Not wasting a second, I dialed Alisa next, eager to share the good news.

The second the ringing stopped, I let the words fly. “House secured. Have you ever been to the Hamptons?”

Excitement filled Alisa’s voice. “Can’t say I have. Is it yours?”

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“My friend’s. Hopefully, it’ll pass the code.” I rolled my eyes, even though no one was there to see it.

“Ilya says it’s a precaution. ‘The tension is rising’ is all I got. He couldn’t come, so he ordered my brothers to accompany us. Andrei will probably be busy with arrangements, and Mila’s working, so I guess we’ll be stuck with Maxim and Luka for company.”

I mean, I could think of worse people to be stuck with.

“Let them play guards. You and I will sip mojitos and sunbathe by the pool. Another first of mine: vacation.”

“It’s an honor to witness your firsts,” Alisa said, cringing at her own words.

“That sounded better in my head.”

A laugh escaped me before I remembered to ask. “Is it cool if Enzo, the owner of the house, shows up?”

“Enzo, the dark Italian guy that always surrounds you?”

“That would be him,” I confirmed.

A gasp filled the silence before Alisa breathed out. “Thank God. We needed some eye candy.”



Her reaction caught me off guard. Not because of the wedding, but because she noticed things so quickly and said them outright.

“Really?”

“You can’t blame a girl for some last-minute glances.” That, I couldn’t.

“Look, no touch. I promise.”

“Knock yourself out.”

This version of Alisa was even better. More authentic. And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to the day.

\*\*\*

After a pit stop at a downtown bakery, morning traffic slowed us down on the way to Enzo’s mansion on the east side. The bakery made the best Iris, a Sicilian dessert stuffed with ricotta and sugar. It was Enzo’s favorite, and my way of repaying him.

As my Mercedes G-Wagon pulled up to the gate, a guard recognized the car. Without hesitation, he headed for the trunk and began loading his boss’s luggage, two suitcases guaranteed to be filled with suits. That was on top of the walk-in closet waiting for him at the house, stocked with even more.

Through the lowered window, I watched Enzo nod goodbye to his staff.

“Uber pickup for Lorenzo?” I yelled out. I rarely used his full name.

He glanced at the passenger in the back seat. “I didn’t order a shared ride.”

“Play nice,” I scolded. “This is Alisa, the bride-to-be.”

I made the introduction while reversing out of the driveway.

“I gathered that,” Enzo muttered. They’d been in the same room at parties, but I’d never seen them interact.

Turning his head toward the back seat, I expected a greeting. Instead, a plea slipped out. “Please tell me Maxim isn’t coming.”

“That would be a lie,” Alisa said, unfazed. She was probably used to the effect her family had.

Enzo groaned. “Great.”

“Cheer up. The house is enormous. You might not even meet,” I tried to lighten the situation.

“I highly doubt that. For some reason, her brother can’t seem to shut up around me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Not just you,” I added shamelessly.

With the convoy visible in his wing mirror, Enzo asked, “What’s with the entourage?”

A line of SUVs followed us after I picked Alisa up. Ilya wasn’t kidding about security. Part of me wanted to floor the gas pedal, but Alisa didn’t deserve what would follow.

“It’s because of me,” she took the blame, confirming what we already knew.

Mischief played on his face as Enzo joked, “Maybe he’s afraid you’ll run.”

“Maybe he should be.” Alisa seemed deep in thought before she added, “But I won’t. In case you were worried.”

Her face fell as I watched her reflection in the rearview mirror, wondering who she was trying to convince: us or herself?

“When should we expect the rest of the Galkins?” I asked their youngest sibling.

“They’ll meet us there.”

I nodded in acknowledgment.

Reaching into the back, I held up the bribery for Enzo. “Coffee and Iris, as promised.”

How he managed to eat the pastry without getting crumbs on himself was impressive, but the price of seeing him smile was worth all the crumbs he'd leave behind.

As we left the hustle of the city and drove closer to the coast, the conversation eased. While my fellow passengers discussed the engagement party or how the Italian pastry was baked, I remained silent, focused on the road.

The lives we lived were opposites.

Both Enzo and Alisa had grown up in families with deep ties to the underworld, surrounded by people they could rely on, people who guided them through the important stages of life. They'd been part of the group from the start.

While death and questionable circumstances followed me, I still fought to find my place.

I would never hold anything against them. We all had our demons. But there were moments, brief glimpses, when the distinction became clear.

I knew I was different, yet somehow, I also felt the same.

Our destination was a house made for hosting. The open-plan main floor offered stunning views of the ocean in the distance. Floor-to-ceiling windows let in the light, and a sliding balcony door in the middle connected to the back of the property, where a backyard with a heated pool and jacuzzi awaited. A roofed patio featured a dining table and bar. The sleeping arrangements were more than enough, with five bedrooms and attached bathrooms to choose from. On top of that, Enzo had his own upper floor, a private apartment within the house.

I knew too much about the kind of parties he hosted, but I restrained myself from thinking about the past events as I entered the lavish space.

Alisa disappeared for a moment to freshen up after the ride.

Enzo was still roaming around the kitchen when I teasingly asked about the sectional couch placed in front of the windows. “Is it safe to sit there?” I pointed toward the furniture, scrunching my face in the best way I could.

“Hilarious,” he retorted. “I tell you too much.”

A grin played on my face. “Yeah, you do. I’ll never look at you the same.”

I shrugged dramatically just as Alisa walked back into the room, setting her handbag on the nearest counter. Overhearing our conversation, she eyed the couch curiously. “Why wouldn’t it be safe?”

“Jesus Christ,” Enzo muttered, and it took all my willpower not to burst out laughing.

“I’m going upstairs to make some calls.” Before he moved, Enzo pointed toward the pantry. “Staff stocked the fridge. Rooms are ready. Pick one.”

I glanced at him in mock disappointment. “In my head, I gave you half an hour before you disappeared.”

Enzo ran his hands through his dark hair, messing up the long locks. “Making the calls now means more freedom later. And after the week I had, I plan on getting wasted and sleeping on the beach.” The sound of his shoes clicking faded as Enzo turned back with a mischievous grin. “Preferably naked.”

“I take it all back,” I called out, too busy taking in the space.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“You know where to find me,” he shot back before the door clicked shut.

The couch was bigger than I expected, and despite my earlier worries, I sank into it. Not even a second passed before Alisa was pulling on my arm.

“Oh my god. Taya, please tell me this is the house.” She tugged at me like a kid begging for attention.

I raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb. Is this where... you know?” She gestured around, clearly expecting me to understand. “My friend went once. She won’t shut up about it.” A grin tugged at her lips, no doubt recalling the conversation.

I stared ahead, emotionless. “Maybe. How would I know?” Oh, I knew, all right.

Unconvinced, she shot me a look. “How come he didn’t need to show you around?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Alisa poked me, landing a hit straight between the ribs.

“Gotcha,” she grinned, clearly victorious. “You’ve been here before.”

“Fine, once.” I held up a finger.

“You better spill all the details.”

I rolled my eyes. “I swear you Galkins are a family of gossipers.”

“Of course we are. How else do you stay entertained?”

A laugh escaped me. “Let’s just say I was young and careless. Received an invitation from one of my contacts. I never found out who sent it.”

“But you went,” Alisa fished for confirmation.

“I was too curious to turn down the opportunity. Mind you, I was nineteen and had just recently started having sex.”

“How experienced are we talking?” Alisa wiggled her eyebrows.

A puff of air escaped me, but before we got into the details, I knew the moment would be easier with something to wash away the taste. “I think this calls for a drink... maybe some snacks too. Be right back.”

I patted her on the knee before heading underground, to where I knew the goods were stored.

Pressing the button hidden behind Dante’s *Inferno* on the bookshelf, like I’d seen Enzo do before, a door opened in the wall, revealing a familiar staircase.

At first glance, you wouldn’t be able to tell the building had a basement area stretching out beyond the base of the house. Enzo had it expanded shortly after purchasing. I struggled to navigate the space without the neon lights pointing the way. It was a maze of doors in different colors, and I had to open one or two before the right one revealed the cellar.

Bingo.

Alisa was still in the same position I'd left her when I returned.

Holding up the bottles, I presented the choices to my companion.

"Courtesy of Enzo's secret stash. Some overpriced Italian wine I won't attempt to pronounce. The rule is, the longer the name, the fancier."

I set them down on the kitchen island, reaching for the wine glasses. "It's like a maze down there. I almost got lost."

Alisa shook her head. "I'm good. You go ahead. I need to fit into the dress, so I'm on a low carb. I'll just grab water from the fridge later."

"Suit yourself." I wasn't one to pressure her, so I poured myself a generous glass and made my way across on bare feet, settling back onto the couch.

We sat in silence, the waves crashing against the shore in rhythmic sound, accompanying our thoughts. A sense of calm overtook me. The scenery was breathtaking, the endless ocean surrounding us. I wondered if anyone ever tried to find the end of it, like with a rainbow, no one knew where it began or ended. What was the middle?

Similar to the life I led, the ocean too survived in crashes, unaware of its upcoming end.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Turning to Alisa, I found her poker face in place. Even if I wanted to pry, her thoughts were well hidden behind it.

A genuine friendship was building. Or so I thought. Maybe I was naïve to believe something real could come from this way of life. Oblivious to the reality of the day, I might be on a path of self-destruction, letting all these people play a role in my life.

Could she be the one? Someone I could share my ups and downs with, without judgment? Or without an irrational feeling of betrayal?

Unaware of my internal battles, Alisa's face lit up when our eyes locked.

"You go first," I insisted, expanding on the conversation we started earlier.

"Okay." She shifted closer and began. "My brothers were determined to make me attend a university. A degree might be useful, but I knew they were trying to get me out of the city," she paused, giving me a quick glance. "Don't get me wrong, I'm very grateful for all they've done, but it wasn't their choice to make. I was born into this family just like them, so I should be allowed to decide."

"Father didn't see it that way," she rolled her eyes. "While they were trained to be the perfect soldiers, I got etiquette lessons and party planning. What a useful skill in a dangerous situation." Alisa let out a short, sarcastic laugh. "At least I'll know which spoon to pair with gazpacho."

"Your mother didn't protest?" I knew the answer, but I asked anyway. My mother's voice was the law, so the dynamics between our families were fundamentally

different.

“She didn’t have a say. Our parents are old school. It wasn’t until my brothers took over the family that I had more freedom.”

I nodded, understanding. Though I wasn’t told what to do growing up, I’d been surrounded by people who tried to control us. Those who saw women as nothing more than property. We were told what to do, how to behave.

Some accepted orders without question, out of fear, or the belief that there was no other choice. Still, we all fought the patriarchy in our own ways.

“I can teach you some self-defense if you’d like,” I offered. I meant it, too. I hadn’t seen her as weak in any way. Just like my own training, I wanted to offer what I knew to anyone willing to learn.

“That would be great. But you’ll have to go easy on me. I possess zero athletic skills,” she agreed. “Anyway, university was an awakening. Suddenly, all these possibilities opened up. Everything that was forbidden before felt reachable. Andrei pulled a few strings so I could attend this prestigious institution in LA, filled with students from prominent families. Kids of politicians, governors, and even some mafia royalty. That’s where I met my friends. We stuck together for the five years, but when we graduated, they all went back to their families. We’re still in touch, but it’s not the same. You know how you’re so close to someone, but then time and distance make you realize it’s not the same?”

When I didn’t respond, she added, “Like the friendship worked for you in that moment, but it’s not who you are anymore?”

I shook my head once. “I don’t have many friends, so I can’t say for sure. Besides Enzo and Ilya, you’re my only female friend, and we only just met.”

Curiosity or practicality got the best of me. “They’re not coming?”

She lowered her gaze. “I didn’t invite them. They’ll be at the wedding.”

Her expression cleared, as if shaking off whatever emotion had surfaced, and she turned the conversation back to me. “What about your parents? What are they like?”

Somewhere in the depths of my layers, a long-forgotten feeling stirred awake upon hearing her question.

Alisa was the first one to ask about my family. I always assumed whoever worked with me had done their research and came up empty. That fact raised some red flags, but if anything, it added to my street cred. There wasn’t much to know about me outside of my professional life. My mother made sure of that. Bank accounts, the apartment, cars, everything I owned was in another name. Practically untraceable. The younger version of me stressed about the possibilities.

What if they find out?

I had rehearsed an answer, a cover story in case the question finally came up, yet no one ever bothered.

I shoved the memories aside. “I’ve been on my own for a while now.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s life. We make do with what we have.”

“You are so badass. My brothers only told me a little about what you do. As if I wasn’t impressed already.”

Not sure how to take the compliment, I turned to her instead. “How are you so positive all the time?”

A silent smile lingered on her face. While that didn’t answer my question, it warmed me from the inside, knowing that despite the darkness and the ugly, some among us still saw the good this world offered.

Gaze focused on the horizon, Alisa followed up with an unexpected question. “Have you ever been in love?”

The smooth taste of the red wine turned bitter on my tongue.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Love? The word didn't sit right on my tongue, no matter how often I spelled it out. I was so estranged from the feeling, I couldn't see the beauty others swore by. I didn't even understand what it meant.

I let men and women possess this body, toss it around as they pleased.

They dug their fingers into me, but none reached the heart. The organ hid behind a wall of doubts so tall, there wasn't a weapon strong enough to breach it.

When I regained my composure, I choked out the truth. "No. I can't say I have. You?"

"Never." Sorrow reflected in her green eyes. "Do you believe it's possible?"

"To find love?"

Alisa nibbled on her bottom lip. "To find love in this world," she clarified. "And I mean true love. With devotion. A happy ending."

"It's not an option for me," I murmured. "Are you looking?"

"I was," she admitted, deep in thought. "Maybe I still am. Being a hopeless romantic, it's not enough to be loved. I want to be worshiped and admired. I want to become someone's reason for existence. The center of their universe, and they will be mine." Alisa's eyes lit up even more, the green orbs highlighted by the sunlight.

Her definition felt straight out of a movie, but the one she was cast in didn't seem to

follow the same script.

“Can Ilya give you that?” I voiced my doubts.

She visibly stiffened at my words. A part of me felt bad for mixing in reality, but I only pointed out the obvious. While an arranged marriage was as new to me as any marriage, it wasn't hard to see there was no love between them. At least not yet. I'm not sure even 'like' could describe what they had.

Her beautiful face turned sad. “It's a fantasy,” she shrugged. “Perhaps I'll look forever.”

“You shouldn't,” I encouraged her.

“I made my choices.” She exhaled a steady breath. “Do you at least believe in destiny?”

Hope displayed on her face before I disappointed her with a shake of my head. “I consider myself a realist.”

“Well, I believe there is something or someone out there for both of us.”

Twisting the wine glass between my fingers, I followed the movement of the red liquid instead. “Tell me more about your brothers.”

“Andrei is married now. His wife Mila is the daughter of a prominent Russian family. That's probably the only reason my parents approved of the relationship. She works as a trauma surgeon. They've been together for what feels like forever.”

Forever, another concept I couldn't get behind.

“They finally tied the knot two years ago. Technically, he’s the head of our family now, since my parents stepped down. Maxim was the middle child for a while, and it shows. He’s the one I’m closest to. Don’t tell him I said that, but I worry about him. And then there’s Luka, still finding his way,” she exhaled, a range of emotions flickering across her face, from love to worry and everything in between.

I often wondered what it was like to grow up in a big family. To have siblings, and while I’ll never find out, I was thankful for what I had.

“Are your other brothers taken?” I followed up with another question.

“As if.” Alisa rolled her eyes. Before I had a chance to react, she sat up straight and turned to me, slightly wide-eyed. “Oh my god. Which one are you interested in?”

I gulped. “Me? I’m not.”

This certainly wasn’t the best time to let her know what had already transpired between me and her favorite brother, so I kept my mouth shut.

“I wouldn’t mind if we became family. You have my blessings, no matter who you choose,” she encouraged. “I think Maxim would be the best match for you.”

If the wine glass weren’t empty, the creamy couch beneath us might be wearing a new color.

I lifted my hands in question, mindful of the curious eyes on me. “Why do I get the cuckoo one?”

With one eyebrow raised, Alisa answered, “There’s just something about how the room feels with you two in it.” No doubt referencing the encounter, the show we put on at their engagement party.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Just to be clear, we’re talking about the same one who winked at me in front of Malek and the others the very first time we met?”

“Exactly!” She slapped my shoulder. “That’s the story that’ll get told at family gatherings.”

“Right,” I dismissed her words with a grunt.

Alisa’s face still carried a knowing smile when she asked, “Where were we before you went off to raid the supplies?”

A story I’ve never told anybody sat in my mind for years. Not that it was a secret. Despite being a personal matter, there wasn’t anything vulnerable worth sharing. I just never had the chance or someone worth telling the tale to. Alisa was still a stranger, but somehow, she seemed like the right person to confide in.

“I met this guy in Ilya’s club. The one we were just at, downtown?”

She nodded.

I tucked my hands under both feet and recalled my first time. “It was a random Friday. Me and your soon-to-be husband just flew back from the West Coast after a week on the job. I wasn’t tired, still riding the high, so I stopped by for a few drinks. One led to another, and before I knew it, I was dancing on tables.” I recalled the wild feeling of unrestricted freedom.

“I just wanted to feel like a normal nineteen-year-old without the weight on my



shoulders.” Something we can both relate to, I thought. “A stranger approached me. I don’t think I ever saw a guy his size. And I would know, I’m surrounded by them daily.”

A military cut, a beard, and an earring. I briefly recalled his features.

“He came up to me. Picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. I thought, what an asshole. He was probably there to take me down, but he totally surprised me when he spun me around, and it felt like forever since I last laughed.” I remembered the carefree sounds escaping my mouth that night. “I couldn’t stop giggling. We danced and drank and fucked in the VIP bathroom, the marble counter digging into my ass. I never got his name, but I remember his smile to this day.” Warm and inviting, so rare between the snares of your everyday gangsters. “I later found out he was a part of some group from Siberia that fell under Ilya’s territory. It was so random, nothing planned, and I loved that.”

To this day, the memory of the night brings a smile to my face.

With that, I turned to Alisa for her story.

“Mine was a total disaster. I really hope whoever ends up with the guy sobers up and runs before it’s too late. We had dinner at this expensive restaurant. One of those you must make a reservation for months in advance. His father was a politician. Gosh, he wouldn’t shut up about it. We had good food, and he took me back to his place. I was so impressed and easily persuaded with the right words. The sex felt straight out of a manual. Like he looked up step-by-step what to do the day before. Methodical and so detached. Safe to say only one of us left satisfied,” she puffed out a breath with her eyes closed. “I’ve been compensating for that experience ever since.”

I raised my empty glass of wine in a toast. “To men who know how to fuck.”

“Amen.”

A regular moment, two women bonding and sharing stories, but to me, it meant the world.

Opening up to others didn't come easily. How could it, when you know everything you share can be used against you if it reaches the wrong person? This city was flooded with them. Every fucked-up thing that ever happened was someone's making.

“I think I'm hitting the pool next,” I announced. I headed to my room to change, leaving the comfort of the couch, and Alisa followed along. She remained in the doorway, leaning against the frame, anxiously chewing on her thumb while I unloaded the bag.

“Is he going to be up there for a while?” Her finger pointed above us.

I paused, gazing at where she stood. “Who, Enzo? No idea. Don't let him stop you. It's your weekend.”

“Ilya won't be happy about him being here.”

“Ilya isn't here. Besides, your chaperones will arrive soon.” I made it across the room and placed my hands on her arms. “Why don't we forget them all? It's just you and me.” I smiled.

“You're right.” She grinned back.

It was rare to have time off to spend however you liked, so I planned on making the most of it.

“Okay. Help me pick a swimsuit. I over-packed.”

I held up an unworn pair I bought for the occasion, a dark blue two-piece.

“Scandalous.”

“Is that yes or no?”

“It’s heck yeah.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

A laugh accompanied me to the adjacent bathroom, where I changed while Alisa browsed the room.

The sun was a welcome warmth on my skin as we settled by the pool. Alisa sat at the edge, her feet dipped in. While relaxing wasn't in my nature by default, she seemed right in her element, so I was determined to give the activity a shot. To make the most out of the weather, I set my towel on the sun chair and laid down.

Calming my mind, I focused on the sound of the waves in the distance. Ever since my mother's death, I'd been in constant survival mode. I slept very little. I never quite learned how to control my brain. To this day, it controls me.

It wasn't the horrid images or faces of the people I killed that kept me up at night. I didn't worry about how I might end up or what might happen. I was too busy obsessing over the bigger picture at play.

A shadow moving close had me on alert. Enzo stood by the other sun chair, drinking out of the wineglass.

"Hey! That's mine," I protested.

"Actually, it's mine," Enzo fired back, his tone sassy.

It was hard to argue against the truth, so I shut up.

On the side table, a nearly finished bottle sat, and when the Italian read the label, he laughed. "I swear, it's like you have a talent for sniffing out the most expensive

stuff.”

Lowering my sunglasses, I looked at him with puppy eyes. “Mad at me?”

“Not if you share.”

My hands flew in the air, pointing at the glass in his hand. “Seems like I already am.”

Enzo bent to drag the other sun chair closer, joining me in relaxing. He lay down, stretching his legs in his precious custom-made Italian suit. The contrast between our attires was almost comical.

“Are you done?” I asked about his work.

“Yes. So how about we enjoy the quiet before the obnoxious one arrives?”

Who was I to deny him that right? We settled in, both soaking in the atmosphere.

“The chef will stop by later to make us dinner.”

I laughed at how well he knew me. Food was perhaps the only thing I thought about every minute of the day.

“Let me guess, Italian?” I teased.

“Any complaints?”

“None from me. But Alisa is eating low-carb.”

As if I’d insulted him, Enzo turned toward me with a withering look. Italians and their love of carbs.

“Why?”

“Wedding dress fittings.”

His voice softened. “Or so she says.”

“Not our business.”

“Do you think Ilya is forcing her?” His thoughts slipped out as he narrowed his gaze at the pool, where the woman in question swam laps.

“I’ve hinted more than once that I’m willing to help. She turned me down. I can’t decide for her. Can I?”

“Her brothers didn’t say much on the matter, either.”

“Since when are you so interested in other people’s relationships?” I questioned his intentions.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Through a clenched jaw, Enzo muttered, “Always, if it affects my business.”

Yeah, business.

“Just remember, she’s getting married. Soon,” I emphasized. Like, literally the day after tomorrow.

Enzo lowered his sunglasses. “What exactly are you implying?”

“I’m not. Just looking out for you. She’s great, but she has a lot going on,” I reasoned. “Also, she knows all about your housewarmings.” I giggled at the hard swallow on his part. “She was very interested in the details.”

“Jesus. Are we being exploited for information?” Enzo grumbled. “First her brother, now her.”

“Runs in the family.”

Settled on our sun beds, we soaked in the rays, passing a glass of red wine back and forth.

An hour passed before Enzo’s voice broke the silence with a curse.

“Cazzo.”

In his presence, I might have let go, dozing off in the sun. The grogginess cleared as I sat up in a frenzy, catching the informality. “What is it?”

“The rest of the family just arrived,” he pointed out.

“Lucky us. I got it.”

I walked to the front door, fixing the straps of my bikini, my bare feet leaving a trail of prints on the concrete tiles.

The drive wouldn't be half bad if Luka would stop insisting on being the DJ. It's safe to say his taste in music didn't match mine, but that didn't stop him from bobbing his head to the rhythm of some R&B song.

He also had the nerve to beg me to stop at every gas station we passed, in case they had better snacks.

When I told him Alisa was expecting us, he just shook his head. “Taya's on it.” He shoved his phone in my face as proof: a text chain with Taya, reassuring him everything was fine.

Nice of her to keep him in the loop, but since when did they text?

Jealous of my younger brother. That was a first.

At least they were closer in age. Given the same traits we shared, he was basically a younger version of me with longer hair.

Wait, what was I even thinking?

The door to the mansion opened, and there she was, the woman occupying my thoughts for all the wrong reasons. It was as if she crawled out of my mind and materialized right in front of us.



To top it off, she wore a blue bikini that matched her eyes, her skin glowing in this environment.

Even a saint would take a peek. I never pretended to be anything less than the devil, so I took the opportunity to memorize the image of her perfect body until I'd had my fill or until she walked away. The confidence with which she carried herself pulled you in every time. Even Luka, standing beside me, had trouble staying on track.

I knew she was younger than me by what some might consider a lot, yet she was the first woman to hold my mind hostage. And in record time, might I add.

I had a feeling my control wouldn't last much longer. Eventually, I'd make another move. That moment of possession she allowed me in the club had left me with a taste for more. More of her moans, more of her back arching against me. Hours spent teaching her everything I knew, showing her what could consume a person, making her forget the weight we both carried.

The trust she gave me, the control she handed over, filled my head like no kill ever had.

"What a welcome," I retorted, taking her in.

She rolled her eyes. "Hello to you too. Your sister is by the pool." Taya spun around and walked away, leaving the door open. "Rooms are to the right. I'm sure you can figure out which ones are unoccupied."

"No house tour?" I teased, my eyes glued to her behind.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Would you like me to pass warm towels too? A glass of champagne? I’m on vacation,” she shouted over her shoulder before disappearing deeper into the space. “Plus, it’s not my house.”

Her words barely finished when Luka smacked me on the shoulder. “See? I told you!”

“Told him what?” Taya’s voice carried over from the neighboring room.

We followed the sound and found her in the kitchen, the space modern and sleek with a Mediterranean touch. A wide kitchen island occupied the middle, placed as a divider between the rooms. Luka, acting right at home, immediately sat on a cushioned bar stool. He wiggled his eyebrows playfully and answered Taya’s question. “That this is Lorenzo’s playhouse.”

Confident in his guess, he slapped his palm on the perfectly polished counter, leaving a massive print.

Taya rolled her eyes at him, and it shot straight through me, igniting every nerve ending.

“Is there anyone who doesn’t know about it?” she asked, her tone tinged with annoyance.

This attitude, man. I wanted to fuck it right out of her. I’d wanted to, ever since that night. So she could crank it up again, and we’d repeat the whole process. Stuck in a cycle of destructive behavior and even sweeter punishments, that’s the way I wanted

to live from now on.

“Are you kidding me? It’s the event of the year.” Reaching for an apple in the basket, Luka took a bite, clearly ignoring the fact that he’d eaten his weight in gas station snacks on the way here. With his mouth full, he smirked and said, “For sure on my calendar.”

A laugh escaped me, drawing their attention. I leaned my forearms on the counter and laughed at my brother once more. “You never received an invite.”

“But I know things.” He grinned, clearly enjoying himself. “Dirty, dirty, exciting things,” he added with a wink. Given the kind of people Luka hung out with, it didn’t surprise me.

“Why don’t you ask the host himself?” Taya suggested. “I’m sure he’d love that.”

“Easy. He and I bonded,” I pitched in.

“I was being ironic.”

I know. Did it stop me from playing along? No. Why? Because I’m bored.

And I seem to enjoy antagonizing her. A recent hobby I picked up.

“Jealous that I might take your buddy away?” I baited her.

A look of annoyance flashed my way. “Have at it.”

Sensing the tension building, Luka grabbed our belongings. “I’ll get the bags.”

While he disappeared to check out the rooms, I didn’t follow.

Taya and I shared a glance before she went back to searching the fridge, comfortable with her back turned to me. Knowing what I know now, I can see why.

The fridge door was wide open, and I got the perfect view of her round ass as she reached for a bottle of water. Intentional or not, I took the move as a sign and closed in on her.

Being tall myself, I was used to towering over people, especially women.

Yet with her, we felt equal. I might have been taller in person, but her entire presence matched mine, putting us on level ground.

My lips pressed close to her ear, her familiar scent enveloping me. I leaned in from behind, letting my frame cast a shadow. “Ilya, Malek, and Lorenzo. Is there a man you don’t have wrapped around your finger?”

She remained unmoved, standing perfectly still in that predator’s way. A skill only earned through years of practice. In her case, the years were short but effective.

Painfully slow, she turned to face me, her skin brushing mine. I knew right away she was out to play.

“Why? Do you want to be next?”

If only she could read the thoughts consuming me since our last encounter.

Standing on tiptoes, Taya leaned in, whispering against my lips. “Heard you’ve been asking about me.” Our chests moved in sync. Breathe in, breathe out. “That means you’re just about halfway there.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

My thumb hovered near her lips, tracing their curve and fullness like a siren's song, luring me to ruin them for all others. But I stopped myself. Not yet.

"It's this whisper of death you carry around with you," I said, desperate to read her reaction. "I'm yet to see the signs."

Her tongue darted out, encircling my thumb in a wet motion, sending blood rushing straight to my dick. Her nipples visibly tightened beneath the thin fabric, the material revealing just enough, but not entirely.

Unable to resist, I pushed my finger into her mouth. Taya grunted in approval. Heavy-lidded, she made a few more circular motions before taking my thumb deeper, sucking on it as if her life depended on it. An image I'd never be able to erase formed in my mind, but before it fully registered, she bit me. Hard and unforgiving.

I've never been this turned on.

Droplets of blood welled from the marks she left behind, coating her lips in crimson. The same color that seemed to follow us around.

Her eyes blazed with fire. "If it's a demonstration you desire, I'll gladly be your last vision."

I didn't hide the desire I felt, handling her with the same roughness. My fingers gripped her cheeks, squeezing hard, while my thumb wiped away the evidence, the imprint still on her lips.

“And what a vision you would be,” I rasped, content with the thought of her as my reaper, my soul collector.

She leaned against the fridge door, her palm resting on my chest, as if unsure whether she was trying to push me away or pull me in.

“I like to think it’ll take more than that to get me,” I finally replied, not letting her out of sight.

Taya’s breath was controlled, her hands steady, but warm against my chest, almost as if she had this ability to deceive even the most observant.

The pulse in her neck was the only sign of life within her. I reached behind her head, grabbing a can of soda from the fridge, and slid the cold metal down her arm, holding it between us. A hiss left her before she refocused on my words, diverting my attention from her reaction.

“Those before you thought the same.”

“I’m sure those after me will, too.”

“Men never learn, do they?”

I furrowed my brows in disapproval, calling her out. “A bit generic, don’t you think?”

“No one proved me otherwise.”

Of course not. Not if you spent time with men like Malek or Ilya.

“You don’t think of yourself as the goddess?” I taunted, imagining the numbers, her hits that crowned her the champion within the ranks. “The one surrounded by men

who run this mess we call our world? The one nothing ever happens to?”

Her face fell, something far too dark taking over her. As soon as the words left me, I realized there were better things I could've said. But, as usual, this damn mouth wasn't connected to my brain.

“All the bad things already happened a long time ago,” she murmured, her gaze on the ground.

The cold from the fridge wasn't the only freeze I experienced when Taya slipped out of my hold.

Free from the room's tension, I walked back to the pool. In the few seconds it took, I cleared my mind with a deep breath.

This wasn't the right time or place. Still, Maxim's last words left a bitter taste, forcing me to realize the battles within me were far from over.

Enzo was still sprawled on the sun bed when I reclaimed my spot beside him. The empty wine glass stared back at me from the side table. I topped it off, well above the acceptable line. There wasn't much I knew about wine, aside from how to drink it. Luckily, Enzo was an expert, and his choices seemed to please everyone, myself included.

Given the product's quality, I planned on spending the day savoring every drop. Maybe a swim and a walk on the beach, my plans wereshaping up.

Taking in the surroundings, I spotted Alisa still calmly swimming underwater.

“He got to you,” Enzo interrupted.

Playing dumb, I asked, “Who are you talking about?”



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

The corner of his mouth quirked. “Do you want me to kill him?”

I didn’t think he was kidding.

“That’s my job,” I replied with a laugh.

Channeling the older man within him, he said with certainty and a sprinkle of pride, “It was mine long before you came along.”

I settled the debate with a pat on his chest. “I don’t doubt that.”

I never thought about how all these people around me had been in the game for most of their lives. Look at Maxim, sworn in as a teenager. His brothers? Same deal.

They had served the Bratva for just shy of my entire life. Some still considered me a newbie. I didn’t bother correcting them.

Through the dark lenses of my sunglasses, I watched the Galkins greet each other. Alisa talked to her brothers with a wide smile on her face. No bad blood between them. Not a drop.

Deciding their type of peace shouldn’t be disturbed, I told Enzo, “Surprisingly, I like them all.”

Some in different ways than others, but all were growing on me.

Enzo leveled me with a pointed look, forcing me to admit further. “Even if they have

big mouths that never shut up.”

Satisfied, he went back to relaxing.

The Galkins joined us on the patio shortly after they shed their clothing, like the rest of us. Except for Enzo, of course, whose idea of letting go was undoing the top buttons of his dress shirt and kicking his shoes off. I’ll give him credit for mixing it up with a linen shirt, looser pants, and moccasins.

He was out of the suits, for once.

The afternoon sun warmed my skin, but didn’t come close to matching the effect the earlier encounter had on me.

The Galkin brothers were all gorgeous in their own way. Whoever started the line had to have some great genes. My hungry eyes roamed Maxim’s body, not bothering to look elsewhere.

Earlier, I convinced myself that I was just attracted to the competition.

After all, that was what had brought me thrills lately.

Wrong. But also, right?

There was more to the attraction. I might need to see this through to gain clarity on the subject.

Maxim neared the edge of the pool and stepped in. The dark gray swim shorts exposed his thick thighs, but it was his wide chest and broad shoulders that made his frame unmistakably him.

The entirety of his body revealed what I had expected from previous glimpses: an uncountable number of tattoos. Compared to his brother standing nearby, Maxim was dipped in ink.

I attempted to get a closer look, fascinated by the art. It was a hard task, given the mix of colors and images, the sun, and the present company.

Right away, one stood out above the rest. It wasn't because of its size, but because it was unquestionably the least expected choice. Certainly not with the typical gangster tattoos of skulls, roses, lions, or biblical references.

Not Maxim.

Mindful of Alisa's proximity, I peeked over the rim of my wine glass.

A butterfly tattoo covered the left side of his chest. Detailed work filled the outline, with the wing spread wide, occupying a major space. The insect's body appeared to be cut in half, split almost perfectly above his heart.

The other end? Red ink mixed with black, creating a collision of colors.

The lines formed a pattern resembling brush strokes.

Even from a distance, the meaning behind the art was obvious, but I wished to hear the origin from his own mouth. Like scars, a story worth listening to hid behind that ink. I would know; I had a handful of them myself. Unlike his, mine were simple quotes, representing the feelings of events I'd lived through. A type of coping mechanism I relied on. Surely, there were healthier ways to process, but this one worked best, among other, more frowned-upon actions I often found myself doing.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

For the rest of the afternoon, we lounged around, enjoying the sun, the sea, and the drinks the host provided. Perhaps the company, too. Though the men still participated in the occasional battle of stares.

I understood the hesitation; there might never be trust between them. But it wasn't above me to put them all on timeout if they dared ruin this weekend for Alisa.

When the sun dipped, casting a golden glow over the horizon, I realized the afternoon had slipped by unnoticed. The bride-to-be and I retreated to our rooms shortly before dinner. She wanted some pampering and a "girls' get-ready" moment. I was prepared for it, taking the role seriously. These were the things I could get behind. I knew the wedding meant the world to her, so making every moment count felt important.

Excitement filled me at the simple thought of having someone to share these things with. Ridiculous, maybe, but I'd long dreamed about this day.

More when I was growing up, but even now. To have a female friend. To have someone who didn't seem to judge or envy, unlike the vipers in the Bratva.

Naturally, we took our time getting ready. When my phone connected to the central system, the entire house had no choice but to listen to the playlist. We danced and paraded around in different outfits, laughing and joking about the most likely pissed members of the group, wherever they were.

When the room seemed to explode, with hangers, clothes, and makeup everywhere, we were finally ready.

Confident in our choices, we headed for the door. Before shutting the room behind me, I looked back and laughed at the state of my temporary bedroom. But I made no move to change anything.

It was perfect.

Down the hall, we followed the clinking of dishes that resonated through the house.

Italians and their late-night dinners. By eight p.m., the chef had finished cooking the last dish, and with the sounds of crickets and crashing waves as our backdrop, we gathered on the patio for a family-style dinner. The setup, however, was anything but casual.

A massive circular wooden table, brimming with food, awaited us. Enzo, ever the gentleman, held out chairs for Alisa and me before seating himself.

Maxim lingered by the beach, finishing his cigarette, his watchful gaze trailing our every move. Luka, always the early one, had already claimed his spot at the table before anyone else arrived.

The smell was heavenly. Having survived on little more than wine and air, my stomach growled in protest. With the host preoccupied, instructing the staff on wine pairings, we all turned our attention to the menu. By the time the wine and bread arrived, I was ready to eat off the floor if it meant getting food faster.

Enzo thanked the staff for their efforts and dismissed them for the night.

The moment they left, we dug in, busily passing sides around the table.

“This feels... very domestic,” I said between bites, savoring the moment.

Enzo held up a serving bowl of greens, carefully passing it to Alisa. “The chef made some salads for you,” he said with an air of politeness.

The gesture didn’t go unnoticed. Maxim, ever sharp, immediately reacted. “Are you suggesting my sister needs to lose weight?”

“Maxim!” Alisa shot him a scolding glare, clearly mortified.

In a calm, measured tone, Enzo clarified, “I’m simply accommodating the requests of my guests.”

“Requests?” Maxim’s eyes narrowed, locking on his sister. “Alisa, what’s this nonsense?”

Luka leaned back, gesturing lazily with his fork. “Seriously, since when do you care about that stuff?”

Enzo didn’t intervene further, though the napkin in his hand twisted tighter.

Alisa accepted the bowl gracefully, offering Enzo a small smile before serving herself. “I’m just watching my weight before the wedding,” she explained, keeping her tone casual. “The dress was custom-made, so I can’t afford to gain anything.”

Her words left a bitter taste even in my mouth. Judging by their reactions, this wasn’t normal for her.

Then again, Alisa had never planned a wedding before. I wasn’t sure any of them fully realized the pressure she was putting on herself to make everything perfect.

Maxim’s voice broke through, sharper now. “Since when do you restrict yourself?”

Alisa sighed, pushing her plate slightly forward. “I want to look perfect on my wedding day, alright? Can we please just drop it? My weekend, my rules.”

“And what are those rules?” the host asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“It’s simple. No more wedding talk, no mention of family matters or business affairs. I want to enjoy the weekend, get to know each other, and pretend, for just a weekend, that we’re normal,” she paused, letting her eyes drift across the table before adding with a smile. “Well, as normal as we can be. I want to relax, be myself, and not have to watch what I say around any of you.”

As Alisa listed her wishes, she turned to Maxim first, clearly seeking validation.

“Don’t be looking at me. I’m always honest,” Maxim replied with a shrug.

“We know!”

“Too honest,” the table answered in unison. I found myself smiling, feeling oddly at home.

While Maxim pouted in his chair, I lifted my glass, offering Alisa the confirmation she was looking for. “To Alisa’s completely normal weekend.”

I turned to Enzo next, hoping to lighten the mood as we indulged in the delicious food and wine. “Do you plan to take a blanket to the beach, or are you just going commando?” I teased.

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” he grinned, his voice as smooth as the wine in our glasses.

From the opposite side of the table, Luka broke in, his impatience cutting through the moment. “I can’t wait any longer,” he said. Dropping his cutlery with a clatter, he



launched into a barrage of questions, excitement practically radiating off him. “When did it start? How do you choose who’s invited? Are there themed rooms?”

While he ranted, I savored the incredible pasta alla Siciliana. The chef deserved a medal. The rich, bold flavors burst in my mouth, undoubtedly the result of handpicked, premium ingredients. The stories I’d heard about Enzo’s events only heightened my curiosity as I watched him react.

Calmly, Enzo wiped his mouth with a napkin, setting it neatly on the table before turning to Luka. “Telling you defeats the purpose of a private event,” he replied.

Unhappy with the answer, Luka switched tactics. “You should know, people talk.”

“You Galkins talk. A lot,” Enzo shot back, his tone sharp.

“We are who we are,” Luka shrugged, unfazed.

The dinner returned to a quieter pace. Nature’s sounds filled the background, interrupted only by the occasional clink of plates. Then, to everyone’s surprise, Enzo broke the silence. “Fine. Only if it won’t be used against me later.”

“What happens in the Hamptons stays in the Hamptons,” Luka grinned, clearly enjoying the moment. Enzo’s body shuddered at the cliché, already regretting his decision to spill the details.

Impatient, Luka leaned forward. “Just tell me already.”

But instead of answering, Enzo turned to me. “Taya?”

I choked on my sparkling water, genuinely caught off guard by the sudden shift in attention. “You want me to tell them?”

He gave a silent nod.

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. “I went once, and I’m still trying to erase the images.”

Exaggerating the night, I shrugged dramatically. But when the memory of how it ended crossed my mind, I couldn’t help but smile. “That’s how Enzo and I met.”

Alisa’s eyes widened, and I immediately realized how that must have sounded.

I rushed to clarify, “Not like that. Nothing ever happened between us.”

“How did you get in?” Enzo asked, his curiosity piqued. I guess we never really talked about that night.

“I don’t know. The invitation came through the web. It wasn’t traceable. Trust me, I tried.” I spent hours trying to trace the source and came up empty. “I was relatively new to the world. Knew Ilya, Malek, and maybe a handful of others,” I paused, recalling those early days. “I was working day and night, hardly had time to meet anyone, let alone enjoy myself. Sure, I went to the club, but this place? Disneyland compared to that. For a nineteen-year-old living a sheltered life, I was overwhelmed.”

I glanced around, imagining how it would be now. “If I went today, it’d be a totally different story.”

The mention of age caught Maxim’s attention. “How old are you now?” he asked, either out of genuine interest or simply to fill in the blanks.

“Turning twenty-four soon.”

Maxim muttered an ironic “great” under his breath and went back to his drink.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Then what happened?” His brother’s gaze shifted to me, curiosity written all over his face, desperate for the story.

“Don’t get me wrong, it was all new and exciting,” I said, recalling the past. “I just never found anything or anyone that could really hold my attention. I ended up at this bar.” I turned, pointing toward the far end of the patio where the same bar still stood, unchanged, just missing a few decorations.

“I ordered the most expensive bottle of red wine, but the server told me it was in the cellar, and the host is the only one with access.” I let out a cough-laugh. “Let’s just say the host was a little preoccupied with one or two, possibly three other attendees.”

A quiet “wow” escaped Luka, but Enzo shot back with words. “You snitch.”

Ironical, considering he was the one person I’d never snitch on.

I raised my hands in surrender. “They wanted details. I barely gave them any.”

“I’m still waiting,” Luka declared, clearly unsatisfied with the answers.

“I guess you’ll have to attend to find out,” Enzo teased, openly enjoying the situation.

Luka’s head snapped toward his brother at lightning speed, his face lighting up. “Did he just invite me? I’m pretty sure that counts as an invite.”

“I’m not sure there’ll be more in the future, though,” Enzo added, lost in thought.

Luka's expression faltered. "What? You can't quit on me now," he protested loudly. "Taya, help?"

"News to me," I said with a shrug. "I thought it was your event of the year."

"It lost its appeal."

In his role as the elder, Maxim pitched in. "It's the years, man. They sneak up on you."

The ridiculous statement had the other Galkins turning to him. Luka nudged his brother's shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

Alisa, close behind. "Out of all of us, you're the least likely to settle."

Maxim dismissed their teasing with a wave. "I'm not talking about settling. It's the sharing you grow tired of."

A moment of thought created a pause. Since I wasn't familiar with sharing, having never experienced it, I eyed my fellow diners, trying to gauge their reactions.

While Alisa maintained an innocent front, I knew from our previous conversations she was deep in some romantic scenario.

Enzo? He just stared ahead. I didn't think he could come up with a single name of someone he could tolerate for that long. Let alone forever.

Luka's smile grew as he answered with confidence. "I have no issues with that."

I doubted the youngest of the Galkin men struggled with a shortage of candidates.

“Just wait,” Maxim stated.

Alisa recalled the story. “I’m still not getting how you two met.”

The table turned to me. “The third vodka landed in front of me when the host showed up. He was informed of my request.” With a sly smile, I teased, “Probably just needed a breather.”

Enzo let out a grunt in protest. “I was fine,” he snickered. “I came down to find out who dared to be so demanding.”

“We ended up drinking the bottle and talked all night. It was weirdly natural. When we noticed, the sun was up, and the guests had left.” I ran my mouth too far before I realized.

“People like to think that soulmates are a romantic concept. Two souls destined to find each other and spend the rest of their lives together in harmony. I think it’s a person you meet who makes you feel at ease, filling you with certainty. You know they’ll tag along for the ride, no matter how bumpy. You become inseparable, an extension of each other.”

I wasn’t used to saying so much at once. It felt strange to leave it all hanging in the air.

Maxim leaned over the table. “How did we get from sex parties to friendship bracelets?”

I burst out laughing at his words.

“I don’t know, but I love it.” Luka grinned from his seat.

Enzo’s lips lifted as he addressed Alisa directly, diverting the attention. “Enough about us. Tell us about you.”

“I already told you some about our family.” She made brief eye contact. “Parents retired to Russia. We have minimal contact. Andrei is the married and most responsible one. I’m sure you will deal with him more now.”

The tiny slip didn’t escape him. “No business, I thought.”

Alisa threw him an apologetic smile. “Right, sorry.”

Maxim observed the exchange, then seized the moment to throw her under the bus. “Ms. Alisa here isn’t exactly as innocent as she seems,” he pointed to her. “Sure, we sleep around. But we don’t sneak them back home. Do we?”

Alisa’s hands flew to her chest in offense. “My own brother,” she gasped.

“It’s the truth. How many times have I caught you sneaking out of the room when I went for a smoke?” With a cheerful smile, he continued, “Or better yet, sneaking someone in. I’m surprised no one died.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Feels like yesterday.”

“It sure was easier at uni.”

“Where did you even go?” I asked her.

“Concerts mostly. A couple of bars.” She shifted her attention to her brothers. “As if Father would let me go alone. How easy do you think it is to pick up men when your brothers kill people for a living? I had to be resourceful.”

When they didn’t reply, she offered a bit more truth. “Honestly, you made my life easier by sending me off. It eliminated the complications.”

Maxim cringed. “Don’t tell Andrei. He’ll never let it go.”

“Where is he, anyway?” Enzo interrupted the conversation.

“Working,” Alisa answered. “But later he’ll be home with his wife. They take this married life very seriously. Any chance they have alone, they use it. Which is rare, since we all live under the same roof.”

“You don’t have your own places?” I asked, surprised.

“We do,” Luka clarified. “But we still stay at the main house. It’s easier that way.”

Either we didn’t want to pry or enough had been said. We all turned back to our meals, occasionally exchanging glances between bites.

When we ate our fill, Alisa turned to me and Enzo. “Thank you both for this. It means the world to me.”

We both nodded before Enzo took over, discussing wine with Alisa.

With dinner cleared, we moved the party to the nearby fire pit for dessert.

Alisa requested s'mores, and despite me not being familiar with the concept, I now perfected the technique thanks to a handful of recipe websites and introduction videos I studied before coming.

The night turned out just the way I hoped. While we all enjoyed the hot mess, Enzo claimed he wouldn't have any, used to having gelato or some other Italian dessert, but quickly softened when I insisted it was mandatory.

The fire crackled as we licked the dessert off our fingers, seated in the comfortable chairs by the ocean.

As I watched Maxim chase his sister down the beach, attempting to smear chocolate on her face, a realization hit me.

I lived for these moments. The rare glimpses of happiness. The calm that settled my mind.

A break from its usual "Tayrmoil."



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

As the clock neared 2 AM, Enzo said goodnight and set off on his naked quest, dragging a sun bed through the sand.

Alisa had already dozed off on the living room couch. When Maxim tried to move her to bed, she protested like a child, mumbling about wanting to see the sunrise over the sea. I was pretty sure the room she was staying in offered the same view, but we complied, covered her with blankets, and turned off the light.

Luka, the last one left, asked his older brother for the car keys. Casually dressed, he kissed his sister goodnight on the cheek and disappeared into the night.

In the unfamiliar space, I opened another bottle and settled on the patio.

With no sleep schedule and my paranoia creeping in, I didn't bother trying to sleep. At least not for a while.

The house and the area around it were dark, except for the LED strips lighting up the staircase. Outside, the moon was doing its part, casting a soft glow. If you lived in the city like I did, the sky was rarely visible. Tonight was a different story. I leaned back and took in the view.

There was something oddly peaceful about the silence that settled when everything else was still. It was exciting, not knowing what was lurking in the dark. I tuned into the night, feeling the stillness and letting my senses catch every little sound.

An orange glow alerted me to his presence.

He approached the house from the beach, a cloud of smoke swirling around his head as he leaned against the patio pole. Legs crossed at the ankles, he stared straight ahead, right where I lay.

Aware of his gaze, I flipped him off. Again. Partly to test his limits, but mostly to get a reaction. The cigarette dangled from his mouth as he returned the gesture with both hands.

Maxim pulled out his phone, the light casting a glow on his face. The change in environment brought out his curls, and the natural style suited him.

A text message notification beeped from the pocket of my dress. While I wondered if I should keep him waiting, curiosity won out, and I pulled out my phone.

MAXIM:Is this all talk, no game?

ME:Who is this?

Amusement flickered in his eyes at my pathetic attempt at a joke. His eyebrow arched in that familiar ‘Seriously?’ way when he looked at me.

I didn’t make him wait long.

ME:Depends on what game we’re playing.

MAXIM:The same one we started back at the club.

Before I could respond, another message came through.

MAXIM:Except the stakes have increased.

ME:How so?

MAXIM:Now I have something to prove...

ME:What?

MAXIM:That there's someone in this house you're interested in.

I cleared my throat, shaking off whatever had lodged itself there. Deciding to play along, I was curious to see where this would lead.

ME:Basement, 15 minutes. I'll leave it open.

I entered the house through the sliding glass door, heading straight for the place I had in mind. Alisa was fast asleep on the couch, her hands tucked beneath her head.

Moving quietly through the house, I passed the dim hallway, heading toward the basement. Three doors down, the gray one waited.

As I entered, the room looked just as I remembered. Dominated by dark tones, shades of gray blended seamlessly with metallic accents and crisp white undertones. Modern art adorned the otherwise sparse walls.

Sophisticated, expensive, unmistakably so. At first glance, nothing seemed out of place, but a closer inspection revealed something else entirely.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

The massive four-poster bed was the room's centerpiece, its ironed satin sheets inviting you in. It wasn't just any bed; after what I had seen earlier, I knew its purpose was far from ordinary.

The furniture, crafted from reinforced rods, was built to last. A metal ring circled each pole, with a snap hook hanging from it. Attached to the hook was a carabiner, connected to a bungee cord, offering a specific range when pulled.

He wanted to play. And I was a worthy opponent.

I picked up the control tablet, adjusting the light settings to red, then set the timer. The room sank into darkness, and I knew the light would flash briefly, casting a red glow before the countdown began again.

Satisfied with the setup, I slipped out of my dress, leaving only my underwear. I glanced down at the pile of clothes, organizing it into a neat path that led toward the bathroom. I'd felt pretty at dinner, but we were about to play a whole different game.

Crouching in the corner closest to the door, I waited. As the minutes ticked by, I steadied my breathing and adjusted my eyes to the dimness.

When I heard footsteps down the hallway, my heart quickened.

Anticipation spread through me, but I forced myself to stay calm.

Maxim entered the room, scanning the space as if he expected me to be sprawled out on the bed, waiting for him to devour me. That wasn't quite the plan I had in mind.

He stepped forward, and as he passed my hiding spot, I silently closed the door behind him. The room slipped back into darkness, and the game began.

Being in the room longer gave me an edge while Maxim tried to make sense of the situation. As he moved toward the bathroom, inspecting the clothes I'd left behind, I took quiet steps toward the bed. Despite my best efforts, he sensed the movement almost immediately, his attention snapping to me. His focus played right into my hands, so I guided him closer.

Maxim didn't ask questions or speak a word, he just followed blindly.

When his foot reached the edge of the bed, I sprang into action. My fingers traced up his chest, teasing him seductively. His muscles tensed under my touch. Slowly, I moved toward his neck, gaining a firm grip to steady him, while my other hand crept up, unnoticed. He let me get close, oblivious to my true intentions.

A loud click echoed through the room as the carabiner snapped shut around the chain decorating his neck, the same damn piece of jewelry I'd been eyeing for a while.

By now, he realized what I had done. He started the game at a slight disadvantage, but I wouldn't call it cheating.

"You can have me if you catch me," I whispered, close to his face, before sprinting to the other side of the room.

The attached cord restricted his movement, and while the ring was fastened to the bed, some areas of the room remained out of reach.

Navigating in the dark made it even harder.

He took a deep breath, turning to scan the room as his eyes adjusted. Like me, he

shed his clothes, standing there for a moment, either in his underwear or naked. I couldn't tell.

The sound of metal grinding on the bar mixed with our heavy breaths. He didn't try to hide his footsteps, relying entirely on his speed.

We were in a cat-and-mouse chase, neither of us sure who was playing which role.

Every time he came closer, I leaped behind him, jumping to the other side. On my next move, I allowed him a brief touch on my shoulder before darting out of his reach.

Maxim stayed focused, waiting patiently for the right moment, but it never came. We went on like that for a while, each step growing more deliberate, until he suddenly halted.

Confused by the change, I positioned myself in the middle, trying to gauge his next move.

Just when I thought he was about to unhook the carabiner and end the game, he spun around and lunged toward the center of the bed with surprising speed.

At the last moment, I grabbed the top bar with both hands, pulling myself up in a quick, controlled motion.

The red light flashed across the room, exposing our positions.

His face was right there, in front of me. His expression, far too unhinged, made me study the man who was every bit the power machine I had always imagined.

Maxim's gaze fixed on the strain in my abdominal muscles. Almost hypnotized, he

stepped closer, running his hand up and down my stomach.

The roughness of his calloused fingers scraped against the fragile hold I had left on my control.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

The chain remained attached to the bed. And when I saw the full picture for the first time, my mind loosened its grip on sanity. I pulled myself up, surrendering, spreading my legs wider in invitation.

Eager for the reward, I begged him to accept, and he did, throwing my legs over his arms with ease.

He slipped the panties off in one smooth motion. With a deep inhale, he took in the sight, the tip of his nose brushing against my clit.

When we faced each other, he couldn't hide the hunger in his eyes, even in the darkness.

A deep grunt escaped him. "I've been waiting way too long to taste this pussy."

As if on cue, the light went out. Feeling now at home in the darkness, his mouth immediately sprang into action, sucking my clit without warning.

Holy Crap.

I didn't bother stifling the desperate sounds that escaped me. The angle at which he held me allowed him to tongue-fuck me deeply. He thrust in and out, each movement precise, alternating with calculated swipes. His grip on my thighs was unyielding yet steady. The darkness sharpened every sensation, my body attuned to the pleasure. I couldn't see him, but I wanted to, no, needed to grasp those curls instead.

His head was trapped between my thighs, and I held him there, squeezing with all my



might, chasing the high. My mind threatened to shut down, but my grip on the metal remained firm.

As euphoria neared, I pressed his head twice. He understood. Lowering my legs to the ground, Maxim straightened me up.

Not wanting to miss a second, I hurried to switch the settings back to normal light. Chain in hand, I led him to the bed, not letting him out of my sight. The chain flashed in the movement, a silver collar around his neck. I eyed his body, the way his muscles strained with each step.

Maxim was a dangerous breed. The one you somehow managed to leash, but you both knew it was because he let you, filling you with false ideas of control before you found yourself underneath the beast, the teeth inches from piercing your skin.

And I was just rabid enough to let him bite me.

Sitting on the edge, he leaned back on his palms, waiting with his thick thighs spread.

I climbed onto his lap, hissing at the mere touch, his hardness pressing against me, demanding entrance. I ran my hand up his torso, grabbing onto the chain. Every part of me wanted to pull, even his eyes daring me, but I only held on, the metal cold between my fingers.

Maxim let me toy with his body, my tongue tracing the side of his neck, teasing, testing. He tapped into some invisible well of patience that I never quite found myself, his breathing steady but his arousal apparent.

The pulsing, the need, was overwhelming, but the second I lowered myself, eager for contact, he lifted me effortlessly, flipping us in one swift motion, forcing me face down.

He was the one chained, yet the power had shifted. Speed was his advantage.

“My turn to play,” Maxim growled against my ear.

Goosebumps rose along my skin as I pressed my face into the satin sheets.

His grip on the back of my neck held me tight, a chain of his own making, as he nudged at my entrance.

Maxim circled his hips, teasing, as the needy sounds slipping from my lips felt foreign to the rest of me. He never pushed inside, only slid against me in slow, torturous strokes. Innocent, but just as devastating.

His grip tightened, fingers sinking into my flesh as he held me down. This time I welcomed it.

From the moment I saw the bed, I wanted to explore the room. Now, I was doing it with him.

Life sure had a twisted sense of humor.

Just like our encounter at the club, he pushed the limits of my boundaries, testing my patience. Maybe even my sanity.

When his finger trailed over my ass, circling before pushing in, the pressure at the back of my neck merciful, I felt completely claimed.

Despite the stillness between us, neither of us seemed restrained.

I knew he was holding back, but I didn't expect his next move. He slapped my pussy, the sharp sound echoing off the walls, then returned to the same position, me sitting

in his lap, in control.

It was all a game. The power shifted with every move, tilting between us, never quite settling.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

When I rubbed against his length, the head of his cock sent a sensation rippling through me.

I thrived on the control he gave me, relishing it even more, knowing he could take over at any moment. That, too, would feel just as liberating.

When his teeth enclosed around my nipple and his hands gripped my ass, we panted together. Maybe it was the most innocent act this room had ever witnessed, but to me, this was the slowest I had ever taken things.

I didn't know why, but when we locked eyes, daring the other to look away first, the pleasure deepened. The orgasms took control. I didn't understand of it, but I trusted the process and let it lead me wherever we were headed.

\*\*\*

The walk upstairs sounded like a nightmare. Drowsiness was setting in, and I didn't dare ignore it. It was a rare occurrence that my body demanded rest. I couldn't afford to ignore this request.

As much as I longed to spend more time with him, I stayed put, slipping under the sheets. Maxim followed, either out of the same consideration or simply in solidarity.

We lay peacefully across from each other, and I cursed the darkness for sheltering the beauty of his gaze from me.

As my hands reached to where his chest rose and fell with even breaths, I traced the

ink.

“What split it in half?” I whispered, my fingers brushing the butterfly tattoo that remained hidden in the shadows. The skin was smooth beneath my touch, only soft hair covering the spot.

I feared I had gone too far, but Maxim erased my doubts with his honesty.

“Even if they bleed me dry and notice the darkness mixed with the blood, I will die knowing I was undoubtedly me.”

His words replayed in my head, and maybe one day, when death comes for us, I’ll remember them and laugh. But for now, they remain poetry in the back of my mind, an inspiration of sorts.

As the silence stretched on, Maxim surprised me with a question of his own.

“Why not accept the protection and tie yourself to at least one?”

There was wisdom in his words. He understood how the world worked and what it meant to be excluded. What he didn’t know was that I wasn’t afraid of standing out or being different. I’d been searching for clarity my whole life.

There were many reasons behind my decision, but I only gave him one: “I do not wish to be owned.”

“Has anyone ever tried?” His voice concealed the humor, but the magnitude of the question was clear.

I gave a soft laugh. “No one has ever dared.” I propped myself up on my forearms, towering over his head. Riding the wave of confidence, I asked, “Why? Are you

considering it?”

“I know better,” he proclaimed.

His tattooed arm spread across my back, pulling me closer.

I was so caught up in the moment that I missed my chance to stop him when his fingers began tracing the bumpy skin of my back.

His movements faltered.

“Who did this shit to you?” Maxim snapped, his anger deepening with each breath. I didn’t pull away; it was too late anyway. A part of me knew it was time to share my story.

The bumps and scars that lived rent-free on my skin were fragments of who I was. A constant reminder of the cuts and stitches I put this body through.

There was no name I could give him. No one to blame or direct the hate toward.

It was... “Myself,” I admitted bluntly.

I admired him for daring to even ask, for caring enough to brace for the answer.

“You don’t get to the top by letting others carry you. I had to take matters into my own hands,” I revealed, searching the darkness for his reaction.

There was no verbal response. Perhaps his thoughts were too preoccupied.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I lay my head back down, pulling the blanket up to my neck.

“You saw it?” I asked, shifting the focus.

He knew what I was referring to: the video. I wasn’t sure what had prompted me to ask, normally I wouldn’t care.

“Andrei played it long ago,” his voice confirmed. “I didn’t know it was you.”

“I was eighteen...”

Maxim nodded. I imagined he had been in a similar situation at that age.

His palm slid under the fluffy pillow I rested my head on. Our bodies remained close, though not as much as before.

Through it all, I didn’t think about how many rules I’d already broken with him, things I’d sworn off. Like cuddling after sex or sharing a bed. Or how vulnerable, both physically and mentally, I was around him. We’d only known each other briefly, but it felt right to be okay with these things, to allow myself to live a different life than the one I was leading.

For just tonight, I wasn’t Taya the assassin. I was Taya the woman. But I knew, there wasn’t one without the other. And when the morning came, they would become one once more.

\*\*\*

The day had twenty-four hours, and if I managed to get two hours of sleep, I considered it a good one. Between language classes, combat, and target practice, I had no spare time. I couldn't afford to waste a minute, being this late to the game. Besides, staying busy worked. It kept the second thoughts at bay.

Two months in, following the agreement with Ilya, Uncle and I became acquainted. An ex-member of a special Russian force called the Spetsnaz, he was a mean-looking motherfucker. A gash decorated his face from the forehead to the bottom lip. A bear fight, they whispered around the compound. I laughed, though it wouldn't surprise me if the gossip was true.

Since I refused to leave the country, Ilya flew him in from Russia. The introduction was short-lived. A brief stare down, followed by a single-worded reply "Go," and I had no choice but to follow. It's safe to say I haven't sat down since.

The demonstration of my skills went equally well. No acknowledgment meant I didn't impress.

Not expecting anything else, I prepared for what was to come.

A helicopter dropped us off in a forest clearing deep in the Alaskan Range. October offered a damp feeling in the air. With nothing but trees and fields surrounding us, Uncle pushed basic supplies into my hands: a wooden bow and arrows, before he took off.

They instructed me not to follow. Left on my own again, the biggest test of them all.

Every morning, I woke at dawn and hiked up the mountain. Set up camp and slept. By the time a new day came, I repeated the process. Up and down, I ran until the skin peeled off my toes in bloody blisters and my mouth turned purple. Outdoor survival skills weren't the only lesson I got. If I failed to provide for myself, I starved.



To stay covered, I built a temporary shelter, just in time. Nothing to be proud of, but as soon as the ground froze and I had hypothermia to worry about, the enclosed space served me well.

To avoid losing track of the time passed, I carved a line on a tree branch each day. I even learned how to spark a flame and keep the fire going.

The forest remained undisturbed, and I spent hours admiring its beauty. Beautiful but deadly. It was painfully obvious my fragile human body didn't belong. A month in, I still hadn't gotten used to the random noises nature produced. A crunch of branches, the wind echoing in the clearings, bird sounds at random times.

When the snowy night came, I stayed close to the small fire, staring ahead into the darkness. It wasn't an animal I awaited.

He was out there, biding his time.

I was close to falling asleep on my tarp on the cold, rough ground when steady hands wrapped around my throat, forcing me to fight for my life with all I had.

After days of staying in these harsh conditions, combined with exhaustion and hunger, what I had wasn't nearly enough.

In a chokehold, he brought me to the edge of consciousness. Misery and despair were feelings I tried so hard to be free of, yet at the moment, they overfilled me.

At least, as we rolled around, I hadn't tapped out. Blackness greeted me, and I let the darkness take me under. The only sign of what had occurred was when I awoke on the ground, coughing my lungs out.

The cycle went on.

At random times, he would attack. There was no pattern, no logic to follow. You had to stay alert. Sleep was a luxury I couldn't afford.

Forced to rely on my senses, over time, I got better at spotting him before he launched.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Confident in my ability to protect myself, I even dared to counterattack.

That's when he switched to weapons.

Scars covered my body. Deep stab wounds I refuse to erase. With no choice but to learn how to tend to them myself, some healed worse than others.

I submitted myself to this experience willingly. Some fucked up part of me allowed me to wear them proudly. Without a second thought. Never covered, they became an interconnected part of the handful of tattoos I got.

Not once have I thought about quitting. Never resorted to begging to be taken back to the compound.

What did I have to return to? An empty apartment and a meaningless life?

The thought of what one might consider a domestic life disgusted me. Failure wasn't an option. Ilya was very insistent on seeing the training through. He had a shit ton of money, that much was clear. Why he wanted to invest it in me was the part I couldn't make sense of. What was his motive? He hired the best of the best to pass their knowledge to me, of all people. Why not himself? I once again didn't ask the right questions. I haven't felt special, like once before.

I had an agenda of my own.

Uncle's training finished half a year after living and fighting in the wilderness. I was losing my sense of humanity. Becoming one with the elements.

An obnoxiously loud helicopter brought us back to the compound where Ilya awaited, desperate to be brought up to speed with my progress. Given the approval of the teacher, we parted ways with a handshake. I watched Uncle drift away as I instinctively held both hands around my neck.

The first mission was to clear a compound north of the city, an act of retaliation for the killing of a Bratva member in cold blood. One of the lower-ranked gangs saw this as an opportunity and took it upon themselves to make their mark. They picked the wrong group to mess with. Ilya briefed me on all that needed to be done, and I agreed, feeling up for the task.

With a camera strapped to my chest, I stood in the compound. I was dressed in the outfit I stuck to whenever I was working: all-black leggings, a long-sleeved t-shirt, combat boots, and my hair styled in a single braid that swung with every move.

A Bratva member dropped me off at a nearby location. Guns and knives were my backup. My weapon of choice was a bow and arrow. No longer one of those wooden kinds used for hunting. The money my mother stashed for me came in handy, allowing me to purchase the weapon. A modern model with a sleek look and almost no weight to it. Ilya contracted a specialist to make all the customizations, the only other person I permitted to touch it. It had features and precision no gun allowed you to have. Sure, it cost me precious seconds to reload, but that's not how I rolled.

The targets rarely saw me coming, and I often aimed from a distance. If I had to engage in short-distance hits, I commonly used knives.

Many reveled in the sounds the knife made when you sliced someone's throat. Enjoyed their pain and suffering. In my mind, the targets were a task to complete, an object made of walking X's marking the spots. It was a methodical process. I counted the hits in my head, one by one, until they totaled zero, and I was done.

Zoned out.

The first mission was a success. Ilya opened his favorite vodka to honor me, and I savored the taste.

The following week, the recording ended up being uploaded on the black market. The video served as a promo, and the inquiries poured in.

I was eighteen.

The inbox soon filled with jobs I was underqualified for, but I took them and learned on the go.

To this day, I recall where the marks were on my throat, even if they've long faded. I feel the powerful squeeze and the initial panic that overtakes you. I see the smoke coming from the gun my loving mother held.

The past had a way of catching up with you, even if you did everything to move on.

Yet, it didn't haunt me; instead, it made me who I am now.

Stronger. Feared rather than fearful.

The kitchen was far too bright after the night I'd just had. As I turned the corner in search of breakfast, I was grabbed by the arms and gently pulled into the pantry. Alisa stood in the middle, her eyes glossy. Piles of snacks cluttered the counters. Half-bitten cookies, spilled Skittles separated by color. I briefly assessed the room before she spoke.

"Let's go out."

“Out where?”

“Anywhere. I wanna dance.” A ghost of a smile appeared on her face. “I never had a bachelorette party,” she pleaded.

I studied her closely. Whatever went down last night, Alisa was eager to forget. But what she was asking for went against everything Ilya instructed. Violated every safety protocol they’d put in place.

Good thing I didn’t work for the man.

“Okay.”

“Thank you, Taya,” Alisa whispered, hugging me tightly as she slipped past me on her way out of the pantry.

I leaned against the counter, grabbing a handful of the scattered sweets.

The eye-level window faced the endless sand dunes, a light summer breeze carrying the sand on the wind. I frowned at the waste of this view in the pantry.

As I lingered, stuffing more Skittles into my mouth, the understanding clicked. Only someone with a lot on their mind would come here, would take the time to separate them. A hint of a smile appeared on my face. The view was exactly where it should be. I stayed a little longer, holding my own thoughts at bay.

When they all settled, I pulled out my phone and began researching.

\*\*\*

Despite the place being advertised as popular among residents, the parking lot was filled with sports cars from various states. If it were up to me, we would’ve ended up in some local dump, listening to gossip over a beer. Summer was prime season in the Hamptons, with the high-end houses attracting all the rich. There probably weren’t any locals left, judging by the diners in this fancy bar. I hadn’t seen this much linen under one roof... well, ever. Looking around at the beige and light browns, I almost missed the black suits typically surrounding me.

There were no doors, no windows separating the bar from the patio.

Ambient lighting added to the seaside atmosphere. Palm trees rooted in pots lined the poles. Since we had little interest in the food, we were seated at the bar. A bowl of peanuts landed in front of us while Alisa discussed the wine menu with the staff.

I couldn't believe the stunt we pulled worked.

Though we knew it was only a matter of time, we hoped we'd have enough to enjoy ourselves. Alisa was an expert at sneaking out of the house.

Combined with my knowledge of the basement, we worked out a perfect escape plan.

At this precise moment, there were three enraged mafiosos trapped together in a sex dungeon below the house. That thought alone was my entertainment for the night.

I don't think the restaurant even had a dance floor, but it was the best I could do. It got her out of the house.

We left our phones at home, not just to make it harder for them to track us, but also because I couldn't stand seeing the screen light up with Malek's name one more time. Twenty missed calls were where I drew the line.

Maybe I should have stopped when he called from a different number. I thought I was clear at the meeting, but the extra text I sent him should've reinforced that.

It wasn't over, because nothing ever really began. Whatever fantasy he had in his head better dissolve by the time we meet at the wedding.

Alisa and I were wrapped up in conversation for a good hour when the hairs on my arm stood up. I focused, calming my breathing.



Time was up.

I kissed her cheek and excused myself, happy to take the bullet for both of us.

Blinded by the light, I squinted, observing the darkness. When my vision adjusted, the silhouette came into shape. There he was, in the center of it, like he owned the very color. Like he purposely painted his body to blend with the shadows.

Maxim leaned against a tree in the dark part of the parking lot, arms crossed.

I hesitated, expecting a shower of angry words. None came. For a split second, I debated returning inside to warn Alisa we'd been compromised.

That's when the darkness spoke to me.

I stepped closer, aware of every move. Summer temperatures brought out the tank top, and I was here for it. He stayed quiet, watching as I approached. While I expected a million questions, he asked none. I spoke instead, "When did you have the time to get all these?" I eyed the art again, hypnotized.

He shrugged with a playful smile. "I'm not always where I say I am."

I rolled my eyes at his vague answer.

"I had fucking years to collect them," he added, his unrestricted smile flashing in the dark.

"How many?"

## Page 56

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Maxim reached into his jeans pocket, lighting up a cigarette. After the first hit, he answered, “A lot.”

“Not tattoos.”

A puff of smoke accompanied his laugh. “I know.”

We seriously had to stop meeting at night. I wanted to observe his expressions closely. I wished to stare into his eyes when the sun brought out their color. To see more than just flashes of who he was through the shadows the world wrapped us in.

I’d already seen the darkness. Now, I strangely craved the light.

“Turn them off,” he ordered.

“What?”

Maxim pointed to my head, circling his finger. “The wheels turning in your head.”

His body entered my personal space, flooding every sense with its overwhelming presence.

He looked down, deep into my eyes. “We both sense it,” he hinted, running his fingers up my arm. “You and I are the biggest danger out there.”

Goosebumps covered my skin in anticipation, but I held his gaze.

“Wouldn’t that mean I should be alert around you?”

Maxim chuckled. “You sure were alert last night,” he rubbed the memory in.

The darkness hid the evil side-eye I threw his way, or maybe he just ignored it. Either way, I resorted to action. I lifted my knee, but he blocked the attempt, pushing my leg back down.

“You’re safe with me.”

A snicker slipped out of me. “I’m not looking for a dark knight.” I tapped my index finger against the middle of my chest. “I’m my own weapon.”

His gaze traveled the length of my body, assessing. “You look like you’re capable of handling two.”

Safe. I laughed internally. The word had nothing to do with capability.

There was never a time in my life when I was truly safe. No one was. Not even with numbers.

“Promises don’t mean much to me,” I confessed.

“I don’t give those,” he shot back, standing firm. “I’m giving you my word.”

I let out a puff of laughter, the sound floating between us. “I’ve yet to meet a gangster who keeps it.”

“Another generalization.” Maxim shook his head in disapproval, his tone one of disappointment. “Baby, we’ve got so much to work on.”

He slid his warm hand around my neck, rotating me to face the opposite direction. Together, we took a step toward the entrance, the sun-warmed pavement crunching beneath our sneakers.

His stubble grazed my ear when he whispered, “I’ll prove you right for every wrong they’ve convinced you of.”

A light kiss brushed my neck where his hands had just been, before he returned to his spot.

Without a glance back, I made my way to Alisa at the bar. Sweat beaded on my neck as I tried to ignore the heat, lowering myself onto the stool.

Alisa sat straight, her maxi dress trailing to the floor.

“They’re here,” I murmured, my voice low.

She remained still, her rosy cheeks matching the color of her shoes.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“I noticed,” she said softly, her chin lowered.

When the meaning registered, I scanned the room. Enzo was the first I spotted, sitting at the end of the bar, wiggling his eyebrows when our eyes briefly met.

“Great,” I chugged the remaining wine.

“That’s not all.” Alisa nodded off to the side.

Luka appeared in the right corner, his hand flat against the wall. Beneath him, a short brunette hung on every word. He paused, flashing me his perfect smile.

I knew, if I faced the left corner, Maxim would already be there.

They covered each front, forming a triangular trap. Us dangling in the middle like bait. He drew me out, so the rest can close in.

Alisa gave in to the pressure, scanning the room for her brother. When her face lit up, I got my confirmation. A moment passed before her focus snapped back to me.

“What did he do now?” she asked teasingly, a smirk on her lips.

I drummed the tips of my nails against the wine glass. “Rotated me like a rotisserie chicken,” I huffed.

Alisa’s drink sprayed across the polished bar top. Her cheeks flushed, but she giggled loudly, attracting the attention of several nearby patrons.

“I mean it literally,” I snorted, attempting to set the record straight, but her dreamer’s mind wasn’t accepting the answer.

Enzo’s face was a display of emotions when I cocked my head in his direction.

“And him?” I asked Alisa.

“Absolutely nothing,” she fidgeted with her hands.

I looked around, the bar getting more packed as the night progressed.

“Now what?”

“Now we feel the moment.” She smiled, not letting the men ruin her time.

And we did. We laughed, discussed fashion, snorted far too often for the type of establishment.

When the waiter came to check on us, we ordered a third bottle, despite Alisa’s previous restrictions. The guy lingered around, smiling widely. He glanced at Alisa’s hand as we arrived, spotting the diamond that pulled her finger down. Even my best stare didn’t deter him when he turned his eyes to me next.

I figured the first few heated glances were in hopes of a generous tip. We exchanged eye rolls with the bride next to me. The fifth glance came with a wink, and that unleashed me. I flagged him down, leaning over the bar.

“I don’t think you’ve got what it takes,” I cautioned, my voice daring. “But then again, does anyone?”

The waiter’s mouth gaped like a fish out of water, but it wasn’t me behind his

reaction.

Tattooed arms eloped around me, placing knuckles against the surface.

“It’s not on you tonight,” Maxim reminded me, his voice softer than I’ve ever heard him speak. Enzo and Luka were already on their way over from across the bar.

“Brat,” Alisa greeted her brother, smiling from ear to ear.

A low sound came from the waiter, but Maxim was quicker. “Shut your dumbass mouth before I permanently shut it for you,” he growled. He stepped in between, holding out a hand to help us down, then let Luka take over.

When we fled the damn place, I turned just in time to see the color drain from the waiter’s face at Maxim’s parting words. He pointed his finger at me, and when they both turned, I mouthed, “Fuck this place,” and walked out.

We each clung to Luka’s arm, with Enzo trailing behind us. Every twenty meters or so, I turned back, checking on him.

I returned to the same bedroom I’d slept in the previous night. Just like then, the door to the basement remained open.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

When Maxim showed up much later, he headed straight to the bathroom.

The rainforest shower gushed out streams of water, the droplets dancing against the marble. I urged my body to leave the comfort of satin sheets, seeking him.

I leaned against the vanity, watching him rinse off. The steam partly hid his figure, my body fighting the urge to join him or, better yet, wipe the fog off the glass to see him more clearly. I fought with all my might, but my eyes... they betrayed me. I stood there, tracing every move, every drop that slid down his skin. It felt like an invasion, to witness something I wasn't meant to see. If there was a canvas worthy of the image, and if I had the talent, I'd rush to capture it.

Maxim cut off the water, stepping out of the red puddle. He reached for the towel and wrapped it low around his hips. His steps led him right to me, our feet touching when he reached over, grabbing my chin between his fingers, denying me the mouthwatering view by tilting my head.

We stayed like that for a while before I pushed up on my toes and placed a kiss on his cheek. His eyes searched for answers, something unreadable flashing through the greens. I gave him nothing, just a smile before slipping back under the sheets.

I tucked my hands under my head, breathing in the moment. The mattress dipped under his weight, the sheets ruffling. His hands searched my back, tracing the scarred lines.

“What would you be in another life?” he asked in a throaty voice.



“Yours,” the word escaped me in a whisper. It was a fleeting thought, clouded by the fog of sleep, because the word felt like a commitment I could never keep.

Closing my eyes, I forced my thoughts to calm and focused on the even breaths of the man beside me. As I neared the sleep gate, Maxim kissed my shoulder blade, his voice a low murmur in the dark. “In another life.”

Maybe it was a dream, a trick of my groggy mind, but I answered anyway.

“There is no such thing,” I whispered, my voice barely a breath.

And I crossed the sleep realm’s door.

Someone was in the basement. Quiet steps, only a trained ear could follow, came from down the hall. It was all it took to jolt me awake. On instinct, I reached for my gun, but the weapon wasn’t there. Wrong room.

Well, this should be fun, I thought.

An unnatural amount of heat poured out of Maxim’s body, pressing closely against my back. His hand looped around, holding onto the front of his shirt I wore. It was as if he didn’t want me to slip out without his knowledge.

With spare seconds to act, I ran out of time to move him gently.

“I know,” his voice grazed my ear when I shifted. A hot puff of air tickled my bare skin as he tightened his grip in reassurance.

We both listened closely as the steps neared the door to the gray bedroom. Still fighting the dizziness of the night, I focused on the movement. There was a familiar rhythm in the steps.

“It’s your brother,” I rasped out, relieved.

“Wha—”

Confirming my educated guess, Luka whispered through the closed door. “Maxim. Are you here?”

“Jesus,” his brother muttered next to me. “You couldn’t announce yourself sooner? We almost shot you.”

“We?” Luka’s voice expressed his surprise. “Are you decent?”

“No,” Maxim protested.

“Yes,” I shouted over him.

Luka poked his head through the gap in the open door, looking at the floor out of politeness or fear of Maxim’s reaction.

“Hey, Tay,” he greeted, his voice quiet. “Ilya called for you guys.”

Ilya?

I slipped out of Maxim’s grip, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. Still early.

When I reached the door and swung it open, Luka was standing behind it, dressed and ready to go.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“What do you mean? The wedding isn’t for another eight hours.”

“Ilya’s freaking out about something,” Luka said, “and he sent me to bring you two.”

Maxim sat up, wrapping the blanket around his waist. “Right now?” His hair was a mess of curls, and I couldn’t look away.

“Yeah. It’s urgent,” Luka replied, clearing his throat.

Maxim rolled his eyes, unaffected, and lay back down.

“I’ll wait in the car,” his brother said, before disappearing down the hall.

“How did you know it was him?” Maxim asked, watching me as I scanned the floor for my belongings, gathering the little I had in this room.

“Everybody walks a certain way.”

I stopped by the edge of his side, and that’s when I spotted my discarded underwear on the nightstand. I hoped Luka hadn’t read the room too much.

“You can tell if you listen closely,” I explained. “I catalog faces, movements, sounds, and the rhythm of their steps.”

I nudged Maxim’s jeans with the tip of my foot, tossing the pair at his face as a signal to get moving.

Without a word, he stood up to his full height, slipping his legs into the jeans. I couldn't help but admire the body in front of me. He didn't even bother with underwear, clearly unfazed by who we were about to meet.

The image of him was stored in my mind, a lingering memory sure to resurface later. If it wasn't so urgent and his brother wasn't waiting for us upstairs, I would've done anything to get more of what he'd offered.

Was this becoming a regular thing?

"That's kinda hot," Maxim commented, reacting to my earlier words.

Or you're kinda deranged, I thought.

Before I could process it, he reached over and pocketed my underwear with a wink, one he'd given me before. Then he moved toward the door.

"Yeah, only you would think so," I called after him.

At the door frame, he paused, tracing the outline of his jaw with his thumb. He stared at me with a ridiculous smile for a while before finally exiting, the mood of the moment leaving with him.

Alisa had hours before she needed to get ready, so she stayed behind. Still splayed out on the couch, her sleepy head nodded as I spoke.

Enzo, a godsend, brewed us coffee to go. Hesitant at first, he agreed to keep her company until Andrei picked her up.

With arrangements out of the way, we said our goodbyes.

Maxim's black Mercedes, nearly identical to mine, roared to life under his touch. When the house disappeared from view, a hint of sadness settled in.

It was a longing for the peaceful weekends we sorely had.

Once on the road, I turned to Luka in the back seat. "What happened?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Malek came by this morning, and he and Ilya talked for hours."

Malek?

"What about?" Maxim asked, his focus set on the road.

"Like I said, no idea. Andrei didn't know either."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

And that was that. From that point on, we remained quiet. Each caught in their web of thoughts. The drive back could be summarized as a series of rapid speeding, occasional overtaking, and lots of curses.

Rap music fueled Maxim's mood, causing his brother to roll his eyes at the choice. I, for once, appreciated the genre. Raw emotions hid in the words of the songs. In some ways, I related to the lyrics.

Enzo's powerful brew helped restore the energy I still lacked. After the third cup, I fought the urge to sing along. Luckily, the Galkin men were spared my musical talents, since I wasn't familiar with the lyrics.

The display on the dashboard cast light on the driver. Maxim handheld the steering wheel firmly while he leaned against the center console, drumming his fingers to the rhythm. He wore casual clothing, a change from his usual suit. Dark jeans with a black V-neck t-shirt. Topped with a leather jacket. Insert the tattoos, he was a wet dream.Mine.

What if that's all he was?

The aftertaste of a dream you chase night after night to experience the high. You prolong the inevitable and hang on, but in the morning it's gone, and you are left to deal with the reality of the day.

I'll cope regardless, but for the first time, I imagined theifs, and they didn't scare me.

So once more, I longed for his gaze. For the intensity his attention brought.

Why did it leave me wanting more?

I sat higher in the seat, wiping the imaginary drool from the corner of my mouth before I got called out for ogling.

When we approached a gas station, I collectively decided to stop. Luka appreciated the suggestion. The man could eat every hour of the day.

When he disappeared deep into the store, I headed for the bathroom, and on the way back, I picked out a pastry to balance out the coffee I consumed.

Whilst waiting in line at the register, I glanced over my shoulder, aware of his proximity. Through the glass storefront, I admired Maxim, still rooted in the parking lot in his signature pose, leaning against the hood of his car, his ankles crossed.

Watching me. Wish granted.

I could see the appeal and the confidence his attention gave. I knew why women craved it, how they dreamed of having someone's entire world revolve around them.

Not just anyone's. A man of his age, maturity, and position, with that much power. Someone who could pick and choose from the masses, rarely coming back for a second time.

Yet, he chose you. Repeatedly. The special one.

I knew he could give me that. Any of these gangsters could. But that wasn't me.

It wasn't power I needed. I wanted the raw, the ugly, and everything in between. Because I knew that side existed in all of us, and I refused

to hide it.

I craved the competitiveness, the thrill, and the excitement it brought. I wanted to be pushed, challenged, and fight for what I earned. But above all, I wanted to choose someone for who they truly were, not for what they represented. Money, power, strength, status, all of it was fabricated.

You gained, you lost, but what of you remained?

With Maxim, though, maturity wasn't part of the offer.

Laughter followed me out the door, and it didn't go unnoticed.

“What's so funny?”

I realized then that I'd let my mind wander. When I zoned in on his face, he blinked, and being who I was, my mouth spoke before my mind could assess. “You.”

Hiding the smile behind a bite of the gas station Danish, I joined him by the car.

He cocked his head and I silently begged whoever was listening to stop sending me all these thirst trap images.

A prolonged breath accompanied his actions as he hooked his hands behind my knees, bringing me closer.

Positioned between his thighs, I stared at him in anticipation, daring him to make a move.



## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Maxim's fingers trailed the inner side of my thigh, but I was confident it was going to take way more effort to taunt me. Or even get a reaction.

With a familiar smirk, he abruptly stood up and faced me head-on.

Leaning in, he came close, stopping just short of my lips.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't eager to give him this first. One I'd been wanting to be rid of for a while.

Do I close my eyes?

No. I blinked several times, watching him from behind lowered eyelids.

It was when his tongue licked the pastry's filling from the corner of my mouth that it hit me.

Asshole.

He was lucky I didn't choke him with the chain decorating his thick neck.

An amused snicker escaped him, and I only saw his back as he returned to the driver's seat, eyes fixed on the entrance. When I glanced behind me, Luka finally walked out, hands filled with junk food.

Once back in the car, it was Maxim's turn to laugh.

This time, I didn't need to ask who he was laughing at.

Ilya was sitting at his desk when a staff member led us to him. Despite today being his wedding day, he looked terrible. I highly doubt he slept.

Cigarette smoke still hung in the air. Whiskey glasses cluttered the room.

Papers covered the ground and occupied the sofas. Broken glass pooled under the left wall, making me wonder what exactly happened earlier.

With the turn of the handle, I opened the window, letting the morning breeze in.

I remained there, in my familiar spot, when I spoke to the man who was apparently in desperate need of us. "Ilya. You do realize that I'm not a dog to be summoned."

With no regard for my words, he barked out orders. "I need you to follow Malek throughout the wedding," Ilya urged. "Keep an eye on his movements. Who he talks to, and report back to me."

A deep breath helped me stay calm.

"Let me get this straight. You want me to be your witness and play spy?" I eyed him. "What's this really about, Ilya?"

His hand waved dismissively through the air. "We'll talk after the ceremony."

"Fine, I'll watch him," I agreed. "But I'm not going out of my way."

My answer displeased him, the vein on his forehead pulsing in response.

"You will do as I say!"

Unacceptable. His manner and tone were far too disrespectful.

“I’m going to pretend none of this happened because I don’t want to ruin Alisa’s special day,” I said, my voice steady. I truly didn’t want to, even if her fiancé was being a dick. “But this behavior won’t fly with me anymore.”

I leaned against the front of the desk. “I am nobody’s toy.”

The Pakhan laughed. Right in my face. A full-hearted, deep laugh that resonated through the room, making my blood boil. I turned to the Galkins behind me, wondering if I was the only one seeing this, but they looked just as confused.

Before we could make sense of Ilya’s strange behavior, he started rambling. “I knew the fucker wanted to overthrow me for a while. There wasn’t much I could do. He had the numbers. My very own people turned against me.”

A fist pounded against the desk, and I instinctively took a step back, preparing myself for whatever was coming next. I could already tell I wasn’t going to like his next words when he looked at me.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Malek listed his demands, and I agreed to give him what he wants.”

He spoke loud enough for the room to hear, but his words felt like they were meant for me.

“I’m preventing a war. One person’s sacrifice compared to the hundreds of lives a war would cost us.”

What war? The question formed, but it died on my tongue at his next words.

“Taya, as part of the deal, you will marry Malek. Today.”

Nothing could have prepared me for this moment. Not years of training.

Not even the level of control I possessed.

Words escaped me. Logic and reason abandoned me. Never have I ever been this blindsided.

When I finally regained some composure, I addressed him with a shaky breath. “I am sorry. What did you say?”

Far too calmly, Ilya repeated. “His first demand was that I make you an official member and agree to a union.”

Union? Marriage?

The words resonated, and the anger began to build. Forgoing any formalities, considering he had lost my respect mere seconds ago, I demanded, “Why the fuck would he want to marry me?”

Silence.

“You agreed?”

“The paperwork is complete.” Ilya inclined his head.

An image flashed through my mind of the two men shaking hands over someone else’s fate. My fate. They exchanged me, negotiated over me. A person. A woman. Like livestock, sold on the market. I became a transaction.

For the greater good? Or for personal gain? They bartered with my life as if it was theirs to possess.

I was so done with all these people. All these men.

“What the fuck, Ilya?” I gritted my teeth, letting out the emotions swirling inside. “Do I mean nothing to you?” A naïve attempt at reaching whatever humanity he had left.

“You were always meant to be something to me,” Ilya replied. “After all, I shaped you into who you are.”

I laughed, a bitter one at his expense, well knowing it was hard work and dedication that got me here. “Please,” I mocked.

He dared to sound annoyed. “If you chose him once before, you can choose him again.”

“For the rest of my life?” I yelled at him over the ringing in my ears.

Moisture gathered in the corner of my eyes. Blurry spots clouded my vision, but I refused to let any tears fall. Painfully aware of the other men witnessing the exchange, I took comfort in knowing they were here to see the situation unravel. I didn’t glance their way, focusing on the problem at hand.

“How many times have I asked you what’s going on?” I reasoned. “You never mentioned anything.”

The boss’s voice took over. “It’s my decision as Pakhan. And you will accept it.”

By this point, I barely stood still. “I am not yours to command, you hear me?” I gathered any strength left and pushed back. “I will fight this, Ilya. With everything I have.”

“You mean to tell me you will put lives at risk?” he tried guiltting me. “Why? Because you can’t be with a guy?”

Enraged at his audacity, I growled. “Don’t you dare put this on me!”

Ilya insisted, pointing an accusatory finger at me. “It is on you. If the deal fails, Malek will come after us.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

There is no us, I wanted to scream. My hands flew to my hair. I pulled on the strands, struggling to maintain composure.

“Stop trying to manipulate me.”

Perhaps I would have crumbled if the pressure he applied continued, but as the breeze hit me, so did the thoughts of the past, and I knew. In my heart of hearts, I knew. It was time for me to fight.

For myself, for those whose lives this decision would affect.

I’d sooner shoulder the burden than accept the fate they tried to impose.

The lies they fabricated and the guilt they attempted to fill me with.

Once, around the time I met Ilya, I might have admired him. Not anymore.

I wanted to be great in my own right. And his presence had run its course.

We will never know the “ifs” because now the fighter had awakened, and she roared.

Ilya picked up on the shift in the air, and with a gesture, he called his guards. To restrain me. To lock me up. Whatever his intentions were, I’d go down fighting before I went down at all.

“Call them off. Last warning.”

Ilya sat there, unmoving. A man I'd known for years and considered my close friend. My only friend for a while. I'd even saved his life once, a long time ago. Yet he sold mine out in the blink of an eye.

His goons were closing in, approaching from behind. Before they got a hold of me, I launched. Timing my move, I played to my strength: precision. I bent and moved out of the way. A moment of hesitation on their part allowed me to execute the move perfectly, their heads clashing together. The sound of the impact wasn't pretty, but they'd have nothing more than a nasty headache. It could've been much worse.

When the guards' bodies hit the ground, I worked quickly. Pulling out their guns, I pointed one at Ilya and the other at Maxim.

I didn't intend to involve the Galkins, who now stood to my left, but to make a safe exit, I had to keep control of the situation, which meant covering all fronts. Besides, they worked for him. In a couple of hours, they'd become family. I couldn't trust them. Any of them.

Eyes narrowed on Ilya, I cocked the gun at him, demanding compliance.

"Back away from the table."

He remained seated, calling my bluff. Frustration surged within me. I wanted to slap him out of whatever delusional state he was in.

Raising my voice to a new high, I spelled out the words, aware of the gun taped to the bottom part of the desk. "I said back away!"

I couldn't afford him reaching for the weapon. Sure, the Galkins were armed, but the code dictated that they must comply and ensure the safety of their Pakhan.



Since it was me who held the upper hand, they better double-think their moves. Thankfully, the reputation I built affected the way I was approached, so they were all wary.

Ilya, not taking my words seriously despite being the one who encouraged me to be who I was, only added fuel to the fire. And I was burning.

Mentally checking out, I aimed the gun and shot. The bullet landed in the wooden panel behind the desk, grazing Ilya's now bleeding ear shell in the process.

The room reached a scorching temperature. By now, the guns were drawn, pointing directly at me. A shot of adrenaline surged through my veins.

Hopefully, this would make them understand.

Ilya's ears were ringing, no doubt, when he finally surrendered to my demands. He stood over the desk while the Galkins followed every move closely, prepared to pounce.

Something close to shock or annoyance took over Ilya's features. I couldn't care less.

His bed was made, and I kick-started the exit plan.

"Here's how it's going to go down," I said, controlling the narrative. "You're going to let me leave in Galkin's car."

Connecting eyes with Maxim, I schooled my face to be neutral. Indifferent, as I continued, "The second I'm past that gate, whatever friendship there was between us? It's over," I warned. "I am coming for you and Malek. I will call in every favor. Gather every rat looking for an opportunity in this city."

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Words weren't registering with his thick fucking head, I could tell. He was dead set.

Still, his expression didn't stop me from pleading one last time. To stop this madness. In self-preservation or a pathetic attempt to maintain the peace we once had.

"Don't make me do this. Think of your people." Alisa. Your fellow members. I silently repeated the names.

What I could never let him find out was that I had a longer list of people to protect, to lose. Which meant I'd have to be two steps ahead of them.

"It's you who should be thinking of them," Ilya stuck with the guilt.

I physically cringed at his words. How could he turn this to me? What sort of twisted psychological game was he trying to play?

"I want you to know that this didn't have to happen." If only he looked beyond his greed. "If you told me what was going on, we would have found a way together. But you sided with Malek instead."

There wasn't more to be said.

With a glance at Maxim, not wanting to raise suspicions about our involvement, I discreetly winked, using a move out of his textbook, before I bolted out of the room.

In another life, I thought, as my legs carried me out of the cage they tried to entrap me in.

Nobody followed me out. The compound was oddly quiet thanks to the early hours, or the fact that Ilya's security was already stationed at the wedding venue.

Maxim's car was still parked in the driveway, the keys in the ignition. A wave of relief hit me. I inhaled deeply, finding comfort in the familiar scent of spiced liquor laced with tobacco and leather within the vehicle's safety.

The stereo turned on along with the engine, and Maxim's Russian rap playlist filled the car. It hit differently when you understood the lyrics.

I desperately wanted to laugh, but the sound died in my throat. The seriousness of the situation prevented me so I focused on the drive instead.

I felt a strange sense of responsibility when it came to Maxim's belongings.

A brief search through the frequently used searches revealed his address. I drove the vehicle to one of the Galkin-owned residences in the city, knowing I had a comfortable lead.

His black jacket lay in the back seat, and I reached for the leather, moving the clothing to the front while I debated how clingy it would make me if I kept it. As if any of it mattered.

With the car parked safely within the complex, I headed toward the closest subway station. On high alert, I stared down at anybody who dared to look my way. Nobody stood out of the ordinary. People commuted to work, trying to beat the rush hour. Many returned home from night shifts or parties.

I rode the train for a good thirty minutes, heading toward Brooklyn.

Despite the alliance, the Russians won't enter Italian territory without a heads-up. By

then, I'll be gone.

The backup phone wouldn't stop ringing in my pocket when I resurfaced back on the street, picking up service.

Without looking, I knew who would be reckless enough to call me, or even have this number.

"Maxim," his name left my mouth.

"Tell me where you're headed."

I couldn't think. Couldn't even focus.

"Why? So you can send Ilya right to me?" I barked back.

His voice carried a hint of hurt. "You know I wouldn't do that."

Did I, though? Regardless, I didn't have a plan, merely an idea.

"Your sister is marrying him. You work for both now. It's exactly what you should do."

Heavy breaths bounced off my ear. Worried he could be holding me on the line purposely to trace the signal, I set on ending this conversation.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Listen to me Maxim, you have your family’s safety to consider,” I reminded him. “You’re going to let me go. Do you understand?”

He had to. This wasn’t what either of them signed up for.

No answer. Static sounds filled the gaps.

I continued, hoping to talk some sense into him. “Malek will have your head if he learns you helped me. And you know exactly what they do to rats.”

Because you assisted many times, I thought.

“I’m not afraid of Malek,” Maxim growled back. Control was slipping from him, I could tell.

“This ain’t right,” he protested. “What do you want me to do? Sit pretty and watch them plan your execution?”

My heart sank at the words, but I couldn’t afford to admit the meanings behind them.

“It won’t come to that,” I tried to assure him. “Just trust me. I’ll be fine. I’ve been on my own for a while.”

When he remained silent, I reinforced the previous statement with more assurances. “This is what I do. It’s all I’ve known until all you people came along.”

“What if I don’t want you to be alone anymore?”

My steps halted, and I stood still, overwhelmed by the conversation. Or how much I hated having to do this over the phone.

Still, satisfaction awoke within me. At how right I was to think this could be more. So much more than a dream. The thoughts left me bittersweet, given the timing.

I stayed on the high road, hitting the imaginary switch that shut off all the emotions.

“Maxim. This kind of talk gets you and your family killed,” I scolded him.

I knew he expected a different reaction, but I couldn’t give him hope when I, myself, haven’t had any.

“Just stick to Alisa. And please let her know I’m very sorry for ruining her wedding day.” I couldn’t think about her, or what this meant for our friendship.

“Whatever happens, she’ll always be safe from me,” I relayed the message.

“It’s between Ilya, Malek, and I. And it’ll end that way. I will right this wrong. Alone.”

With the parting words, I made one more call before I disposed of the phone by throwing the device to the nearest trash can.

It wasn’t smart, but I had no other choice. If I used a phone booth? He wouldn’t pick up an unknown number.

“Pick up, pick up. Please,” I whispered under my breath, listening to the repeated rings.

“Pronto?” Enzo’s raspy voice greeted me.

“Are you still in the city?” I blurted out, thankful to get a hold of him.

That got his attention. “Maybe. What is it?”

“I need an extraction.”

“Who?”

I closed my eyes and said, “Myself.”

“Cazzo,” he swore. A brief pause followed. Just when I thought he hung up, he threw me a lifeline. “You got thirty minutes.”

I wasn’t surprised Enzo was eager to help. He never gave me the tiniest reason to doubt this friendship. But asking for his help? That was another thing entirely.

“I won’t forget it.”

“Be careful.”

Under-prepared, that’s what I was. How did I become the hunted?

Getting a grip on the anxiety flooding my brain, I flagged down the first taxi to take me to the apartment, where I gathered necessities before rushing to the provided address.

The private airstrip was deserted at this ungodly hour. The sun was barely in sight when I entered the check-in area, where a familiar face awaited me.

My head shook in a frenzy, careful not to attract attention.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I murmured, slapping the man’s chest.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said casually. “I am flying back to Italy on an urgent business. But you see, I had one too many last night, so I brought a hot date on board.” With a wink and a smile, he added, “Jenna or Katie, I can’t recall, but I’m sure the check-in lady will know all her details.”

A sigh of relief escaped me.

Enzo didn’t waste any time picking me up and carrying me toward the jet while I used his body to cover my face.



He was the one I could always count on. It was time to repay him for all the good he had done for me.

“Thank you,” I whispered to his neck.

In the distance, the private aircraft, my means of the great escape, awaited us. This wasn’t forever. Just for a little while.

While the crew rushed the preparations for the takeoff, we sat in the comfy seats. Maxim’s leather jacket stolen from the car kept me warm. I wasn’t ready to take it off. Not yet. I refused to analyze what that meant.

An hour ago, I crossed him out, crossed them all out. Out of paranoia or fear for their immediate safety. It had to be this way. For now, or forever, that remained unclear.

Up in the clouds, I recapped all that had happened in the recent hours.

Enzo paid close attention, clinging to every word, and hearing the story out loud put things into perspective.

In need of a moment, I turned to stare out the window. The clouds wrapped around the aircraft, and I imagined what it must be like to free-fall through them.

Would it feel freeing? Or mediocre, knowing it was short-lived?

Taking our silence as her cue, the flight attendant brought us refreshments and cold drinks. When she retired back to the front of the plane, Enzo asked the important question. “What are you going to do?”

“I need a minute to think,” I admitted. My mind was spinning, but somewhere at the core, a plan was forming.

“You pointed a gun at the Pakhan and made it out alive.”

Realizing I left out an important part, I expanded, “I might have fired at him, too.”

Enzo stared at me, his expression filled with pride. “On top of that, you refused a direct order and a million other reasons they’ll demand your head for.”

“Fuck his order,” I spat, shooting to my feet. “What did he expect me to do? Nod silently and let Malek whisk me away to his Russian fortress, where I’d be locked up for the rest of my life?”

A shiver ran through me.

“Play a docile wife, bear him little ones so he and Ilya can stay in power?” At my expense.

I paced the aisle of the plane, stomping loudly. The flight attendant peaked from behind the curtain, concerned, but Enzo dismissed her with a wave.

When it all dawned on me, I added the crucial piece. “Malek never saw me for who I am. I let him close, and his obsession will cost us all.”

There it was: the truth and the partial blame.

## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Emotions hit me out of nowhere. An uncomfortable burn rooted itself behind my eyes, threatening to spill the tears. A heaviness weighted down my entire being. In the sky's safety, I broke down in front of a person for the first time in my adult life.

Quiet sobs sounded from my chest. I fought the urge to suppress the sounds. Enzo drew circles down my back, and it was his reassurance that made me let go of all that had been burdening me. I lost control, omitting everything that held me together.

Not only was I furious at Ilya for using me as a bargaining chip, but I also felt betrayed. By him, by my mother, or life in general. Everyone seemed to have abandoned me sooner or later.

Life took them away, leaving me with no choice but to take over.

Extinguish the wildfires they all left in their wake.

It would be so easy to resort back to being the girl hiding in the closet. Scared and hopeless. To not bother fighting anymore. Give up hope. Curse everybody to hell and back.

I couldn't. That would mean they won.

I allowed myself this one moment of fragility. Let all the emotions out to make space for the strength to replace them.

Piece by piece, I will build back up.

“I can’t marry Malek, Enzo,” I forced out between hiccups.

“Understood.” He gave me a sharp nod, passing a bottle of fancy water.

“Do you think it’s selfish?” I sought his opinion, voicing the insecurity that made me doubt my actions.

Leveling me with a look, Enzo expressed his answer in a question. “To take control of your life?”

To refuse to give it up, I thought.

When we ran out of need for words, I resorted to playing out each scenario from start to finish. And when I finally considered all the options, I addressed Enzo, who patiently waited.

“I know what I have to do.”

With a subtle smile, he turned to me. “What do you need from me?”

“I need to get some sleep. Breakfast and coffee won’t hurt, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere. I think it’s time I got to see the world.”

Enzo tensed at the statement, not understanding my intent, but I quickly put him at ease.

“At least for a short while.”

I held Maxim's jacket hostage, closed my eyes, and dreamed about a new world.

A better world. Within reach. To those who dared to get their hands dirty and build the path.

Italy. The land of great food, stunning coastlines, endless sunshine, and men who inspired painters to preserve reality. I wasn't sure which one excited me the most. Okay, fine, it was the pasta.

Enzo told me plenty of stories about his childhood in Sicily, where his family owned an olive tree farm. How each harvest he reached higher into the tree. How he raced his father down the hill, where his mother already waited with lunch and a sweet treat for the victor.

It was him I thought of when the private jet I chartered landed. To avoid complications, we parted ways inland.

Enzo was the sixth generation to carry on the family business. The Artuso's were well-known on the island, mostly for their homemade products: olive oils, soaps, cosmetics. The usual stuff. Profitable, yes, but nowhere near as lucrative as their backdoor operations.

It all started with a conversation over a shot of espresso. One foggy morning, when the island's fate hung in the balance. With Mount Etna on a roaring rampage and repairs desperately needed, the oldest Artuso decided it was time to step outside the confines of tradition. To bend their moral code and preserve what they were about to lose.

The business had grown into a global empire, smuggling contraband alongside the legitimate goods. Whatever you wanted, they could get their hands on it. His family's network, built over generations, was unlike anything I'd ever seen.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

As I dug my toes into the sand, I pictured little Enzo picking olives. I burst out laughing. He definitely wasn't wearing a suit back then, though with Italians, you never really knew. Everything was an excuse to dress up. It was something I teased them about but secretly admired.

Peak summer season packed the beaches with tourists and locals alike. Swimmers splashed in the waves, while stylish grandmas strolled the promenade, tiny dogs in tow.

In a long sundress and the high heels I'd snagged from a tiny boutique after dinner, I fit right in. For a fleeting moment, I wanted to belong. To be a part of the culture. A part of this community.

It was a far cry from the constant hustle of NYC I'd grown used to. Back there, people looked over their shoulders so many times, their heads were no longer screwed on right. Here, the only thing you saw behind you was the sea. Everyone seemed so calm. No rush, nowhere to be. While it was admirable, this lifestyle wasn't for me. Not long-term. That didn't stop me from enjoying it while I could.

But this wasn't a vacation. I was here to meet with Don, the Italians' highest-placed man.

Enzo might've been on board with my movement, but he didn't call the shots. A one-on-one with Don was either a last call or an honor reserved for only a few. Somehow, Enzo arranged the meeting, though I didn't doubt they had their own agenda. Everything came with a cost, and I was just desperate enough to pay.

When the church bells tolled fifteen times, I dusted off the sand from my feet and hopped on the vespa. The twists and turns of the road led me to a property perched atop a cliff. I gripped the handlebars tighter, settling into the familiar head space.

Greeted by a thorough pat-down, the guards confiscated the few weapons I carried on me. While polite, they made it clear: I shouldn't try anything.

And I wasn't going to.

A table sat at the edge of the property, overlooking the coastline.

Afternoon coffee with a view worth the hefty price. The smell of tangerines hung in the air as I walked down the stairs toward the man I was meeting.

Don sat in the patio chair, his eyes fixed on the horizon. His reading glasses rested on the table next to his daily newspaper and a steaming shot of espresso. A matching one waited for me on the opposite side.

Dario Motta, the Don of the Cosa Nostra.

He was nearly twice my age, though it wasn't immediately apparent. The gray strands of time appeared only in the sunlight, his sole indication of aging. His dark hair was short but professionally styled.

Often described as the perfect gentleman with his impeccable style, mature looks, and heated glances, Dario was a charmer. I'd often mock Enzo for his obsession with looking his best, but this man was on a whole different level.

Though among members, it wasn't his looks that he was known for.

Despite the pristine clothes, Dario loved to get his hands dirty. Whispers circulated

about the latest torture method he'd introduced. About how he'd flown people in from all over the world just so he could get to work. A master at extracting information, they called him.

I'd studied his methods ever since I entered the game. In a way, this felt like meeting a celebrity I'd been crushing on.

Public appearances, on the other hand, were Don's downfall. He stayed hidden in Italy, appointing a trusted few to represent him. Enzo was somewhat of his protégé. Whenever we talked about his childhood, Dario's name always came up.

Wary of each other, he made the first move, raising my hand to his lips for a kiss.

I stared into his dark eyes, just shy of black. They looked tired, restless.

"Ms. Taya, we meet at last," he greeted, motioning to the empty chair at his right.

I sat, smoothing my sundress beneath me, trying to play the part of the lady I rarely was. "We do. I wish the circumstances were different."

With a quick glance at the guards surrounding us, he dismissed them, granting us some privacy.

"Lorenzo gave me the rundown of your situation. Though I'd rather hear it from you," Dario opened a window of opportunity.

Not shying away from his intense gaze, I explained the reason behind the meeting.

"It's simple. I'm here to offer you a deal. A one-of-a-kind opportunity, if you ask me."



With a cool expression, he responded, “What could you offer me that I don’t already have?”

Don reached for his tiny cup of coffee, letting the words sink in before he continued, “Besides, you don’t hold a position of power with the Russians, last I checked. Or with others, for that matter.”

His eyes dissected me. Every breath measured. Every movement logged.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Am I mistaken?” he pressed, his voice low and steady, like he already knew the answer.

“No,” I admitted. It wasn’t a secret. I didn’t hold power, at least not the kind he was used to. That didn’t mean I couldn’t make an impact.

“How it gets done is solely up to me. All you need to do is agree,” I added, my voice unwavering despite the storm of thoughts brewing in my head.

He raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. “What is it you’re proposing?”

“A change, for starters,” I said, indirectly implying my intentions. “But most importantly, a chance to add names to the List of Angels. Of your own choosing, of course.”

He didn’t flinch, but his gaze sharpened. “We’re already on good terms with the Bratva. Why would I risk the alliance for an outsider?”

“I think it’s time we step out from under our parents’ shadows. Wouldn’t you agree? A new legacy,” I proposed, my voice steady.

“Ambitions are often short-lived. As are the people who carry them,” he countered.

“It’s not the ambition I seek. It’s protection,” I clarified, leaning forward slightly.

Dario smoothly deflected. “The peace treaty we signed ensures that.”

“A treaty formed years ago, barely hanging by a thread?” I let out a quiet laugh. “Do you honestly think that when someone screws the Russians over again, they’ll honor it? That Ilya will? Or perhaps Malek. Is he more trustworthy?”

Don didn’t move, his gaze locked on mine as he calmly replied, “Let them come if they think they stand a chance.”

“What about Lorenzo?”

He didn’t waste a second before responding. “What about him?”

“You care about him, but so do I. He believes in what I’m trying to achieve. Are you prepared to go against him?”

His reply came without hesitation. “We all make choices and live with the consequences.”

“Don’t you have something to protect?” I pressed, trying to break through.

I knew better than to expect an answer. Only a fool would reveal their hand.

“No one’s untouchable,” I muttered, mostly to myself.

“No one’s trustworthy,” he responded, his voice harder now, the weight of his words settling between us.

I sat up straighter in my chair, feeling the shift. Now we were finally getting to the heart of it.

“That’s exactly what I’m getting at,” I confirmed. “What if we created a world where the chosen few didn’t use loved ones as leverage? Where they stood together. No

more revenge fantasies or retaliation plans.”

His expression hardened, and he scanned the edge of the property, eyes lingering on the cliff hidden behind the cypress trees.

“I’ve been a Don for twenty years now, Ms. Taya.” He turned his vacant stare back to me. “That’s almost your entire life, I hear. People always find a way to disappoint me,” he paused, letting the weight of the words land.

“Forgive me if I don’t believe in your vision. I know Lorenzo, and I know you. The one he vouched for.” He eyed me cautiously before continuing, “It’s the rest I don’t trust to keep their word. It’s all just a promise. Words.”

I crossed one leg over the other, leaning on my arm. “That’s exactly the type of mindset I’m trying to change. Take Lorenzo or Enzo as I call him. Him and I? If the world wasn’t changing, would we really be such good friends? Not once have we betrayed each other.”

Unlike other people, who I considered friends, I thought.

“There’s hope,” I assured him. “It just takes the right kind of people.”

“It also takes someone willing to step out of line.”

This time, I reacted swiftly. “Then I guess I’ll just have to hope the rest will carry on the promise and do better next time.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Taking advantage of the pause, I eyed the delicious pastries on the table.

Unable to resist the amaretti cookie, I popped one into my mouth. The almond taste took over my senses, and I refrained from moaning a vocal approval. Creamy coffee washed it down before it sounded.

I put down the cup, smiling at the thought of rewriting history the same way Enzo's ancestors once did. Dario studied me closely. Not much escaped him. I could see why Enzo warned me. But the warning didn't prevent me from running my mouth the way it tended to. Or putting his skill to use.

When the porcelain saucer clung, I revealed the other reason behind my visit. "I'm also in need of your services."

"From what I hear you're well capable."

The corner of my mouth lifted. "It's more the capacity that I lack."

I pulled out the stacked envelope, placing it on top of the newspaper. Don eyed the object, as if he possessed the ability to read it through the paper.

For all I knew, it could be tossed the moment I left, but I hoped it would at least be opened first. I was betting a lot on this moment, knowing full well that asking for help, calling in favors, never worked in this world.

Alliances broke daily, but the cost had to be worth the price.

So I opted for trade. Don worked for organizations outside the alliance. Whether for money or respect didn't matter. Trade and business ruled, so I played the system to my advantage. I gave him an out, offered him an in, and secured the help outside both choices.

His hand hovered over the envelope, not close enough to touch but not too far to reach.

"If you dare to climb high enough to get to the moon," Dario spoke in code, the wrinkles on his forehead more pronounced. "You better hold on," he warned, his tone weighted with experience. "Because the stars will rise closer each night, and your fall will come long before the ground is in sight."

I understood each word, feeling the weight of responsibility already dragging me toward the very ground he warned of. Dario was right. I needed to be sure. But what he didn't know was that years of resentment had built up within me. I couldn't stand the unfairness. I wanted to wipe it off the face of the Earth for good.

I would climb over the moon if that's what it took to restore the balance.

When the tension bubbled, I broke it with a smirk. "You should make public appearances more often," I suggested, his wisdom leaving an impression.

Dario's body tensed. "Not my style."

"Too bad. You and I could be friends." I flashed him a charming smile.

His expression could melt icicles, but the intensity of his stare didn't faze me.

"I could be your father, Ms. Taya." His tone registered, but his charm left no effect on me. No goosebumps traced my spine, no instinct stirred to attention. The words

brushed past me like a breeze: noticeable, but without real impact.

My smile was wicked, but there was some truth behind the words. “I always wanted a Daddy.”

The upper corner of his lips lifted in an attempt at a smile. He came close, but not quite.

Dusting the crumbs off my sundress, I stood tall and met his gaze again.

“I’ll give you time to think it over,” I said. “The document is on the network.”

I eyed the spot he kept returning to, watching the somewhat calm waters before I added a few coded words of my own.

“The tides are turning,” I implied, my chin lifting toward the sun. “The question each of us must answer is: will you swim, or will you let them drown you?”

The heel of my shoe sank into the perfectly mowed grass as I turned, my sundress floating behind me.

“I want her found and brought back immediately.” Ilya’s words played on repeat. Every meeting, every command, involved her whereabouts. Bratva’s operations were temporarily shut down, production postponed. Members were called in from various locations to NYC. Our warehouses were overcrowded with more people than products.

Members slept on top of gun crates. Maps and screens occupied each corner. All in efforts to find her.

Ilya, or Malek, spared no manpower. We were all working around the clock, scouting

the Earth for a single person.

While she was stubborn and beyond capable of taking care of herself, there was very little Taya could achieve in such a short time without help.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

We all knew that. It wasn't a secret she turned to her closest allies. Lorenzo was likely the only trusted person she had left. It fucked with my mind more than I admitted, but I understood the reasons. My fingers itched to dial the motherfucker and give him a piece of my mind. The fact she trusted him spared him my visit.

Beyond my promise to serve the brotherhood, I had family to think of.

Taya was damn right about that. We were deep in this in far too many ways. Alisa's marriage contract was just one thread tying us to this clusterfuck.

A week after we had lost contact, a fist pounded on the door of the house. Water still dripped down my bare torso, landing on the wooden stairs. I haven't slept. Barely ate. Now even my shower time got interrupted.

The warm air hit me from the outside when I opened the door. It sneaked past me, into the air-conditioned space. I scrutinized the Bratva's messenger standing on the doormat. His muddy boots stained Alisa's welcome mat with its quote: "Enter at your own risk." I vividly remembered the day she had it custom-made, since I drove her to the market. The mat didn't match the house, but its occupants.

Ever so slowly, I raised my eyes back to the man holding out a piece of paper.

"There's a doorbell for a fucking reason," I fumed, ignoring the message.

It seemed he had trouble locating the button. Even now, the man remained unmoved.

"Use it!" I ordered.

The messenger's smile slipped.

My hand shot up, grabbing him by the neck as I hauled his head toward the doorbell. Bang after bang, I rang it with his skull, smashing it against the bricks the bell occupied. The melodic sound echoed through the empty house as I hummed to the rhythm.

On the sixth ring, matching his previous pounds, I let go. His body crumpled, landing on the mat. The sight brought me the biggest joy of the week.

I bent over, picking up the paper. The corners were stained red when I stuffed it into his mouth.

Up the stairs, I followed the water droplets leading me back to the shower.

Ilya demanded my immediate presence.

A simple phone call would have sufficed. A text? Even better. But no. Ilya reverted to the old ways, back to dictatorship. They put on a show of force.

The silent transfer of power had forced Ilya to relinquish some control to Malek. Given he hadn't delivered on his promises, with Taya now in the wind, there was no other option. The precise details of their control remained undisclosed.

Malek's previous efforts ensured that none of the members protested or even dared to question. We all returned to reality as if she had never existed. She was this myth we were chasing. Our success was based on a whisper of rare sightings.

There was no wedding day in sight, either. Alisa hung her wedding dress atop the closet door in the guest bedroom, and it remained there, catching dust.

The rest of the organizations watched each move closely. Sniffing out signs of weakness like rabid dogs. It was a matter of time before everything got out of control. We had to be ready.

For that to happen, I needed to call a family meeting. Before I could do that, I had to deal with the Pakhan.

The club served one purpose during the day, and that's what I was here for. Staff cleaned the remainder of last night's party when the door cast light into the dark space. I entered the damp basement through the disguised entrance. Giant metal door hid the memories of Bratva's methods. It swallowed the screams, sealing them shut within the space.

Out of the six rooms, only one or two were typically in use. Since she escaped, this floor had experienced more foot traffic than the dance floor above us. I tried to be here for every interrogation. My presence hadn't raised any red flags, since I often was. Little did they know these days, it was for an entirely different reason. Before, I was the Bratva's enforcer.

Now? I was their protector first. Alisa's. Luka's. Andrei's. Mila's. Taya's. Even the Italian might count. I analyzed all the extracted information closely.

Whenever I could, I diverted their attention elsewhere. Maybe I was hoping to conduct my own investigation, find peace of mind in the process.

Beyond my selfish interests, I still belonged to this organization, and its future placed above the two men's egos.

Ilya awaited in his chair, swirling a shot over ice against the ambient light.

"You are late," he complained.

I bit my tongue, unaware there was something to be late for. The guard on duty held the massive door open for both of us. Ilya paused at the threshold, handing over the empty glass. As if the guard was his waiter, not a made man.

I silently encouraged the guard to act up. To throw the glass against the wall. Smash it against Ilya's face for the way he was treated. Despite my efforts, the guard lowered his head, letting us pass.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

The electro room, as we called the first cell, harbored a man already filled with static.

Not just any man, another made man. An Underboss.

Lorenzo Artuso sat in the chair, clutching the metal arms.

His eyes immediately flicked to us. Shock overtook his face at seeing my proximity to the man who had him captured.

With the slightest shake of my head, he turned away. We both needed to play our roles right. I pretended we didn't know each other, while he ignored my presence.

There was no freaking way he allowed himself to get captured. Thankfully, Ilya was too wrapped up in his fury to recognize the probability of the situation.

He could have been in the safety of Don's fortress in Sicily, smoking cigars while it all played out. The alliance didn't need to get involved in internal affairs. This was Bratva's mess.

Instead, he was here. Tied to a chair with electric cables burning off his fingertips. In his suit and tie, flashing us the annoying smile.

His eyes dared anyone brave enough to come close. I've experienced his stares many times before, but now they burned a darker color. Outside of his position, I knew nothing about the man. His past or his abilities were as much a mystery as mine were to him. But over the short while, I've learned all I needed to be sure about.

Lorenzo and Taya found what my siblings and I didn't have to look for. A strong bond. Life came with relations for us. It only expanded as our family grew, but they fought and earned their friendship.

Somehow I knew there was nothing the man would do to jeopardize what they had. After all, he was here, in her place, offering himself on a silver platter.

“Artuso.”

“Aistov.”

Ilya leaned over the chair, keeping his distance as if Lorenzo wasn't worth dirtying his shoes.

“If you missed me so much, all you had to do was call.” The Italian sent a virtual kiss on the air, and I held my breath, keeping in the laughs. I leaned against the doorframe, observing the exchange.

“You were always her expansion,” Ilya sharpened his words.

Lorenzo tsked. “Desperation doesn't suit you.”

The Pakhan reached for the remote, dialing it up two digits. A buzzing sound came out of the machine, traveling through the lines straight to Lorenzo's nerve endings.

“Let's skip the part where we pretend we don't know you're the first person she ran to,” Ilya disclosed.

The Italian ignored every word. He trashed in the chair, veins popping on his neck.

“Does it make you angry?” he hissed each word through the pain. “Knowing you

don't control her like you thought?"

Those words sliced Ilya deep, even if the knife was still dull.

"Can you feel the control over her slipping through your fingers?"

"She was nothing when I found her," Ilya barked, panting.

"Or it was you who would be nothing without her." God knows how many watts were running through his body as Lorenzo spoke the very truth. "You finally found someone to carry out the dirty work you see beneath you. Would you make it this far without her help?"

Ilya remained quiet, though I highly doubt he considered the words.

"I didn't think so," Lorenzo shook his head. "She blindly eliminated all the threats. Except Malek." A manic laugh came out of the bound man. "Malek rooted himself deeply. Tell me, in your grand scheme, have you ever considered the two of them could overthrow you together?"

Ilya visibly paled. Of course he didn't. Malek was his childhood friend. Even Taya, despite his cold interior, was someone he heavily relied on.

"After all, Malek is obsessed with two things. Her and climbing the ranks. What do you think would happen if he married her?"

Ilya's answer landed on Lorenzo's face, and the Italian chuckled.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“I’m sure the Don will receive this well,” he spat.

Ilya straightened his back. “I’m not worried about that. For all we know, he doesn’t even exist.”

Lorenzo grinned, a knowing look in his eyes.

“Where is she?” Ilya pressed, his voice growing colder. “You’re willing to lose your life for someone who isn’t even here?”

“I’m choosing the right side,” Enzo finally replied, his calm unwavering.

“The right side? There are no sides. There is us and no one left out of you.”

“There will be when she’s done. And you? You chose wrong.”

“All this talk about friendship. Protection?” Ilya scoffed. “Where is she now?” he yelled, his eyes scanning the room in search of her. “The feared assassin in hiding. Leaving those she claims to care about to clean up her messes.”

“I said, where is she?” Ilya’s voice thundered, a command he expected to be obeyed.

“Let me think on that one.” Enzo spat the little blood that formed in his mouth. “I’ll get back to you.”

“Maybe this will change your mind. Maxim, I want a location by the end of today.” He eyed the Italian but addressed me. “By all means necessary.”



The soundproof door shut behind him, sealing us in the room. The Pakhan rushed out, likely on his way to supervise Malek's move to the compound.

"Are there cameras in the room?" Enzo mouthed.

I shook my head. "Not to my knowledge."

He rolled back his shoulders, blowing his hair out of his face.

"Is she safe?" I asked.

He nodded in answer.

I needed more words. Sentences, pictures, more than that, but the stubborn asshole wouldn't budge. When I reached the machine, I might have waited three more seconds before I turned it off, just for that.

"Is your sister?" he asked, relieved of the pressure.

I mirrored his response.

"You need to get her out," Lorenzo urged. "Take her somewhere safe before it's over."

"Andrei disagrees," I admitted. "He thinks it will agitate him more. We're keeping a close eye on her."

"Listen to me. Have one of your brothers take your sister away and wait."

"Wait?"

“Just wait. Okay?”

Though it went against everything I knew, I took a leap of faith. Now I just needed to convince my brothers to think the same.

“Do you have a location for him?” I tilted my head toward the door.

The Italian gave a slight nod. “There’s a safe house in Sicily, on my family’s property near Palermo. Don used it for money laundering, but they relocated the operation. It should be vacant.”

Perfect.

“It’ll buy her time,” he confirmed my thoughts. “But you need to make it believable and oversee it personally.”

I understood.

“Maxim?”

“Hmm?”

“When you look at her, what do you see?”

Lorenzo’s question struck me as odd, causing my movements to pause.

“I ain’t so sure you want me to answer that,” I chuckled. “You might end up punching me.”

“Tell me,” he insisted.

Was this a test? A game to figure out where my loyalties lie?

Strange, given he was the tied-up one. When it took a while to sort my thoughts, he began answering instead. “Ilya sees her as an object. The same orphan he found her as. Someone with nothing to lose to manipulate as he sees fit,” he noted. “A tool to win him battles, while he plans the war.”

Well said, I thought. It seemed to be precisely how things were standing.

Lorenzo continued, “I see her as someone who made it through life alone. She sacrificed all that was left within to find herself. She likes to call herself independent, but in reality, she wants to be a part of something. Seeking what she lacks: stability

and acceptance. There is a great lot she isn't telling us, but once the truth comes out, I hope to stand by her with a handful of others. United."

His bluntness surprised me, but my mind was clear, despite how I reacted.

"I don't have an answer for you," I voiced.

Slight disappointment clouded his face, his eyebrows lowering. He sat back, restricted in the chair, scrutinizing me with his gaze.

"Not because I'm uncertain," I admitted before his eye resorted to the familiar twitch. "She deserves to hear it first."

She earned our answers, and both Enzo and I could do with more straightforwardness, but I wasn't one to go around giving advice.

I began rolling my sleeves up, not bothering to find out if he understood.

"You realize that after the heartfelt speech, I still have to reorganize your pretty face?"

He threw me a cocky smile. "Give it your best shot, stronzo."

The first punch landed hard on Lorenzo's cheek. The second landed straight in the eye. The third was somewhere in between to finish the picture. A tooth joined the pool of blood formed under his legs. I had to make the interrogation believable. I also wasn't going to let an opportunity to let go of the rage waste. Unfortunately, in this case, the receiver was someone with good intentions.

"She can't know," he muttered between the punches. I understood, but hated him at that moment for letting me in on a secret I'd have to keep from her.

The fourth, being the last but also the strongest, knocked him out.

I hoped the information I gathered to feed to Ilya would distract him enough not to question the process. Luckily, beyond the beating and slight torture, Ilya stood no ground to hurt Lorenzo. Information extraction was his only excuse.

I wasn't sure where this was going, but I set on playing my part and seeing it through.

Punching the nearest pipe, I purposely landed miscalculated punches until my knuckles busted open. Our combined blood smudged the front of the shirt I wore when I returned upstairs as the enforcer the Bratva believed me to be.

Despite wearing light clothing, sweat had already formed on my forehead by the time I arrived in Colombia.

The Amazon rainforest, stretching across multiple countries, was the dampest environment the Cartel could have picked as their base. I could see the advantage of such a strategic spot, with its rough terrain and unpredictable conditions. A far cry from the usual environment I worked in.

As I ventured deeper into the jungle, the colors intensified. Half the plants looked so beautiful, you itched to touch them. Exquisite, but poisonous.

There was a comparison somewhere, but I couldn't quite place it.

Getting a hold of the Jungles, as they called them, had proven difficult. It took longer than I expected to convince them to meet up, and a few days were wasted in the process. Days I spent worrying, hypnotizing the servers, and manifesting an answer.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I didn't have insider knowledge, and they were wary of strangers. I couldn't afford to fuck up. Time was running out.

This meeting? It was the one I dreaded most. No one ever tried to contact them, let alone meet them. They were the one organization out there completely unbothered by the rest.

The Jungles had two key leaders: one for the Colombians, one for the Brazilians. The third and unofficial claim was for the French. Whispers circulated that they were aligned, creating an unusual alliance. A trio of leaders. I turned to the web for answers, but found almost nothing. Just more proof of how well-protected they were.

Despite their past, they appeared united and grew in numbers each day.

They were all about narcotics, supplying both the US and Europe with their gummy juice. Thanks to their product, the endless parties in Miami, Ibiza, and Mykonos kept going. They were probably the richest organization on the market, though no one could confirm it. No generational wealth of the Russians compared to the stacks these guys had.

Their instructions were simple: wait for transport at a bus stop in a nearby town. No weapons. No phones.

I'd debated all night whether to comply. Too much was on the line, and I couldn't risk messing this up. With only my abilities to rely on, I showed up at the meeting point the next day.

A four-wheeler pulled up, driven by a guy who looked barely legal. Tall and skinny, his bleached blond hair was a mess. He had a hoop earring in one ear, wearing a white tank top and ripped jeans. A couple of years ago, he would've fit in a boy band, but that wasn't something I planned to tell him.

"Taya?" His accent made his loyalties clear.

I nodded.

"On." He held up a ski mask, the eye holes stitched shut. With no way out, I complied, pulling the fabric over my sweaty forehead.

Warm hands guided me toward the vehicle, pushing me to the spot behind the driver. When he slid in, he placed my hands on his abdomen.

A bit too cozy for our first meeting, but I got the reason behind it. I interlocked my fingers, trying to stay composed.

The vehicle sped down a bumpy road, and neither of us spoke. Through the fabric, I could barely make out the blur of green rainforest as it whizzed by.

Ten minutes later, I'd counted, he fired off some quick Spanish into the walkie-talkie before we came to a stop.

"Can I take it off? I'm going to melt," I complained.

"Oui," he said, his voice calm.

Thank God. The humidity in the air wasn't for everyone. Certainly not me.

When the mask came off, I rushed to get a good look at the place. A fenced area filled

with buildings made from shipping containers stretched across the land. Some were two stories tall, while others were interconnected, joined together in what appeared to be squares. They all had windows and solar panels, and all carried an industrial look.

My escort took off walking toward the heart of the camp. Not wanting to be left behind, I swiftly followed. The grounds were filled with activity. People were hard at work, unloading crates or moving supplies.

Heading for the building in the middle, the young guy opened the side door, letting me enter first. The square-shaped house was made of at least three containers on each side, stacked on each other, forming a multistory building. The middle served as an inner yard with a pool and a grassy area. The space felt futuristic, yet resourceful.

One could mistake the building for an industrial unit from the outside, but the inside was a different story.

A hallway led us to a lavish living room with huge leather sofas and Persian rugs. The fire crackled in the fireplace, which caught me off guard given the surrounding heat. A wide staircase led upstairs, likely to the living quarters or offices.

I took the chance to scan my surroundings when a raspy voice called from behind me. "Assassin."

I guessed the voice had been worn out by smoking before the cloud of smoke reached me. The Colombian materialized right in front of me. He was shorter, but the lack of height didn't detract from his harsh features. A deep cut split his left eyebrow, oddly complementing his face. His hair, styled in a mohawk, suggested youth, probably close to my age, if not younger.

Steps echoed down the stairs, signaling a third presence. I glanced over the Colombian's shoulder and spotted who I assumed was the Brazilian.



Our eyes met just as he zipped up the fly on his jeans. Upstairs, a door slammed shut, a subtle reminder that he wasn't alone.Duh.

“You’re going to have to excuse him. He lacks manners,” the Colombian grunted.

The new arrival slouched into the nearest armchair, rubbing his eyes frantically. He shot me a shit-eating grin that reminded me of someone I knew too well. “Or all the right ones.”

A familiar reaction stirred within me. I bantered right back. “All you mafia gangsters,” I rolled my eyes. “Don’t you ever get tired of flirting?”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

He turned, his movements slow, his eyes devouring me with no shame in sight. “I haven’t even started, chica.” His tongue darted out, making his intentions clear.

I glanced back, giving him a second look. Bold, but no. His eyes weren’t the right color. I quickly stored away the memory of the shades I had wished to stare into instead.

But I knew how to play the game. “Please don’t,” I said, dismissing the advance. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“What are you here for?” I half-expected the third person to join us, but the bleached-haired guy spoke up. He was the very third man. “We owe you money or something?”

“More like a favor,” I snickered. “You know who I am, right?”

“That’s a loaded question,” the Colombian responded. “Do we know what you do? Yes. Did you work for us in the past? I believe so. Will we need your services again? Guaranteed.”

His voice took on an annoyed undertone as he added, “But we for sure do not need to meet.”

“That one’s all me,” I acknowledged, smiling unapologetically.

“Are you looking for a place?” the Frenchman asked bluntly. “Heard there’s a bounty on your head.”

A shiver of resistance ran down my spine. “That’s news to me,” I admitted.

About time. I’d rather anticipate their moves than deal with the silence they’d been giving me.

“The Russians and the Italians might be aligned, Assassin,” the Brazilian finally chimed in. “But we have inside sources of our own,” he said, scanning my face for a reaction.

“Word on the street is, Malek is turning the world upside down looking for you,” he teased in a creepy voice. “Did we catch the runaway bride?”

I rolled my eyes at his cocky confidence. “I walked in,” I retorted, returning the same scrutinizing look.

“That’s Bratva dealings,” I warned, brushing off their questions. “It’s no secret I’m not their favorite person.” I dusted off the dirt from my pants, a result of the ride. “I grew tired of the endless cycle of submission.”

When I had their attention, the lust-filled one included, I laid out the real reason for my visit. “I’m here to claim what I’m owed.”

The trio exchanged looks, no doubt weighing the value of my request against what I’d done for them in the past.

I pulled out the crumpled headshot, wrinkled from being stuffed into my pocket. In the light, I stared into the familiar dark eyes, wondering if my suspicions were right. Had I let the viper poison my mind while it fed behind my back?

A brief glance confirmed enough for the men in the room. I stood and threw the paper into the fire.

“I will ask you the same as everyone who finds us. Why?” the Colombian asked, seeking answers.

Heaviness settled on my shoulders. I ignored it, focusing on each word. On what felt right.

“Because I will be the wall this world crashes against before it resets.”

There was no posturing, no threats when I admitted my intentions. Just as there was no doubt in their minds about my commitment. Before they had a chance to ask questions I didn’t want to answer, I continued, “How many members have you lost in the bloodshed? What if it was preventable?”

“Idealistic world you speak of. Not reality,” the Colombian grunted.

“Many tried to prevent it by mixing bloodlines with arranged marriages and false promises. And here I sit, short of a couple of family members, a kidney, and richer than I’ve ever been. Sure, I lost some, but I gained some too.” He took a puff, concluding, “It’s the circle of life.”

“There are casualties in all wars. I get that.” My head shook slightly. “I just don’t believe in innocent bystanders getting caught up in the mess. Kids, wives, sisters, brothers, cousins. The boundaries this life places on them,” I said, staring at them with serious intent. “Maybe I’m doomed to fail. Maybe I’ll be dragged out by my cold feet, but I’ll go knowing I tried to make a difference.”

“There’s a code of conduct you don’t break. You know that,” the French protested.

I did, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. I was determined to push the lines, maybe even obliterate them altogether.

“Some might say a Colombian, a Brazilian, and a Frenchman ruling together breaks it too, yet here you are.” I tapped my temples. “It’s all about looking past what’s been drilled into your mind.”

“Let’s say we agree.” My ears perked at hearing that. “How do you fit into this? What do you offer? You’re just one person.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Past this point, I’ll take the oath. I just don’t believe in the limits it brings,” I stated. “Will I stop being friends with others? No. Will it stop me from fucking someone from a rival gang if I feel like it? Fuck no.”

“This is my life,” I spoke louder than usual, the rage that had been building inside me for weeks finally breaking through. “And I certainly don’t plan on living it by some set-in-stone rules created by people long gone.”

As the young guy drove me back to the city, I wondered if I’d done enough.

I never reached out to the Irish. Time caught up to me. It was both a loss and a disadvantage. My plan hadn’t gone perfectly but there was no choice but to execute it. I packed the little I’d acquired during this time and headed back to the airport.

The distance wasn’t the only difficulty I was facing. Sneaking into a country on high alert was one of the bigger challenges I’d ever faced. But with enough money and reckless ambition, I was willing to risk it all.

I might’ve been crazy in the head, but the next night, I was airborne for Russia. The place where it all began.

My last stop.

Bratva’s key players were invited to a monstrous house on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, Russia. All eager to discuss their next moves against me, no doubt. There was no way I was going to miss that.

All the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place. Now, I held a handful of cards myself. The balance had shifted, or so I hoped.

The event was an annual gathering, a gala of sorts, held in honor of those who had contributed to the wealth and prosperity of the organization.

It was a tradition that had held for decades, and the Russians were nothing if not traditional.

The surviving members of the founding families and their appointed heirs have been entertained by the Pakhan, by Ilya, for two days. Days filled with negotiations, arguments, persuasion, and overindulgence in the most luxurious food and alcohol money could buy.

I slipped into a fabulous black dress I had bought in Italy, one that gave me the right amount of flexibility, just in case things went sideways. I didn't bother to tell the shop assistant the real reason I needed it.

By the time I arrived, the meeting had already started. That was exactly how I planned it. After all, who didn't live for a little drama?

The handler, who I'd been in contact with, opened the massive wooden door. Gasps of shock filled the room.

I held my head high, where it should always have been.

As everyone turned to their fellows for answers, I scanned the crowd for the men I'd come for.

They were actively searching the earth, trying to understand how someone managed to show up on their home turf.

Malek was the first to break through the shock. “How?” he stuttered. “How is she here?”

I turned to the handler, letting him answer. After all, he was the one who managed the guest list.

“Ms. Taya has provided proof of her right to sit at this table,” the old man announced.

If I thought they were shocked before, it was nothing compared to the looks on their faces now.

Ilya sat at the head of the table, his face reddening with each passing second.

I didn’t dare look around, focusing instead on the two faces that had been occupying my mind for the last few months.

Malek, now seated once again to the right of the Pakhan, exploded. His voice roared through the room. “Can someone explain?”

With a brief nod of thanks to the attendant, I entered. The sharp clicking of my heels on the centuries-old floor followed me to the last empty seat.

Once settled, I raised an eyebrow and asked, “What’s the problem? I thought you wanted me to become an official member.” I tossed Malek’s earlier demands right back at him.

“What is the meaning of this? Have you changed your mind about marriage?”

I resisted the eye roll. As if. “Oh Malek, not a chance. But I’ll gladly clarify for you.”

I stood, meeting each of their gazes, before the carefully guarded words, carrying the



weight of death and misery, slipped from my mouth.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“I am Taya Laurov. The only daughter of the Black Widow and Kristian Laurov, the most respected of the rulers. As the last of Pakhan Laurov’s kin, I am here to stake my claim over the Bratva’s approval of leadership.”

The members eyed the chair I occupied, glancing between my face and the furniture, slowly making the connection.

I let the moment linger, allowing the weight of my words to settle before I continued, aiming straight for the jugular. “I hereby do not recognize either Ilya Aistov or Malek Zuev as the rightful leaders of the Bratva.”

The words tasted bittersweet on my tongue, but with them, an era was coming to an end. “Their actions have not prioritized the best interests of the Bratva. Therefore, I call for their immediate removal and for a new Pakhan to be appointed in their place.”

A graveyard silence followed. Ilya’s eyes widened, threatening to pop out of his skull. I could practically see the wheels turning, desperately searching for anything to undermine my claim, but I pressed on before he could throw doubt into the mix.

“Should the Bratva require proof, a DNA test will be conducted to confirm the legitimacy of my claim.”

I covered all fronts, patched up any air holes. There wasn’t much they could do now and I relished every second of that certainty.

“Should the Galkin family choose to recognize Ilya as a member of their family, I’ll have no issue with that. Ultimately, the decision is theirs. I only request that Ilya no

longer hold any position of power and will bow to the rightful Pakhan. Given the circumstances, if his fiancée wishes to be freed from their marriage contract, I'll grant it. As for Malek, a decision will be made, along with the newly appointed leader, regarding his role in the brotherhood."

I eyed the two men, absorbing their desperation like a sponge. Not long ago, I'd been in their exact position, standing on unstable ground, trying to make sense of who had pulled the carpet out from under me.

"One more thing. I took it upon myself to ensure the safety of the Galkin family and anyone connected to me or them by adding them to the List of the Angels."

I slammed the document down in front of Ilya, savoring the despair that seeped from him.

Enjoy the taste of your own medicine. And choke on it, I thought.

"Their current spouses, their future partners, their children born or unborn are included," I said, my voice sharp. "My father's list has been reinstated. And signed by others outside the organization."

I watched them, letting the words sink in, knowing the chaos they'd bring.

"As my witnesses, and for the necessary demonstration, I brought in a representative from each organization bound by the agreement."

I turned the phone over, revealing the faces of the men from my summer meetings, all present. Even the Don. They'd kept their word.

Satisfied with their reactions, I ended the call with a nod, then looked back at the room.

“In case any of you get stupid ideas...” I paused, letting the weight of it settle.

“She can’t just march in dictating us,” Ilya protested, his words childlike.

Ridiculous and sad, considering how I once idolized him.

“She can, Mr. Aistov,” the handler replied firmly. “Pakhan Laurov was so respected in the community that he and his family held the most votes. Add to that the vote of the Black Widow or Inna, as I knew her. And now, with Ms. Laurov officially anointed, the total gives her the majority.”

Ilya faltered, but the handler wasn’t finished. “Her decisions can’t be overturned, not even by all your combined efforts.”

The handler’s gaze turned back to me, and I could see the sincerity in his words. “Your father would be proud of you, Taya. I have long awaited someone from his blood to step forward and lead us.”

I nodded, the weight of his praise not lost on me. “Thank you.”

When we spoke earlier, I realized how strange it was to meet someone who knew my parents. The handler seemed eager to share stories about them, but I stopped him. As much as I appreciated his intent, I wanted to hold on to the few memories I had left.

“I’m afraid I might disappoint you in that regard,” I admitted to the old man. Looking around the room, I addressed the other families politely. “If you don’t mind.”

The handler clapped his hands, signaling the end of the conversation. He hurried the other members out of the room for dinner.

As the crowd filtered out, I finally spoke to the Galkin men. “You guys stay,” I

suggested. “I think you’ll want to hear this.”

There was no way I could see this through without slipping back into who I was around them, so I avoided eye contact, focusing on the task at hand.

“Laurov’s daughter?” Malek spoke, his voice dripping with disbelief. “I’ve been fucking royalty?”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Expecting comments like that, I softly laughed, numb to whatever he was trying to provoke. “Good for you.” Men, and their egos.

“You almost married one, too,” I added, pursing my lips. “Almost.” Ilya’s face twisted into a murderous expression when our gazes locked across the table. He didn’t even realize he was to blame for all of this.

“What are you doing, Taya?”

I stood my ground, steady in my response. “I’m putting a stop to what you should have prevented from the beginning,” I sneered. “This little secret of mine would have never seen the light if you trusted me more.”

I didn’t flinch, leaving all my thoughts out there. “You forced me to use it to my advantage and protect those who needed protecting. To keep my freedom. I refuse to let you two rule when neither of you is worthy.”

“Or maybe you were planning this all along,” Malek accused, his voice dripping with suspicion.

I laughed, dry and cold. “That is precisely why you and I would never work out.” Among other reasons.

“I don’t want to be in charge,” I admitted. “I’m happy to let others take the place. I’m good at what I do, thanks to you, sure. But mostly thanks to the blood that runs through me and hard work.”

Finally, taking pride in who I was and where I came from, as my mother reminded me in her last words, I spoke, “I am the daughter of a power couple. Royalty among our kind. Now everyone knows, and it’ll cost me.” I chuckled darkly. “Hell, it already cost me my entire childhood. I never met my father, but I’m told he was a man of honor. He valued fairness. Something you’ve lost the meaning of.” I locked eyes with them. “I know for a fact he wouldn’t climb to the top on the backs of others. You won’t use me or anyone else to grab more for yourselves.”

“Who’s better?” Ilya asked quickly.

I let the pause linger, letting the tension build before I calmly announced the news, fully confident in my decision. “The Galkins.”

Ilya shot up from his seat while the Galkins exchanged whispers.

“You’re joking,” Ilya protested.

I shook my head. “It’s theirs if they want it.”

“You just put a giant target on your back,” Ilya sneered, pointing an accusatory finger.

He had no idea.

“I just repainted the old one,” I sneered right back, leaning over the table. “The same one I’ve had since the moment I was born.” The very same one that brought my mother to her early grave.

Ilya eyed the document abandoned on the table, briefly reading the text.

“What do you think will happen when the Italians start asking for more? Demanding

more?”

“The Galkins will deal with it accordingly. And I will gladly assist,” I settled his doubts. “But unless someone gives me a real reason to act, believing their word is assurance enough.”

I saw the fight in him, the anger, but there was something else. As if he bit his tongue and organized his thoughts, which is exactly what I expected Ilya to do. So I moved on to the biggest problem I had uncovered of them all.

“Malek, you let your obsession take hold of you.” My gaze sharpened, unflinching. “You better make every breath count, because the second I hear you’re growing in numbers, I’ll hunt you down. No deals, no negotiations.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Malek growled, his voice rising.

“I don’t want you to be,” I answered coolly. “Fear isn’t necessary when you’re confident in your own strength. And trust me, I am.”

“So tough,” he sneered. “Even mummy and daddy couldn’t protect you.”

I leaned forward, my smile barely there, but loaded with meaning.

“Long live the new generation,” I whispered, the words shaping our future, this organization, and perhaps even the world.

I couldn’t hide all the bad I did with the good, but this decision would be the mark I leave for the future.

The blue, rundown backpack my mother handed me when I was thirteen finally proved useful. Though it had terrified me at first, the bag harbored the answers I’d



long sought:

Initials on the front that were never mine. A birth certificate, bank account, and an apartment, prepaid in full. And a handwritten letter explaining it all.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

All that made me who I am, stuffed into this worn bag. Remembrances of my childhood, but more importantly, facts that painted the full picture.

Mother may have left me for good, but not before she set me up for life.

Always three steps ahead, that woman. Until the past caught up with her.

My mother, Inna, was born in Odesa, Ukraine, an only child to a working-class family. Her father, a retired army officer, and her mother, who worked at the post office, raised her with love. Growing up by the sea, Inna enjoyed a peaceful childhood. From a young age, she set her sights on becoming a nurse, the first in her family to pursue higher education. Her parents were immensely proud of her achievements.

After graduating, she joined the Red Cross to gain field experience, but it wasn't long before she caught the attention of the Bratva. With few options, she relocated to Russia, hoping to send money back home to her parents.

The funds allowed my grandparents to retire and enjoy a better life.

Under the rule of Kristian Laurov, the Pakhan at the time, Inna worked her way up to become a member of his medical team. Only a trusted few were allowed to be close to the Pakhan, let alone treat him.

Long story short, they fell in love. Luckily, she left out the details.

They both knew it wasn't meant to be, yet that didn't stop them from trying. When

you're wrapped up in feelings, you tend to disregard reason.

With her Ukrainian heritage and father's duty to marry the daughter of a prominent Russian politician, she would never be accepted. Back then, the organization valued tradition above all. The Pakhan's wife was a position worthy of those with the right pedigree. So mother became the next best thing: The Black Widow. A legend whispered about in the streets.

Poetic, if you ask me. She found the perfect way to use her knowledge of the human body and stay close to my father without raising suspicion.

Planned or not, I came along. Out of love, but most importantly, out of wedlock. A bastard child of the Pakhan was a threat that couldn't be ignored. The tension within the Laurov family only grew. The plan was for mom to live in the United States, where I would grow up until I came of age. The big reunion was in sight. Unfortunately, before that ever happened, father was betrayed by his brother, who appointed himself the ruler.

One person's greed brought misery to all, resulting in bloodshed and the entire Laurov line wiped out in a shootout. A bloody massacre. Family killed by family.

Ilya's father took over shortly after.

We had a place of our own in the city, far from prying eyes, which spared us the worst of it. When my mother learned what happened, she bottled the rage, forsook the revenge, and took off with baby me. We got on the next plane to New York.

Full of sadness and grief, she swore to hide and protect me. For thirteen long years, we lived undetected thanks to her unique skills.

My grandparents, whom I never met, died and were buried by neighbors, as their only

daughter never made it back home. Inna never stepped foot in her own country again. I was all she had left and vice versa.

Father never married. Death found him sooner. With no other children of his own, I was the only surviving family member of the Laurov line. His legitimate heir.

This protected secret was now both a weapon and a curse, revealed to the world. All for one reason: to prevent bloodshed. For those who stood by me when it mattered. For the promise of a future. All in an effort to keep my freedom.

So another person, another child, wouldn't have to live in a world of secrets and betrayals. I would carry the burdens, all to protect the little worth protecting.

\*\*\*

The Galkins had a family home where their parents retired. Alisa hid there while her brothers attended the meeting. She was sitting in the back garden with her feet stretched out when we entered, a cup of steaming tea balanced on her thigh. Her hair had grown long, longer than I had ever seen her wear.

Through the glass door, I watched her run to the entrance.

"Where is she?" Her eyes, a familiar green, searched the space.

"Hi there," I greeted her from behind a wall of Galkin men.

Pushing her brothers aside, Alisa squeezed through, crashing into me with all her might. "I'm so mad at you."

I kissed her cheek, whispering, "I know."

An unidentifiable sound escaped her, a mix of laughter and tears.

“Are you crying or laughing? I can’t tell,” I asked, my voice soft.

Maxim and I locked eyes, and the weight of his gaze unsettled me. His presence was both a comfort and a challenge, a reminder of all the unspoken words between us. I closed my eyes and hugged Alisa tighter.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“While I might be mad, I missed you too much. You made me worried.”

As we pulled apart, I murmured, “It’s good to see you.”

Alisa gave me a pointed look. “You have a lot of explaining to do.”

“I think you do too.”

When we all settled onto the velvet Victorian couches, I scanned the lavish space, taking in the history. The house had character, its charm visible in the squeaking wooden floorboards and the hand-painted wallpaper adorned with delicate floral patterns.

I might have been born in Russia, but I couldn’t remember anything about the place. Until recently, I wasn’t sure if there was even a part of me that could identify as such. But sitting here, among them, in the very country I still knew so little about, I saw the glimpses. We all shared the same resilience, the same hotheadedness. And while many bowed before the stronger hand, we refused.

Now, we held the power. Not for personal gain, but to prevent all that had happened from repeating.

I called Andrei in advance, and our lengthy conversations led to this moment. Despite his lack of interest in power, the state of the organization convinced him to act.

“Can we address the elephant in the room?” Luka asked as we all settled in.

“Which one? There’s an entire herd,” Maxim grunted.

Luka threw his hands in my direction, gesturing. “That a literal runaway mafia princess is sitting in our living room?”

“Don’t tell mama we have royalty under our roof,” Alisa shushed her brother. “She’ll insist on bringing out the best silverware.”

“I guess now you’ll have to bow every time you see me,” I joked.

Luka glanced at his brother, expecting a reaction. When he got none, he stood up, walked over, kissed the top of my hand, and bowed low, surprisingly elegant. The gesture felt ridiculous.

“Stop it,” I laughed, gently pushing the top of his head away. “I don’t have a drop of royal blood in me.”

“I beg to differ,” Luka teased, still holding my hand.

I raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I played princess enough for today.”

Alisa chuckled but leaned in, curious. “I need to know everything.”

I sighed, shifting the mood. “You know how I said I was an orphan?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I wasn’t one for the first thirteen years. My mom and I lived in a house in the suburbs, isolated from the rest of the world,” I recalled my childhood. “I had no idea who any of us really were. She kept both her identity and my father’s a secret. I tried asking her, hoping to make sense of who I was, but she would always shut me down.”

“I get it,” Alisa said softly.

I exhaled, the weight of it all hanging in the air. “It’s hard to believe... that both of my parents lost their lives because of their choices. I don’t think about what it would be like if they were still here. It’s done and dusted,” I sighed before I met their eyes. “But to move forward, we have to stop hiding. We need to let the secrets out in the open.”

I straightened, my voice unwavering. “This is mine. My name is Taya Laurov. To you? I hope to be the same Taya I’ve been since we met. Nothing changed.”

Alisa smiled, her usual unrestricted smile, and despite the world crumbling in the distance, I returned it.

“It’s your turn to tell us the truth,sestra,” Maxim diverted the attention.

Alisa fidgeted with her dress. “I know. I’m just not ready for what it’ll mean.”

I kept a steady hold on her chilly hand. “We’ll get through this.”

In a deep breath, Alisa faced us and began telling the story we had long awaited to hear.

“I met Ilya in the club. It seemed to be the place to go around here,” she revealed. “I went out to celebrate and find some local friends. I felt lonely after saying goodbye to my life at uni.” Her gaze burned a hole in the wooden flooring.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“I don’t know what I was trying to prove,” she shrugged. “The drinks were flowing, and I was having a good time. But now that I replay the events of the night, I’m pretty sure it was intentional on his part,” Alisa admitted. “He kept talking about the future, and security, and I haven’t decoded any of it.”

Her shy gaze roamed the room, first landing on her brothers, before settling on something to the left. Her throat closed, forcing her to abruptly cut to the end. “I wished to have something of my own,” she rushed out.

The questions were visible in her brother’s expressions, but I shut down their attempts. She’ll come to us when she’s ready. When she’s at peace with her choices and their consequences. When she identifies the reasons that drove her. Until it clicks into place, the conversation is closed.

Luka understood her hesitancy perhaps the most, since he held a few unrevealed cards of his own. With his sister in mind, he changed the topic entirely. “You actually met with the Jungles?”

“I did. In terms of crazy, they’ll give you a run for your money,” I joked, leaning back in my seat.

Luka raised an eyebrow, clearly interested. “What were they like?”

I took a moment, trying to find the right words. “Like us. Making it work,” I said. “But unlike us, or I guess you, they’re young.”

Since I was the youngest in the group, I had to remind them now and then. Sue me, it

was fun watching their slightly offended faces. I couldn't help but enjoy their reactions for a second, but I didn't let them dwell on it, continuing, "Speaking of money, they're filthy rich. I mean, obnoxiously rich. It really surprised me when they suggested they would collect the bounty on my head. As if they needed it," I puffed.

Luka's eyes widened, clearly impressed, but it was Enzo's voice that cut through the room. "They did what?"

His raised voice echoed off the wallpapered walls. For a second, I forgot he was there. He insisted on coming along. The man was dead set on not letting me out of his sight. I swear, he was one thought away from handcuffing us together.

He agreed to stay behind with Alisa in their family home while we dealt with the situation.

"I handled them." I knew my answer didn't give him much, but it was just enough to settle his worry.

Luka, always keen for more details, poured himself some tea from the pot.

"Who did you even meet?"

"The three guys. The Colombian, Brazilian, and the French."

Andrei caught on quickly, seeking confirmation. "They're in alliance, then?"

I nodded. "It seems that way."

Fascinated, Luka leaned in, the questions coming faster. "How did you get there?"

"I flew, took a bus. The French kid picked me up in a buggy," I said, simplifying the

details.

“What did he look like?”

“Bleached hair, tall, skinny. Why? Do you know any of them?” It was unlike him to show so much interest, and I couldn’t help but notice.

“I met them once, but they were wearing bandanas.”

I itched to ask more, but seeing the confused looks the rest of the family gave him, I decided to let it rest for now. I’d ask later, in private, if we ever got the chance.

Doing Luka a favor, I quickly redirected the conversation. “Met Daddy Don too.”

Enzo’s jaw snapped shut, his eyes narrowing. “You did not just call him that.” His chest swelled with the weight of his words. “People lose their heads for it.”

“I said the same to his face,” I replied, beaming. “And mine is still on,” I gestured to it. “He even smiled at me.”

I turned to Alisa, my partner in crime, and we exchanged a mischievous smile. It was enough to agitate Enzo even more.

“Isn’t it enough that we have his big mouth to deal with?” Enzo pointed at Maxim. “Now you join him?”

“It runs in the family.” I used the same phrase the Galkins often tossed around.

This was my moment to set the record straight, and I wasn’t going to waste it. I had months to organize my thoughts, but the words still escaped me no matter how many times I rehearsed my speech.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

“Listen, we might not have blood ties...and thank God for that,” I turned to Maxim, letting my gaze linger on him. It had been too long. What a sight he was. The attraction between us was undeniable, magnetic even.

Enzo, clearly uncomfortable with the silent tension, shrugged. “Stop eyefucking each other.”

The jolt broke my train of thought, but Andrei quickly cleared his throat, bringing me back. “You were saying?”

“What I was getting at,” I continued, “is that for all of you, I’d go to war if it came down to it. Us first, duty second.”

Even though they remained silent, their presence was loud, an unspoken support that meant more than words ever could.

“Where do we go from here?” Enzo asked, breaking the quiet.

“We fix what needs fixing,” Andrei answered, our thoughts aligned after the previous conversation.

“Count me in. But I meant what I said at the meeting. I’m not one to rule, but I’ll always be here,” I reminded them, my resolve still firm.

“What about Ilya?” Maxim asked, his tone surprisingly controlled, despite the anger still simmering beneath the surface.

Andrei turned to his sister, a silent question in his eyes. “Your call.”

Alisa’s response was decisive. “We’ll question him first. Then we decide.”

Ilya’s destiny was Alisa’s decision. I wouldn’t touch him until she made up her mind. I wasn’t going to break her heart. No matter how high the stakes, it wasn’t worth it.

I nodded in agreement. “Do what you gotta do.”

Enzo sensed the weight of the words I left out, watching me closely. When the Galkins went upstairs to check on their parents, we stayed behind, walking slowly through the garden, the air heavy with unspoken thoughts.

“You’ll keep an eye on them, right?” I asked, my voice low.

“Why does it feel like another goodbye?” Enzo protested, his tone tinged with concern.

“Never. Just see you around. I promise,” I reassured him, planting a quick kiss on his cheek as we walked through the rose bushes that lined the alcove.

I didn’t tell them that the fight wasn’t over for me. There would be no “normal,” not for a while. Despite all the precautions I’d taken, I knew the pressure wouldn’t stop.

If you lost everything you’d worked for, where did that leave you?

Bitter. Angry. With all the time in the world to plot.

Ilya had ignored Malek’s advances, thinking he could fix things with a trade. He’d let it go too far. What he didn’t understand was that Malek was a fighter. He’d survived in the harshest conditions and thrived in chaos. He would be back, even more power-

hungry. But this time, I wouldn't be blindsided.

This time, I'll control the board and toy with his fate, just like they did with mine.

This time, I embrace revenge.

I may have handed the reins over to the Galkins, but before they set course, I had to clear the waters of the closest sharks. This is what I do, after all.

Malek's ambition wasn't his only weapon. He had connections, a network of people who'd profit from his rule. They wouldn't take kindly to the overthrow I'd orchestrated. It's only a matter of time before they retaliate, and when they do, I'll be here to greet them.

I've been called ruthless, lacking compassion, with no sense of morality.

What they don't understand is the inferno that burns within. I care for Enzo, for Alisa, for all the Galkins, even the unhinged one. Maybe him the most.

They weren't my family, but they sparked a feeling of pure love I had only felt once before. What my mother sacrificed made more sense now. The lengths she went to, keeping me safe, seemed worth it. If only to protect them a little longer, to spare them from getting involved.

I would take it on. And I would wait. Patiently biding my time.

I had a reason. Now, I was just waiting for the right opportunity to take him down.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

As I predicted, Malek was closing in, setting up a base about two miles from the Galkin residence. With that, he became a direct threat to the new leadership, giving me more than enough reason to eliminate him for good.

Of course, that explanation was for those in the organization. I'd known for a while that his actions had made him outlive his usefulness. Don's information proved to be true, and I cursed myself for being so blind. The Jungles repaid their debt, providing me with solid intel on where to start the hunt.

I'd been on his trail for the past few weeks. It was a game of chase. While I tracked Malek's movements and interactions, he seemed to enjoy being aware of my presence. Yet, it didn't stop him from advancing with whatever he was planning.

Crouched on a nearby rooftop, I tracked his movements using thermal binoculars, one of the new toys I had acquired for the occasion. A sniper rifle would have been useful, but tonight called for a more personal approach.

I counted ten guards scattered around the compound. I had long anticipated this day: Orthodox Christmas, the perfect night for an attack. It was the one time orders were slightly ignored and guard concentration was lower.

I was packing my gear, ready to move in, when a man caught my attention. January snow reflected off the ground, crunching softly under his boots. The stranger, dressed in dark clothing, stuck to the shadows with purpose. I wasn't the only one with this idea. Malek made plenty of enemies along the way, but I didn't expect any to be brave enough to face him alone. Unlike me, most preferred numbers over skill.

Some help could be useful. Scratch that. His visit was scheduled. A knock on the reinforced door echoed through the empty streets. A guard slid the metal open to let him in.

I had to make a decision: stay and bide time, or follow and use him as a distraction. One extra guy wouldn't make much of a difference, I figured.

I got up, brushed off the snow, and sprinted across the street to the entry point, a window I had discovered earlier while scouting.

With a push, barely fitting through, I slid in, landing feet first in a grimy bathroom. I quickly left my gear behind, neatly arranging it against the wall before focusing on the surrounding movement. This part of the building seemed quiet, unlike the rest. Malek's idea of spreading forces involved positioning men around the entrances, in addition to the few people near him.

I never understood why people did that. Why surround themselves instead of tactically spreading out their forces? Ilya had done the same thing back in the old, sweaty gym.

If you cover your bases, there's no need to be encircled.

I turned the dusty doorknob, peeking into the dark hallway that led to the maintenance area. It offered a perfect opportunity for distraction. You could disable the brakes or cause an explosion; the possibilities were endless, but I preferred the element of surprise. I slid on the thermal glasses. Sticking to what I knew I readied my weapons and advanced.

A countdown from twelve.

Ready? Breathe and begin.



Luck was on my side, allowing me to catch the first duo of guards on a smoking break.

Didn't they get the memo? Smoking kills.

I approached from the back, my steps steady as I searched for the perfect angle. An arrow through the head took down the first one. A throwing knife to the neck, the second. The cigarette butts hit the ground along with their dead-weight bodies. I dragged them behind the barrel they had been leaning against, covering my tracks as they gagged on their blood.

Ten to go.

A mirrored bathroom on the other side revealed a loner. The guard faced his reflection, splashing water on his face in a pathetic attempt to sober up.

Surprise flashed across his face when he noticed me behind him. Before he could react, I grabbed him by the hair and bashed his head against the porcelain. The sink chipped, a perfectly shaped piece landing next to my boot, begging to be used. I picked it up, finishing the job.

Blood smeared across my black leather gloves, which I wiped on the mirror. Through the smear, I faced my reflection. Determination and pride reflected in those blue eyes. No longer did I fear this version of myself. It was part of me now. This life? I embraced it.

Nine to go.

A medical wing occupied the left side of the building. A strange vibe poisoned the damp air, the eerie atmosphere forcing me to stay alert.

There, in one of the rooms, lay a man I'd watched get wounded last week. Something earned him a bullet to the chest, fired by Malek. A warning to those who disobey.

The blond-haired man's wheezing echoed off the walls as I approached the bed, leaning over his sleeping form to cover his mouth. He spun into action at the intrusion, but it was too late.

"Not a sound," I warned him.

He nodded frantically in response.

I held a knife to his neck as insurance, slowly uncovering his mouth, my eyes tracking his every move. At the first sign of trouble, the knife would slide.

"Who are you?" he whispered in a raspy voice, his breaths becoming more frantic.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

I asked the more important question. “Who’s Malek meeting today?”

“I wouldn’t know,” he said, panic evident in his voice. “They marked me a traitor.”

His hand made a sudden move toward me, but the knife drew a few drops of blood in response.

“Easy,” he murmured, pulling at his hospital gown to reveal the mark.

I’d seen the same mark once before. It was given to those labeled as traitors. A clear message: they were not to be trusted. A snake without a head, burned into the flesh with a hot poker. The mark was still fresh, angrily red, and possibly infected.

“How are you still here?” I asked, wondering why they hadn’t taken care of him yet.

“My punctured lung delayed the transport. They’re shipping me back to Russia tomorrow.”

Oh.

“What’s your name?”

“Lev.”

“What will happen to you?” I asked, needing him to confirm what I already suspected.

“You don’t want to know,” he whispered.

Prostitution. Human trafficking. Illegal fights. There were many ways those who were written off found themselves used. They became currency, exchanged to settle debts and enrich the already rich.

I stepped back, sheathing the knife, when an impulse hit me. “Take the exit by the barrels,” I handed him one of the guard’s guns. “If anyone sees you, shoot.”

“I won’t blame you if you disappear,” I admitted. I probably would, too.

“But if you want to fight, I’ll hear you out.” I held his gaze. “Wait for me at the docks in Brooklyn. If anyone sees you, ask for Lorenzo and mention me.”

“Why help me?” Lev appeared shocked. He was right to question me.

“Call it Christmas spirit,” I half-joked.

An enemy of Malek could be a friend of mine, but I wouldn’t claim it was out of kindness. I’d learned long ago that factors like age or innocent looks could be persuasive, but they’d only cost you. In Lev’s case, though, I was his best shot. I could only hope it was enough to prevent him from doing anything stupid. Still, I warned him, “Don’t mistake my kindness for weakness. I could take it back just as quickly as I gave it.”

He limped out as I helped him into the guard’s clothes before seeing him off.

“If you cross me, I won’t hesitate to end you. Now go!”

Lev took off.

Eight to go.

The others were all centered around the meeting place. I circled the space, searching for a lookout when I stumbled upon an office nearby. I helped myself to some information. A file with a picture awaited in a safe.

The combination? Malek's birthday.

Zero points for creativity. Or maybe a hundred for acting.

Did he plant the documents? Whether intentional or not, they found their way to me.

Ravager. The man I'd seen entering the building.

I held the picture up to the light, studying the man behind the name. His face was destroyed. Beaten and swollen, it was clear his nose had been broken one too many times, now hanging at an unnatural angle. On top of that, a bloodied eyebrow and a black eye marred his features. The damage the name promised had already been done to his face.

Malek's new ally?

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

More players entered the game with each round, whoever had the strength and guts to join.

Leaving the office, I scouted for higher ground. Voices carried over as I lifted my body to the nearest vent. I crawled on all fours through the tight space, armed with only a few of my trusted knives. A dust-filled breeze swept through the tunnel, and I suppressed a giggle at how ridiculous it would be if the dust made me sneeze. But any humor was wiped away when I reached the room. I could tell it was near the door through the bars of the opening on the side. Two guards stood outside. From this angle, they looked like they were in jail, which would be a better fate than the one I planned for them.

Not wasting any time, I pulled out a knife and started to loosen the bolts. I only advanced further when I was sure it could be kicked off easily.

I lay flat, schooling my breathing, and slid rather than crawled to avoid making noise, silently praying for another viewing point closer to the center of the room.

The next vantage was almost directly above what seemed like a living room setup. A coffee table filled with cakes, fruits, and nuts occupied the middle. A hand reached for some of them. There on the couch, Malek sat, sporting a thick beard. With his legs casually spread, he laughed, his demeanor unconcerned. Suddenly, his eyes lifted this way, and I skipped a beat or two, waiting for his reaction.

None came.

The man they called Ravager must have been directly below me. Not wanting to

reveal myself, I slid away from the opening and tried to make myself comfortable, unsure how long I'd be stuck up here.

They spoke in fluent Russian, and I focused on their conversation.

"Cousin, it's good to see you," Ravager greeted Malek, shocking me to the core.

Cousins?

"I was beginning to worry you would miss it."

"The holidays? Or you taking over?" Malek chuckled deeply.

"What is it I hear about an engagement?"

"Ah," Malek's smile was heard in his words. "Another event to look forward to."

"And to Laurov's daughter."

I rolled my eyes. Laurov's daughter, my ass.

"We are a long way from that wooden cabin we grew up in Siberia."

Malek was Siberian? I mentally slapped myself. All those background checks and research I've done, I should have crawled in the vent shafts and listened to people's private conversations more often. Somehow it revealed what I didn't know and then some.

"You tell me," Malek turned to his cousin. "I hear this isn't your first time in the States, either."

“No. It isn’t,” the man revealed.

“Excuse me if I find the timing a tad suspicious.”

“Oh, by all means.”

I had heard enough when I reversed to the previous opening, expecting the action to begin any minute. Despite wearing long-sleeved clothing, the movement still burned me. I ignored the feeling. When I reached the intended spot, another challenge awaited me: rotating without making too much sound. Slowly and with precise movements, I positioned my feet against the bars, breathing in, remembering what or who

I was fighting for.

If this is how I go down, let me make it count. I got back into the zone, running my mind through the motions.

Eight to go.

With a kick to the bars, I briskly squeezed through. Steady on my feet, I took the fight to the guards first, praying that Malek or the other guy wouldn’t kill the bride-to-be. Or at least not before I face them.

Based on their movements, I first took on the slower one, applying the pressure to the guard’s hand. With a snap of his wrist, he let go, allowing me an opportunity to eliminate them both. By the time the first one went down, the second had me in his grip. He lifted me above ground, spinning us around toward his boss. My eyes locked with Malek ahead of me, the shock on his face lacking when I kicked the guard with the back of my head.



Thick-headed assholes. What did they feed these men? Potatoes, that's what.

Spots formed around my vision, but he had it worse. With another kick to the head, he stepped back just in time. A shot between his eyes did it.

## Page 87

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:42 am*

Gun aimed at the family reunion ahead, I glanced at the back door, waiting for the expected rush of guards. Nothing. Neither moved. If anything, Malek seemed...pleased.

Did I walk into a trap?

“The last piece of the puzzle,” Malek said, lounging on the couch, before rushing to my side.

“Welcome home, solnishko.”

He placed his hand on my cheek, stroking it, then kissed my forehead.

The gesture felt wrong, far too intimate. The same touch I used to crave now made my skin crawl. Still, I forced an innocent smile, playing the part he wanted for this occasion.

His last.

But just as I started to play my hand, Ravager broke the moment. From behind us, I watched him raise his gun, aiming it directly at us.

“You were always blind. And you will die blind.”

A shot rang out. I braced for impact, sidestepping to hide behind Malek just in time.

A fountain of blood splashed on my face.

For a split second, I questioned if it was mine, but the fact that I could still move told me it couldn't be. I swallowed the lump in my throat, the metallic taste coating my taste buds, and closed my eyes.

The weight of the body leaning against me registered in my brain, and I laughed. I laughed and laughed, and when I opened them again, Malek slid down the front of my shirt, coating me with even more blood.

The weight lifted off my shoulders. Literally.

I laughed some more.

Following the movement, I found him on the ground, bleeding into the carpet. His head was blown apart, bits and pieces scattered. It resembled a shotgun blast, except the shot had been so quiet and the impact spared me, destroying him from the inside. I didn't dwell on the specifics.

Suddenly aware of the chunks covering my clothes, I tried to wipe most of it away.

"Destructive bullets," Ravager clarified, even though no one asked.

I didn't reply. I didn't look his way. I just stood there, soaked in the blood of the enemy, witnessing the carpet change colors with Malek's remains.

Five to go.

The back door busted open.

I took a fighting stance, expecting the guards, assuming they were alerted by the gunshot, and came to defend. Too late.

Maxim stood there in all his glory.

Wait, what?

He looked pissed. His wandering eyes came to a halt at the sight of me.

“What the fuck happened here?” he roared into the room.

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, raw and full of rage. That wasn't Maxim's usual detached, sarcastic tone. This was something else entirely.

The fury radiated off him, and I couldn't help but feel a flicker of something inside.

“Maxim?” I called his name, still in shock. Or maybe surprise.

“You could have fucking killed her, you idiot,” Maxim snapped.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Ravager was quick to answer, his tone dripping with mockery. “I didn’t, did I?”

“I took care of the rest of the guards,” Maxim informed us.

My brain absorbed his words, still in fight mode.

One to go.

With a last look at the dead body at my feet, I lifted my gaze and pointed the gun at Ravager. I focused on his face, blinking away the droplets of blood covering my lashes.

It was when he smiled, I crumbled to my knees.

Too much was happening at the same time. I was overloaded with the events of the day or the year. People appeared and reappeared in my life, unexpected allies, betrayals, the weight of it all suffocating me.

Exhaustion overtook me. My limbs felt heavy, like they belonged to someone else. Maxim saw the crush coming. He rushed to my side, catching me before I could crumple to the floor beside Malek’s lifeless body, his face appearing above me.

It was like he read my mind and understood my soul. I so desperately wanted to reinforce it. But crack after crack, the shell peeled away, and I became a bystander within my own body. Unable to act, I sought answers in his emerald eyes. What they reflected confirmed what I feared.

We were one. Two bodies, the same fate. A shared one. If I dared to reach for it.

My fingers twitched, approaching him, but the heaviness prevailed.

With me in his arms, Maxim rushed out of the building without a word, leaving the killer behind.

I smiled, noticing the wake of bodies forming a trail out. I beat his number today, didn't I?

Though I wanted to brag and laugh in his face, I remained silent, drained of all energy.

He parked the car a block down, the same one I had driven away from him in. He sat in the driver's seat, holding me close as he pulled out of the spot.

"I don't think this is safe," I whispered, each word hurting more than the last.

Maxim chuckled at my observation. "This is the safest you'll ever be."

He wasn't wrong. Compared to the everyday tasks, this was a walk in the park.

My brain failed to decode the rest.

"Let's get you home," he said, his hot breath kissing my neck.

Home? The house in the suburbs?

I didn't dwell on the meaning. The road rocked me to sleep. With Maxim's scent encircling me, I let the dreariness drag me under. His heart beat steady beneath my ear, so I let myself focus on the comfort of it.

Safe.

For once, I allowed him to be the strong one.

I relied on him, my new home.

Taya was nearing her limits. I could see the tiredness in her eyes, feel the exhaustion in her body.

Worried about her state, I contacted Mila, Andrei's wife, on the way back. As a trauma surgeon, she dealt with similar cases.

I pulled up to the house and shut off the engine. After a few minutes of listening to her steady breathing, I finally moved, carrying her inside. Her red-soaked hair shifted with each step. My siblings were already on edge, all gathered in the hallway to meet us. Taya's current state caused immediate panic.

"Is she okay?" Alisa cried out.

"Fine," I reassured her.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Not willing to let her out of reach, I sat on the white couch in the sitting room. Gently readjusting her position to make her more comfortable, I covered her with blankets. She slept soundly, her breath steady.

Since I hadn't witnessed everything that transpired, I was worried shitless.

Was she hurt? Did something happen to her?

It wasn't supposed to go like this. As many times before, we had the same idea: strike today. Except this time, I had a way in through Orest, a guy I met in the military. We served together at the front and stayed in touch.

When he reached out a couple of weeks ago, I couldn't believe Malek was his cousin. Their connection played to my advantage.

Whatever happened between them had to be worth blowing his cousin's brains out.

Malek was dead.

My sister handed me a wet cloth to wipe Taya's face. She hadn't stirred since we arrived, and I knew she was at the end of her rope, if not past it.

I scanned my siblings before searching the room for the man, the cause of her troubles.

"Where is Ilya?"



Alisa's eyes gave the answer away, but I needed to hear the confirmation out loud.  
"Alisa? Where is he?"

"He took off," my sister admitted, chewing on her thumb.

"What do you mean, took off?"

Andrei answered for her. "He's gone."

"Motherfucker," I hissed, my voice barely contained. Instantly, I scolded myself for being too loud.

"We have bigger things to worry about." Luka nodded toward the woman in my arms. "What happened?"

I told them what I knew. None of them were aware of my plan. I didn't want them to worry or to get involved, for that matter.

The doorbell rang, interrupting our conversation. I cursed whoever dared make a sound loud enough to wake her.

Alisa stood up to answer, with Luka following close behind as a precaution.

Furious, Lorenzo stormed inside, dragging a young man behind him. The Italian hauled the seriously injured boy by the collar. Blood, old and new, stained the front of his white t-shirt, dark red soaking into the fabric. I eyed the stranger, piecing together the connection, the reason behind Lorenzo's unannounced visit. But it came as no surprise, the man had an annoying tendency to pop up wherever Taya was.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't anticipate his approach until he was right next to me.

“Cazzo,” Lorenzo swore, his voice tight with something raw. “Is she...?”

“No,” I answered sharply, offended by the thought.

I leveled him with a glare, pulling Taya even closer to my chest, her fragile form warm against me. A growl might’ve escaped me, a warning to stay the hell away.

I knew they loved each other, but it wasn’t registering. My brain had overridden all logic, operating purely on protective instinct. All that mattered was keeping her safe. In her fragile state, she trusted me, of all people. I would sooner unalive myself than disappoint her.

“Who’s that?” Luka asked from behind, addressing the issue at hand.

“Wonderful question.”

Lorenzo dragged the boy to the center of the room, forcing him to his knees.

“Thisstronzoshowed up at the docks, asking for me. He claims he was advised to do it.”

The room’s attention shifted to the stranger as he stood, awkwardly straightening. “I’m Lev. Me and...” He glanced at the woman in my arms, but his words trailed off.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Out of pity or instinct, Alisa supplied the name. “Taya.”

Lev gave a brief nod before continuing. “We met at Malek’s. She told me to wait for her at the docks.”

“Why would she spare you?” Andrei asked, his voice edged with suspicion.

The boy reached for his shirt, setting off a wave of reactions. Weapons were drawn in unison, even by Alisa, who usually avoided fights.

“What’s up with you all?” Lev grumbled, clearly annoyed, likely referencing a previous encounter with the fierce warrior currently recharging her batteries, bundled in my lap. A smile lit my face, and I suddenly couldn’t care less about the man.

Despite my disinterest, Lev attempted to lift his shirt again, this time with slow movements, revealing the mark. Traitor. I had come across that mark many times before, never in a good light. Not a smart move, my man. Not when your intentions were already being questioned.

Annoyed by all these interruptions, these loud rumbles, I dismissed him. “Sit down.”

“The next person through that door better be Mila,” I muttered, more in hope than humor.

Andrei shot me a look, clearly displeased with how I’d spoken about his wife. I loved my sister-in-law, but this wasn’t the time for pleasantries.

“Malek’s dead,” I finally announced, trailing my fingers through Taya’s hair.

Lorenzo’s eyebrows shot up, his forehead wrinkling in disbelief. “She killed him?”

For God’s sake. I tried to calm myself, closing my eyes, but it was like he was shouting directly into her ear. I shook my head at his ignorance. “Not exactly.”

“Whose blood is that?”

“His,” Taya answered, her voice faint.

Her eyes opened, bloodshot and tired, but they found me. With a crusted hand, she gently traced my outgrown stubble. In a room full of people, it still felt like the most intimate moment we’d shared. No words were spoken. No one dared interrupt us or they would be next.

Sitting up took all her energy, so I strengthened my hold, not letting go. I couldn’t. I wasn’t ready to.

She received the silent message. Taya pressed a ghost of a kiss to my neck, keeping her hand intertwined with mine. Still in my lap, she made herself comfortable, facing the room.

“Lev,” she acknowledged the man sitting across from us first out of concern for his safety.

When her gaze found Lorenzo, he sighed. “You’re going to drive me to an early grave.”

“I’d rather not,” she replied with a grin.

“Everybody,” she turned to the rest of the room, “it’s been a while.”

“For the last time,” Alisa scolded her like a child.

“I don’t promise, but I’ll try,” Taya answered, offering her a warm smile.

The two of them were close now, sharing a sister-like bond.

“To answer your question, Ravager killed him.”

Ravager?She meant Orest?

“Who now?” Luka demanded, leaning forward.

The room fell silent. Taya turned to me, her gaze sharp. “Care to fill us in?”

I sighed, keeping my tone steady. “A guy I know from the military. We served together.”

“Did you now?” she shot back.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Her skepticism hit me like a punch, but she already moved on. “Alisa, remember that story I told you about a Siberian guy with the smile? In Ilya’s club? The one I met when I was nineteen?”

“The one you lost...?” Alisa’s eyes widened, and I froze.

My hands shot to Taya’s wrists, feeling her pulse race. “The one you what?” I exploded.

Taya ignored me. “Imagine my surprise when he shows up at Malek’s door, calls him his cousin,” she said, still focused on Alisa. “But that was nothing compared to when I found out your brother knows him. Or better yet, he planned the whole fucking night with him.” Taya turned to me, the fire of her stare burning through. “So what? We calling out every guy I’ve fucked now?” she yelled. “It’s getting a little personal.”

“You slept with Malek?” The new guy blinked, confused.

“Keep up,” Taya snapped, brushing off the fact. “Where is he?”

I knew he followed us here. Good. The list of topics to discuss with him kept expanding. I gestured toward the door, silently signaling to Luka. He understood immediately and opened it, inviting the stranger who was likely waiting outside. As expected, Orest walked in. Unlike the rest of us, he looked well put together. He acknowledged Andrei first, showing respect to the leader. The men exchanged a brief greeting while Taya watched closely.

Her reaction to his proximity was instant. She stood up faster than anyone should, leaving me empty and bitter in her absence. Gone was the exhaustion she barely pulled through. No, she'd caught a second wind, and I couldn't help but wonder what had triggered her sudden shift in alertness.

We were all eager to hear the story, but considering I knew him, I didn't expect her to be this on edge.

As Orest stepped toward the group, Taya positioned herself in his path, blocking the view. With a finger poking at his chest, she went off. "You were supposed to remain nameless."

"A happy memory," she added under her breath.

"And aren't I? Nameless?" Orest countered, a challenge in his voice.

His unwise words were my cue to stand, but I didn't need to, since Taya had already pushed him back. When he remained still, taking her blows without a flinch, I realized there was history between them that needed to be sorted out. No real danger, aside from the woman letting off some steam. Whatever she decided next, I'd hand her the tools before I stopped her. I sat back down, watching the exchange unfold.

When Taya grew tired of the same old dance and saw no end in sight, she turned to Ravager's face.

"Oh, how I'd love to bruise that face. Just like the pictures. In your cousin's office?"

"Ah, yeah. The golden times."

A growl crawled from her throat, the sinner in me immediately reacting, but I quickly schooled my expression.

“Sit,” she ordered him. “I’ll deal with you later.” Her commanding voice wasn’t helping my focus.

The three of us: Orest, Lev, and I ended up sitting in a perfect line on the bloodied couch. Like sinners awaiting judgment.

On the opposite side, the jury sat: Lorenzo, my sister, and my brothers.

The judge stood between us, pacing back and forth, a bridge holding us all together.

“Let’s start with you,” Taya addressed Lev first.

The boy didn’t resist, realizing he had no choice. “Okay.”

To my surprise, he didn’t seem afraid, though he should be. More than ever.

“What did you do?” Taya asked, her stare sharp on the mark beneath his bloodied t-shirt.

“I passed information about the next shipment.”

I studied his face, trying to read any emotions he might be hiding, but there was no regret. No sneaky glances. There had to be a reason, somewhere.

Taya walked a circle into the carpet, rubbing her temples. “Complex sentences, please.”

That made me chuckle. A loud, unrestricted laugh earned me a glare that promised a slow and painful death. Even Alisa disapproved. I grinned right back at both women.

“Malek had an operation back in Russia,” Lev explained. “A white meat trade. They



lured women out of poverty in Siberia and sold them in Moscow to various buyers.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

A shiver ran through Taya's body. With her eyes closed, she pulled the elastic from her hair and let it fall free. She exhaled deeply, staring at the blood caked on her skin, yet didn't ask to shower. To wash it all away. To erase him. As for me, I itched to lose any reminder of the excuse of a man who had once tried to trap her.

"They promised them a better life. Convinced them they'll be married to a Bratva member and taken care of," Lev expanded on his accusations.

"How did you find out?"

He stayed quiet, clearly dreading the truth, until I nudged his foot, warning him.

"My sister got involved." The truth finally came out. "Malek told me he'd do the same to me," he admitted. "If I made it to Russia, they'd trade me off."

"But you didn't. And you won't," Taya promised, still pacing around the room.

Alisa cut in, asking, "Is your sister...?"

Lev nodded. They killed her in retaliation.

Information spread quickly. A phone call was all it took; a chain reaction followed. There was nothing he could've done with him half a world away. Just stand by and watch it happen. An unfortunate example of how cruel this world could be to those who are indirectly involved. Being related to a traitor? That just added oil to the fire. Tortured, beaten, left to die. Still, compared to the alternative, it was a mercy kill.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

Taya stared at the boy beside me, blinking rapidly, likely reminded of herself at that age.

She turned to my older brother, the Pakhan, with a silent request. Andrei understood. “I’ll look into it.”

A silent nod of gratitude, and we moved on.

Her blue eyes cut through the room’s darkness when she turned to the man next to me.

The wrath in her voice sent a thrill down my spine. “Did you know?” Her tone rose with each word. “I said, did you know?”

Orest kept his composure. “I found out recently,” he admitted. “It gave me one more reason to kill him. And I did.”

This fucking guy. I couldn’t stay out of it anymore, god knows I tried.

“In her fucking face.” I grabbed him by the collar, yanking him to my side of the couch. “What if the bullet went through her too? Hm?”

“I should kill you for that,” I growled through clenched teeth. Given our history, I warned him first. Any other time, the bullet would’ve come before the words.

“We should,” Lorenzo backed me up.

“Destructive bullets.” Ravager and Taya spoke in unison.

What?

“Like that makes a difference,” I muttered, puffing out a breath.

Orest remained calm, his words low, meant only for me. “We’re on the same path, Maxim.” He held my gaze. “The same way we were in the desert.”

All the new pieces of information didn’t make sense anymore. Orest wasn’t even American. Why would he have served?

The questions swirled in my mind, but before I could voice any, Taya’s expression silenced me. Her intense stare was a clear warning to back off.

She was handling this. And that was it. The protector role was hers now, but I wasn’t about to stop looking out for her.

She sat beside me on the arm of the couch, and I leaned closer, my arms slowly snaking around her waist.

“Where is Ilya?” Taya finally noticed his absence, glancing around the room.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Alisa's voice was soft when she answered, "Gone."

"No."

The rage hit her in waves. She was heading toward another crash, and I felt for her. But most of all, I felt for my sister. A man she thought would be her forever had just disappeared.

Taya rubbed her temples, eyes squeezed shut as she muttered, "Can we catch a break?"

Alisa moved over to comfort her. "We can, and we will." Her confidence was admirable, but the realists in the group remained skeptical.

"Fuck, I left my bow there," Taya exhaled, and we all chuckled at the trail of her thoughts.

When we all retreated into our thoughts, it was Alisa who broke the silence.

"I suggest we clean up," she said, referring to the dirt mixed with blood on our clothes. "Get you checked, then we'll celebrate. It's Christmas, after all." She smiled.

"Tomorrow, we deal with the rest."

The live-in staff set the table for the family, not expecting any guests, so we added a few more chairs.

Nine of us. Five family members. Two unexpected strangers. One Italian. And her. The one who belonged. In this world. In my world.

The food smelled incredible, and even though I wasn't one for formal gatherings, this felt anything but. Soups, potato salad, meat, and fish, but I had my eye on the best part of the evening: the cakes. The sugary goodness.

I vividly remembered our mother baking whenever Christmas came around. Even though our father employed a cook, she insisted on making them herself. Little did she know, I always stole a piece of the raw cookie dough while she took her smoke break. Over time, I learned where she hid the baked goods, tucked behind the potatoes in a metal box. I snuck so many that my tiny mouth couldn't quite chew them all. The crumbly dough dissolved in your mouth, the jam in the middle adding a fruity sweetness. It was the essence of Christmas.

When we all approached the table, I ignored the usual family seating plan and reserved the spots nearest the goods. I saved her a seat, quietly hoping she'd gravitate toward me, though I'd noticed in the past that it was always Lorenzo she gravitated toward first.

In a beautiful black dress, Taya entered the room as a different woman. Her hair was once again the familiar blond shade. Gone were the reminders of Malek for good. The dress must have belonged to my sister because it was short and tight on Taya.

Her gaze flickered to the food before finding me. Ever so slowly, she walked across the room, silently eyeing the seat next to me.

"Reserved just for you," my smile replied.

Taya sat down, her muscles stiff. The distance between us still felt too far, and sitting her in my lap seemed out of place at the Christmas table, even if my mind argued

otherwise. I grabbed the legs of her chair and slid it closer. She laughed at the action, but her eyes told a different story.

When I snaked my arm alongside the top of the chair, Taya finally relaxed, her shoulders lowering. She leaned in close, whispering a secret. “This is my first Russian Christmas.”

It hit me then. She hadn’t eaten in hours.

I rushed to load her plate, slapping my sibling’s hands away. I ignored tradition, which dictated that the Pakhan be served first.

She’d sacrificed enough for one day. The least we could do was serve her.

Food first, I smirked internally.

Lev sat next to Alisa, glancing around the table. He briefly eyed the choices before reaching for the lamb. I observed the man, the boy, who didn’t bother swallowing. He inhaled each bite like his next meal wasn’t guaranteed.

Despite Mila clearing him of any serious diagnosis, his condition remained critical. My sister-in-law appeared shortly after our living room encounters to check in on everybody before she returned to her shift. It took her a while to clear the deep wound rooted in his chest. While she worked, Taya stayed close, reassuring him that he was safe here.

Because of his actions, Lev was now on the wanted list. In a situation so far beyond our reach, even with Andrei as the Pakhan, the fact couldn’t be solved. He was a traitor, no matter his good intentions.

Taya refused the label, the mark imprinted on his body that sealed his fate in the

organization. We hadn't addressed what it meant, or how we would deal with the mess, but as I watched the two talk, I knew she wasn't letting him go.

Either she had seen a part of herself, the fighter, the loner in him, or couldn't stand the unfairness he was dealt with. Experience told me to investigate further, and I planned on doing just that, as soon as everything was said and done.

The same applied to the other man the night had brought to us.

I thought I knew everything there was to him, having served with him in the trenches, risking our lives for each other. Back then, though, I knew him as someone else entirely.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Someone willing to scar his hands to pull the barbed wire lodged in the back of my neck. A memory only the two of us shared. As soon as I returned from deployment, tattoos covered the faded scars, erasing the evidence of the only time I allowed myself to be used for the greater good.

When I served as a human stepping stone for others, in the literal sense.

I knew Orest. Whoever Ravager was? That remained unanswered. He stuck around, eating his dinner in silence, his eyes solely on one person.

And he sure as fuck wasn't sticking around for me.

My grip on the back of Taya's neck tightened, the possessive claim obvious. My eyes didn't communicate the threat to those in apparent need of a reminder. Instead, I searched her face for a reaction. When she rolled her eyes and smiled, I got my confirmation.

No one could come between us. Not even havoc himself.

Stuffed with food and cakes, we continued the Galkin traditions. The dining table was pushed against the wall to make space for a dance floor.

Music blasted from the stereo, songs a generation too old, even for the oldest in the family. Christmas lights twinkled in the space. Alisa went above and beyond for Christmas, her second favorite season. She even made eggnog. Well, something closer to vodka spiked with the essence of eggnog at that ratio. She forced everybody to drink the creation. Even Lorenzo couldn't resist.

Lev and Orest were wary of the sudden change. They didn't know us yet.

This was how we survived. We fought hard and balanced the scales by partying even harder.

When Taya's hips swung in rhythm, my palms holding on tight as our family twirled around us, I might've just converted from the Grinch too.

So many questions plagued my mind. Where is Ilya? How will we stop the trafficking? Did I make the right choice? Have I doomed us all?

I leaned on the balcony rail, staring up at the sky. The clear January night stretched above us. I took a moment to find the brightest star and wondered what it was like to look down from the opposite side.

I never got closure.

There was no body to bury, no grave to visit. Whether I believed in the afterlife was irrelevant. Somewhere out there, she remained, in heaven, hell, or just an empty void.

"Merry Christmas, Mom," I whispered to the stars.

A heavy breath escaped me. The traditions weren't the same without them. Without her.

None of what I had done would make her proud. She warned me about this lifestyle, dedicating her life to protecting me, only to lose it in the process. When I looked back, the reasons were clear as day. Why she couldn't be here, why she did it all.

There would always be anger within me at what we lost. I liked to think her opinion would change. Despite the life we led, love surrounded me more than I'd ever known.

Good people who protected me and lifted me at my lowest.

After all, that's all she wanted: for me to live how I wanted to, the way I deserved to.

With the secrets spilled, I no longer carried the guilt. I lost the need to hide.

I was who I was, largely thanks to her.

Yet, it hit me heavily that the wrong hadn't been corrected in her case.

Another mission to find out who was after us eleven years ago and make them meet the same fate.

Until then, I'll keep her in my memory. Their legacy continues in me.

The aftermath of today's mission still lingered in the tightness of my muscles. I could vividly remember the warm blood dripping down my face, despite the liquid being long gone down the drain.

I wasn't the one to deliver, to finish what I started in the first place, as I intended when I set down this path. The thought was hard to shake.

Inside, the rest of the party continued without me. Observing them from a distance, I caught a rare glimpse of Enzo. It was about time the real him came out to play. After all, this is what it was all about: being a part of a group. Being loved for who you were, not who you were meant to be.

Surnames, positions, genders, nationalities. None of those made us a family.

Dancing with the Galkins in a drunken haze, he showed off his signature dance move to Luka. In the quiet of the night, standing in the crisp January air, I burst out

laughing.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

The sound carried on the wind and got his attention. Oops. Rushed steps sounded in my direction, and the man came to a halt in front of me. The tips of our shoes briefly touched when he threw me over his shoulder, carrying me to the makeshift dance floor.

In the circle, surrounded by all these people, I let my guard down again and threw my hands in the air. We danced, laughed, and goofed around for hours. Buzzed off Alisa's eggnog, we were all determined to last the night.

After finishing her shift at the hospital, Mila, Andrei's wife, returned home.

We were all too excited to see her, but her husband immediately whisked her away, and the two vanished for the night.

At midnight, the eggnog disappeared, replaced by bottles of the same brand of vodka.

Ravager, as I now called him, remained seated on the couch, confusion written across his familiar features.

Imagine my surprise when the man I was dead set on killing alongside Malek turned out to be a ghost from the past. His presence was perhaps the biggest shock of the night. To find out that he and Maxim served together not long before we met? Mind-blowing.

For a spare moment, I considered a bigger game at play. Thankfully, the pure fury on Maxim's face cleared me of any doubt. Regardless of our past relations, I was wary of Ravager. The name he used deserved an eye roll of its own. A double roll at the

laugh the fates were having at my expense.

The past, the present, the future all under one roof. I knew how to pick ‘em.

His eyes followed me across the room, silently requesting a private moment. I wasn’t ready for that conversation. If today taught me anything, it was that things had a way of working themselves out with time, space, and a sprinkle of luck.

For now, I would let him tag along.

When my legs felt like giving out from all the dancing and action, I staged a bathroom break. Maxim’s absence didn’t escape me upon my return.

We desperately needed a moment alone, a chance to talk.

The last door on the left, in the upstairs portion of the Galkin residence, revealed the man I was desperate to locate. He casually sat on the ground, his back resting against the massive bed.

He was aware of my presence but remained staring ahead, even when I slid down next to him. Heat radiated off him in waves. His stomach expanded with each inhale before shrinking back to the formation of muscles I remembered.

Wide shoulders cast a shadow over the room. Tempted by the image and fueled by a handful of memories, I dug my fingers into the plush carpet beneath us.

This damn brain was forcing me to relive the last time whenever he was around, no matter the seriousness of the situation. What it felt like to unravel under his touch.

I craved his touch. Even more, I missed his presence.

There was something oddly intimate about seeing a man shirtless with bare feet. Or maybe it was just him.

A primal urge awoke within me. To possess. To own. At that very moment, I wished for nothing more than to be the only one to see him like this. Lock the door and keep him behind it. Allow him to be every version of himself he wished to be in my presence.

I wanted to be his safe space.

The fire reflected off his strong features, matching the inferno brewing within me. I wished to be the ember that lights his fire. To let the flame rage and burn within us both.

The green in his eyes stunned me every time. I let them pull me in and hold me hostage while I used the moment to decode whatever was going on inside him.

As eager as I was to add to the memories, something was wrong.

Maxim appeared relaxed, except for the iron grip on a bloodied shirt scrunched up in his left hand. From the angle I sat, it would've been easy to miss the item: a long-sleeved piece I wore earlier tonight. The same one I'd stuffed into the bathroom garbage, disposing of it before I took that never-ending nightmare of a shower.

Surprise filled me at the sight, but I gave him time. Long moments passed.

We just sat there.

A moment longer and I would've resorted to shaking it out of him, so I spoke instead. "Is this the part where you shout at me for being reckless?"

A somber voice answered. “No.”

I grasped the true meaning of the word. Maxim wasn't one to restrict me, and while I might have pretended to be many things in life, not with him. Never with him.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Taking a deep breath, I reached for his chin, letting him see the appreciation firsthand. Hear the sincerity in my words. “Thank you.” He remained still, hanging on to my words when I added, “For today.”

Since the moment the two of us met, he had been there. For me, for his family, even for Enzo. And that was what I needed. I didn’t need anybody to speak for me, to deliver the threats, or to carry out hard tasks. I just needed them to be present. I needed him present.

A familiar smile curled Maxim’s mouth. “You don’t want to chew my head off anymore?”

A sigh of relief left me. The humor hadn’t escaped him. With everything going on, he was more than entitled to a sober moment. Still, the second his playful smile reappeared, I relaxed.

“I considered it for a minute,” I shrugged playfully. “But I think I like it where it is,” I threw him a grin, “for now.”

We remained frozen in the moment, our heavy breaths in sync.

It wasn’t the years between us that caused me to hesitate. Not at all.

Rather, it was the unknown waters I was swimming in.

I wanted him. Needed him in a capacity I’d never been familiar with before. Even knowing that, I held back, self-aware of my inexperience. Sex came as naturally to

me as breathing. Feelings, on the other hand, were a different story. Despite being in my twenties, relationships were

new to me.

If we were to do this, assuming he felt the same way, I wanted to do it right. Something deep within me whispered a promise of a future. That meant I had to open up to him.

I abandoned all fears and admitted, “I don’t know how to do this.”

The fireplace held our gazes as we braced for the turning point of this conversation.

Maxim inhaled deeply and, on the exhale, asked, “Do what?”

A somewhat bitter laugh escaped me. “Rely on somebody. For starters.”

“You managed today,” he pointed out.

I did.

Before I unraveled the thoughts of the day, I turned to him. “What are we?”

I should have felt exposed, yet I didn’t. Laying it all out there for this man felt... liberating. Safe. Intimate.

He leaned in, holding my chin between his fingers. “We can be whatever you want us to be.”

With a raised eyebrow, I studied him, wondering about the possibilities.

“You know why?” Maxim breathed the question in a steady exhale.

Taking the bait, I asked, “Why?”

The truth reflected in his eyes. “Because I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give me.”

I swallowed hard. “What if I don’t have enough to give?”

His eyes called my bullshit. A ghost of a smile touched his lips before he dragged out a prolonged, “Hmmm,” trailing his thumb across my bottom lip. “What if you have everything?”

A breathy laugh escaped me, whether it was at this situation or at him being all serious and proper, I couldn’t tell.

“If there’s anyone in this hell of a world who can handle me, it’s you,” I breathed out, barely a whisper, but it was enough.

The tips of his fingers dug into the back of my skull. Cold metal rings scraped my skin.

Maxim held my head still, but inside, a windstorm raged.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

His hypnotic eyes hid a future within them. Short or endless, it was full of possibilities.

Another promise was in order. To me, but to him first.

“Till that day comes.”

A groan escaped him as he licked his lips seductively. “For it never will.”

He brought my head to him, claiming my lips with a passion that threatened to destroy the remains of my reinforced heart.

A first.

First kiss.

First deepest desire.

First love.

I was desperate to give him all the firsts I had left, for there were many. This little thing inside me? It had never beaten for anyone. What an unfamiliar feeling to have it now beat for someone. A selected few. And there he sat. At the top. A king seated on a throne covered in smoke.

A staircase paved with sin and blood led him up, but he didn't let the darkness stop him from claiming the spot. Maxim scaled it step by step with every action. I gave

him each heartbeat, without even knowing I had something left to give.

But luckily, unlike in our world, he will remain seated. Unchallenged. With no posing threat and no one to take over his position for as long as the throne exists. And in his lap, I will remain. Through all that we have ahead. For I, too, somehow made it up the steps.

As Maxim deepened the kiss, his tongue traced the edge of my lips, demanding entry. I obeyed. Let him take control. Take it all and leave me panting.

The sadistic part of me wanted to come out and play: bite, tease, or delay. Something prevented me. The moment felt far too important. We stood at a turning point, and I was ready to jump into the depths.

Arousal, mixed with desire, filled me in delicious doses, and when I thought of the man I had chosen in my heart, I saw them all.

The mobster. A brother.

The killer. A protector.

The psycho. A son.

The monster. A partner.

Growing up, my mother never warned me about the monsters under my bed. She knew they were out there, awaiting their moment.

This monster?

I openly invited him into bed to play with a kind I harbored within me, for one didn't

exist without the other. There wasn't a single moment, not once, had he shown me something not worth loving. I was ready to accept them all.

The future was sealed when his lips crushed mine, and when he pulled away, breathless, to look me in the eye, I smiled brighter than I ever knew possible.

I was relieved Malek was dead, but instinct warned me the fight wasn't over. It might never be. I knew for certain I would never dare restrict her in any capacity. But a more unhinged part of me wanted to grab Taya, lock her up, chain her to the bed and service her until she forgot the outside world ever existed. Dissolved and turned into mist. That would be an ideal scenario.

Needing a moment to process, I abandoned the party for some quiet. My bedroom became my refuge. The glass fireplace burned with scorching heat as I paced for several minutes, shedding half my clothing before finally settling down. I stared into the flame long enough, the embers clouding my vision. When the door opened and Taya walked in, I feared I needed more time to calm down.

She knew what occupied my mind and found me when I needed her most. Her presence calmed the murderous thoughts brewing inside me. I was seconds away from a bloody rampage I would have set into motion if she hadn't come.

Not engaging at first was a decision to avoid dragging her back into my lap, where I could keep her close and let us forget the weight of the day.

Those who say opposites attract clearly haven't experienced a truly fucked-up life. The kind you can only reveal details of to someone equally affected.

Perhaps it was just me, but all I wanted was to be seen. To be understood on a level even family can't reach. Who better to see me than someone of a similar nature?

Someone who had lived and fought their way through the trenches of their own mind,  
breaking the barriers they'd tried to trap them in.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Taya. The answer to questions I hadn't bothered to ask.

My parents were right, God forbid. There was more to living than just surviving. If only to live for her.

I hadn't feared for my life. My sibling's safety had always been my biggest concern. But the dread settling deep in my stomach upon seeing her was the strongest I'd ever felt. The closest I'd come to losing my sanity. Or what was left of it.

I felt the weight of a lifetime in that one image.

Though it had been obvious to me before, the understanding that she was all I ever needed finally slid into place in that instant. A heart-stopping moment, yet the organ occupying my rib cage beat stronger than ever.

In the truest sense, she became the reason for my excuse of an existence.

So much of her reflected in me: a soul too damaged, a mind too deranged.

I towered over this beautiful creature on my bed, channeling every thought into action. Someone above sent her my way, and I thanked whoever chose me as the receiver.

The left side of the bed peaked from behind Taya's exposed shoulder.

Oh, how it mocked me. It laughed at my idiocy for thinking I would be the only one occupying this bed.



I'd never brought a woman home. Never fucked anyone in this bed. A hard pass, always. A topic out of the question. Now, it was all I could think about: making her scream my name until her voice gave out. Time it. Test the limits.

The thought of this woman being the first and perhaps the only made me hard.

Devouring her with my eyes, she blushed a crimson red under my attention. Very unlike her, considering I'd seen her in far more revealing states. Somehow, we both felt the extra layer of intimacy between us.

With deliberate slowness, her foot traced the outline of my bulge.

The straps of her dress slipped down her shoulders, hanging loosely, and I grabbed the hem. The fabric tore loudly as I pulled, discarding it on the floor.

"What do we have here?" I took in the sight of Taya, bare. "You sat through Christmas dinner with my family and all those men, naked underneath?"

"Right under your nose."

A smile tugged at my lips, impressed by her boldness.

Her legs spread wide, offering me a clear view of her arousal, the open invitation to my undoing.

I was aching for another taste.

With a quick motion, I undressed to match her state, feeling her eyes hungrily follow my every movement. She leaned on her elbows, devouring my form before pushing up and meeting me at the edge of the bed. A sharp exhale escaped her as my cock sprung free, the sound echoing in my ears.

Taya's hands trailed down my stomach, as if to memorize every inch of me, but she didn't delay, and soon, that beautiful mouth took me in. Her tongue swirled around the tip, and I shivered in anticipation.

Instinctively, I gripped the back of her head, something I always found myself doing when she was close.

A molten wave of sensation settled in my stomach as her mouth enclosed around me, sucking hard, her cheeks hollowing. She took me in completely, not leaving an inch behind.

When I hit the depth of her mouth, a groan of approval slipped from me, while Taya added a few moans of her own. The erotic sounds filled the room, mixing with the crackling fire. As the flames spread, I, too, felt the burn on my skin.

I couldn't look away, captivated by every breath, every movement.

When her eyes left the action and locked with mine, she nodded, giving me the go-ahead.

I gathered the silky strands of her hair at the nape, taking control.

She submitted, parting her lips wide, letting me use her mouth the way I wanted, the way it silently begged to be used.

My pace quickened, falling into a ruthless rhythm. Moisture gathered in her eyes, but she held my gaze firmly, never closing them. Not even for a second. She gave me exactly what I craved.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Taya was magnificent. Beyond perfect. Perfection was a concept she had long surpassed.

Her breaths spilled out in soft moans as I pushed the limits of human speed. Her voice hummed and vibrated around the shaft, every little sound fueling my pleasure.

Desire hit hard, and I thrust once, twice more, emptying myself down her throat.

She didn't waste a drop, licking me clean, slow and thorough, making damn sure she got it all. When I pulled away, Taya sank to her knees, sitting back on her heels, mouth wide open. Her eyes were locked on mine, filled with the same hunger I felt.

Her tongue, slick with my release, stretched out as she rasped, "Yours."

Then, right there, she swallowed it all.

Call it devotion, submission, whatever the hell you want, but seeing her like that, hearing those words, wrecked me.

I was a man obsessed. Possessed. Devoted and owned. I'd never have enough of her.

I leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

There were no words for what I felt, so I'd show her instead, eager to pledge her the same loyalty.

What I wanted to do in bed would take more time than we had, so I lifted her up and

led us to the balcony.

Despite the cold, the floor was heated, so no snow or ice formed on the tiles. It covered the ground elsewhere, glittering in shards under the moon.

The balcony overlooked the surrounding property, hidden from prying eyes. It was often my haven. Many nights, I slept outside, the darkness inside me blending with the night, the stars my only company.

Now, I was ready to share it. Let her occupy this space the way she occupied my mind, my heart, my whole damn being, right down to the last bone.

Pushing her body against the French door, I held her arms above her head.

In that moment, I wished I could split like an atom and watch her ass pressed against the glass from the inside, while the other version of me pleased her drop-dead body from this spot. But here I was, still whole, ready to devour her.

Her nipples hardened, sharp against the cold air. The mix of heat and chill was a perfect combination, amplifying the pleasure.

When my hand wrapped around her neck, Taya arched her back, releasing a loud moan of approval.

Breath play?

She never stopped surprising me. I searched for her pulse; the frantic rhythm beat against my fingers. It was a rare occurrence for someone who'd trained themselves to stay calm, to always be in control.

A smirk tugged at my lips, as it always did when I thought about the effect I had on

her. Hell, whenever I thought about anything related to her.

I lowered myself to my knees and devoured her pussy like a man starved. The sweet, familiar taste coated my mouth, and I couldn't shake the feeling, the deepest hunger to have her for every meal, every day, for as long as we existed.

When she twitched, her body trembling from the aftermath, I didn't waste a moment and repositioned us on the opposite side.

With the railing pressing against her back, Taya spread her arms and grabbed the metal on both sides, steadying herself in place. I lifted her bottom torso and let my eyes roam over her body.

Without hesitation, she locked her feet behind my back, pulling me forward with greedy urgency.

The evidence of her earlier orgasm still was still evident, her body responsive. I remembered the sweet taste and didn't resist the urge to hook a finger inside, smearing it over my lips like something I couldn't get enough of.

Satisfaction crept through me. Before, I didn't understand the appeal. I had a strict no face-to-face, no mouth-to-any-parts policy. With her? Losing all senses wouldn't stop me from finding a way.

There was no time to play around. I needed her as desperately as she craved me.

In one smooth motion, I entered her. The tightness pulled me in, threatening to break me apart.

When Taya's head leaned back, hanging beyond the balcony's outline, I slid my hand under her lower back, gently lifting her in support.

## Page 100

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

A smile spread across her face, so... unrestricted. Truly carefree.

It turned into a deep O when my cock reached a perfect depth, hitting just the right spot, causing Taya to curl her toes behind my back.

The flexibility this woman, my woman, possessed was a gift I wasn't about to let go to waste.

Wicked thoughts danced in the back of my mind, each one cataloged for later.

I picked up the pace, moving my hips in a steady rhythm. She matched me with a rotation of her own. We moved in perfect harmony.

When I brought my head closer, she shivered beneath me; the angle hitting a new depth. My tongue traced her neck, then grazed her ear, tugging on the lobe with my teeth.

"I wish Malek could see what it's really like to own you," I whispered.

The weight of my words wasn't lost on her. Her expression darkened, her nails sinking deeper into my skin. Crescent moon-shaped marks formed over the ink, and I hoped they left a memory. It would be the most beautiful scar this body carried.

An extension of her, expanding the mark I already carried on the inside.

There wasn't a free spot on my skin, but the inside had been empty until she came along.

The black swirled with the red in my blood, the darkness mixing in, and now a new color poured in: blue.

Together, we burned in the cold air of the night, two bodies, one soul. As we neared the edge, I whispered the words she had longed to hear.

“You were never one of them, but you will always be one of us.”

With the last thrust, her walls crumbled, and I followed her through the ruins, desperate to stay close. I gave her everything I had, down to the last drop, and she held it in.

When green met blue, I absorbed the longing, kissed her temple, and sought the familiar touch at the back of her neck.

“Best Christmas gift ever,” she called out, the sound bouncing off the tall trees, and I laughed like the idiot I was.

Somewhere downstairs, a loud thump echoed through the house. The music paused. Five beats of Maxim’s heart against my ear passed before the melody picked back up.

A slight crease formed between his brows. As much as I wanted to keep him to myself, there were people downstairs who needed him. Needed us.

To save him the trouble, I handed him the discarded clothes. Despite not having siblings of my own, I understood the drive, the need. In the madness of it all, I hadn’t considered how they’d react to me dating their brother.

Dating?

I laughed to myself as I browsed the selection of clothes in his walk-in closet. Since

when had that word even existed in my vocabulary?

In a strange twist of events, this turned out to be the best day of my life.

I slipped on a black dress shirt paired with black underwear and styled it just like he would, unbuttoning the top buttons. The only thing missing was a chain around my neck, but I much preferred his hands wrapped around it anyway.

Lost in flashbacks of the amazing sex earlier, I returned to the bedroom just in time to find Maxim's colossal frame leaning against the doorframe, waiting. He took in my outfit without commenting, though his green eyes gleamed with something darkly possessive.

We faced each other, the same clip playing in our minds, before I jumped up, wrapping my legs around him in a piggyback style.

Voices drifted from the direction of the kitchen. There, gathered around the kitchen island, the rest of the family hung out.

Alisa was the first to spot us. Out of all these gangsters, she was probably the most observant. She shrieked with excitement at the sight, the sound loud enough to alert the rest of the men.

"Yes!" she yelled, surprising me when she ran straight to Enzo, her hand outstretched. He spared her a glance before reaching into his pocket.

Bouncing on her heels, she barely reached the top of his chest, but her attitude made up for the height difference. "Pay up, Italian." She wiggled her fingers.

Her brothers, the poor souls who'd fallen victim to her shenanigans, smirked knowingly. A stack of hundred-dollar bills landed in her hand, her fingers trapping



the cash before she stuffed it down her bra.

With a wide grin, she finally turned to us.

“I always wanted a sister.” A sloppy kiss landed on my cheek. “Even if you end up dumping his ass,” she whispered between hiccups and giggles.

“Hey!” Maxim protested, his voice filled with humor.

Ignoring his sister’s eye roll, Maxim embraced her. When his gaze landed on Enzo next, he didn’t miss the chance to tease.

“I guess you’re stuck with me now,” my man grinned.

“You’re a costly fucker,” my best friend shot back.

By the way things were shaping up, there was no choice but to accept the reality the two found themselves in.

“To Tay and Maxim,” Enzo smiled, raising his glass in a toast. “Let them live dangerously and love even more furiously.”

Everyone cheered. Even though it felt exaggerated, we lived for the small wins. The little moments that gave us a reason to celebrate.

When the crowd settled, a bittersweet laugh escaped the Sicilian. Before he opened his mouth, I knew the next words would come as a warning.

“If you hurt her, she and I will bury you alive.” A daring grin flashed on his face, but

Alisa was there to wipe it away with a poke to his ribs.

I looked at the man and saw the brother I had never had. My legs carried me over to where he stood, and I squeezed his arm in appreciation for all he'd done and was willing to do.

We all fought hard for what we had, for where we were. And we'll never stop fighting.

Later that night, or early morning, I lay in Maxim's gigantic bed beside the man who had erased all my previous experiences and replaced them with his own.

Filled with excitement, I couldn't sleep. Even with my legs peeking out from under the blanket, I kept shifting, savoring the slow spread of warmth in my chest. Maxim's arm lay across it, and I spent a good hour decoding his tattoos, their ink softly illuminated by the fire.

In a ghost touch, I traced the outline of the butterfly, attempting to read the story the art told: the good, the bad, and the downright ugly.

By the time my bladder threatened to explode, the clock was nearing dawn. Careful not to wake him, I slipped out of bed.

In the darkness of the bathroom, I turned my phone back on, using it as a light. Operating on autopilot, I quickly took care of things, washing my hands before checking in on the world while the house slept soundly.

Maxim's soft breaths came from the room, pulling me back, so I hurried.

My fingers managed to bypass the security, but before I could get to the web, a message popped up on one of my work servers.

An unverified source had attached a video.

Who?

Eager to find out, I lowered the volume and played the clip. The screen revealed nothing but pitch-black darkness, making me suspicious of its origins. Just as I thought it was a scam, a single light flickered on, revealing a square room about the size of a small bedroom. Concrete walls surrounded the space, and an industrial lamp hung above a wooden chair.

There, tied up with her hands behind her back, sat a woman. Her head bobbed from side to side, the soft sounds of protest filling the otherwise silent room.

It couldn't be.

Just as I leaned in for a closer look, a man stepped out of the shadows behind her. A brutalized hand, covered in scars or burns, I couldn't tell, appeared in the frame. He grabbed the woman's head, forcing her to face the camera.

Alisa?

My legs threatened to give out, the confirmation too shocking, too raw, awakening every nerve ending in response.

I leaned against the counter, my grip tightening for support, my body bracing for impact.

"Ilya Aistov," the individual called the name maliciously.

## Page 102

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

It echoed off the walls, and I hated this. Hated Ilya. Hated this guy. Hated them all. Above everything, I hated myself the most.

How did I let this happen?

Alisa fought the effects of whatever they pumped into her system, desperately trying to regain consciousness as the man dragged a ridiculously long knife across her pale skin, demonstrating what was to come, but she was too groggy to protect herself.

My throat tightened with resentment, my hand balling into a fist as I stood there, forced to watch.

“I suggest you come out of hiding.” With a finger pointed directly at the viewer, me, he spoke one last time. “You are next.”

The light shut off, swallowing the room in darkness, Alisa’s body hidden within. A brief text filled the screen instead: Location for her. You have three days.

The video ended, and for a split second, I stared at the black screen.

My phone barely hit the ground before I bolted out of the room, heading straight for Alisa’s bedroom down the hall. It didn’t take long before loud footsteps echoed behind me. Maxim was hot on my heels, wearing nothing but his underwear, his messy curls a sign of sleep, yet his gun was drawn and ready.

The door to her bedroom was wide open, the bed unmade and empty.

I flicked on the light switch and searched the room.

A muffled grunt from the closet reached us, alerting whoever was inside.

“Alisa?” I turned toward the sound.

Slowly, Maxim opened the closet door and I prayed she was okay. That it was all just a dream. A result of my colorful imagination combined with a sprinkle of insomnia.

Except it wasn't.

There, in the corner, Enzo leaned against the rack of clothes. His eyes kept rolling back, thick streams of saliva dripping from his open mouth.

Upon seeing the state of his body, Maxim pulled Enzo from the closet and carefully laid him down on his sister's bed. With a quick glance in my direction, he took off running, alerting the rest of the Galkins, including Mila, the doctor, whose help we desperately needed. Not even twenty-four hours later, we were back in this hell.

“Enzo, what happened?” I tried to make sense of the situation while we waited.

With slurred attempts, he repeated her name. “Alisa. Alisa.”

Sleep threatened to pull him under, but he fought it with everything he had, resisting the drug or poison in his system. With surprising strength, Enzo reached over and grabbed my arm. Unable to mutter more than a few words, he resorted to communicating through actions. His chocolate eyes, unfocused and sickly, pleaded with me. Fix this, they screamed.

His sweat-covered forehead wrinkled in worry, and I had nothing but empty reassurances to offer.

“It’s going to be okay.”

With a delicate touch, I reached over and stroked his cheek, putting on a strong front for all of us. But deep down, I didn’t believe a word I said.

It wasn’t going to be okay. Not until someone untangled the mess we were trapped in once more.

The house awoke. Loud footsteps echoed from all directions as familiar faces filled Alisa’s room, turning to me for answers. My eyes darted to Enzo’s body. Mila understood the urgency and took over with the patient.

I took a deep breath to steady my voice. “Is he going to be okay?” I begged for answers.

Andrei, always the wise one, shooed everyone out, allowing his wife to get to work. He even stayed behind to assist her. I wasn’t ready to leave Enzo alone, but we knew there wasn’t much we could do. We gathered in the sitting room, the bloodied couch a silent reminder of the darker side of yesterday.

Tension poisoned the air. No one spoke. When Andrei rejoined us, I knew what I had to do next, but I dreaded every second of it.

I could count all the turning points in life off the top of my head, and this one was about to be added to the list.

Relief flooded my mind as I remembered the recovery system I had in place. It was the miracle we desperately needed. A bot actively monitored every interaction, uploading a copy to a separate server. As expected, the message self-destructed. Under normal circumstances, that meant all traces vanished, as if they’d never existed. There goes your hope of finding the sender.

I played the video as soon as my phone connected to the TV.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:43 am*

Dead silence consumed the room. It crawled up my spine, reminding me of when loud music once resonated through the same house. How quickly things had changed.

Maxim leaned against the wall to my right, his eyes distant. I couldn't imagine what was going on inside his head. Though I longed to be near him, I knew the severity of the situation required space and time to process.

Nervously biting my nails, I stayed put, staring at the ceiling. The voice from the video forced me to relive that dreadful moment. I shook my head, wanting to tune the sound out, but the rational part of me insisted on listening.

Watch the faceless man and memorize every detail. Notice any clues that might help us figure out who he was.

I struggled to focus, my thoughts splintering between Enzo's condition, Alisa's whereabouts, the backlash this would cause, and the pain and worry it would bring.

Before I could organize my thoughts into words, a loud noise interrupted the silence. A large crystal vase flew across the room, shattering into tiny pieces on the floor. Glass bounced off the marble tiles, and Luka stood over the remnants of his creation, consumed by fury. The calm brother, no longer.

I blinked back the tears threatening to fall. What good would they do us or Alisa?

They thought they could mess with me. Mess with us.

If you hit me, I'll return it a thousand times harder.

And this hit? It struck too close to home.

The worst-case scenario occurred. Ilya didn't care about Alisa. He didn't care enough to stick around. Yet somehow, the video found me. Someone wanted me to know.

A part of me died inside, knowing that everything I'd tried to prevent had happened. Despite my best efforts, bad things found us. It wasn't about what we did, but what it made us. It showed how uncertain this damn world was. How fleeting safety felt.

I wouldn't dwell on the failure. I would use my strength to my advantage.

We were racing against the clock. We had to find her before it was too late, before we lost her for good.

This was what I trained for. I thrived under pressure, grew stronger with each hit.

Whoever did this didn't care about the List of Angels, meaning they weren't part of it. There were only two options: The Irish or someone entirely new. As I'd predicted, new players had entered the game. Now, the stakes were higher than ever for our group. For our family.

It was time to call in the friends I'd made over the summer. Assemble and fight. Together, we'd bring her back and restore order to this world. Once and for all.

For their sister. For our sister.

Cold hands moved up and down my bare torso, attaching something to my chest. It felt like a ghost was touching me, passing through or out of me. I didn't know how this stuff worked.

Zia, my dear aunt, had warned me this would happen when I was a child. No wonder

she protected the family farm from the dead.

What if I was now among them?

“Am I dead?” I voiced my concern, unsure if anyone would hear.

A weak attempt to swallow made me realize my tongue felt like sandpaper. Like I was back home, in the olive fields, the sun sucking the life right out of me.

“You were close, but no,” a familiar voice replied.

That’s exactly the kind of thing they’d say when you die, I thought, just to calm you down and make you accept it.

No. This wasn’t happening.

I tried to move, assessing my state, but the attempt was unsuccessful. The bright light above blinded me, yet I struggled to close my eyes to protect them. It was then that I knew something had gone horribly wrong.

What sort of hell was this?

Determined to regain control of my body, I lifted my limbs, hoping to crush the lightbulb in my fist. But despite the strength I summoned, I came up empty.

Why did it feel like ants were crawling up my arm? Their movements tickled my skin, followed by a sharp pain that resonated through my body.

Was I decomposing?

“Turn it off,” I grumbled to the one who had spoken earlier.

My muscle reflexes told me to turn my head left, but I couldn’t, despite my brain sending the commands.

“You’re up for all of five minutes and already grumpy.”

A voice I knew well joined the conversation from the opposite direction. The owner of it ranked very low on my list of voices I wanted to hear when I died. Or didn’t die. Who knew what was real and what wasn’t anymore?

The woman from earlier answered my prayers when she finally switched off the light. An angel, not a ghost. I misjudged her.

The room slowly came into focus. I wasn’t in a hospital, but in a room resembling one. Tucked in bed, I lay there, surrounded by two Galkins: Maxim and his sister-in-law Mila.

While I tried to make sense of the situation, Don walked in with Taya beside him.

An unexpected visit from him was always a cause for alarm. Someone must have fucked up. Royally.

I might be that stupid someone.

Upon seeing me conscious, Taya approached with caution. Maxim matched each of her steps with one of his own, reaching for the spot his hand so often occupied, eyes fixed on the very bed I lay in.

Was he guarding her? From me?

I laughed at the absurdity of it all. I couldn't even control my own body. Not a single finger would move.

With a pointed look, she called him off, and the Russian's steps halted midway as if an invisible barrier stood before him. Maxim never stopped staring, his posture daring me to move an inch toward what was now his.

What the hell was happening?

Taya neared the bed, about to explain, I was sure. Except the words came too fucking late. The image of her sitting on the bed beside me, her man's protectiveness mirroring my own, created a *déjà vu*.

The realization hit me like a tidal wave. It took me under while the memories rushed back.

Men. Visions. Closet. HER.

Gasping for air, I choked on the emotions squeezing my throat.

"Alisa," I whispered her name, a question and a plea in one.

Frantically searching the room for answers, I clung to hope. This tiny, little probability that would suggest none of this was happening.

I settled on the one I knew was always straightforward in her answers. But when

Taya shook her head, sorrow controlling her features, I got my answer.

I gritted my teeth and let the anger pour out. The roar coming from me was a battle cry.

“WHERE IS SHE?”

THE END (FOR NOW)