







# Vengeful Embers

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

**Description:** Marked by the Bratva King.

I didn't run to save myself.

I ran to save the people I loved.

I ran to keep the horrible truth buried.

But the Dragunov brothers found me first.

Now I'm shackled in chains of silk and steel,

Thrown at the feet of Ruslan Dragunov.

He's ice and fury.

Law and destruction.

The devil in a perfectly tailored suit and the hottest guy on the planet!

To him, I'm a murderer.

A liar.

A woman whose sins must be atoned for.

And he's the man who will make me suffer.

He doesn't just want my confession.

He wants me.

Under his rule.

Under his control.

Under him!

I fear for my life, and everyone wrapped up in this web of deceit

Because when he finds out the truth...

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

1

TARA

Seventeen Months Ago

Early afternoon in Vegas means heat that makes the pavement shimmer and tourists in too little clothing snapping selfies under the Ember Club's gilded sign. Inside, the air conditioning hums like a sedative, soothing against the velvet heat pressing down outside. The club's mostly empty, the hush of late afternoon before the city wakes for sin.

I sit at my desk in the back office, notes from my thesis sprawled across the surface—highlighted textbooks, color-coded index cards, and a half-drunk cup of cold espresso perched precariously near the edge. Quantum entanglement equations blur before my eyes as I rub my temple, my focus scattered like broken glass. I don't have a lot of time left until my dissertation defense, and less than zero time to waste.

My phone buzzes and vibrates in the middle of some papers on the desk. Grabbing it, the caller ID flashes with my sister's name, and I tap to answer it.

"Hey, Rina."

"Don't forget the china," she blurts the second I pick up. "Mom's gonna lose her shit if it's not there when she gets home."

Fuck, is that tonight? I press the heel of my hand into my forehead, then glance at the

time—3:47 PM.

Shit.

“No, I didn’t forget. I was just about to head out. I’m totally on top of it.”

“Bullshit,” Sabrina calls me out on my lie. “I bet you’re in your office at the gangster den working on your dissertation defense and didn’t realize the time.”

“I was just about to pack up and head to the storage facility.”

“When you drop the china off, grab us a piece of cake and some of the food,” Sabrina orders. “I’m going to be super late tonight as I have to fill in for two extra dancers who have the flu.”

“Agh.” I suppress a shudder. “Don’t bring that shit home okay? I don’t have time to get the summer flu.”

“When did you ever get the flu?” Sabrina scoffs. “You’re the healthiest person I know. It’s like the flu bug just bounces off you.”

“Did Mom give you any indication of where the plates are in the storage space?” I start getting ready to leave, grabbing my purse and keys from the desk drawer.

“She said the boxes are clearly marked,” Sabrina tells me. “I’ve gotta go. Don’t forget the food and cake. Tell them I said happy three-year relationship anniversary.”

“I’m hoping they won’t be and it’s just a drop-off and run.”

“Then get there before they get home,” Sabrina suggests. “Bye, love ya.”

The line goes dead rather abruptly.

I exhale, push back my chair, and shove my notes into a battered leather satchel. I reach for my phone again when a shadow cuts across the door.

Gavriil steps inside, tall and broad-shouldered, his ever-present scent of dark spice trailing him. His suit jacket is slung over one arm, shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbow, tie loose like he's been working since dawn. He probably has.

"Got a second?" he asks, his accent still thick despite two decades in the States.

I glance at the door. "Only if it's fast. My mother's gonna skin me alive if I don't make it to storage before it closes."

"Irina and I want to talk to you," he says. "Nothing bad."

I narrow my eyes. "You're not firing me?"

"Never." He chuckles. "Didn't you hear me say it's nothing bad?"

"Okay. After I make this emergency china run, I'll swing by your office."

"Good. It's important."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

There's a weight in his tone that settles somewhere in my chest. He gives me a tight nod, turns, and leaves.

I hurry, heart thudding like I've just been handed a test I forgot to study for. There is hardly anyone in the burlesque club at this time of day. Just a few afternoon drinkers nursing their drinks at a few of the tables that line the club floor, which will be packed with millionaires and mercenaries in a few hours. I wave to Sasha, one of our dancers, rehearsing on stage. She's filling in as the headline dancer tonight in my mother's absence. I push out into the sunlight.

Vegas hits me like a furnace as I step outside, leaving quantum theories to collapse on my desk while I try to map out my workload over the next few days to squash it all into a limited time frame. The hot Vegas sun is ruthless and blinding as I bolt across the street heading for the parking garage.

Then everything crashes back into terrifying focus as an SUV screeches to a halt, close enough to shatter my atoms. My bag slams against my hip. I freeze like a deer in a sniper's scope.

My head lifts to the windshield, shock zinging through my nervous system, and I watch the driver's window slide down. A man leans out the window. He has a sculpted jaw, sleek black hair, and electric blue eyes—he's fucking gorgeous. The words Greek God resound in my brain as I stare at him, and the way his eyes rake over me is like a caress, and even before he speaks, I can feel the raw masculinity and danger resonate like a warning beacon from his eyes.

"You really have to be more mindful," he says, voice smooth, deep, and threaded

with a faint Russian lilt. “It would be a shame for someone as beautiful as you to end up as a hood ornament.”

I stare, flushed, rattled, and my knees are starting to feel like jelly.

The stranger waits for a reaction, as my confused mind spins, and I realize I’m just standing there gawking.

“Sorry,” I breathe, dragging air back into my lungs and forcing my brain to reconnect with my limbs. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

He studies me like he’s memorizing the slope of my jaw and the stutter in my breath. Then he smiles, it’s slow and sexy, making him even more gorgeous. My stomach does a barrel roll.

“Maybe use the crossing button,” he advises.

I nod, already backing away. “Will do.” What the hell, Tara! I sound like a stupid person. A horn honks, and jolts me from my zombie state, rebooting my brain and restoring control back to my limbs, allowing me to turn and flee.

Even though I can’t see it, I can feel him watching me as I dash into the cool parking garage. My body’s zinging and lit up like I stuck a fork in a socket. As I wobble on shaky legs towards my car, the man’s voice and insanely gorgeous face are playing over and over in my head.

When I finally get to storage, I almost forget what I had come for as my thoughts are filled with my near-death experience and wondering if I’d only imagined what he’d looked like in my state of shock. But I can hear his voice and still see his face as his smile transforms his features from gorgeous to sinfully gorgeous, and my stomach knots as my nether parts heat thinking about him.



“Get a grip!” I admonish myself as I unlock and slide the storage unit open, sighing as I see the neatly packed garage.

Each box is numbered, labeled, and stacked in an order that only makes sense to my mother. Stepping into the cool space, my eyes scan the room until I find the box I’m looking for.

“China, glassware, and tea cups.”

The box is at the top of a pile next to the table. My mother put it in the locker for sorting. The boxes aren’t stacked too high, so my mother has easy access to them. As I walk toward the box, I notice there is a box on the sorting table, and it’s new—box number seventy-seven.

Last time I was here, there were only seventy-six boxes, and I’m here quite often now that my mother has moved the contents of the loft here. Contents that included a lot of my old papers and things I need for school.

I’m tempted to take a closer look, but a glance at my wristwatch tells me I don’t have the time. I find the china plates, and while I’m closing the box the china was in, I notice the name on top of the new box on the sorting table—Sol’s treasures.

Placing the china plates carefully on the table, I move toward the box that holds my late father’s treasures. The familiar pain slices through me, and my heart grows heavy at the thought of him. It’s been nearly twelve years since he was killed, but I still miss him so much.

It’s almost as if I’m compelled to open it and look inside. There’s an odd assortment of old items—slide rules, military medals, a watch that hasn’t ticked in thirty years. Tears sting the back of my eyes as I can picture my father telling me stories about a lot of the items in the box. Then my fingers run across a small wooden box,

intricately carved and worn with age. I've never seen it before. I lift it from the crate and curiously examine it. It's a puzzle box, a faint memory from physics club sparking in the back of my brain, and as I turn it over, the lid shifts and pops open.

It's empty.

A pang of disappointment cuts through me. I tilt the box to the side and listen to the hollow clunk. I tap my nails in a soft rhythm across the surface. It's not called a puzzle box for nothing; there is a trick to it. The top part came open far too easily. It must be a false top. I run my fingers along the edges of the box until they stop on a tiny groove. Flick the hidden latch. Another compartment springs open.

A folded sheet of paper and a faded photo lie inside. A rush of blood makes a whooshing sound in my ears as I stare at the unfamiliar face of the woman in the photo.

I flip it over and find a date, the last digit smudged or faded: 196...

My fingers fumble in my purse for my mini flashlight. I switch it on and shine it across the date. The beam bounces until I switch it to black light mode. The missing number reveals nothing, but below it, is another message: My darling. This is not much, but may it help you remember who you are and where you come from. That I love you more than life itself. Stay safe. I hope we will meet again in a world filled with love.

A shockwave of emotion ricochets through me, squeezing my lungs. I can almost feel the tenderness with which the words were written, the desperation and ache. I can't process it. This is crazy. I shove the photo and note back into the box, a step away from hyperventilating as my brain spirals with the implications.

I clench my hands in my hair and inhale deeply. My thoughts are like a blizzard, wild

and consuming. Could the woman be my mother?

No. My grandmother, maybe. That makes more sense as my father and mother were born in the sixties.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

But why would it be hidden?

I sidle up to the wooden box and take the folded paper. I unroll the sheet of paper and freeze. A cold weight settles in my chest.

It's a birth certificate, and I don't think it's a full one as the parents aren't listed on it.

It is also Russian.

I recognize the Cyrillic immediately—thanks to my mom insisting we speak it fluently. “Because of who your father and I work for,” she always said when my sister and I complained.

I'd rolled my eyes as a teenager, but at this moment, I'm grateful for it. Actually being able to speak Russian now that I work at the Ember Club has come in handy most days.

My eyes scan the document.

Name of child: Lidiya Zorin

Date of birth: 1 June 1998

My birthdate.

My heartbeat stumbles.

Place of birth: Sokolov Medical Center, Moscow.

My knees nearly buckle, and I grip the side of the table to steady myself.

I've never been to Russia. I was born in Nevada. That's what my records say. That's what my parents always told me.

So why is there a birth certificate—official, stamped and signed—saying someone with my birthday was born in Moscow?

Someone named Lidiya Zorin, and why would it be in my father's box of treasures?

The paper shakes in my grip. Either my father kept this for a reason... or my whole life is built on a lie.

I'm about to crack under the weight of questions and emotions I barely understand. The woman in the picture. The name on the birth certificate. The words on the back of the photo. The world pitches and steadies as I clutch the piece of paper in my hand.

"I wonder if I can get a full copy of this birth certificate?" I mumble to the empty unit.

The jarring trill of my phone jerks me back to reality. It's my mother.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hello, sweetheart, do you have the plates?" she asks, her voice calm while I feel like a soda that's been shaken one too many times, and I'm about to blow, erupting like a soda volcano.

"Yes. I've got them. I'm leaving now." I can't believe how calm I managed to sound.

“I should be home in about fifteen minutes.” I have an urge to demand answers, but I take a deep breath instead. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Tara. Stay calm. Think this through.

“See you in fifteen, sweetheart,” she says. “Drive safe.”

The line goes dead, and I stare at the objects before shoving them back in the box, grabbing the plates, and heading to my mother's, trying to decide the best way to get answers. My mother has always been a master of vague answers.

2

RUSLAN

Seventeen Months Ago

Vegas stinks of desperation hidden behind too much cologne and illusion. From the floor-to-ceiling windows of my Diamond Hotel suite, I stare down at the Strip. It pulses and glitters like a machine running too hot, too fast. My reflection stares back, expression cold, untouched by the city’s delusions.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

I didn't need to come. Petrov could've been handled by any one of my attorneys from my law firm back in Moscow. It wasn't because I didn't trust any of them with Petrov, but because Petrov isn't the only reason I'm here.

My younger sister Irina is. I take a sip of the premium vodka clutched in my hand. A few days ago, I was walking past Nadia's private living room in my penthouse in Moscow, and heard her talking to Irina. I wasn't intending to eavesdrop, but the word adoption hit me like a gunshot.

Adopting? That was not the plan or the real reason I agreed to let Irina marry Gavriil Mirochin under the guise of joining the Dragunov and Mirochin families to cement an alliance between us. An alliance that only benefited the Mirochins, as they used our village port and boats for their own gain. I feel the familiar burn of anger start to flare in my gut, and I down the rest of the vodka.

Irina married Gavriil Mirochin to produce a Mirochin-Dragunov heir and win the trust of the Mirochins and, by extension, the Molchanovs. In return, Irina gets to study her PhD in America, I would give her freedom, and ten years to achieve the goal set for her. That would give her enough time to make the Mirochins trust her, and give me leverage over their empire while I rebuilt ours and ensured we were strong enough for what was to come.

I held up my end.

So far Irina hasn't. Her mission started on her nineteenth birthday, the day she married Gavriil. She will be twenty-nine in little over nine months and still there is no child but talk of adoption.

I roll my cuff down, fasten the button. I warned Irina four months ago—twenty-nine is coming.

She sounded distant, vague. Now I know why. I have as suspicion my sister's allegiances may have shifted and Irina's under the impression that if there is no blood heir I have no hold over the Mirochins or her. She forgets she has a twin sister and I have more than one plan in play.

So here I am in Vegas. Not as Ruslan Dragunov, but as Damien Romanov. A ghost with perfect credentials and no history. I brought Konstantin with me and he has gone to get my sister and bring her to me—alone.

“She's here,” Konstantin tells me now, entering the bedroom. “She's waiting in the living room.”

“Did she come alone?”

He nods. “Da. It is just her.”

“Thank you.” I start to walk toward the door and he steps aside. “I'll call you when she's ready to go.”

Konstantin nods and walks out.

I walk into the living room and I'm greeted by a stormy Irina. Her jaw is tight. Her posture is rigid as her outrage is hurled at me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she demands.

“Hello to you too, little sister.” I tilt my head. “I'm in Vegas for a client.”



“Bullshit,” Irina hisses. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Irina—”

“Don’t Irina me in your placating voice and think it will calm me down or make me believe what the real intent of you being in Vegas is.” Her arms fold across her chest. “You’re spying on Gavriil. Or maybe Oleksi. Or... you’re getting antsy because I haven’t yet produced an heir.”

“If I wanted to spy on you or the Mirochins, I could do it from Moscow.” I glance out the window, my stomach clenching at the sight of the Vegas strip. I have no love for this city or this country.

“Sure!” Her voice is filled with disbelief. Her phone bleeps and she looks at it shaking her head. “If you’re not here to spy on my husband and his family, why are you checked into their hotel under the name Damien Romanov?”

“Because of the sensitivity of my client’s case it’s best that opposing counsel doesn’t get wind that his attorney is in town.” It’s not a complete lie.

“Then why all the cloak and dagger sending Konstantin to discreetly get me here alone?” Irina asks suspiciously. “Or has that got to do with you having to maintain cover too?”

I walk toward the bar and pour us both a drink. “No, I wanted to talk to you alone.” I hand her the glass but she doesn’t take it so I put it on the coffee table. “Because the last time we spoke, you sounded... distraught.”

“Wow!” Irina looks at me in disbelief. “You were so concerned about me that it took you four months to come check on me?”

“Part of our deal was that I give you your space and freedom with no interference,” I remind her. “I was hoping that you’d call me and tell me what was going on.” My features soften and I sit on the sofa watching her as I give her a small smile. “There was a time when you came to me with all your problems.”

“There was a time when I had a big brother with a big heart and who really cared about those he loved.” Irina’s eyes narrow and her voice is thick with accusation. “I felt safe with him and knew that no matter what, he’d always have my back.”

“I’m right here.” I feel a twinge as her words pull at my heartstrings but ignore it. I have no time for sentiment or petulant younger siblings. “And have always been.”

“Another lie.” Irina’s voice is soft and her eyes flash with hurt and betrayal. “You haven’t been there for any of us since...” My eyes narrow warningly as I know where she’s going with this. “For thirteen years.” She changes direction.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

I lift the glass to my lips and take a sip of vodka, letting it swirl around my tongue before sliding down my throat as I stare at her, deciding which way to steer this conversation to get to the point.

“My concern grew when I overheard you and Nadia talking on the phone a couple of days ago.” I see her brows rise.

“You mean when you were spying on Nadia as you have her trapped in your penthouse like she’s ten and you’ve grounded her!” Irina’s voice rises a bit. “You know what the English say about eavesdropping. No good ever comes of it. Especially if it’s a telephone conversation and you can’t hear the other side of the story.”

“Nadia is not a prisoner,” I tell her. “She is laying low after accusing an official’s son of abuse.”

“Of course you wouldn’t take Nadia’s side,” Irina accuses.

“Nadia was playing a very dangerous game,” I point out.

“And then you were the opposing counsel against her in the case,” Nadia says. “Now she has lost her medical license.”

“She is lucky it was just her license.”

“So what did you overhear?” she asks me.

“That you and Gavriil are looking to adopt a child!”

My sister doesn't even flinch. “That's right.”

“Is everything okay with you, Irina?” I swirl the vodka in my glass watching her intently. “Are you having problems conceiving or is this an attempt at rebellion?”

Her eyes flick with fire, but her voice becomes quiet. “You want to know why we haven't had a child?”

“Yes.”

She hesitates.

Then she mumbles, “I've had four miscarriages.”

I stare.

She takes a breath, choking on it. “The last one nearly killed me. The doctor said I need to rest. Wait for a year to fifteen months.”

My chest tightens. “Why the fuck didn't you tell me?”

“Because I didn't want to fail you. Or our people.” Her voice cracks. “But I'm not ready to give up. I just need more time and all the stress and pressure of trying to have a baby before I'm twenty-nine...” Her eyes tear up and she looks at her hands. “It's part of the problem.”

My heart squeezes for her. “Do you want out, Irina?”

“I...” Her eyes meet mine. “I want more time.”

I nod slowly. “Okay. You have another year. But that’s all I can give you before we need to go to plan B.”

“What exactly is Plan B?” She looks at me curiously.

“Don’t worry about that,” I tell her. “You just worry about completing your mission.”

“I do need you to leave me alone and give me space,” Irina tells me. “No more pressure as it’s not good for me.”

“Okay,” I agree. “But I want you to check in with me. It's not just about your mission, Irina. Your calls once a month mean more to me than that.”

“Sure.” She nods. “Enjoy your stay in Vegas, Damien. I hope you’re able to help your client.”

She turns and walks out without a backward glance.

As the door shuts, Konstantin steps out of the shadows.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

“Get her back to the club, and I want you to follow Gavriil,” I order. “Find out if the rumors about him fucking someone at the Ember Club is true.”

Konstantin raises an eyebrow. “Of course.”

He nods and disappears.

I grab my keys and head to my meeting with Petrov. On the way, I drive past the Ember Club. It’s sleek, tasteful, with a sleek black awning and polished brass accents. The windows are tinted, offering nothing to the street but reflection.

Then everything slows.

A woman bolts across the street.

My brakes screech. Tires burn. My chest jerks forward, and the SUV lurches to a stop.

She stands frozen, caught in my headlights like a wild creature. Her eyes meet mine—they are hazel, blazing. Her body is lean, with long legs cased in denim, with a pink cotton shirt caressing her torso and hair a dark brown halo. Fuck, she’s beautiful, and even standing staring at me in a dazed shock she has a graceful poise.

I roll down the window, heart slamming against my ribs.

“You really have to be more mindful,” I say. “It would be a real shame for someone as beautiful as you to end up as a hood ornament.”

She flushes. “Sorry.”

“Maybe use the crossing button,” I advise her.

“Will do.” A honk of a horn makes her head snap around before she turns, then rushes away, leaving her image branded into my brain.

I sit there, gripping the wheel. Her face, her form—every bit of her electric in my veins.

All I can think is, Who is she?

The question haunts me all the way to Petrov’s house.

The meeting’s mechanical. My brain’s stuck somewhere else. The woman I nearly ran down with the hazel eyes—eyes I can’t forget. It’s been a long time since a woman has affected me like this. I don’t let myself think about the past, the ghosts that shape our future. I’m on my way back to the hotel when my phone buzzes.

It’s a message from Konstantin. I’ve found her. Name’s Tara Craft. Sending a photo.

The photo from Konstantin comes through, and I freeze—it’s her. The woman I nearly ran over, and who is embedded in my mind.

She’s the club manager, is a physicist working to get her PhD.

I stare at her photo.

Change of plans. Follow Tara Craft.

Looks like we might just meet again after all, Tara Craft. But this time I won’t be

behind a windshield.

3

TARA

My childhood home smells like roasted garlic, lemon zest, and tension.

The hallway's filled with the clatter of dishes and the thud of heels against hardwood floors. My mother, Carla's voice carries from the kitchen, sharp and focused, giving Mark a list of last-minute errands like it's a mission briefing.

I step into the doorway and pause, taking in the scene. My mom, her blonde hair twisted up in an elegant clip, crisp white shirt tucked into slim black slacks, is in full control mode. The kitchen gleams behind her, every surface polished, a bowl of lemons on the counter that I know she won't use but insists makes the place look "fresh."

"Hi, baby." She sees me and doesn't even pause. "Did you bring the china?"

"Right here," I lift the bag with both hands, carefully wrapped plates cradled inside.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

“Good. Could you please set them out on the dinner table, sweetheart? The white tablecloth is already down.”

She turns back to the oven and doesn't see me hesitate. I glance at the hall closet, the old wood floor beneath my sneakers. So many memories live in these walls. This house is muscle memory. This kitchen, every cabinet drawer, every creak in the stairs—I know them as well as the pages of my thesis. But today it feels different.

I move toward the dining room, but my tongue won't stay quiet. “Mom,” I say, turning back, my voice more tentative than I'd like. “Can I ask you something?”

Carla doesn't glance up from the roasting tray. “Of course, sweetheart. Make it quick, though—I still need to get dressed.”

“Do you know anything about Dad's parents? Or... My biological mother, Lena's family?”

That makes her stop. Not freeze. Not flinch. But her hand pauses mid-reach. Just for a second.

She recovers fast and turns to grab a tea towel to dry her hands. “Where's this coming from?”

I start placing the china on the table as she had asked me to. “It's for extra credit,” I lie. “I was asked to help with a Genetics project. They're making us trace biological traits through parents and grandparents. I was going to ask you about it next week, but I'm trying to get through so much right now, I didn't want to forget.”

She stills again. A fraction longer this time.

Then her smile returns, and it's too bright. "You've heard this before. Your father, Sol, didn't know his parents. They died when he was young, before he joined the military."

"And my biological mother, Lena?"

"She died in childbirth, baby. You know that. Sol was in the hospital at your birth when it happened."

"Did she have family?"

"No." Her answer is immediate. Firm with a hint of finality, like she's slammed a door on the subject, and it wasn't to be pursued. "No one but your dad. And then me, when she came to us to tell Sol about the pregnancy."

"What about your family?" I try, knowing the answer word by word as it never changed.

She turns. Her eyes are soft now, not angry, and she gives me a sad smile. "There is no one but me, Tara. My only family is you and Sabrina—my girls are my whole world."

I nod slowly, biting the inside of my cheek.

It's the same story. Every time. I've asked in different ways, at different ages, and it's never changed. I used to accept it, but after what I found in the storage unit today, I see it for what it is—a well-rehearsed story!

Now I see the flash of worry in her eyes, and I know there's something she's not

telling me. I can feel it now, vibrating under my skin.

But I smile, and take the container, food, and cake she hands me.

“This is for you and Sabrina,” she tells me with love shining in her eyes. At least I know that is real. I just wonder what the price of that love was. “I wish you could both be here with us tonight.”

“We’re both working, Mom.” I take the dishes and kiss her cheeks. “Speaking of work, I have to get back to the club as my shift starts soon. Happy three-year relationship anniversary to you and Mark.”

I don’t bother going home. I have an outfit in my office and will use the shower in Gavriil’s. I walk in the door, and it’s already starting to fill up. The place always smells faintly of expensive perfume, scotch, and velvet.

“Tara, Gavriil asked me to remind you to see him when you got back,” Wayne, the barman, calls to me.

“Thanks, Wayne, I’m heading there now.” Shit, I nearly forgot Gavriil and Irina wanted to see me about something.

Back in Gavriil’s office, I sit across from him and Irina, who’s perched on the edge of his desk like she’s waiting for bad news.

They exchange glances, and something cold coils in my stomach.

“Tara,” Irina says gently. “We wanted to ask you something.”

“I swear to God,” I say, lifting a hand, “if you’re firing me, I’m gonna sue for emotional damage.”

That breaks the tension. Gavriil chuckles. “Not even close. But this is... big.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

Irina nods. “You know about the miscarriages. All four.”

I exhale, nod. “Yeah.”

“We’re thinking about surrogacy,” she says. “We’ve already started the process.”

“Oh?” My eyes widen. “I think that’s a great option for you.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Gavriil says, leaning his elbows on his desk. “Irina and I would like to ask you if you would consider being our surrogate.”

“You were the obvious choice,” Irina says quickly. “We both love you dearly and trust you.”

My breath catches. “Me?”

Irina reaches out, takes my hand. “You’re smart. Healthy. You’re already like family to us.”

“We’re not asking for an answer now,” Gavriil says quickly. “Take the night off. Think about it. We know it’s a big ask.”

I open my mouth, then close it. The yes is right there. I don’t even know why. Maybe because I love them. Maybe because I feel like I owe them. Maybe because saying yes makes something in me feel... needed.

“Yes!” I say, impulsively. I saw how this last miscarriage had almost broken Irina. “I

want to do this for you both.”

“Tara, while my heart has just done a double-take at your answer,” Irina’s eyes glisten, and she reaches for my hand, “Gavriil thought you might say yes right away. And it fills my heart with joy. But we want you to be sure.”

“Think it over tonight and give us your answer tomorrow,” Gavriil tells me.

“Go out tonight. Have some fun,” Irina encourages me with a naughty glint in her eyes. “Call that sexy doctor of yours.”

“Oh, no,” Gavriil groans. “Not Steve. Can’t you go out with Sasha or one of the girls?”

“Gavriil,” Irina says with mock outrage. “Don’t be jealous.”

He throws up his hands. “I just don’t trust a guy who waxes his chest and drives a Porsche on a resident’s salary.”

“I want to do this for you,” I tell them, standing. “But I’m not going to say no to a night off as it’s been a rough day.”

“Then go home, soak in the tub, order in, and binge-watch a television series,” Gavriil suggests. “Then tomorrow you’ll be fresh and you’ll be able to make a grounded decision.”

“Or, go have a hot, steamy night out with Dr. Steve,” Irina encourages.

I laugh, hugging each of them. “I might just go crash my mother’s anniversary dinner.”

“No, don’t do that!” Gavriil discourages. “It’s a romantic night fortwo.”

I sigh. “You’re right!” I grin at Gavriil. “A night out with Dr. Steve, it is then.”

As I head toward the staff hallway, I nearly crash into a man. He is tall, built like a solid wall of muscle, ruggedly handsome with sharp, piercing blue eyes, dressed in a sharp charcoal suit, and looks intense.

“Can I help you?” I ask, eyeing the hallway sign that reads: Staff-only.

His voice is smooth. Polished. With a Russian accent. “I was looking for the bathroom. My apologies.”

I nod, relaxing. “It’s out front, not back here. I know the sign can be confusing.” I shake my head, muttering. “I’ve told Gavriil to change it like a hundred times.”

“Thank you,” he says, giving me a quick nod before walking away.

I pull out my phone, fingers already flying over the keypad as I send a message to my friend with benefits, Steve.

Are you free tonight?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

My phone rings within a few seconds.

“Hey, you,” Steve’s deep voice, which usually sends goosebumps over my skin, barely jolts my heart today. “I’m free and I was going to message you to find out what time you finished work tonight.”

“Well then, I think we should go to the Blue Diamond Lounge, and you’d better not get called into the hospital this time,” I warn him. “I’m sure the emergency center can do without you for one night.”

“I’m all yours tonight, T,” Steve promises. “What time?”

“Seven at our usual spot at the bar?” I suggest lowering my voice. “I’ll use my staff discount to get us a fancy room for later at the hotel.”

“I think, tonight, it’s my turn to book the hotel room,” Steve tells me. “I can’t wait to see you later.”

“Me too,” I say and hang up.

I need this tonight. To get lost in the companionship, our sexy role play that will end in hot sex, that will quiet my mind and help me relax. As I make my way to my car, this time using the walk button before crossing the street, I flip through what I’m going to wear, and I smile. I bought a new little black dress and some insanely expensive two-inch heels to go with it.

But as I get home to the apartment I share with Sabrina and step into the shower, it’s



not Steve's lips and hands I picture exploring my body!

RUSLAN

My phone buzzes against the hotel room table.

Konstantin.

I slide my finger across the screen and lift the phone to my ear. "Do you have news?"

"I couldn't hear anything they were saying in Gavriil's office," Konstantin says. "His office must be soundproofed. No surprise. But I found out something else."

I lean back in the leather chair, fingers tapping the glass of vodka balanced on my knee. "Go on."

"Tara Craft is going out tonight. She just called someone. Steve. I think he's a doctor. They're meeting at the Blue Diamond lounge at seven tonight."

Steve? Something twists in my gut. I sit forward.

"Do you want me to follow her?" Konstantin asks.

"No." I smile, slow and dark, as the first threads of a plan begin weaving in my mind. "I'll handle Ms. Craft."

A pause. "You want me to dig into this, Steve?"

"Yes. Quietly and make sure he doesn't make it to his date."

"Understood."

I end the call and set the phone down, standing slowly as excitement begins to slither down my spine.

It seems fate must be smiling on me where Tara Craft is concerned.

There's something about her I haven't shaken since the moment she locked eyes with me on that sunlit Vegas street.

My cock twitches at the memory of her. Those long legs encased in jeans that hugged the curve of her ass. The soft cotton of her shirt stretched across her chest, and the subtle sway of her hips.

I roll my shoulders, loosening the last bit of tension from the earlier meeting. I came to Vegas with one mission, but it seems I'll be ending my last night with something far more satisfying.

A chance to get inside Tara's head and, if I play my cards right, my bed.

4

TARA

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

The Blue Diamond Lounge glitters in dim golds and rich navy velvet, like a velvet jewelry box cracked open to the city's most polished predators. The scent of sandalwood, money, and too-sweet cocktails wraps around me as I slide onto one of the bar stools and cross my legs, feeling the sleek brush of my new black dress tug along my thighs. It cost more than I want to admit—and the heels even more—but after the week I've had? Fuck it. I needed to feel like someone else tonight.

Like someone bolder. Braver. Sexier.

I swirl the wine in my glass, watching the garnet liquid catch the low light as my nerves stretch thinner by the minute.

Steve is late.

Thirty minutes and counting.

I glance toward the double glass doors, then down at my wristwatch, then back to the screen of my phone for the sixth time. Still nothing. No missed call. No apologetic text. Just silence.

I exhale hard through my nose and down the last of the cabernet in one frustrated swallow. Then I call him. Voicemail.

"Hey," I say, tone clipped. "I've waited thirty minutes. I'm heading out."

I hang up, not giving him the satisfaction of anything more.

This was supposed to be a distraction. A palate cleanser after the emotional whirlwind that's been tearing through my life like a damn hurricane. Between the surrogacy offer, the discovery in the storage unit, and the flicker of doubt that's grown into a full-blown firestorm inside me... I deserved one night of no drama. Just a drink. Maybe some sex. Something uncomplicated.

But no. Steve fucking bailed.

I signal the bartender and start to settle my tab. I'm halfway through pulling out my card when I feel it.

A presence behind me.

A shift in the air. A scent. Masculine, expensive, with a smoky edge that tickles across the back of my neck.

Then his voice, deep and unmistakably Russian, slices through the low hum of conversation beside my ear.

"I would never let anything get in my way if I knew you were waiting for me."

My breath stutters in my chest. I go rigid, slowly lifting my gaze to the mirror behind the bar.

He's there.

The man from earlier. The one who nearly turned me into a Vegas hood ornament.

The stranger with the glacier-blue eyes and the kind of face that's carved into legends and terrible ideas.

I turn to face him. My pulse is in my throat now.

“You,” I say, more breath than voice.

He’s wearing a dark suit, black shirt open at the collar. No tie. His jacket fits like it was stitched over his frame by a sinful tailor. And when he smiles, it’s lazy, lethal, and laced with hunger.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw you sitting alone at the bar,” he says, his voice sliding over my skin. “I think fate has made our worlds collide.”

I give a breathless laugh. “Literally.”

His eyes flash, amused. “You look stunning.”

The words hang between us, unashamed. His gaze moves over me—my neck, my breasts, the hem of my dress where my thigh peeks out beneath the bar’s shadow. It’s not lewd. It’s reverent. Like he’s memorizing the curves of me, planning what he’ll do with them.

My core tightens. My breath hitches. I’m heat, and nerves, and wicked curiosity wrapped in a black cocktail dress.

“I’m Damien Romanov,” he says, offering his hand.

I slide mine into his. His fingers close around mine, firm, warm, slow. Not a shake. A claim.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

“Tara,” I reply, and my voice sounds far away.

“Tara,” he repeats like he’s tasting it.

And he doesn’t let go.

His fingers still wrap around mine. My skin tingles. I don’t pull away. I should—but I don’t.

“I was heading down for a drink. Maybe something to eat,” he says, the low rumble of his voice curling between us like smoke. “Now that we’re no longer strangers—and we’ve already shared a harrowing experience—would you make my night and join me?”

I blink, caught off guard. My instincts wrestle with each other.

There’s the usual voice in my head—the rational one, the good girl voice. The one that tells me to say ‘No, thank you’. To smile politely and head home to wine, pajamas, and disappointment.

And then there’s the voice that’s been rising louder since I opened that goddamn puzzle box.

The voice that whispers, “Maybe nothing in your life is what it seems”.

I glance at my phone. Still no message. Still no Steve.

The fucker ghosted me.

I look back at Damien Romanov. A man I don't know, standing so close my heart races and my knees feel unsteady. He smells like danger and silk. His eyes tell me he could ruin me.

And I want him to.

"I... I'd like that," I say.

His smile widens, subtle and pleased. "Good. I was hoping you'd say yes."

He lifts my hand, still in his, and threads it through the crook of his arm as though it's the most natural thing in the world. His body is solid beside mine. He's tall—easily six-four—and I can feel the power radiating from him like heat. He walks with assurance, like a man used to being obeyed, admired, and feared.

The maître d' in the restaurant recognizes him. I see it in the way he straightens his posture, the flash of nerves in his smile.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Romanov," he says after a glance at his chart. "We're at full capacity—there might be a wait of twenty, thirty minutes..."

Damien looks at me, then back at the host. "That's fine." But he doesn't move to take a seat. He leans toward me, voice lower now. "Would it be too forward if I suggested dinner in my suite instead? It's quieter. Private. We can order whatever you want."

I freeze for a breath. Every alarm in my head starts going off.

Say no.

You don't know this man.

You don't follow strangers into elevators and let them take you upstairs.

I wet my lips. He catches the movement, his eyes dipping briefly to my mouth.

"That was too forward," he says softly. "I'm sorry."

But I shake my head.

"No," I whisper. "I think... I think it's a great idea."

I don't know who this version of me is, this reckless girl in designer heels and a heartbeat pounding out yes, yes, yes, but I don't stop her.

We head for the elevator. Inside, the doors close with a hush. I feel the silence wrap around us. It's thick with tension. Every second that ticks past has my breath catching and my thoughts racing.

"You can still change your mind," he says without looking at me. "We'll go back. Find a different place. One with more people and fewer...risks."



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

I study his profile. His jaw is carved. The lines of his face are almost too perfect, too sharp, too dangerous.

But I don't feel afraid.

"I'm fine," I say. "I want to be here."

He turns to look at me. "Good."

The elevator dings. His suite is near the top. Of course it is.

He unlocks the door, and I step inside a space that looks like the fantasy of someone who's used to power. Dark floors, sleek furniture, and a view of the Strip that stretches forever.

There's wine already open. Food is ordered within minutes—whatever I want. We end up with tapas and grilled prawns, truffle fries, and fresh fruit.

We talk.

He's funny. Sharp. His questions are thoughtful. And to my surprise, he knows more about astrophysics than any man I've dated. He listens. Challenges. When I say something smart, he doesn't blink. Doesn't look surprised.

He looks... hungry.

Not just for my body. For my mind.

I'm halfway through another glass of wine when he leans closer, eyes on mine.

"I want to kiss you," he says. His voice is low and warm and absolutely certain. "But if I do... it won't stop there, Tara. I want you. More than I've wanted anyone in a long, long time."

I feel the bottom fall out of my stomach. My heart flips, then spins.

Everything inside me tightens. My breath is shallow.

My voice is barely a whisper.

"Kiss me."

He doesn't hesitate.

His mouth finds mine, and the world narrows to heat and pressure. His lips are soft at first, then rougher, hungrier, his hand sliding along the curve of my jaw to the back of my neck, pulling me in. The kiss deepens until I can't think, can't breathe. I feel it everywhere—between my thighs, in the pit of my stomach, in the wild gallop of my pulse.

His tongue strokes mine, and I moan into his mouth. It spills out of me like heat. My hand finds his chest, fingers clutching the expensive fabric of his shirt.

He groans, the sound vibrating between us.

Then his hand drops to my thigh. He slides it higher. My dress rides up, the smooth fabric parting easily. His fingers trace along my bare skin, teasing, until they graze the edge of my panties.

I gasp. My legs part without my permission.

His mouth drifts to my jaw, my neck, his teeth grazing the sensitive spot just below my ear. “It’s good to feel how much you want this,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my throat. “How wet you are for me.”

His fingers press against the damp fabric of my underwear. I jerk against his touch.

Then he takes my hand and slides it to his lap.

I suck in a breath as I feel the thick length of him straining against his pants.

“You feel that?” Damien says, his voice rough now. “That’s how much I want you.”

His eyes hold mine. “Lie back on the sofa, Tara.”

I do as he asks, not breaking eye contact.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

My body clenches at the raw truth of it. My pulse pounds so loudly it fills my ears. Before I can reply, Damien's mouth crashes down on mine—urgent, possessive, scorching. His tongue parts my lips and claims me with a force that knocks my breath sideways.

Then his hands are on my dress.

Damien drags the zipper down in one swift, controlled motion, pulling the silky fabric over my head and drops it in a pool of black on the floor. Damien's gaze drops, and the corner of his mouth curves—not in arrogance, but reverence. I'm in nothing but my lacy black bra, matching panties, and heels, the cool air teasing my skin where the heat of his body just was.

Damien's fingers trail lightly over the tops of my breasts, and then he cups them through the lace, kneading gently. My backarches, a soft whimper escaping my throat as he brushes his thumbs across my nipples. The friction is maddening. When he slips a finger beneath the lace, tugging until my breast spills free, my breath hitches.

“You're perfect,” Damien murmurs.

He unclasps the bra with ease and peels it away, baring me fully to his gaze. I'm exposed. And yet, I've never felt more desired. Damien's pupils darken as he drinks me in, his eyes igniting something reckless and hungry inside me.

The cushions cradle me as I stretch out before him. Damien turns towards me, his large hands sliding down my thighs, pushing them apart as he settles between them.

Then, slowly, he hooks his fingers into the sides of my panties and pulls them down. The air hits me and I shiver—not from cold, but from the intensity of his stare. He sucks in a breath, like the sight of me naked steals the air from his lungs.

“Fucking beautiful,” Damien growls.

His hands glide up my thighs again, rough palms and skilled fingers dragging fire in their wake. When he reaches my core, Damien pauses, eyes locked with mine. His touch is soft at first, teasing, exploring the slick heat of me.

My hips jerk. He strokes again—firm, deliberate.

“God, you feel amazing,” he says, voice low and guttural. “Like warm liquid velvet against my fingers.”

His face drops close to my pussy as his fingers part the lips and he runs the tip of his tongue over my sensitive flesh.

“Ahh,” escapes my throat as my body hangs in anticipation, wanting to feel his mouth on me. But instead, he slides a finger inside me. My breath catches. Another joins it, stretching me, filling me, curling just right. My hands grip the sofa cushions, my body arching to meet his rhythm.

Damien moves slow but steady, his thumb circling my clit in time with the thrusts. Pressure builds fast—my whole body alive and trembling, caught in the pull of a storm I can’t stop.

“Oh God,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

“That’s it,” Damien breathes, watching my face. “Come for me, Tara.”

I shatter—everything in me breaks open. Pleasure explodes, racking me in waves. My thighs clamp around his wrist. My hips buck against Damien's hand. I moan his name as the orgasm rips through me, body trembling, breath stolen.

He doesn't stop pumping until the tremors subside, until I collapse back against the cushions, dazed and gasping.

And then, before I can catch my breath, Damien lifts me.

Cradles me like I weigh nothing.

I press my forehead to his shoulder, still catching my breath. "That was..."

"Just the beginning," Damien murmurs, carrying me toward the bedroom. "I hope you didn't think our night was over."

He lays me gently on the bed like I'm something precious. Something fragile. But Damien's eyes say he's about to ruin me.

And I want him to.

I want to be ruined by this man whose name I barely know.

Damien strips off his shirt, revealing a body chiseled from stone with a dragon tattoo wrapped around his torso. His muscles flex as he undoes his pants, and I can't stop staring. He's big. Everywhere. My pulse skips a beat.

Damien climbs onto the bed and slides over, his skin warm against mine.

His mouth finds my breasts, tongue circling my nipple before sucking it deep. I cry out. My back bows off the bed. Damien's hands grip my thighs, spreading me,

positioning me exactly where he wants me.

He kisses his way down my stomach, takes his time with the inside of my thighs, his breath teasing my sensitive skin.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

Then his mouth is on me.

And I come undone all over again.

I grip the sheets, my thighs shaking against Damien's shoulders as his tongue flicks over my clit. He doesn't rush. He takes his time, exploring me like he's memorizing every reaction—every whimper, every hitch of breath, every gasp when his lips suck gently and his tongue presses harder.

“God—Damien...” I pant, hips lifting from the bed.

Damien groans in approval, like hearing his name from my lips, turns him feral.

One of his hands slides up, spreads wide over my stomach, keeping me still as his mouth drives me closer and closer. His other hand slips between my thighs, and when his fingers slide into me again, curling deep while his mouth devours my clit, the orgasm crashes over me like a tidal wave.

I come screaming his name.

My legs lock around him. My back arches so hard it hurts. Stars burst behind my eyelids as my body pulses and writhes beneath his mouth. Damien doesn't stop—not until I'm limp, shivering, completely wrecked and he's lapped up every drop of my pussy juice..

When he finally pulls away, his mouth glistening with my juices, I can barely open my eyes.



And then I feel him crawl over me. The hard weight of him, his cock sliding between my thighs, thick and hot, pressing against me.

He kisses me again. Deep. Rough. Possessive.

“You are so beautiful and taste like honey.” His voice is rough, and his lips tease mine.

My hips arch, hungry to feel him inside me.

“Please, Damien,” I whimper, my eyes locking with his.

“What do you want, little one?” His cock teases my entrance.

“You,” I breathe. “I want you deep inside me.”

A groan rips through his throat, and he thrusts into me in one hard, perfect stroke.

I cry out as he fills me. Stretches me. My fingers claw at his back as he starts to move, slow at first, then harder, deeper, until I’m gasping for air.

Each thrust slams into something deep and perfect. He buries his face against my neck, his breath hot against my skin.

“You feel so fucking good wrapped around my cock,” he groans, dragging his mouth to mine again. “It’s like your pussy was made for me.”

I cling to him, my nails digging in as pleasure builds again. My body responds to him like it was made for this. Every thrust hits the right spot. Every grind of his hips lights another fuse.

He growls something in Russian, his hands gripping my hips, anchoring me as he starts thrusting faster. Harder. My moans turn to cries as I spiral again. I can feel myself unraveling, feel the orgasm coiling tight.

And when it hits, it steals everything.

Sound.

Thought.

Breath.

I shatter beneath him. He keeps moving, driving me through the orgasm, making it last until I collapse beneath him, shaking, gasping, completely undone.

Then with one last deep thrust, he groans, his whole body going rigid above mine as he spills inside me. His hands fist the sheets beside my head. His teeth graze my shoulder.

We lie tangled together, breathless and sweat-drenched, and I feel like my entire identity is melting away, leaving something new behind.

As he pulls me closer, pressing a kiss to my forehead, I expect the moment to end. Expect the calm to settle in. With his arms wrapped possessively around me and my body sated and spent, I can't help the exhaustion that envelops me, and I drift off with my ear pressed against his chest, listening to the beat of his heart.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

And while I know I'll probably never see Damien again, I also know that he won't be someone I'll ever forget because tonight, I'm not the girl who follows the rules, and Damien was the one who helped me shed the old Tara. The goody-two-shoes who haughtily shied away from meetings like these. I know that I'm no longer the woman I was before, now I'm the woman who said yes to a stranger, and has no intention of stopping the transformation taking place inside me.

5

RUSLAN (DAMIEN)

Tara is asleep in my arms, her breathing slow and even. One leg slung over mine, her bare skin warm against my chest, her hair a dark spill over the pillow. Her scent is everywhere—on my skin, in the sheets, embedded in my lungs. I stare at the ceiling, wide awake, pulse still thumping like a war drum.

I should be thinking of my exit. My next move. My mission. But all I can do is replay the last few hours.

She was fucking radiant tonight. Sitting at that bar, back straight, legs crossed, lips wrapped around the rim of a wine glass like she owned the place. Her dress hugged her like a second skin, her curves poured into it like sin made flesh.

I'd seen powerful women, beautiful women. But Tara Craft walked into that lounge and knocked the air right out of my lungs.

And I hadn't even touched her yet.

My arm tightens around her without meaning to. I don't want her to leave. The thought of her walking out that door makes something primal rise in my chest—and that is dangerous.

I try to shove it down. I don't need this, or the way she's blindsided me.

Then she stirs. Rolls onto her side, her ass pressing into my thigh and I turn on my side as she snuggles into me. I run my hand over her breasts. She stirs, tries to roll away, but I pull her back, trailing my hand over her stomach, down her thigh and my fingers slide into her pussy still slick and her clit swollen. Her body arches, reacting even before her mind, and I feel her gasp.

I press my lips to the back of her neck. She sighs, tilting her hips, her ass nudging my cock. Her back curves and presses into my chest. When I circle her nipple with my thumb, her breathing shudders. She's waking up, and the way she melts against me, even in that hazy place between sleep and not, fires a deep and primal heat.

"Hello, beautiful," I whisper against her ear.

Tara's eyes remain closed, but her lips pull into a sleepy smile.

"Mmm," she breathes. "I had dreams about you." Her body is soft and sleepy in my arms. She shifts against my thigh, making sure I know exactly how slick she is. "A blue-eyed devil. Dangerous and with an insatiable appetite." She exhales, barely a sigh, but I hear the shiver in it.

I chuckle against her skin and wrap an arm tighter around her. "Is that a complaint?"

Her eyelids flutter, half-lidded but glowing with amusement.

"Oh, not even a little." She reaches back with one hand, wraps her fingers around my

cock, squeezes gently. “I see he’s fully recovered.”

Her touch finds me urgent and impatient. My breathing thickens, chest tight with want as her fingers move with intention. She is skilled and sure, my head spinning from the sensation of being at her mercy. I clutch her hips, growl, and move her slightly. Before she takes her next breath, I’m inside her, hard and aching for release. She gasps, gives in to me with a moan, and the hunger takes over. Each thrust has her crying out and wanting me deeper. I pull out of her.

“No!” Tara’s plea is desperate, but my hands guide her onto her hands and knees. She lowers her torso against the mattress her ass raised as I plunge back into her and she cries out once again at the impact. I start to thrust, each one driving into her harder, deeper. Tara’s body moves to meet each one, her body wrapped so perfectly around mine. She breaks first, shuddering as her pussy clamps around my cock and she cries out.

“Oh, fuck, Damien!”

I’m close behind, almost lost and one last thrust of my cock into her pulsing pussy and I spill my seed deep inside her, a guttural groan ripping from my mouth.

Not wanting to fall on top of her, I pull out, grab her, and turn her around, collapsing us against the bed. We lie there panting, hearts slamming, limbs tangled, nothing separating us. I catch my breath and kiss her head. Her scent, her warmth, her body locked with mine—it stirs something dangerously possessive, and I have to focus on my breathing. Her pulse calms beneath my palm, and I feel her breathing even out. Her cheek is against my chest now, damp and flushed. She makes a contented sound, part exhale, part satisfied sigh.

Then her voice, quiet and sweet, whispers words that jolt me. “I should go.” She doesn’t move, her cheek still pressed to me, her body tucked in. “It’s getting late.”

I close my hand over hers, my grip tender but not willing to let go.

“Stay until the morning light breaks through,” I say, a soft command in my tone. “I’m leaving at noon. I want more time with you.” I know the power this offer holds, and I don’t have to wait long.

She smiles, slow and beautiful, nuzzles against my chest, making herself comfortable. “More time?” she whispers, thoughtfully.

“I promise, you won’t regret it.” I kiss her neck and move to her lips.

“How can I say no to that?” Tara says, smiling against my lips before pulling back slightly. “But I need a shower.”

I push myself up, lift her in one swift motion, her bare skin still slick against mine as I carry her to the bathroom. She laughs, the sound breathless, her hair a wild halo around her face. I set her down gently, the luxury tile cool beneath her bare feet.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

While I go to switch the shower on, Tara finds the toothpaste and starts to rinse her mouth out with it. I come up behind her.

Tara watches me in the mirror as she rinses. She's naked, her eyes sleepy, her limbs relaxed.

I run my hand over her breast. Tara gasps as I tease her nipple, then trace a line over her stomach, the mirror reflecting the slow path of my fingers. I press against her, her spine bending as she fits her body to mine. My hand finds her thigh and moves toward the apex of her legs. I slide my fingers over the slick skin of her pussy, she lets out a broken sound and braces her palms against the bathroom counter.

"Damien!" Her voice wavers as her hips roll, meeting my touch. "Oh, God..."

I work her slowly, keeping her on edge, watching her face in the mirror as she pants and clutches the counter, so close and wanting. Her eyes start to close.

"Don't close your eyes," I demand. "Watch... watch yourself come for me."

When I stroke her harder, faster, she arches against me, the name she knows me by flying from her lips.

"Damien!"

The sound of it nearly makes me tell her my real one as a powerful need hits me to hear it screamed from her lips as she explodes with pleasure. I work her throbbing clit holding her against me as her body shudders and the waves of her orgasm die down.

Steam curls between us as the shower heats. I press her to the tiles, kiss her hard, my mind locked on every part of her. How her hair clings to her skin, how her spine arches with every sigh and moan. My grip tightens around her waist, and I'm almost reckless, almost lost in the feel of her wet and wanting. She pulls back and her hands trace my torso, running around the lines of the dragon tattoo that wraps around me. I suck in a breath when her lips and tongue follow the invisible line traced by her soft fingertips. Then she drops to her knees, and my stomach knots in anticipation. The water hits my shoulders, tracing a path down my chest and I feel none of it as she takes my cock in her hands, teasing, sliding, and circling the small slit.

My knees nearly buckle as her lips surround the head of my dick and her tongue tenderly teases the slit, dipping in to lick the precum. Her eyes move to capture mine, and they are filled with dark desire as her hands work the shaft and cup my balls, which she expertly massages.

She pulls her mouth away, and it takes everything I have not to cry out in objection.

“My turn to taste you,” she murmurs, then wraps her mouth around my cock.

I lean against the wall, groaning as she moves, the pressure building, a heat so intense I can barely keep my head clear. I thread my fingers through her hair, the world narrowing until it's only her—how she feels, how she takes me in with abandon, almost wild. I shudder and pull back right before I nearly explode in her warm mouth. I grab her, pull her up, and wrap her legs around my waist. Water streaming down our faces, I pin her to the tiles, too close to the edge to wait, I slide inside her with a deep, rough groan.

Her body clings to mine and the walls of her pussy massage my hot shaft. Her eyes fly open, her head tilts back, the sound she makes tearing through the shower as her hips rock, desperate and eager. I drive into her harder, faster, both of us frantic and nearly breathless, the heat and slickness making my pulse stagger and my chest



clench. Her fingers clutch my back, her body draws me in, and I can't slow down. Can't stop.

"Tara!" Her name leaves my throat as I groan against her neck.

She lets out a soft cry as she shatters. I'm right behind, a crashing wave, and my mind goes white as I fill her, feeling her break apart and cling to me all at once.

The shower cools as our breathing evens. I slide her down my body. An hour later, we are clean, dry, and my pulse still pounds like a war drum as we lie wrapped in each other's arms, totally spent.

The suite is cloaked in the soft hues of early morning, the city lights of Las Vegas casting a muted glow through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Tara lies beside me, her breathing steady, a serene contrast to the turmoil within me as sleep eludes me.

My mind is racing at how horribly my plan for Tara Craft has failed.

I came to Vegas under the pretense of assisting a client entangled in legal troubles. But that was a facade. My true purpose was to uncover the truth about Irina. Overhearing her conversation with Nadia about adopting a child had set off alarms. Adoption? That wasn't part of the mission.

Upon arrival, Konstantin and I discovered that Gavriil had a mistress—a woman he had loved before being compelled to marry Irina. The pieces started to fit. If Gavriil was involved with another woman, perhaps he and Irina weren't... intimate. Irina had always harbored dreams of studying in America, and marrying Gavriil was her ticket. But now, it seemed her allegiance was wavering.

The revelation that Gavriil's mistress was also Irina's close friend added another layer of complexity. Was Irina orchestrating an exit strategy, using the mistress as a

scapegoat for her failure to produce an heir?

Our meeting was tense. Irina spoke of miscarriages, of trying again. She seemed sincere, but something felt off. I extended her timeline, but a new plan formed in my mind: eliminate the mistress from the equation. Seduce her, make her fall for me, and ensure she stays away from Gavriil.

But fate had other plans.

A woman darted in front of my car, our eyes locking for a brief moment. The impact of that gaze lingered. Later, when Konstantin showed me a photo of Gavriil's mistress, I recognized her immediately, and now I had a name which rolled off my tongue like a caress—Tara Craft.

From the moment we touched, I knew I was in trouble. This isn't just about strategy anymore. I want her, deeply and inexplicably.

Tara murmurs in her sleep, shifting slightly. I resist the urge to pull her closer, to lose myself in her warmth. Discipline. I must remain disciplined.

I glance at the clock. Nearly 3 AM. Our flight to Moscow is scheduled for noon. But I can't wait that long—I need to leave Vegas as soon as I can to put distance between Tara and me.

I rise quietly, retrieving my phone. I reschedule my flight for an earlier departure. Then, I message Konstantin: I'm leaving earlier. Stay behind. Get close to Tara Craft. Keep an eye on Irina, and I need you to look into Irina's medical records.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:40 am*

His response is swift: Understood. How close should I get to Tara?

A surge of jealousy flares within me. The thought of Konstantin near her is unsettling. But I suppress it.

I message back: Do what's necessary.

Konstantin's replies: Understood.

I return to the bed, watching Tara sleep. She looks peaceful, innocent. I can't blame Gavriil for falling for her. But if I can't have her, neither can he—and I'll keep her from him no matter what it takes.

6

TARA

The first thing I feel is heat—his heat. A furnace of a body pressed against mine, his arm draped over my waist, anchoring me in place. His scent lingers on my skin, a reminder of the night before.

I blink, adjusting to the dim light filtering through the curtains. The bedside clock reads 5:30 AM.

Shit.

I need to go.

Carefully, I slide out from under his arm, trying not to wake him. He stirs but doesn't wake, his brow furrowing slightly before settling back into sleep.

I take a moment to look at him. Even in sleep, he exudes danger and power. His chiseled features are relaxed, but there's a tension in his jaw, a hint of the storm beneath the surface. The dragon tattoo coils around his torso, a guardian etched into his skin.

I dress quickly, gathering my things and slipping out of the suite. The hallway is quiet, the early morning hush wrapping around me as I make my way to the elevator.

As I step out into the cool morning air, a voice calls out.

"Tara!"

I turn to see Irina hurrying toward me, her gym bag slung over her shoulder.

"So, I take it you and Dr. Steve had a hot night of sex after all," she teases, looping her arm through mine.

I feel my cheeks heat. "Actually, Steve stood me up. Again."

Irina raises an eyebrow. "Seriously? That guy is the worst. This is what? The fifth time he's done this."

"It's time number six," I laugh, a little embarrassed. "But I met someone else. A stranger at the bar. We... connected."

Irina grins. "You little slut. Good for you."

I smile, the memory of the night still fresh. "It was... intense."

“Intense good or intense bad?” she asks.

“Oh, good.” I nod, flashes of the night running through my mind. “Very, very good.”

“Then, I’m glad Dr. Steve stood you up,” Irina says. “I hope this time you ditch him. He doesn't deserve you.”

We walk together for a moment before I turn to her. "I've decided. I want to do the surrogacy."

Irina stops, looking at me with wide eyes. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "Yes. I knew last night, and I still feel the same."

"Thank you, Tara. This means so much to us." She hugs me tightly. “But let’s not tell Gavriil that we spoke about it without him. And let’s not mention your night with a hot stranger.

“Of course.”

We part ways, my heart feeling both heavy and elated at the same time as I head home, my mind a whirlwind of emotions.

Later that day, I meet with Irina and Gavriil.

“How was your night?” Gavriil asks as I walk into his office.

“Oh, pizza and indulgence,” I answer, and then move the conversation away from last night. “I’ve made a decision about the surrogacy.”

Irina’s eyes shine the moment I say the words. Gavriil straightens from where he’s leaning against the desk, his brows lifting just slightly—it’s the only sign of emotion he allows to break through that stoic face.

“I’ve made my decision,” I repeat. “I want to do this. I want to be your surrogate.”

Irina lets out a shaky breath. Her hand finds mine across the desk. “You’re absolutely sure? You don’t feel pressured?”

“Not at all,” I tell them. “I’ve thought it through.”

“You don’t know how much this means to us,” Irina says, tears already rising. “After everything, this... It’s hope.”

“What comes next?” I ask, needing something concrete to hold on to. Something

clinical. Safe. A process I can follow.

Irina's composure tightens. "We've already started. I've been working with a fertility specialist for the last month. My hormones are being tracked, and we've reached the point where they're ready to extract my eggs."

"They'll retrieve them next week," Gavriil adds. "All we need now is for you to undergo a physical. Just routine—blood work, screening, and an ultrasound to check uterine health. If everything checks out, we can proceed almost immediately."

"How long until we know if the implantation works?" I ask, my voice quieter now. The weight of this is starting to settle in.

"About two weeks after implantation," Irina says gently. "It's hard not to get attached, but it's best to take it one step at a time. Still... I can't help but be hopeful with you."

"And this is your last chance to back out," Gavriil says, his tone firmer now. "We'll understand if you change your mind. Are you sure, Tara?"

"Yes," I say without hesitation. But the word lodges in my throat differently now. As if it echoes through something fragile inside me. Because the high of last night has faded. And now I feel a dull ache—a hollow space in my chest where Damien used to be.

It's stupid. I knew what it was. A night. A perfect, scorching night with a man I don't even know.

But it wasn't just sex. It felt like something else. Something that reached inside me and left a mark I can't seem to scrub away.

Still... I push it down.

I've worked too damn hard to let one man throw me off course. I'm going to be a professor. I'm going to finish my PhD. I have a future lined up, a real career ahead. Not just some fantasy that could blow up my whole life.

"I'm one hundred percent in," I say again, and this time, I feel it in my bones.

"I wish there were something we could do for you," Irina lets out a soft cry and throws her arms around me. "You have no idea how much this means. We owe you everything."

"Actually..." I pause, unzipping my purse. "There is something I want to show you."

I pull out the wooden puzzle box and place it carefully on the desk. Irina's brows lift.

"What's this?" Gavriil asks, curiosity replacing his usual cool expression.

I open it and take out the birth certificate and the photograph. "I found this in one of my dad's boxes. I don't know who she is. But... I think I might."

Irina picks up the photo, and her breath catches. "Oh my God... This is Anya Novikov."

Gavriil leans in. "As in the Anya Novikov? The Jewel of Russia?"

"Yes," Irina confirms, her eyes scanning the image with reverence. "She's still alive. Married to General Timofey Morozov. They're Russian legends. Anya was a codebreaker—probably one of the most brilliant mathematical minds of her time."



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

Gavriil adds, "I've seen her in old government archives and press clippings."

"There were rumors," Irina continues, voice lowering. "That they lost their daughter and grandchildren in a fire. Years ago. In Russia. But no one ever confirmed it publicly. It was just... whispers. A tragedy that never made the papers in detail."

My heart skips a beat. "My father told me that when I was three, we lost everything in a fire. He said that's why we have no photos from before I was three. Nothing survived."

The silence that follows hangs thick in the air.

"That can't be a coincidence," Irina whispers, touching the corner of the photograph.

Gavriil picks up the birth certificate and scans the Cyrillic text. "It's not the full document. If it were, we'd see the parents' names."

"You could try to get the full version," Irina says slowly. "But you'd have to go to Russia for that."

Gavriil nods, setting the document back on the table. "And if you do, we can help. You know I have a lot of contacts there."

I nod, heat spreading through my chest. "I want to go. I've always wanted to. But only after the surrogacy. That's my priority."

My heart beats faster. I've always felt a pull to Russia.

Irina wraps her arms around me again. “You are everything to us, Tara.”

“And you to me,” I whisper.

I offer to stay and help, but Irina waves me off. “No. It’s still your night off. Go. Rest. Dream of hot strangers who don’t stand you up.”

I laugh and give them one last wave before I step outside. The sun is still high, and the city hums around me. I walk a few blocks to the small park across from the club and settle on a bench under the trees. I pull the puzzle box from my bag and run my fingers over the grain of the wood. My thoughts tangle. Damien. Lidiya Zorin. Secrets. Surrogacy. Everything.

I open the box. The photo still pulls at something deep inside me. A connection I can’t explain.

“Why did my father have this?” I mutter to myself.

A shadow falls over me. My heart stutters.

“Mind if I sit here?”

The voice is deep. Russian. Familiar.

I look up and blink. “You...”

It’s the man from the club. The one who got “lost” looking for the bathroom. Dressed casually now, but still commanding in presence. His eyes are sharp, blue as glacial ice.

“Oh. No, of course,” I say, sliding to the edge of the bench.

“Now I know where I’ve seen you before.” He sits, angles himself slightly toward me. “You helped me find the restroom the other night,” he says, smiling. It softens his severe features, making him look almost ruggedly charming.

“That’s right.”

He leans slightly, nodding to the photo in my lap. “She’s beautiful. Mother?”

My pulse kicks. “No. I’m not sure who she is. I found it in my father’s things.”

His expression shifts, something unreadable flickering in his eyes. “Ah. I see.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking,” I add quickly, realizing what conclusion he must be jumping to. “The photo’s old. From the 60s. My father would’ve been a child.”

He studies me. Then glances at the photo again. “Grandmother, maybe?” His gaze flicks from the picture to me. “There is a resemblance.”

I stare at the woman in the photo again. And this time... I see it. Not just in me. In Sabrina, too.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Could be,” I whisper, suddenly needing to shut this conversation down. My fingers close over the box, and I slide it back into my purse. “I should go.”

“That’s a shame,” he says, rising as I do. “But hopefully we meet again.”

“Vegas isn’t as big as people think,” I reply, and walk away without looking back.

But I can feel him watching me. And even though I just buried Damien in my past with the rest of last night... something tells me this man isn’t a stranger at all.

And fate? Fate’s not done with me yet.

7

TARA

The paper sheet rustles under me as I shift on the exam table. My legs are still in the stirrups. Cold gel sticks to my lower belly, and I’m trying not to think about how uncomfortable that ultrasound probe felt inside me. I’ve had vaginal exams before—obviously—but this one? It felt more invasive. Longer. Like he was looking at something he didn’t expect to find.

The doctor pulls off his gloves, his expression unreadable.

“You can get dressed now,” he says, voice tight. “Then I’ll need to speak with you and Irina in my office.”

My chest tightens. The way he says it... It's not casual. Something's wrong. Or might be. I nod mutely, watching the door close behind him.

I slide off the table, wipe away the gel, and pull my clothes back on with fingers that feel too slow, too stiff. I tug my jeans over my hips and try to calm my racing thoughts. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's routine. Maybe my womb is hostile. I've heard about women having hostile wombs. Or maybe I have something wrong with me, like cancer!

My heart thuds at that thought, and the blood rushes to my head. Oh fuck, please no. Irina and Gavriil will be devastated if I can't carry their baby for them. There are not many people a Bratva Prince and his wife can trust to do this. Breathe, Tara. You're just being paranoid. He's a doctor. Doctors are abrupt dicks.

Breathing out, I open the door, and Irina is waiting outside the room. Her eyes are shining like she's eager for gossip.

"How did it go?" she asks, looping her arm through mine.

I swallow. "Uncomfortable. I hate those exams."

Irina gives me a sympathetic wince. "Tell me about it."

I glance down the hallway. "The doctor said he needs to talk to us. Together. In his office."

Irina's brows lift. "Oh? That doesn't sound great."

My stomach knots. "I don't think it is. He didn't look happy."

"I'm sure it's just protocol," Irina says, waving it off.

“Maybe.” I press my hand to my stomach. I feel... off. “I need to pee.”

“Go ahead. I’ll head to his office and tell him you’ll be there soon.”

I nod and slip into the restroom down the hall. The cool tile feels good against my palms as I lean against the sink for a moment. I splash water on my face, then dry it with a paper towel. The gel still clings to the edges of my waistband, so I try to clean that up, too.

Then I go to open the door—and it won’t budge.

What the?—?

I twist the knob again. Pull harder. Nothing.

“Seriously?” I mutter. “Come on!”

I pound on the door. No response. I shout. Bang harder.

I don’t know how long I’m stuck—ten minutes? Fifteen?—Before I hear Irina’s voice.

“Tara?”

I fly at the door. “Irina! I’m in here. I’ve been locked in!”

A moment later, the door creaks open. A nurse stands behind it, flustered.

“We usually lock this for cleaning after appointments—oh no, I didn’t check?—”

Irina steps in, fury lighting her eyes. “Are you kidding me? You didn’t check?”

“I’m so sorry?—”

“Just... leave,” Irina snaps. She turns to me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I’m not. My nerves are shot. “Did you see the doctor?”

She nods, her eyes wet. “Yes. And Tara—you’re perfect.”

My heart jerks. “What?”

“For the surrogacy!” she squeals and throws her arms around me. “You’re viable! Everything is a green light. He says we need to move quickly—implementation has to happen by the end of the week.”

I pull back, blinking. “Really?”

She beams. “Yes.”

I hesitate. “Because... I don’t know. The doctor didn’t look pleased when he told me to go to his office.”

“He’s just that way,” Irina assures me. “He’s a brilliant man, but he has the bedside manner of a stapler.”

We leave through the back entrance, the same way we came in—discreet, no curious stares or questions.

“I’d rather keep this quiet until we’re well into the second trimester,” Irina says as we walk. “Like we did with my other pregnancies.”

I nod. “I understand.”

She glances at me. “You do?”

“I do,” I say honestly. “Also... please don’t tell anyone about what I found in my dad’s puzzle box. Not even my mom.”

“We already knew that,” Irina says softly. “It stays between us.”

Six days later, I’m back at the hospital with Doctor Abrupto.

Today is implantation day. I lie in a quiet, sterile room with soft lighting, waiting for the procedure. I’ve been given something to relax me. I feel floaty, warm, and a little emotional.

There’s a small photo of Irina and Gavriil sitting next to my bed. A token from Irina.

“To help the baby know it’s loved right from the beginning,” she said.



The procedure doesn't take long, though it feels momentous.

By late afternoon, I'm ready to leave. I expect Irina... but it's Gavriil who appears in the hallway outside my room.

"Surprise," he says, offering a crooked smile.

"You didn't have to come," I say.

"I wanted to."

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

He leads me to a waiting car, sleek and quiet. I expect to be taken home, but we stop in front of the Diamond Hotel.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“You’re staying here tonight.”

I blink. “Gavriil?—”

“It’s for the best,” he says firmly. “Just in case something happens. We don’t want your family asking questions. We’ve taken a suite upstairs. I’ll stay too. Just to make sure you’re okay.”

The suite is beautiful, warm, and welcoming. A plush sofa. Soft lighting. The kind of place where secrets feel safe.

That night, we eat takeout and watch game shows, laughing like idiots and yelling answers at the screen. It’s easy, familiar, comforting.

But somewhere during a rerun of Jeopardy, I feel my body growing heavier. Drowsy.

“You’ve had a hell of a day,” Gavriil says as I fight to keep my eyes open.

“I’ll just rest my eyes,” I murmur.

When I wake, it’s just past five in the morning. Light peeks through the curtains. I’m in bed. Tucked in. My sweater and jeans are gone. Leaving me in a T-shirt and

panties. My mouth feels dry, and my limbs ache in that soft, pleasant way that comes from good sleep.

I get up, pull on my jeans, sweater, and sneakers. I find Gavriil in the living room.

“Did you undress me last night?” I look at him accusingly.

“You’re awake,” Gavriil says, seated near the window, sipping coffee. “No, that would be the housekeeper I called to help me. You were out for the count, and I know how much you hate sleeping in your jeans.”

“Thank you.” I grab a cup of coffee.

“No.” Gavriil is out of his chair at an astonishing speed, taking the cup from my hand and replacing it with a cup of herbal tea he pours. “This is for you.” He gives me a toothy grin. “No more coffee for you.”

“Awesome.” I sigh and sip the tea. It’s not bad but it’s tea and I suppress a shudder.

“Did you sleep well?” he asks, his eyes following me as I put the hardly touched tea on the table.

“Yeah.” I rub my eyes. “How did I get into bed?”

“You passed out,” he says. “I carried you.”

“Thank you,” I say and smile. “You and Irina have been great. But I need to get home.”

“I’ll call a car to take you,” Gavriil tells me, and does just that.

Ten minutes later, we're standing by the town car.

I hug him and kiss his cheek. "Thank you for a wonderful evening."

He catches my hand. "Thank you, Tara. You have no idea what you are doing for us."

There's something in his eyes. A flicker of guilt.

"Don't do that," I say. "Don't feel guilty for asking me to do this for you and Irina."

He nods and gives me a tight smile. "I'm just sorry I've entangled you in this."

The words give me pause as my eyes search his. "I would do anything for you and Irina. You are my best friends."

"You know I love you, right?" he says, softly, his eyes darkening with emotion. "And that we'd never do anything to harm you."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

I frown. “Of course I do. Don’t be dramatic.”

“No, Tara,” Gavriil's voice is soft as he pulls me into an embrace and whispers. “You are carrying a bratva heir, and that is not to be taken lightly. We have enemies everywhere and this baby...” He clears his throat and steps away, releasing me. “Just by being pregnant with it, it potentially puts you in a dangerous line of sight.”

“Which is why I’m the only one who can do this for you and Irina,” I point out. “I know the risk and who you are.” I cup his face in my hand. “If I’m feeling threatened, you’ll be my first call.”

“I hope so,” Gavriil says, his eyes holding mine.

“Now, go home to your wife,” I order as the driver opens the back door of the car for me. “And be hopeful. In two weeks, we’ll know if there is a baby Mirochin on the way.”

As we drive away,, I turn to see Gavriil standing, staring after the car, and the look on his face sends a cold shiver down my spine—he looks like a man who has just thrown a loved one to the wolves. And suddenly the gravity of the situation hits me.

Fuck.

My hand instantly goes to my stomach. Gavriil is right, if anyone finds out about the baby, if the pregnancy takes, I will become a target for all the Mirochin enemies.

RUSLAN

Drako Kremlin, Dragunov Village, Russia

The clang of steel and grind of stone drown out everything else. Sweat clings to my back as I hoist the broken slab with two of the men, guiding it into place above the archway. Drako Kremlin rises piece by piece—just as I imagined. Just as I promised.

This fortress was stolen once. It won't be again.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, a sharp vibration against my thigh. I ignore it. Then it buzzes again. Persistent. Relentless.

I pull off my gloves and check the screen. Konstantin.

A cold weight drops into my stomach.

He's not due to report in for another week.

"Da," I answer in Russian, stepping out into the cold wind cutting across the coast.

"I couldn't stop it." Konstantin's voice is tight. Regretful.

My jaw locks. "Stop what?"

A pause.

Then: "Gavriil and Tara. They spent the night together at the Diamond Hotel last night."

Everything inside me stills. The wind, the waves, the fortress behind me—all

disappear under a surge of blood pounding in my ears.

My grip on the phone tightens. “Do you have proof?”

Another pause. “Da.” A chime. My phone pings. “I’m sorry, Rus.”

His voice is soft, his words sharp. He knows, without me even having to tell him, that Tara had gotten under my skin after just one night. Even if I refuse to admit it out loud, and try my best to bury it.

I don’t look at the pictures yet. I can’t. Not yet.

“Anything else?” I ask, the words jagged in my throat.

“Yeah.” Konstantin’s tone shifts—careful now. “The day you left Vegas, I made contact with Tara.”

I turn and brace one hand on the cold stone wall of the Kremlin. “And?”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“She was sitting in the park, alone, looking distraught. She pulled a puzzle box from her purse, and as I drew closer, I saw her pull out a photo of a woman. She muttered something about wondering why her father had a picture of the woman hidden in a puzzle box.”

“I’m assuming there is something interesting about it?”

“The puzzle box, for one thing,” Konstantin says. My phone dings. “It’s a hand-carved Ofeliya Zorin puzzle box. Just sent you the photo.”

“Tara’s mother and Gavriil’s aunt are good friends. She could’ve given it to the Crafts,” I point out.

“Maybe,” Konstantin says. “But the picture of the woman she was holding was Anya Novikov.”

That gets my attention. “There are a lot of pictures of Anya. She is well known worldwide, being the Jewel of Russia.”

“I thought of that too,” Konstantin continues. “I followed Tara from the park to a storage unit where she was fiddling through a box. When she left, I checked it out and found a picture of her mother and father.”

“I thought you checked them both out,” I say. “Isn’t the father dead and the mother the headline burlesque dancer at the Ember Club?”

“Correct. There were no red flags there,” Konstantin confirms. “But this is the first



time I've seen what Tara's late father looked like."

"And?" My knuckles whiten against the stone.

My phone pings again.

"See for yourself."

I swipe the notification open and stare.

My stomach flips. No fucking way.

The resemblance isn't just close. It's undeniable. Leonid Zorin! According to the files I'd seen, the man had died over twenty years ago.

"What the hell are you saying?"

"That maybe Tara's father wasn't who he said he was. And that maybe, just maybe, Tara Craft isn't who she thinks she is either."

"Why keep a picture hidden in a puzzle box of Anya Novikov?" I hit back another question.

"Do you remember the news about the Morozovs?" Konstantin jogs my memory. "Anya and her husband, General Morozov, lost their daughter, granddaughter, and son-in-law in a house fire over twenty years ago."

"You think the son-in-law was Leonid Zorin?"

"The Morozovs were always careful not to bring their family into the limelight," Konstantin reminds me. "Not much was known about their children except that night

of the house fire.”

“I need to find articles from back then on the fire,” I mutter.

“Already had someone do it,” Konstantin tells me. “There was not much mentioned in there, and no names for the daughter, husband, and child.”

“Fuck!”

“Do you want me to look into it?” Konstantin offers.

“No. Stay on Irina and Tara, but I need you to do a deep dive on Carla Craft,” I order.

“I want to know everything there is about the Craft family. I’ll handle the Zorin and Morozov part.”

“Understood.”

I end the call and stare at the wall in front of me. The mortar in the cracks. The raw bone of stone beneath my hand. I need to breathe, but all I can do is brace myself and open the damn photos.

The first image loads.

Tara. Her head tipped back against Gavriil’s shoulder. Her eyes are closed, her lips parted in soft sleep—or worse—contentment.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

Gavriil has one arm around her, possessive and easy. He looks at her like she's his. Like she belongs to him.

Another picture—Gavriil kissing her forehead.

Another—him lifting her effortlessly from the couch.

And the last one—he lays her on the bed like she's fragile. Precious. Then he walks to the window, pulling the blinds closed.

My pulse slams like a war drum.

Heat floods my chest, behind my ribs, down my arms. I want to crush something. Smash the phone in my hand. Fly back to Vegas and put Gavriil through a wall.

But I don't move.

Being so fixated on Tara Craft wasn't part of the plan.

Tara was never supposed to matter. She was supposed to be someone I strung along to get her out of Irina's way.

But the second I touched her, that plan dissolved like ash in my hands.

I don't allow myself to look at the pictures again. Instead I pocket the phone and head for the truck. The coastal road cuts through the frozen cliffs. Wind howls off the Black Sea, slicing through the quiet.

Konstantin's information clatters around in my head like loose rounds in a mag.

Tara. The photo. The puzzle box. Her father, Leonid Zorin?

I throw the truck into gear and turn onto the long, dusty road that leads to Zorin Farm.

If Tara is tied to Leonid Zorin or the Morozovs, this changes a few things. My brow furrows as I wander about Carla Craft. Now that I think of it, I have heard Carla Craft and Irina speaking Russian during a previous visit to Irina. I had even commented on how well Carla spoke Russian, as if it were her mother tongue. Now I'm thinking maybe it was!

As I pull up in front of the Zorin farm, more questions pile into my mind.

The large iron gates with a keypad loom in front of me. I press the buzzer, and a voice answers.

"Da?"

"I'm here to see Mrs. Zorin. I'm Ruslan Dragunov, the village elder," I say.

The gates open, and an armed guard dressed in black tactical clothes steps out. I don't like the look of the rifle in his hand as he walks forward and sticks his head by my window. I open it, noticing the red dragon logo on his flak-jacket—D-Fire private security. General Morozov's private security firm who stole their logo from another disbanded elite force from a few generations ago.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dragunov," the guard greets me. "I need to check your car."

I nod, and he does a sweep while another comes out with a mirror and checks beneath the car. "What is all this about?"

“Just trying to keep Mrs. Zorin safe,” the guard tells me, then orders the gate to be opened, and I’m let through.

I park in front of a wide farmhouse with slate-blue shutters and the kind of porch that should look welcoming. It doesn’t—not with guards carrying tactical rifles standing watch on it.

Which makes me wonder what the fuck is going on here. Are the guards soldiers, protectors, or perhaps prison wardens? One of the guards steps out from the side, waving me toward the front door.

“Mr. Dragunov, please follow me.” The man's eyes are sharp and alert.

Inside the farmhouse smells like aged wood, lemon oil, and antiseptic. It’s simple and neat, with a cozy fire crackling in the living room, which I’m ushered into.

“Wait here,” I’m told before the man leaves the room.

I glance around. The floors are wooden and covered with well-worn rugs. The furniture is antique, but I’m willing to guess it has sat in this room for generations. For all its lived-in feel, something is missing—there are no pictures on the walls or family photos.

But something catches my eye on the mantle above the fireplace. I move closer. It’s a wooden puzzle box that resembles the picture Konstantin sent me—the one Tara had. I pull out my phone and find the image as I hear someone approaching. I snap a picture of it and shove my phone into my pocket just in time.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

The soft sound of wheels on polished wood makes me turn as a woman enters the room in a motorized wheelchair. She's in her mid-fifties, maybe older. One half of her face is burned, the scars tight but healed. The other half is untouched and striking.

I notice her wince of pain as she shifts slightly. The thick wool blanket covering her lap ripples, and the bump beneath it tells me exactly what she's hiding there—a gun.

"Mr. Dragunov," she says, voice cool but clear. "To what do we owe the honor of your visit?"

"I was hoping to speak to Mrs. Ofeliya Zorin," I tell the woman whose face suddenly registers.

I realize who she is, and now I know why the house is so heavily guarded with one of the top security firms in Russia, if not the world.

"She's asleep," the woman replies. "Even if she wasn't, Mrs. Zorin doesn't take visitors." Her eyes narrow slightly. "Especially unannounced ones."

"I apologize for that," I say. "But I need her help with something."

"Can I try to help you with it instead?" the woman offers.

"And you are..." I enquire.

"Mrs. Zorin's nurse," she tells me, not offering a name or any further details that clarify my earlier suspicions that she's Lidiya Zorin, who supposedly died twenty-six

years ago. Also, in a fire, except hers was said to be a fiery car wreck. Seems the Zorins like to burn themselves to death, then reinvent a new persona, like a phoenix. “Whatever you want to say to her or ask, I can assure you I know her well enough to answer.”

I glance around the room. “I notice there are no pictures of Mrs. Zorin's family.”

“What concern is the decoration of the house to you, Mr. Dragunov?” The woman's eyes narrow a little more.

“It was just an observation,” I tell her. “I came here with my grandfather as a boy, and I remember this room being filled with family pictures.”

“They are too painful to keep on the walls,” the woman answers. “I have a lot of work to do, Mr. Dragunov. If you could please get to the point of your visit. If I cannot answer, I will ask Mrs. Zorin when she wakes and contact you.”

I nod and pull out my phone. “Can you confirm this is Leonid Zorin?” Her eyes drop to the photo, and there is a brief moment of shock in her eyes, but it disappears quickly. “Leonid Zorin is dead, Mr. Dragunov. He died twenty-four years ago.”

“In a house fire?” I ask, and see her brow lift in surprise. “I don’t see any burn marks on him, though in this picture, do you?”

“What is your point here, Mr. Dragunov?” Her voice turns cold. “Is this what you came here for? To harass Mrs. Zorin about her late grandson?” She looks at him in disgust. “She is nearly ninety-five years old. She lived through losing her son, her grandson, and...”

“Granddaughter?” I fill in for her. “I was going to say she barely remembers her name, but she remembers the family she lost. Do you want to know where all the

family photos are?" She cocks her head. "They are in her bedroom where she is bedridden. They are a cold substitute for the people she loved." Her eyes narrow a bit more. "If that is all you came here for, I'm glad you never got to talk to her."

"All I want to know is what Leonid's connection to the Morozovs was?" I see her look at me in surprise. "Anya, in particular."

"That's a dangerous question, Mr. Dragunov, even for someone like you," she states. "Why are you asking? And where did you get that picture?"

"I got it from a contact," I tell her. "I want to know if another friend is in danger."

She looks at me for a while before saying. "I'm sorry, I can't help you. Leonid died in a fire twenty-four years ago."

"Like you were supposed to have died, a few years before that?" I ask, smugly, letting her know I know who she is. "Funny how the youngest Zorin dies in a fire and then a few years later her older brother goes the exact same way." I glance at the walls. "Is that the real reason there are no photos of your family on the wall?"

"I think it's time for you to leave, Mr. Dragunov." She starts to reverse her chair. "The guards will see you out."

"Wait!" She stops at the door. I take out a business card from my pocket and a pen. I flip it and write my personal number on it and put it on the mantle beside the puzzle box. "This is my number if you change your mind about talking."

"A bit of advice," she offers and I nod. "Don't get involved in whatever your friend is involved in. As this is one spiderweb you don't want to get caught in."

She turns her chair, and I hear it glide down the hall as I stare at the empty door with



a furrowed brow. I wonder what the fuck that meant and am even more curious about Leonid's connected to Anya Novikov or rather Anya Morozov. While she didn't answer me directly, I'm more than convinced there is one. What worries me is that Konstantin had said Tara had no clue who the woman in the photo was. So now I have to wonder. Is she in danger? Or does she know who her father really is?

9

RUSLAN

The wind off the Black Sea cuts through the silence as I approach my car, gravel crunching beneath my boots. I pull out my keys, barely glancing up. I might not have gotten exactly what I came for, but I got enough to go to General Morozov with, who is the next call on my list.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Please wait, Mr. Dragunov.”

The voice is clipped. Not nervous, not deferential—just firm.

I stop mid-step, the keyless remote in my hand, and turn slowly toward the voice. The guard is young but trained. His flak vest doesn't sit awkwardly on his shoulders. His hand doesn't twitch near his weapon. He's not here to ask.

Then I hear it—the low, rhythmic thump of blades.

A helicopter slices through the pale sky, descending over the Zorin farm like a hawk onto prey.

Fuck.

The guard doesn't speak again. But steps closer to me. “There is someone who would like a word with you.” He nods toward the incoming chopper.

The helicopter touches down thirty yards from the farmhouse, kicking up a storm of dust and grit. I narrow my eyes against the wind, watching a tall man in civilian clothes climb out. Jeans, sheepskin-lined bomber jacket, thick wool scarf, cap pulled low—but there's no mistaking the posture, the weight of command in every stride.

General Timofey Morozov walks straight toward me.

I guess this saves me a trip.

I slide my phone into my coat pocket and adjust the collar of my jacket. The general stops just in front of me and extends a leather-gloved hand.

“Mr. Dragunov.”

“General Morozov.” I take the handshake. Firm, measured. No posturing. No warmth either.

“I heard you were here,” he says. “Visiting one of the people under my protection.”

“Is that why you came?”

“When Ruslan Dragunov walks into my territory unannounced, I make it my business to ensure no one’s being harassed, harmed... or bullied.”

“I’m not here on official business,” I tell him. “But I’m glad you came. I was heading to your farm next.”

His brows lift slightly. “Also in a non-official capacity?”

“Yes.”

The air shifts, sharp and quiet. The unspoken tension builds between us like a rising tide. I tilt my head.

“Well, that’s a coincidence. I was going to call you in the morning when I heard you were at Dragunov Village,” the general informs me. “May I ask the intentions of your visit?”

“I’m looking for answers,” is my reply.

“Answers to what?” the general asks.

“What is your wife’s connection to Leonid Zorin?”

There’s a flicker in his eyes—small, fast—but I catch it. His hand raises, and he circles his index finger.

Then the world goes dark as a bag is shoved over my head and something hard jabs into my temple.

I know the feeling of the cold steel of a barrel even through a bag.

“Don’t resist, Mr. Dragunov,” the General says softly. “I would hate to be the one to ruin all the great things you want to accomplish.”

Surprise zaps through me.

My wrists are yanked behind me. I’m relieved of my gun and car keys, and zip-tied as a whisper of jasmine rides the air.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“My men and the villagers will wonder where I am,” I warn.

“They won’t,” Morozov replies. “One of my men will inform your people you’ve been invited to dine with me and my wife when he takes your car back to the village.”

I hear the smile in his voice.

They march me toward the chopper, firm hands guiding me like a prisoner of war. The blades scream above us, drowning out my thoughts. I stumble inside, heart hammering.

What the hell have I stepped into?

The flight lasts fifteen minutes. Fifteen long, silent minutes with nothing but the roar of the blades and the vibration of tension humming through my bones. The hood muffles sound, but I feel the descent in my gut—my ears pop, and the cabin tilts.

Then the shift of boots. A door groans open.

Hands grab me again and march me forward. Inside.

Cool air. Quiet hallways. The thump of my own heartbeat sounds louder than anything else.

I’m shoved into a chair, my wrists still bound. Then the hood is ripped off.

Stark white walls. Fluorescent lights that hum overhead. A metal table bolted to the

floor. No windows.

I flex my jaw.

So this is how the general plays it.

The guard clicks one cuff around my right wrist and loops the other through a steel ring fixed to the tabletop. I test the chain. Just long enough to sit back or lean forward. Not long enough to do anything useful.

The door clicks shut.

I exhale and wait. There's not much else to do except wonder what the fuck is going on? This is what I get when I act on impulse driven by a need not to face what's really eating me—the picture of Gavriil taking Tara through to the bedroom. Two weeks after we'd been together. My jaw clamps down hard, and I breathe through my nose, trying to squash the raging anger inside me.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm snapped out of my torment when the door opens.

A bulky guard steps in first, blocking most of the frame. Then the general follows, coat open, scarf loose around his neck. His eyes sweep the room, landing on the cuffs.

“Why is he restrained?” he asks.

“Security protocol, sir,” the guard answers. “To ensure he doesn't pose a threat.”

The general's gaze moves to me. Steady. Unmoved. But there's something beneath the surface. Calculation.

I stare right back.

“Uncuff him.”

“Sir—”

“Now.”

The guard hesitates, then hands his rifle to the general before stepping forward. I lift my wrist, and he unlocks the first cuff.

He leans in close—too close. His voice drops to a whisper, meant for my ears alone.

“We respect the Dragunov name,” he says. “But we follow General Morozov. Remember that.”

I hold his stare. And in that moment, I notice the insignia on his sleeve—a thin red stripe interrupted by a circle containing the number five. On his flak jacket is a red dragon.

The uniform has just been taken from The Dragunov Guard—that insignia on the sleeve tells me they are a revival of it.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

The Dragunov Guard was my ancestors' elite protectors. When my great-grandfather was captured, the guard was disbanded, hunted, forcefully absorbed into the Russian military, or killed outright. I see General Morozov has taken the liberty to recreate it.

Lev. The name sits heavy as he steps back, retrieves his weapon, and nods to the general.

"You can leave us," Morozov says. "I have sensitive matters to discuss with Elder Dragunov."

The title hangs in the air.

Lev doesn't argue. Just gives me a final look of warning before slipping out and shutting the door.

We're alone now. The hum of the lights above us is the only sound.

The general takes a seat across from me and lays a folder on the table.

"So the legends are true," I say. "The great General Morozov instills such deep loyalty in his team that they would lay down their lives for him on command."

"I've long since learned that loyalty goes both ways," the general informs me. "To earn it, like trust, you have to give it."

"Thank you for the lesson, general." My voice drips with sarcasm. "Always a thrill to get some words of wisdom from the great General Morozov." I lift a brow. "But you



do know that the Dragunov Guard is meant to serve The Dragunov?"

"And when a new Dragunov arises," the general tells me, "I will gladly send my men to protect him." He leans back and looks at me with that look that says he knows something I don't.

"No, thank you, I would rather have men loyal to me," I decline his offer. "Not some private security that serves most of Russia's elite and powerful, as well as other parts of the world. I want the real Dragunov Guard, not D-Fire Private Security."

"They are the Dragunov Guard," General Morozov tells me. "Your grandfather and I started recreating the guard after the raid of the Dragunov Village by the Golden Hydra."

My heart lurches, my gut clenches, and I force away the memories that want to spring to light in my head when he mentions that fateful raid on my village fifteen years ago.

"My grandfather never mentioned it to me," I tell him in disbelief.

"Why would he?" the general counters. "You wouldn't have listened as you were grieving and consumed with rage and revenge."

"The Mirochins used the village like a prized toy a scorned member of the Mirochins family tried to take away from the head of the family," I seethe at the memory. "They use my people as pawns, cheap labor, and keep us in line through fear of things like that happening." My eyes narrow angrily. "I will not let that happen again."

"Neither will I," the general announces. "That is why D-Fire private security is now securely positioned as Russia's top security firm. It's not just government officials and the elite who use the service. It's crime families, including the Mirochins."

That does get my attention. “My grandfather knew about this and didn’t tell me?”

“He was going to when he thought you were ready,” the general tells me. “And before he died, he made me promise to continue the tradition of my ancestors to protect the Dragunov Territory and the Dragunovs. Like my family has had as the head of the Dragunov Guard for generations.”

“I thought that tie had been severed when you became such a decorated and revered General in the Russian Army,” I point out.

“The first Morozov to serve Damien Dragunov, your great-great-grandfather and the man who built the Dragunov Legacy from the shattered remains of the ruined Russian Royals, also served in the military,” the general reminds me. “I didn’t bring you here for a history lesson. I brought you here to hear you out because you had questions.”

“I already asked it. Before your little power play.”

He doesn’t blink. Just sits, patient and calm, like he’s got all the time in the world.

I lean forward. “I know Lidiya Zorin is alive. Or should I say—Lidiya Ergorov. General Ergorov’s first wife. She was supposed to be dead, wasn’t she? But there she is, hiding behind a nurse’s uniform, playing caretaker to her grandmother, Ofeliya Zorin.”

The General’s face doesn’t change, but I see the slightest shift in his posture. Tension in his shoulders.

“I also know Leonid Zorin faked his own death and started over in America with a new family.”

No denial. No confirmation. Nothing.

“But what I don’t understand is why he would take your granddaughter with him?” I continue. “Unless... she was valuable. Like her grandmother. A prodigy?”

Still no reaction.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“You brought me here because I asked the wrong question. Because I got too close.”

“I brought you here to protect you,” the general says at last.

I let out a bitter laugh. “I don’t need your protection.”

“You think you don’t,” he says, folding his hands over the folder. “But you’ve stumbled into something larger than your vendetta with the Mirochins or your secret project to rebuild the Dragunov Legacy.”

My brows shoot up. “I can assure you, general, whatever it is, I can take care of myself.”

“Not if you’re going to continue looking into Leonid Zorin or his connection to my wife,” the general says.

“Is that a threat, General?” I look at him challengingly.

“Not from me,” he replies.

“Trust me, I can handle the RMSAD and the military,” I assure him.

“If you continue pursuing this,” the general warns, “the Russian Military, government, and even the RMSAD will be the least of your worries, and I suggest you start sleeping with one eye open.”

RUSLAN

“Do you want to tell me what the fuck is going on then?” I ask.

The general flips the folder in front of him open and pulls out a photo.

He slides it toward me.

My hand freezes halfway to the table.

It’s Tara and me outside the Blue Diamond Lounge. Her arm is linked through mine as I’m walking her toward the elevators.

“You’ve had me followed,” I say, voice low.

“We didn’t have to follow you,” he replies. “This arrived anonymously by email about two weeks ago.”

“How well do you know the woman you’re with?” the general asks me.

“We met that night,” I answer honestly. Although I did technically meet Tara when I nearly ran her down in the street.

“Did you target her that night?”

Fuck! “I saw a beautiful woman sitting on her own who had obviously been stood up, and I approached her.”

“It was just a coincidence you were staying in the same hotel?” The general says.

The door opens again.

My eyes widened in surprise when a woman of average height, slender, and beautiful walks in. She's dressed in the same black uniform with a red stripe on her arm. The circle around the number four stands out like a burn.

Lavender clings to her skin as she approaches and walks over to the general, handing some papers over to him. She's the one who took my keys.

The general takes his time scanning the page.

"Petra?" I greet her. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Hello, Ruslan," Petra says smoothly. "I could ask you the same thing... uh, wait. I don't have to." She pulls my phone from her pocket and wiggles it in the air.

“My phone,” I growl.

“You dropped it at the Zorin farm.” She puts it on the table beside me. “You really should be more careful, Ruslan.”

I don’t move. Don’t blink.

“You went through my phone?” My eyes narrow angrily.

“I had to,” Petra gives me an innocent look. “How else would I’ve known who it belonged to?”

She turns to the general. “Everything’s arranged. I’m ready when you are.”

“Thank you, Petra.” He nods and she leaves.

“She works for you?” I ask, stunned. “You do know she was a wanted fugitive? I want to say, by the Russian Government, but she’s on nearly every country’s most wanted list. She is a notorious black hat and cyber thief.”

“One of the best,” the general says proudly and smiles. “You have Konstantin Romanov,” the general says. “I have his sister. You don’t get better than the Romanovs when you need something done.”

I don’t respond. He knows that I would never turn Petra in. That would break the trust and bond between Konstantin and me.

“You said you didn’t target the woman in the picture with you?” The general looks at me inquiringly.

“That's right.”

“Then can you explain these?” He slides a page full of my text messages to Konstantin, asking him to follow Tara.

“Like I said, I met her once, that night in the bar,” I repeat. “We had one night together.” My eyes meet the general's, and a flush of hot rage flashes in his eyes. Oh, yes, he knows who Tara is. That's the type of anger I'd get if someone had just told me they'd seduced my daughter for a one-night stand. I actually admire his restraint because if I were him, I'd have thrown myself through the wall.

“Why have her followed?” He pulls out another page. “Should I answer that for you?” He slaps another page of text messages. “You think she’s Gavriil Mirochin’s mistress?”

“She is,” I reply, and see the anger flare in his eyes once again. “Look, yes, I targeted Tara. But I didn’t know who she was until that day. I was looking for Gavriil Mistress. I wanted to get her away from Gavriil.”

“So you seduced her?” The general's eyes narrow dangerously. “What? Were you going to romance her into falling in love with you, string her along, and then dump her as soon as you knew she was no longer a threat to your sister's marriage?”

Yeah, something exactly like that. “I was protecting my sister.” I defend my actions.

“Has your question about Leonid Zorin’s connection to Anya got anything to do with her?” The general continues questioning me.



“Yes,” I answer honestly.

“Did you find the picture in this box?” He shows me one of the pictures Petra just handed him, and this time, my blood runs cold.

The puzzle box.

“I believe so,” I reply honestly. “What is this all about?” I grow suspicious now.

“Where did you get this puzzle box?” he asks, ignoring my question.

“Garage sale.” I shrug.

I don’t expect the instant anger that jolts through the general as he slams his hand on the table. Hard. Making the contents on it jump and the metal table rattle.

“For fuck’s sake, Ruslan. This isn’t a joke.”

“Why does the box matter?” I ask, heart hammering. So there is a connection between the Zorins and Morozovs. That box has hit a very tender nerve. “What is the significance of it that has you so fucking mad?”

“Because it was stolen from a private safe of mine three weeks ago,” he tells me.

“And you think I stole it?” I splutter in disbelief. “What the fuck would I want with an old puzzle box containing a photo of your wife?”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“The safe was hidden in your grandfather’s house.” The general's words have me jolting in surprise.

“Is that why he left the house to you?” I ask.

It had not made sense at the time. I know my grandfather and the general were good friends, but to me, it didn’t warrant the general inheriting my grandfather's house in Dragunov Village. Now I’m wondering what else besides a photo of Anya was in that box that has him so rattled and was so important that my grandfather left him a house just to protect the safe.

“Part of the reason,” the general tells me.

“So what was in the box that is so important?” I ask.

“You tell me,” the general says.

“Fuck. I didn’t steal the fucking box.” My anger bubbles over. “I’m not the one who has your precious box. I didn’t even know it existed until Konstantin sent me that photo this morning.” My stomach knots.

“If you didn’t steal it,” the general asks. “Where did you find it?”

I sigh. “In Vegas.”

That makes his face drop. “Where in Vegas?”

“On Tara Craft’s lap.” My answer has the man sucking in his breath and fear flashing in his eyes.

“Fuck, this is not good.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Tell me all you know about the puzzle box.”

“Why?” My eyes narrow. “You tell me why it has you so freaked out first.”

“Inside the puzzle box was DNA in the form of baby teeth, hair, and cheek swabs in a small medical bag. A birth certificate, a photo of Anya, and a one-of-a-kind key.”

“I’m guessing it’s the key that’s got you worked up.”

“Partly.” He pulls out another photo and holds it so I can’t see it. “The main reason I thought you had taken the box was because of this.” He puts the photo in front of me.

The vault. My throat closes as I stare at the vault, which I was beginning to think was nothing more than a myth.

He leans forward. “It’s the key that opens the Dragunov vault.”

“You’re the gatekeeper?”

“Not for long,” he tells me. “The DNA in the puzzle box belongs to the next gatekeeper. The photo of Anya has a cryptic message on the back letting my estranged daughter know it’s safe or time to come home. The picture of Anya was taken in the place where my daughter and her family were to meet us.”

“It’s Tara’s DNA, isn’t it?” I watch him closely. Again, he doesn’t so much as blink. “She’s the next gatekeeper?”

“When the box first went missing, I thought you’d found and figured out who the birth certificate was,” The general admits. “I was waiting for you to make your next move after sending me that photo of you and Tara.”

“But now that you know it wasn’t me?” I ask.

“Do you know how Tara got the box?”

“Konstantin saw her sitting on a park bench. When he approached her, he saw her pull a photo from it and overheard her wondering aloud why her father would have the picture of a woman hidden in a puzzle box. When Konstantin questioned her about the woman, Tara said she had no idea who she was.”

“How did she find the puzzle box?” the general pushes.

“It was in a box of her late father’s things,” I tell him. “Konstantin found the storage unit and got inside. There was nothing else of significance in the box except the picture of Carla and Sol Craft, whom he recognized as Leonid Zorin.”

He runs a hand through his hair and pinches the bridge of his nose. “If Tara found the puzzle box, it was not by accident but by design. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say the key was not in the box.”

“I don’t know, she keeps it with her, and Konstantin hasn’t been able to get into it,” I tell him. “If they have the key, why haven’t they gone after the treasure? Why send the box to Tara?”

“Because this isn’t just about the treasure,” the general tells me. “It’s about something far more valuable, and they’re using the treasure to leverage it. The picture of you with Tara is a message. That if I don’t deliver what they want, they’ll get you to do it because they know you want that treasure.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“What do they want that’s more valuable than the treasure?” My heart kicks up speed as I fear I already know the answer. I swallow, and before he can say it, I do. “They want Tara, your granddaughter. When you refer to ‘they’, I’m guessing you mean either the Russian Government, Military, or the RMSAD. Which could only mean that Tara is a prodigy like her grandmother.”

The room spins.

“Oh, she’s much more than a prodigy,” the general's voice lowers. “As you work closely with the RMSAD, I know you have access to their top secret projects, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then I assume you’re familiar with their prized initiative. The Jewel Program.”

A chill crawls over my skin.

“I don’t think they can call it their prized initiative, considering only one test subject survived,” I say. “And he wasn’t even the Jewel of the project.”

“That’s what you were told,” the General says. “The truth is—two survived. Ergorov’s son. And test subject Eleven.”

Now, shock has me frozen to the spot, and my chest feels like an anvil has been placed on it. The general doesn’t have to say it out loud. I already know.

Tara Craft is the new Jewel of Russia, and someone just found out she's still alive.

11

TARA

It's been two weeks since I had the procedure. It still seems a little surreal. I had another woman's fertilized egg implanted in my uterus. I go from feeling what the fuck have I done? panic to anxious and what if this doesn't take?

I find myself staring at my stomach—a lot! Like I'm going to be able to see the egg. I've been reading up about pregnancy and what to expect, and I haven't had the courage to watch a woman giving birth. I saw that once at school and I can remember thinking, I'm fucking having a cesarean birth.

My eyes fall on my desk, littered with printouts of research into Lidiya Zorin and Anya Novikov or Anya Morozov. The research has hit a wall. Again.

I toss the latest stack of printouts onto the pile and lean back in my chair with my arms crossed, eyes burning from too many hours staring at screens. The name “Lidiya Zorin” might as well be a ghost. There are small breadcrumbs of information. But nothing solid. And unless I have definitive proof, there is no way I'm getting a full birth certificate from the Russian department of births and deaths. I even tried the Russian Embassy in Los Angeles, but they were no help either.

There are also no ties between Lidiya Zorin and Anya Novikov. Just that damn puzzle box and the swirling uncertainty it's dredged up inside me.

Gavriil's tried every contact he has in Russia, but nothing has turned up. I've even tried every genealogy site I can find—nothing.

Frustration itches at the base of my spine. “Aghh.” I rest my head on my arms, perched on my desk. “There has to be some clue somewhere.”

“Still nothing?” Irina walks in, and I can hear the paper bag in her hand.

Candy! is the first thought to hit my brain as I look up to see a brown paper bag in her hand. She pulls out a box, but it’s not candy.

“I think it’s time,” she says softly, shaking the pregnancy test.

My brow furrows. “Already?”

“It’s been two weeks,” Irina reminds me.

She drops the bag on the counter and hands me the pregnancy tests.

“Is there candy in the bag as well?” I look at her hopefully.

“After you’ve done the test,” Irina says. “Then we’ll talk candy.”

I stare at the box. My throat tightens.

“I know it’s early,” Irina says, her voice gentle, “but I thought maybe...”

She doesn’t need to finish.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

I take the box and go.

The bathroom is warm, with soft light filtering through the frosted window. I sit, pee on the stick. Put it on the counter as I wash my hands and set the timer. Then I wait. My heart drums against my ribs like a warning bell. Then I stand. And I stand. Suddenly, three minutes starts to seem like an hour. Finally, the timer dings.

I'm too scared to look. I don't even know what I want the result to be. If I'm not pregnant, will I feel relieved or disappointed? The truth is, I'm terrified of being pregnant. But I also want this. I want to do this for Irina and Gavriil. And then the doubt hits, sharp and sudden, and I realize maybe I didn't think this through at all. There are so many unknowns swirling in my head, it's like I'm not just standing in the middle of an impossible equation—I am the unsolvable problem.

Just look at the fucking stick Tara and stop freaking out.

I do and then wish I hadn't.

Two pink lines bloom.

Shit. Fuck. Shit.

I stare at them for what feels like forever.

By the time I step out, Irina is waiting anxiously, pacing outside the door.

I hold up the stick. "Two pink lines."



Her face lights up when she sees them and squeals like a little girl who just got a pony for Christmas.

“I’ll book the blood test,” she says, hugging me tight.

“Really?” I shudder. “Can’t we just trust the stick?”

“No.” Irina rolls her eyes. “Come on.”

That afternoon, I’m dragged back to the same doctor who knows me better on the inside than anyone else after having had a good look up there a few weeks ago. I still feel violated by it. This time. He sticks a needle in my arm and draws out a syringe full of blood.

“You should have the results by tomorrow,” the doctor tells Irina, like she’s the one that he just pulled a huge syringe of blood from, and I’m not even in the room.

“Thank you, doctor,” Irina says excitedly, then turns to me. “Why don’t we stop at the frozen yogurt shop on the way home?”

“Are you bribing me?” I look at her suspiciously.

“I’m trying to say thank you and sorry for having to go through this,” Irina tells me.

“In that case,” I say, grinning. “I want the real deal. I want ice cream.”

“Are you sure?” Irina says. “It’s sugar and...”

“I want some!” I look at her with raised eyebrows. And then push on the band-aid on my arm where the needle had gone in.

“Fine!” Irina gives in. “You are such a drama queen.”

“I’m allowed to be,” I tell her. “I’m pregnant. There is this little bean inside me starting to sprout into a whole little person inside me.”

“This is going to be a long nine months.” Irina sighs.

The next morning, Gavriil is on the phone trying to find out where we could get information on Anya Novikov, and all we get is a bio of her from her fan club manager.

“We’re never going to find out anything,” I moan.

“I keep telling the two of you, you need to go to Russia,” Irina says.

“Irina’s right,” Gavriil says, agreeing with her.

We’re interrupted by the sound of Irina’s phone ringing—it’s the doctor.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

Gavriil and I sit, holding our breath, while she takes the call. A beat later, she hangs up and beams. “We’re pregnant!”

She pulls us into a group hug, and I suddenly want to cry. But I chug from my water bottle instead, swallowing the lump of emotion down with it. I don’t gush. I don’t even smile. I’m not sure if I’m happy, scared, or just stunned.

While Irina and Gavriil chatter excitedly beside me, I spiral into a full-blown existential crisis. My head is screaming with questions I’m not ready to answer. Then Gavriil’s phone rings, and for the briefest second, I actually hope it’s the doctor calling back to say, Oops—false alarm.

Stop it, Tara! I admonish myself. What the fuck is wrong with you? You agreed to do this and were even happy to.

“Tara!” Gavriil’s voice snaps me back into the present. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, just tired,” I lie. “What were you saying?”

“That was the contact from the hospital administration,” Gavriil tells me. “He says he can get us into the records room at the hospital Lidiya Zorin was born in, to get her original hospital file.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Gavriil nods, smiling. “Seems like it’s a day of good news.”

“Then you and Gavriil should go to Moscow, together,” Irina suggests. “You’ll feel safer with Gavriil there,” she tells me. “And the Mirochin mansion in Moscow is fully staffed. You’ll be comfortable.”

Comfortable isn’t the word I’d use for flying halfway across the world, but if it gets me answers, I’ll do it. Admittedly, I’m really excited to see Moscow.

The next morning, we land in Moscow.

Snow dusts the city like powdered sugar. The air tastes colder, sharper, more dangerous. Gavriil’s town car pulls into the hospital’s back lot. We enter through the service hallway to avoid prying eyes. Gavriil leads me through a narrow corridor until we reach the records department.

The door is locked. No one is there.

A shiver snakes down my spine.

“Something’s wrong,” I whisper.

Then we’re surrounded.

Russian Special Forces, full tactical gear, weapons holstered, but hands twitchy.

“Well this is just fucking great!” I whisper to Gavriil. “We’re about to get arrested.”

12

TARA

“Just stay calm,” Gavriil whispers back. “I’ll handle this.”

A man steps forward and demands to know our business.

Gavriil steps up, voice smooth, calm. “My wife isn’t feeling well. She’s pregnant. We’re here for an emergency ultrasound.”

I go with it. I press a hand to my stomach and feign queasiness. The leader of the unit eyes me, then Gavriil, then sighs and waves us along to the ultrasound wing.

It’s cold. The doctor speaks only Russian, but I’m as fluent as Gavriil is, so I keep up with the conversations. Once again, I find myself on an examination table having icky gel spread on my stomach before the doctor is gliding the wand over my flat belly, and then she points something out to us that steals my breath.

A flutter.

Tiny. Perfect.

The baby.

I’m handed a printout of it. My fingers tremble as I take it. Irina will want this, and something deeper reaches out, whispering, I want to keep a copy too.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

No. This is not yours! I tell my subconscious. I'm just the incubator.

But still, I can't take my eyes off the picture.

"It's always a breathless moment the first time you see that little life starting to grow," Gavriil tells me, grinning.

When we leave the building, I'm still shaken. The moment feels unreal, like I've stepped into someone else's life.

Then I freeze as we run into the giant just outside the hospital

"Hello again," he says to me.

Gavriil stiffens beside me.

"Konstantin," Gavriil says, forcing a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting my father," Konstantin says, his eyes narrowing. "What are you doing here?"

"You two know each other?" I look at them.

"Yes, Konstantin works for Irina's brother," Gavriil tells me, and that's all the introduction he gives.

My heart jumps. What the fuck? Was he stalking me? Keeping an eye on me because

of the rumors about me and Gavriil? Bastard!

His eyes flick to the sonogram in my hand.

“How far along?” he asks.

“Two weeks,” I blurt before I can stop myself.

His brow rises.

“Are congratulations in order?” he turns to Gavriil.

“Would I be wasting my breath asking you to keep this quiet?” Gavriil asks. “As in don’t report back to Ruslan?”

“That depends,” Konstantin replies. “What’s in it for me?”

“What do you want?” Gavriil asks, tense.

Konstantin’s eyes return to me. “To know what was in the puzzle box Miss Craft had with her in the park the other day?”

“Are you following her?” Gavriil asks accusingly.

“No,” Konstantin says, shaking his head. “I was taking a walk in the park when I saw her. She’d kindly helped me the night before, so I stopped to talk.”

“Why do you want to know about the puzzle box?” I ask.

“So I don’t call Irina’s brother about this meeting and what you have in your hand.” Konstantin looks at me. “He’s back in Moscow tomorrow.”

Fuck.

Gavriil stiffens some more, and I can all but feel the anger radiating off him and know he's going to explode.

"It was just a photo of Anya Novikov," I say quickly, "and a birth certificate."

"You didn't have to tell him," Gavriil growls, sending Konstantin a warning look before taking my hand.

"It's okay," I whisper back, though my stomach churns.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“I hope you stick to your end of the agreement, Romanov,” Gavriil barks before he starts to pull me away.

Irina told me never to let Ruslan Dragunov find out about the baby. Now Konstantin knows. And if he tells Ruslan...

“Do you have it with you?” Konstantin asks, stopping us from leaving, his eyes on me. “The photo and certificate?”

I shake my head. “No, sorry.”

“Can you send me pictures?”

“I...” but before I can finish, Gavriil steps forward.

“That’s all we know. And we don’t have them with us in Russia.” He starts to guide me around Konstantin. “Now if you’ll excuse us...”

As I pass him, I brush against him. He turns and smiles.

“Take care of yourself, Tara,” Konstantin says and salutes. “Till we meet again.”

Gavriil yanks me away.

“How does he know my name?” I wonder aloud.

“It’s not surprising,” Gavriil tells me. “And he probably knows a lot more about you

than most people do.”

“Wonderful!”

Back at the mansion, I call Irina the moment we walk in.

“How did it go at the hospital?” Irina asks.

“Another fucking dead end,” I say, feeling frustrated. I tell her about the special forces and the sonogram. “We bumped into Konstantin Romanov on the way out.”

“What the fuck was he doing there?” Irina hisses.

“Gavriil thinks he’s been following me,” I reply.

“Yes, on my frucking control freak brother’s orders,” Irina hisses.

“Irina, he knows about the baby.” I pause. “He thinks it’s mine and Gavriil's.”

“Shit.” There’s a pause. “He’ll call Ruslan—that’s a guarantee.”

“Gavriil said he was going to call Ruslan and sort it out,” I tell her. “Get on top of it before Konstantin has a chance to tell your brother.”

“No,” Irina says quickly. “Don’t. Get out of Moscow before Ruslan knocks on your door. I need to think. This might be a good thing.”

“Okay.” I nod even though I know she can’t see me.

We hang up as Gavriil walks in, jaw tight.

“That was my contact,” he says. “When he pulled the file on Lidiya Zorin, RMSAD showed up within a couple of minutes. They are this black ops, special project team.”

“Why on earth would they do that?” My brow furrows. “Is that normal?”

“No.” Gavriil shakes his head. “But I’m beginning to think that there is a whole lot more to the story of Lidiya Zorin than just your father bringing you to America if she does turn out to be you.”

“I have come to that same conclusion.”

“My contact said he’ll be able to help us tonight and must be at the hospital at eight,” Gavriil tells me.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Let’s hope this time, we get somewhere.”

We arrive at the hospital at eight. Only the building’s burning, and now I’m sure we’ve kicked over a hornet's nest looking into Lidiya Zorin.

Flames leap from the records room windows. Fire trucks scream. A body is wheeled out. Gavriil turns pale as we glimpse an arm hanging out from beneath the sheet.

“It’s him,” he says. “My contact.”

Terror crawls through me.

We back away.

We’re halfway down the sidewalk when a black car screeches to a stop. Doors fly open. Hands grab us. Hoods drop over our heads, and our hands are zip-tied.

“Get in,” a woman’s voice commands, thick with a Russian accent.

“Who are you?” Gavriil growls. “We are American citizens.”

The car speeds away.

“I am aware of who you are, Mr. Mirochin,” the woman assures him. “And you, Miss Craft. And you need to know that whatever you’re searching for is not worth the cost.” She pauses for a moment, and her voice seems a little less cold. “Some truths are buried for a reason. It’s best to leave them where they are.”

“Where are you taking us?” I demand.

“You need to leave Russia, you are not safe here, Tara.”

After what feels like an hour, the car stops. The door opens, and another engine drives off. Our hoods are removed.

A tall man with a square jaw gets in the driver’s seat.

No words. Just motion.

He drives us to a private airstrip. The Mirochin jet is ready and waiting.

“What about our things?” I ask.

He opens the trunk. Our bags are inside.

“You broke into my house?” Gavriil growls.

“Your housekeeper packed them. She thought I was your driver.”

He cuts our zip ties. “Have a good trip home.”

He’s gone before we can say another word.

“We can’t leave,” I say. “We didn’t get what we came for.”

“It’s not safe,” Gavriil tells me. “We’ll find another way.”

I want to argue, but then I touch my belly. The baby.

We board the plane and I reach into my pocket for the sonogram.

“The sonogram, it’s gone.”

“Maybe you dropped it?” Gavriil says.

“No.” My eyes widen. “The last time I had it was when we saw?”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Konstantin,” Gavriil finishes grimly.

“Why would he take it?”

“Because that is what he does,” Gavriil tells me. “He is only loyal to two people. Ruslan and himself.” He gives me a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll sort it out when we’re home.”

Gavriil takes his seat, and I leave him to get on with some work

My phone is in my hand before I realize I’ve moved. I want to contact Konstantin. I want to get the sonogram back, but I also want to ask him the real reason he’s so interested in the puzzle box. I toy with the idea of getting Gavriil's phone and seeing if he has the number, but he seems pretty busy on it.

I do know someone who can help me, though.

I start texting: Sam, can you get me a number for Konstantin Romanov?

Sam: Hey, kiddo. Please tell me you’re not serious, or it's not Konstantin Romanov who works for Irina’s brother.

Me: He took something of mine and I want it back.

Five minutes later, the number pops up.

I stare at the screen, then start typing to Konstantin: You have my sonogram. I want it

back.

Konstantin: Hello, Miss Craft. If you want it, come get it. Alone.

Me: I'm on a plane back to Vegas.

Konstantin: That was a short trip.

Me: Send it to me.

Konstantin: Call me when you land.

Me: How do I know you won't give it to your boss?

Konstantin: You don't. But I won't.

Me: Why do I feel like you want something in return?

Konstantin: Call me when you're free of your watchdog. Safe flight.

When I get home, it's just after seven.

I make tea, curl up on the couch, and dial.

"Hello, Tara," Konstantin answers smoothly. "Did you have a good flight?"

"No. Because of you," I say. "I was all anxious, wondering if you were going to stick to your word and not give Ruslan Dragunov that photo."

"Being anxious is not good for the baby," he says. "And I told you I wouldn't give it to him or mention it."



“I want my sonogram back.”

“Let’s make a trade,” Konstantin suggests.

“What do you want?”

“Tell me about the puzzle box,” Konstantin says.

“Tell me what you know about it first,” I counter.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“I know it’s Russian and made by Ofiliya Zorin,” he tells me.

The name strikes me like lightning.

“Does she have a daughter named Lidiya?”

“I don’t know. Why?” he asks.

“The birth certificate...” I hesitate. “It’s for Lidiya Zorin. Born in Moscow in 1998. It’s the same date as my birthday.”

Silence.

“And you think it’s yours?” Konstantin says. “Any reason for that?”

“You mean other than it was hidden in my father’s things and has my birth date on it?” I laugh.

“I mean, do you have any reason to doubt who your parents are?” Konstantin clarifies.

“I never knew my birth mother,” I admit. “My father said she died during childbirth.”

“And now you find a birth certificate with your birthday, no parents listed, hidden in a puzzle box with a photo of a woman no one will talk about.”

“Yes.”

Another pause.

“I’ll make you a deal,” Konstantin says. “If you answer a few questions. Honestly. I’ll help you look into it.”

“What makes you think you’ll have better luck than we did?” I ask skeptically. “So far, all we’ve managed to do is nearly get arrested by the RMSAD and then abducted by some woman who warned us to stop digging and put us on a plane back to Vegas.”

“Wait, what?” Konstantin asks, concern etched in his voice. “Start at the beginning with the RMSAD. And how do you even know about them?”

“Gavriil made an appointment for us to meet a friend of his at the hospital who was going to let us into the hospital records room,” I explain. “But then, when we got there, the RMSAD were waiting for us. Gavriil told them we were there for a sonogram, and they believed us. But I had to get a sonogram.”

“Is that what you were really doing at the hospital?” Konstantin queries.

“Yes.”

“Are you pregnant?” he asks.

“Yes.”

More silence.

“I’ll help you find your mother,” Konstantin says. “But I want something else in return.”

“What?”

“End things with Gavriil.”

“I have already,” I tell him. It’s not an outright lie. We ended things a few months before he married Irina about nine years ago. “But I still work at the Ember Club.”

“Fine. But the affair ends. I’ll know if it doesn’t,” Konstantin warns.

“Why do you want me to end things with Gavriil?”

“You deserve better,” Konstantin says, his voice firm. “I don’t want to see you get hurt, and staying with him will end that way.”

“I told you, it’s already over,” I assure him. “Gavriil is helping me find my birth mother.”

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Now you have me helping you,” Konstantin points out. “Trust me, I have a lot more reach than Gavriil.”

“Okay,” I agree. “Like I said. It’s already over.”

“Does he know that?”

“Yes.”

“What about the baby?” Konstantin asks. “Are you keeping it?”

“What kind of question is that?” I’m instantly on the defence. “Of course I am.”

“What’s Gavriil’s involvement going to be?”

“I’ve made it clear, I don’t want help from him,” I tell him.

“Good.” Konstantin’s voice is soft. “If you need help. Any time of the day or night, Tara, you can call.”

“Thanks.” I clear my throat as a lump forms and tears gather in my eyes. “That is kind of you.”

I have no idea why I just opened up to the man. A man who, for all intents and purposes, was following me. If he knows Gavriil, it means he probably knew where the toilet was that first night. And the park; he’d probably followed me there and then a chance meeting in Moscow?

All these things scream to me that he's been sent to follow me. Which means Irina's brother has heard the rumors and thinks I'm having an affair with Gavriil. But something inside me, the same thing that drove me to message him in the first place, trusts him.

"You should get some rest," Konstantin suggests, snapping me from my thoughts. "I'll call you tomorrow to find out how you are."

"Thank you," I say. "But you don't have to check in."

"I want to," Konstantin says. "Goodnight, Tara."

"Good night."

I hang up, take a bath, and eat. Then I climb into bed and pull out the box.

The photo of Anya Novikov is still inside.

I flick on my blacklight to read the message on the back again, but I find the edges of the photo shimmer. A faint outline appears—an X marked on what looks like a map.

My breath catches.

A map?

Holy shit.

What the hell have I found?

## RUSLAN

Moscow's sky presses heavy over the city, gray and wet and pissed off—kind of like me. I sit at a private corner table in one of the city's most exclusive five-star hotels, trying to make it through lunch with a woman whose idea of negotiation involves a deep neckline, breathy sighs, and a not-so-subtle foot brushing against mine under the table.

Valentina is beautiful in that too-polished, high-maintenance way that always sets off warning bells. Her dress clings to her surgically enhanced curves. Her lips curve into a smile that says she's not here for the lobster bisque or to discuss her very serious case.

"Ruslan," she says, my name like a promise. "You're far more uptight than I remember."

I sip my bourbon, swirling the amber liquid before swallowing it. "I'm professional. There's a difference."

"But we're not in your office. And I didn't come here just to talk about my case." She leans forward, her silk blouse slipping just enough to offer a clear view of the double D's her husband paid for. "I came here to talk about fucking you. It's been years since we fucked last and you were such a God in bed."

My brow lifts. “Blunt.”

“I’ve learned to stop wasting time,” she says, lips painted blood red to match her nails. Her gaze drips heat. “I’ve always admired your... firm grasp of the law and how good you are with your hands in other areas.”

She trails her finger along the rim of her glass like it's my collarbone she's teasing. Subtlety isn't her thing.

“I’m flattered,” I say, setting down my bourbon. “But you’re my client, Valentina. That complicates things.”

“I like complicated.” Her lips part in a mock pout. “Besides, I was your client when you bent me over your desk two years ago.”

“That was before you were married.”

And now she's married to one of my most influential clients. I had to clean up her financial mess so her also insanely rich father could ensure her future husband was protected from Valentina's scandal. It was just a few quick fucks in my office. Which were fun as the woman sucks cock like a pro and likes to take it in every hole she has.

But it didn't go beyond that, and I'm not at all interested now. Especially as I still have a slow-burning poison coursing through my veins from a one-night stand that haunts me every waking hour and makes me feel like I'm impotent, as I can't seem to get aroused by anyone else. And that's after just one night with Tara Craft—it's a good thing I didn't go ahead with my plan to keep her on a hook and woo her away



from Gavriil. Because I'm sure it would be me on the hook.

Fuck! I down the rest of my drink and let it burn away the tension coiling in my gut from letting my mind stray back to Tara fucking Craft.

"Oh poo!" Valentina pouts prettily. "My husband has never satisfied me like you do." Her eyes glitter with lust.

I open my mouth to shut her down again when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I glance down and see the name flashing across the screen.

Konstantin. Thank fuck.

"I need to take this," I say, standing.

Her gaze follows me with annoyance.

"Konstantin," I answer as I step out of the restaurant lounge and into the quieter hallway, finding an out-of-the-way corner. "Where have you been? I sent a message to you two days ago."

"I got it," Konstantin tells me. "I haven't had time to respond."

Since when has Konstantin not had time to respond? My brow furrows as suspicion rises. But I bite it down. I'm just being paranoid because of the mission I've got him on.

"Do you have information?"

"I do," he replies. "I found out what was in the puzzle box."

I pause. There's something in his voice. Something different. I shake it off and put it down to my annoyance with my client.

"And?" I'm tense waiting for the response.

"All there was was a photo of Anya Novikov and a birth certificate."

That hits me square in the chest. I wasn't told what was on the birth certificate, but I want to know. "A birth certificate? For whom?"

"Lidiya Zorin."

I frown. "Zorin?" What the fuck? "Isn't that Leonid's sister?"

"No. This girl would be too young as she was born in 1998. So I doubt it's his sister. More like a daughter or a niece."

"Surely it would've listed the parents?" Another bit of information the general hadn't given me.

The only information I'm sure of is that Tara is his granddaughter and Leonid was his son-in-law. I don't even know his daughter's name, and all records pertaining to the general and Anya, I don't have clearance for. There isn't other online information about their family either. But that's not surprising as they are both tied to the RMSAD, and they go to great lengths to protect the identities of their employees and employees' families.

"No. It's not a full birth certificate, " Konstantin tells me. "It just lists the child's name, birth date, and the hospital she was born in. No parents."

"We need to find the full one."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Already on it,” Konstantin assures me, and again, there’s that edge to his voice.

Something sharp lodges in my throat as I wonder if it’s guilt. “How’d you get this information?”

There’s a pause. Just a beat too long.

“Are you still there?” My voice drops. My gut clenches. “Konstantin?”

“I followed them to Moscow,” he says finally.

My heart slams in my chest. “Tara’s in Moscow?”

“She came with Gavriil.” His voice is low and in the tone you deliver news like a loved one has died or your best friend was fucking your partner... I grit my teeth.

“Where is Irina?”

“Back in Vegas.”

His words explode through my system. I don’t hear the rest. Not over the roar in my ears. My hand grips the edge of a marble column so hard I think I might crack it. I can picture them—together—in my city. My territory.

“Why?” I clear my throat. “Why are they in Moscow?”

“They were digging into the birth certificate.” Another pause. “Tara thinks the birth

certificate may be hers.”

“Has she cause to believe that?” I ask, my breath shallow.

“The birthdate is the same as hers, and they are here trying to find out who the parents on the certificate are,” Konstantin informs me.

“Does she think that Carla and Sol Craft are not who she’s grown up to believe they are?”

“I think she knows that her father isn’t really Sol Craft,” Konstantin tells me. “But Tara’s hoping that if she is Lidiya Zorin that the full birth certificate will tell her who her real mother is.”

“Carla Craft isn’t her biological mother?” That’s another bit of information the general left out. I’m getting a bit pissed off with the general, especially when I thought we had joined forces.

“No.” Konstantin tells me the story that Tara’s parents told her about her mother. “Her real mother’s name is Lena, but her parents never mentioned a last name.”

“You got all this information by following them?”

Quiet again. “No.” The catch in his voice again.

I nod and close my eyes, breathing through the need to smash something. You were with this woman for one fucking night! I remind myself.

“There’s something else you should know.”

Just by that lilt in his voice, I can tell he’s kept the worst news for last, and I brace

myself.

“When Iraninto Tara and Gavriil in Moscow to find out what they were up to, they were at the hospital.”

“Is Tara hurt?” My mind immediately jumps to the worst case—Gavriil abusing her.

“No.” Konstantin’s tone is clipped. “Tara’s two weeks pregnant!”

It’s like the floor shifts beneath me.

My voice comes out lower. “His?”

“Yes.”

“The fucking bastard.” I can barely contain my rage now. “Gavriil can’t get his wife pregnant, so he goes and knocks up his mistress?” I run my hand through my hair. “Perfect,” I mutter. “Just fucking perfect. Irina’s trying to worm her way out of her mission, and this will be her golden fucking ticket.”

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“I don’t think you have to worry about Tara and Gavriil anymore,” Konstantin says.

I laugh bitterly. “Why’s that? You killed him?”

“Tara has ended it. He’s not involved anymore. She plans to raise the baby alone.” Konstantin’s words make me breathe a little easier, but my gut is still twisted in conflicting knots.

That changes things a bit. “So Tara is doing this alone?”

“With my help.” This time there’s no apology or strain in his voice, just confidence.

That hits wrong. “You two seem close.”

“I’m winning her trust,” Konstantin answers. “Just like you asked me to.”

A beat of silence passes.

“Good.” My tone’s clipped.

I close my eyes and try to force my mind to focus.

“I also found out that they went to the hospital to meet a contact of Gavriil’s who was going to let them into the records room. Only when they got there, there were RMSAD guards waiting for them.”

So I am right. This has RMSAD written all over it. “I take it they didn’t get into the

records room?”

“No.” Konstantin confirms. “But the contact told them to be back at eight that night, only...”

“The hospital was ablaze, and the fire started in the records room,” I finish for him. Fuck! That fire had been deliberately set because someone was getting too close to finding out about Lidiya Zorin.

“Yes. Then, when they were going back to the Mirochin mansion, they were abducted,” Konstantin informs me. “It was a woman who put them in a car, but hoods had blinded them and their hands were zip-tied so they couldn’t see who she was.”

“What the fuck!” I hiss. “Is Tara okay?”

“She’s fine. The woman warned Tara she was in danger if she stayed in Russia and took them to the Mirochin jet,” Konstantin says. “They’ve gone back to Vegas.”

“Did you try to find out who abducted them?” I say, alarmed.

“I tried to. But there was a convenient power surge around that time that knocked most of the cameras around that area out,” Konstantin’s words make me go cold.

“So it was someone who knew what they were doing!” This just gets better and better.

“How did your meeting with the Zorins and General Morozov go?” Konstantin asks.

I lie without hesitation. “Dead end.”

“That’s tough. I’m sorry,” he says.

“At least you’re getting some answers,” I point out.

“You still want me to stay close to Tara?” he asks.

My jaw clenches. I can hear from his voice that something is shifting in him. Everything in me wants to scream no. Stay the fuck away from her.

But that’s not the man I can afford to be right now.

“Yes,” I say through gritted teeth. “Keep watching her. If she’s going through this pregnancy alone, I want someone nearby. Keep her safe.”

“I will.”

There’s a pause. Then Konstantin says something I don’t want to hear.



## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“You know, Tara is carrying a Mirochin heir. Blood is blood, and you know how the Mirochins are about their family line.”

“She’s not carrying the right heir,” I snap. But even as I say it, I know—an heir is an heir. And it could work for our plan. For Morozov’s plan.

The line goes dead.

And before I can dwell on what any of this means, I feel a hand curl around my waist. Then dip lower.

Red fingernails slide into my waistband. Valentina.

“There it is,” she purrs. Her palm finds my cock, stroking slowly. “Mmm. He’s waking up.”

For a second, I close my eyes. Let it build.

But then Tara’s face flashes in my mind. Her mouth. Her body. The sound she made when I buried myself inside her and made her forget her name.

Every ounce of arousal withers.

I grab Valentina’s wrist and yank it from my pants.

Her eyes flare with surprise as I stand and button my jacket.

“I told you, this isn’t going to happen,” I say coolly.

“You didn’t have a problem fucking me before.”

“Before you married my client.”

“If you leave now,” she narrows her eyes threateningly, “I’ll tell him you came on to me. That you couldn’t take no for an answer.”

I lean in close, just enough for her to feel the shift.

“Try it. See what he believes when I show him your text messages and the surveillance from this hotel.” My eyes narrow dangerously. “Your husband may be blinded by you, but he is no fool.”

Her mouth drops open slightly. She wasn’t expecting that.

“I’m done here,” I say. “You’ll need to find another attorney.”

I turn and walk out, not bothering to glance back.

Pavel, my driver, is already standing beside the black sedan.

“Trouble?” he asks, watching the woman through the glass doors as he pulls the car door open

“Nothing I can’t handle,” I reply, getting in.

“I keep telling you, boss. That face of yours? Blessing and a curse.”

“Fuel the jet,” I say, rolling my eyes at him.

He starts the car. “Where are we headed?”

I look out the window, jaw tight. “Vegas.”

He glances at me in the rearview. “Business?”

My voice is quiet.

“To fetch my future wife,” I tell Pavel, my voice cool and final.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

He whistles low under his breath. “Want me to call Konstantin?”

“No, Pavel. This time, you’re riding shotgun. Konstantin has his own mission.”

And while I’m going to collect what’s mine, I might just sneak up on him... see how deep he’s gotten himself into it.

Fuck. Now I’m sneaking up on my best friend. Jesus.

I’ve tried to stay out of her life, but every excuse I make to dig into her is just that—an excuse. My plans? They’ve gone completely off course. I’ve even aligned myself with the general.

And I can lie to myself all I want—it’s not about the treasure. It’s not about rebuilding the Dragunov legacy.

It’s about her.

From the moment I looked into her eyes in the middle of that road, something snapped loose inside me. Then fate threw her into my lap, and once I lost myself inside her...

Game over—my world, my plans shifted.

My denial hasn’t protected me—it’s just turned want into obsession.

And fuck the treasure. Fuck the bloodlines. Fuck the heir.

I want her.

And I'll be damned if I let another man lay a hand on her again.

We're five minutes from the private hangars when my phone lights up with a secured line.

General Morozov.

I accept the call, already annoyed at whoever's interrupting my first good decision in weeks.

"General."

"You need to get to RMSAD headquarters. Right now."

His voice is low, cold, and controlled. The kind of tone that means shit's hit the fan.

"Can it wait?" I ask. "I'm on my way to Vegas."

There's a beat of silence. "Are you already on the plane?"

"No," I grit out. "I'm five minutes from the airport." I feel the muscles in my jaw lock. "What's going on?"

"It's your sister."

That stops me cold.

"Nadia broke into a secure RMSAD site. She's in custody."

“For fuck’s sake!” I slam my hand against the back of the seat. “What the hell was she thinking?”

“She wasn’t,” the General replies. “And while I understand your... priorities, Vegas can wait.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, my vision narrowing with fury. “I should leave her there and let her rot. She keeps pulling this reckless bullshit and expects me to clean it up.”

“We don’t need this kind of attention right now,” the general says quietly. “Get there. Handle it. Quietly.”

I stare out the window, the hangars drawing closer. Tara’s face flashes in my mind. Her lips. Her voice. The soft, forlorn last look she gave me before sneaking out of my room, thinking I was asleep.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

But the moment's gone.

I kill the call and toss the phone on the seat beside me.

“Change of plans,” I bite out.

Pavel glances at me in the rearview mirror. “Where to?”

“RMSAD headquarters.”

He doesn't ask questions. He turns the car around without a word, tires humming against the asphalt as we reroute.

I lean back in the seat and close my eyes, fists clenched, fury simmering just under the surface. Nadia's used her last fucking free pass.

This time, I'm done with the warnings.

When I'm finished at RMSAD, she'll be on lockdown. Confined to Dragunov Village under the watchful eye of our cousin Agafan. And if she so much as tries to cross the boundary, there will be consequences. Family or not.

14

TARA

It's been five days since our trip to Russia, and I've done everything in my power to

avoid being alone with Gavriil. I've even bailed on lunch with Irina twice, claiming I'm buried in final edits for my dissertation.

It's not a total lie—I am busy. But that's not the real reason I'm avoiding them.

My phone buzzes on my desk. I glance down and smile.

Renfield: What are you doing for lunch?

Renfield is what I've listed Konstantin as in my contacts. It's not just a private joke—it's protection. Because I already know how judgy Irina or Gavriil would get if they found out I've become friends with Irina's older brother's fixer. The right-hand man to the guy they've officially labeled The Enemy.

So yeah, if they ever saw me messaging Ruslan Dragunov's second-in-command? I can already hear the lectures.

He's dangerous.

Yes. I know. So are pit bulls. And just like them, if you treat one right, it might just become your best friend. Still... you don't turn your back completely.

He's spying on you. He's using you.

Also noted. But I'm using him right back. Because honestly? It's been kind of nice to have someone checking in. Someone I can message in the middle of the day and who always answers.

My sister's always working or out. Just over a year ago, she was off gallivanting through Europe on some mission with a Bratva prince, chasing after our best friend Leigh. Meanwhile, I work. I come home. I study. Rinse and repeat.



Once they get what they want, he'll disappear.

Yeah. Probably. Everyone does, eventually.

But right now? He's giving me the support I need, when everything else around me feels like it's unraveling.

And the real kicker:

He's not who you think he is.

Okay, sure. But is anyone? I just found out the people I've called my parents for twenty-six years might not even be my parents. I don't even know who I am anymore. Am I Tara Craft... or Lidiya Zorin?

Right now, Konstantin is exactly who I need him to be.

We've been talking constantly these last few days. Two, three times a day. He sends ridiculous cartoons, unhinged news stories, weirdly sweet animal videos. I send him back worse ones. We're in a full-on meme war, and honestly? It's one of the few things keeping me sane.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

Me:Heading home. Taking a few days off. Packing for L.A. I was offered a job there even before my PhD defense results were ready.

Renfield:Is that today? I nearly forgot. How are you getting there?

Me:Bus

Renfield:What time are you leaving?

I glance at the time on my wristwatch. “Shit!” I curse aloud, heart lurching as I scramble up. I start throwing things into my tote, hunting around for my car keys. I pull open drawers, overturn piles of books. Nothing. I drop to my knees and start checking under my desk. That’s when I see them. A pair of shiny black shoes.

“Lose something?” Gavriil’s voice cuts through the moment.

I back out too quickly and bump my head on the edge of the desk. “Fuck. Ow.”

As I stand, rubbing my head, he’s already holding my keyring up with a small shake of his finger. “Where’d I leave them this time?”

“Refrigerator in the back room. Bartender found it while grabbing beers.”

“Of course.” I reach for the keys just as my phone buzzes again. A message pops up from Renfield.

Renfield:Have you disappeared on me?

Shit. I forgot to turn it face down onto the desk. Gavriil glances down and catches the name.

“You're dating Dracula's assistant now?” he asks, brow raised.

I snatch the phone off the desk. “College friend,” I lie smoothly. “You know the professor I used to joke was Darth Vader? We called his T.A. Renfield.”

“Yeah, I remember the Darth Vader professor.” Gavriil gives a knowing nod.

“The T.A. needs my help with his dissertation.”

“Tara, you're already stretched thin. Isn't this the fourth college friend you've helped in a space of two months?” Gavriil's eyes fill with concern.

I shrug. “I'm the brainiac of the class. What can I say?”

“You always were,” he says softly.

I throw my purse over my shoulder and grab a stack of books. “I've found a new home for these. UCLA said they'll take my old textbooks. They've got students constantly hunting for used ones.”

“Not surprising with the price of those things,” Gavriil replies, following me to the door. “I'm going to miss you when you leave us for good. You've been a good friend. And I'll always love you, Tara.”

I pause, heart clenching.

“I know,” I whisper.

As he steps forward for our usual hug, I fumble and drop my keys again. “Fuck.” I bend, scoop them up, and glance at my watch.

“Fuck fuck. I’m going to miss the bus,” I hiss, rushing down the hallway as he calls out behind me, “Safe travels, Tara.”

Not until I’m in my car do I finally text Konstantin back.

Me:Sorry, got cornered by the boss and had to sprint to my car. I’m probably going to miss the bus.

Renfield:You didn’t tell me what time you were leaving.

Me:In forty-five minutes.

Renfield:Cutting it close, aren’t you?

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

Me:I just never seem to have enough hours in a day.

Renfield:Are you texting while driving?

Me:No. Red light.

Renfield:Okay, get home safe. I'll shut up for now.

I smile as the light turns green. It's the same light where I met the Russian who altered my entire life in one night, where Damien Romanov nearly flattened me. My chest tightens at the thought. Of all the nights to replay in my head, that one still burns the brightest. I can still feel his touch burn a delicious, sensual heat down my skin. The apex between my legs throbs, and I can't help but move my hips slightly to press against the seam of my jeans. Fuck! Now I'm hot and achy again, and there is only one person I know who can dull the ache. But I'm never going to see him again, so a cold shower it is when I get home.

Twenty minutes later, I'm flinging things into a duffel with no real organization. Clothes, chargers, makeup bag. I'll deal with it when I get there. I check my purse again, making sure I have my wallet, my ID, my folder for UCLA, and just as I zip the bag shut, there's a knock at the door.

"Not now," I mutter, dragging my wheeled suitcase behind me. "Molly, I love you, but I don't have time for tea."

I yank open the door.

And stare directly into a hard male chest clothed in a black cotton shirt.

A faint, clean cologne drifts off him, expensive and subtle. My heart skips a beat.

“That’s a pity,” the familiar deep voice says. “I enjoy our chats.”

My eyes travel up. “Konstantin?”

He’s casually hot in jeans, boots, and a shirt that clings to his chest like it was custom-stitched there. For the first time, I notice the tattoo curling over one bicep—a devil’s tail winding toward a pointed tip on his forearm.

“Holy shit,” I say, before I can stop myself. “How tall are you?”

His brows lift, amused. “Six-five.”

“Can you bend a little? I’m getting a crick in my neck just looking at you.”

He chuckles and reaches for my bag. “Can I take this for you?”

“Wait.” I narrow my eyes. “What are you doing here? I thought you were in Moscow.”

“I was.” His eyes darken slightly. “I didn’t like the idea of you crammed on some bus to L.A., so I came to offer a more comfortable option.”

“You flew all the way from Moscow just to take me to Los Angeles?” I eye him suspiciously.

“I did.” He nods. “But I got here yesterday and waited until now to surprise you.”

I blink. I think that's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. "Are you shitting me?"

He grins. "That's such a weird American phrase."

So I repeat it in fluent Russian, just to mess with him. "?? ??????????? ??? ??????"

Now his eyes widen. "You speak Russian?"

"My parents insisted. You're right. Are you shitting me doesn't have the same ring to it in Russian."

"No, it doesn't," he agrees, and then gestures to the hallway. "Ready?"

I nod, and I'm rushing toward the stairs when Konstantin calls. "Are you leaving your door open?"

Fuck! I stop and sigh. Jesus, I've been even more forgetful than usual lately. I turn and run back to the door, scratching in my purse to find my keys.

"Let me." Konstantin takes them from me, his fingers brushing mine, and my heart flutters.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

I shake it off putting it down to feeling quite horny lately—I've read it's hormones. So, I'm horny? I shake the silliness from my head as I follow Konstantin down to his SUV. I'm still reeling from the surprise of seeing him, and when we pull into a private airstrip just outside of Vegas, I'm bowled over.

“You're flying me?”

“Only the best for the future astrophysics professor at UCLA.” He grins. “I hope you don't mind company for the trip?”

I feel my eyes mist as I shake my head, and my voice is a little wobbly as I say, “Not at all. You're a welcome surprise.”

Onboard the sleek, luxurious jet, I gape at the interior before dropping into buttery-soft leather. Konstantin pops a bottle from a cooler.

“I hope that's not champagne,” I tease. “You know I can't drink alcohol right now.”

He holds up the label. “One hundred percent fizzy apple juice. No alcohol.”

I laugh. “Do you remember everything I say?”

“When a woman talks about fizzy apple juice more than three times, it's worth remembering.”

The plane lifts as I sip my drink and study him. I've heard the stories—about what he does for Irina's brother, the rumors of violence, the time in jail. But sitting here now,



watching how he subtly monitors everything—how his body is always slightly turned toward the exits, how his hand occasionally brushes near his inner jacket where I’m guessing he keeps a weapon—he doesn’t scare me. If anything, I feel safer with him than I have in weeks and with anyone else.

“Are my horns showing?” he asks with a teasing smile.

“You’re not hiding them very well.”

We both laugh. As the flight gets underway, I glance around the aircraft. “Is this your boss's jet?”

“You mean Ruslan?” Konstantin looks at me, and I nod. “No. It belongs to the Romanov Corporation. My father’s younger brother.” His eyes darken. “He passed away several years ago, and now my sister and I are the sole heirs as my uncle never married or had children.”

“So you're independently wealthy from Ruslan?”

“We were, before we inherited my uncle's fortune,” Konstantin tells me.

“Then why do you do what you do?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“I suffered a loss and then found myself being blamed for a crime I didn’t commit,” Konstantin’s eyes darken and I suck in my breath as I see it. The anger. The danger that lurks inside him, but even seeing that, I’m at ease with him. Maybe I’m just projecting or needing someone to cling to and he is funny, dark, dangerous and fucking sexy as hell. He’s exciting. Something I have lacked in my life.

“Oh no.” My heart squeezes for him.

“Ruslan was the only one who believed in me,” Konstantin says, his voice dropping. “He fought to get me acquitted, something my own father, also an attorney, did not do.” He exhales slowly. “By the time I got out of jail my reputation was fucked. The career I had started carving out for myself was gone.” He gives me a tight, bitter smile. “You can’t become a weapons engineer with a criminal record.”

“You were going to be a weapons engineer?”

Konstantin nods. “Yeah, I was already studying and in the Marines.”

“I’m sorry.” I can’t imagine working so hard toward something and then having it all ripped away like that.

“Ruslan gave me a job. Something to focus on,” Konstantin continues. “He’s not just my best friend. He’s my brother.”

“I understand,” I tell him. “Well, technically, Leigh is my sister's best friend. They’ve known each other since they were three. But she’s like another sister to me.”

“You’re a lot like Irina,” Konstantin surprises me by saying. “You have acquaintances but a handful of people in your inner circle.”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “I don’t have a lot of friends.”

“You have real friends.” Konstantin's eyes hold mine. “Those are more valuable and worth a million false ones.”

It’s not long until the plane begins its descent. I feel my stomach drop, and my nerves start to tense.

But then Konstantin shifts and distracts me as he reaches into his jacket pocket and

sits beside me.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“I nearly forgot,” he says. “I have a surprise.”

“Another one?” My pulse jumps. My eyes narrow suspiciously as I tease, “You’re not about to propose, are you?”

He snorts. “Not today.”

He holds out a folded paper.

I take it. And the breath whooshes out of me as my eyes take in the full birth certificate of Lidiya Zorin.

Lidiya Zorin

Born: June 19, 1998

Father: Leonid Zorin

Mother: [Redacted]

I stare at the redacted line like it’s going to erase itself. “Why is the mother’s name hidden?”

“I’m looking into it,” he says quietly. “There are only a few reasons it would be blacked out. None of them simple.”

I trace the date of birth. My birthday. And then my eyes land on the father’s birth

date—same as my father, Sol Craft's.

"Konstantin..." I whisper, my eyes meeting his. "It's the same date as my father, Sol's."

"Which means," Konstantin says, "you may not be who you think you are."

The plane touches down before I realize it, and I whip my head toward him. "You timed that so I wouldn't get anxious about the landing."

"Of course I did." He grins smugly.

"Asshole." But I'm smiling as I say it.

Then, on impulse, I hug him without thinking. A full-body wrap of my arms around his neck. "Thank you. For everything."

His arms come around me slowly, then hold me tight. "You deserve answers, Tara. I'll help you find them, I promise."

The SUV is already waiting when we climb off the plane. When we pull up in front of one of L.A.'s swankiest hotels, my jaw drops.

"I can't stay here. I can't afford this place."

"It's on the house."

"You own this, don't you?"

"Inherited it. My uncle was the real estate type."

Inside, the staff greets him like he's royalty. The penthouse is pristine and tasteful. He shows me to a suite across from his.

"Pick any room but mine. That one's off limits," he jokes, pointing to the door on the left.

"How many bedrooms are there?" I eye the huge apartment that could swallow mine three or four times over.

"Five." He shrugs. "I'm going to jump in the shower and then drop you at your interview and go to a coffee shop while I wait."

Then it hits me in the chest. The fear! Holy fuck I'm here! I am in Los Angeles, and I am about to go for my dream job interview at UCLA! I reach out and grab his arm.

"Will you come with me?" Tumbles from my lips before I can stop it. "Obviously not into the interview but... If you don't mind waiting in the waiting area..."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

A warm smile splits his face, and his large hand covers mine, sending delicious shivers of desire through me.

“Of course,” Konstantin says, then leans forward and kisses my forehead. “I told you. I’m here for you, Tara.”

My heart jumps, and I have to stop the urge to reach my arms around his neck and kiss him.

“We’d better hurry or you’re going to be late for an interview the dean has already rescheduled to an earlier one for you,” Konstantin points out.

After a shower, I dress in flowing black pants, a cream blouse, and my best three-inch heels. Hair slicked into a chignon. Professional as hell. When I step out, Konstantin is waiting in a crisp dark suit, looking like a Bond villain I wouldn't mind seducing, and his sexy cologne is almost hypnotic.

“You look... stunning,” he says, his gaze dragging down, slow and deliberate.

“I liked you better in jeans,” I tease, trying not to squirm under the heat in his eyes.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he says in a low, gravelly voice filled with sinful promise. “Come on.”

He takes my hand and we head out.

On the ride over, we avoid anything heavy—no Russia, no secrets, no family drama.

He keeps it light, pointing out random landmarks, throwing out funny observations, making me laugh until the tight ball of nerves in my stomach starts to loosen.

When we get to UCLA, he walks me in like he's my personal security detail. Just before I'm called in, his hand brushes against mine—casual, but it sparks a bolt of warmth through me.

“You’ve got this,” he says, eyes steady on mine. “The job’s already yours. They just don’t know it yet.”

I nod, trying to hold on to that confidence as I step through the door. But as I take my seat for the interview, it hits me like a freight train—something else is waking up inside me. Dangerous. Complicated.

I’m crushing on Konstantin. And it’s the worst possible time to realize it.

15

RUSLAN

It takes five goddamn days to pry Nadia from RMSAD custody.

Five days of calls, favors, threats, and negotiations with men who operate like shadows with too much power. Five days of silence from Konstantin, too. Not a fucking word.

I don’t know which pisses me off more.

The drive south from Site 17 is long and silent. We’re hugging the coast now, where the Western Caucasus rises sharp and snow-dusted beyond the trees. Nadia sits beside me, arms folded, mouth clamped shut. She hasn't spoken since the moment she



stepped into the car. And I haven't asked her to. The silence is better. Gives me time to sort through the wreckage of my schedule, the damage she's caused, the mess waiting for me back in Moscow... and the rising storm I've been pushing down for a week.

I should be in Vegas. With her.

But instead, I'm babysitting my reckless little sister.

We've nearly reached the outskirts of Dragunov Village when her voice finally slices through the thick air between us.

"I can understand the pain of your loss, Ruslan," she says quietly. "But you've held onto it so long, it's turned to poison."

I don't look at her. Just keep my eyes on the winding mountain road.

"Everyone's lost something. That doesn't mean they burn down the world."

"Difference is," I say evenly, "the world let them forget. They buried their grief, moved on. I don't get that luxury. I have to remember. It's my fucking job."

"To keep it alive, or to use it?" she presses. "Because I can't tell anymore if you're honoring the past... or using it as a weapon."

The words hit a little too close. I inhale, hold it, let the burn settle in my chest, then release.

"What the fuck were you thinking breaking into a secure RMSAD site?" I turn to face her now. Turn the subject away from her accusations. My voice sharpens. "They already took your surgical license. Did you really want to give them another excuse

to bury you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“You helped them take that from me,” she spits back. “Don’t pretend otherwise.”

I snap my gaze to the road. “You’re lucky I stepped in. They wanted you locked away. You know what RMSAD does to its prisoners.”

“I’d rather be one of their lab rats than rot in the cage my brother built.”

“I gave you a chance, Nadia,” I grind out. “You pissed it away. So now you go under village watch.”

Her head jerks toward me. “You realize it’s the fucking 21st century, right? Village watch? Are you serious?”

“It worked before,” I say. “It’ll work again.”

“That was to keep virgins safe until their families married them off like breeding cattle.”

“Exactly.” I glance over and see her face pale.

“You are not seriously?—”

“You’re almost twenty-nine, Nadia,” I say, voice low, deliberate. “You haven’t married. I don’t think you’ve ever even taken a lover.”

She gapes at me. “What the fuck do you know about my love life?”

“Not much,” I lie. “But I don’t need to. You buried yourself in work. Now that you’ve burned that bridge, maybe it’s time to consider a different future.”

She lets out a disbelieving sound. “So what, you’re marrying me off like it’s the Dark Ages?”

“Oh, your days are going to get dark, little sister.” I shift in my seat. “Agafan and the watchers have their orders.”

“You bastard,” she hisses. “You’re not the same Ruslan I grew up with. The man I loved... he wanted to rebuild our territory without bloodshed. He had vision. Plans. Now? You’re just another tyrant dressing up revenge as justice.”

“I still have those plans,” I say flatly. “But honoring our ancestors means keeping the traditions that made us who we are.”

“And those traditions are why the world is divided,” she fires back. “Why hate and ignorance keep winning.”

I ignore it. We roll into the village, the tight-knit buildings silhouetted against the evening sun. A few kids play soccer near the fountain. The old clock tower still stands, worn and proud.

“I’m not a child anymore, Ruslan,” Nadia says as we stop in front of the town hall. “You can’t do this.”

“Then stop acting like one,” I say, as Pavel kills the engine. “You should’ve known better.”

“I was trying to help a friend.” Nadia tries to plead her case.

“By ending up in a cell? Yeah, that’s real helpful.”

“At least I still have friends to try and save,” she mutters, climbing out of the car.

The words hit like a punch. I sit still a second longer than I should, her voice ringing in my ears. Then I force the sting away and climb out just as Agafan walks out of the hall.

“Cousin,” he greets me with a nod. “It’s good to have you home.”

He turns to Nadia. “Hello, Nadia. We’ve got your room ready. You’ll be staying with Watcher Anna.”

“Awesome,” Nadia mutters, her tone thick with venom. She doesn’t say goodbye. Doesn’t even glance at me as she turns and heads down the path.

“She’ll come around,” Agafan says, watching her go.

“I don’t care if she does,” I lie again.

Agafan is shorter than me by nearly five inches, but his presence is solid. He’s more than my cousin—he’s my shield when I can’t be everywhere. He grew up in this village after Boris Mirochin murdered his parents in front of Agafan, who was ten at the time, and the entire town. Another lesson from the Mirochins in loyalty written in blood. Another reason to finish what I started.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“How is the building coming?” I ask him.

“We have made quite good progress in the past week,” he says. “The general’s men have helped a lot.”

“Good.” I nod and walk back to the car. Pavel pulls the back door open.

“Are you not going to brief the council?” Agafan watches me move to slide into the back seat of the SUV.

“I have business to attend to,” I tell him. “I will be back in ten days or so. I will brief them then.”

“We were hoping you’d at least stay one night,” Agafan presses.

“When I return, I will be staying for a few weeks,” I tell him. “We will have plenty of time to talk then.”

“Of course, Ruslan.” Agafan gives a slight bow and relents.

I pause. “In the meantime, start preparations for a Dragunov wedding ceremony.”

Agafan blinks. “You already have someone for Nadia?”

“No,” I say. “It’s for me.”

His brows rise. “May I ask who?”

“You’ll know when it’s time.” I clap his shoulder. “Trust me, I’ve chosen well.”

“No doubt,” he says. Then, after a beat and glancing into the SUV: “Where’s Konstantin?”

My jaw tightens. “On assignment.”

Something flashes behind his eyes—nothing but ice between them. But I don’t give a fuck. Konstantin serves me. Not the other way around.

Pavel closes the door and climbs behind the wheel.

I turn to Pavel. “Let’s go.”

“Back to the airport, boss?” Pavel asks once we’re inside.

“Yes.”

“Turn off your phone this time,” he mutters. “Or we’ll never leave Russia.”

I ignore that and check it anyway. Still no message. No update. No call. My pulse tightens. I dial a secure number.

It picks up on the third ring. “Boss.”

“Alexi,” I say. “Where’s Konstantin?”

“In Los Angeles.”

The answer hits harder than it should. What the fuck is he doing in Los Angeles. He’s supposed to be in Vegas.

“Is he alone?”

“No. He’s with Tara Craft.”

Fucking hell.

I inhale sharply. “In his penthouse?”



“Yes.”

The air in the car thickens and rage coils low in my gut.

“Stay on him. But do not engage with him.”

“Yes, boss.”

I hang up.

As the car pulls into the private airstrip, I walk toward my jet. Each step cuts sharper than the last. My head swirls with betrayal and fire.

“Tell the pilot,” I tell Pavel, “we’re going to Los Angeles.”

His brows shoot up. “What’s in LA?”

I climb the stairs without answering.

But in my head, the answer is clear.

The woman I should never have touched.

The woman I can’t stop wanting.

The woman who’s carrying another man’s child.

And the man who may just pay the price for getting too close to that woman.

16

TARA

The Dean's office is a blend of old-world charm and modern elegance, with mahogany shelves lined with books and a sleek glass desk at the center. He rises as I enter, his smile warm and welcoming.

"Miss Craft, it's a pleasure to meet you. Your recommendations are nothing short of stellar."

"Thank you, Dean," I reply, shaking his hand firmly.

He gestures for me to sit, and we discuss my academic achievements, aspirations, and the potential role at UCLA. Despite not having my final results yet, he seems confident.

"I have no doubt you'll excel. Let's proceed with setting up the formal interviews if you're happy to do so."

I'm buzzing as I leave his office, and the reality of the opportunity begins to sink in. This time next year, I could be lecturing here.

Happy? I'm practically floating. Is this really happening? UCLA. A real future. Maybe even a career that doesn't revolve around secrets, puzzles, or fake names. Maybe.

My eyes land on Konstantin, standing near the glass wall, tall and sharp in his suit. He sees me, and his posture shifts—upright, alert, but relaxed in the way only

someone like him can be. My heart hitches. My stomach flutters. God help me.

“Miss Craft,” the Dean says beside me. “I look forward to seeing you back here soon.”

Konstantin turns and approaches. His presence is commanding, and my heart skips a beat.

Konstantin holds out his hand to the Dean. “Konstantin Romanov. I’m a friend of Miss Craft’s.”

The Dean’s eyes light up. “Are you related to Melor Romanov?”

“He was my uncle.”

“A wonderful man. The Melor Romanov Trust has done more for this city’s hospitals and universities than most philanthropists combined.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

My brow arches as I glance at Konstantin questioningly. He meets my gaze, just for a second. No smugness, no pride. Just a soft smile and a quiet nod as he turns back to the Dean.

“And it will continue to do so,” he says calmly.

The Dean beams. “I know this is very short notice, but if you and Miss Craft have no plans this evening, I know my wife would be honored if you joined us at her charity event. It’s one of her favorites, a children’s hospital fundraiser.”

I open my mouth to politely decline. Konstantin beats me to it.

“We’d be honored.”

“Excellent! I’ll have the invitations couriered to your hotel.”

As the Dean walks off, I spin toward Konstantin. “I thought we were doing dinner and exploring L.A. nightlife?”

“Tara, you don’t turn down invitations like that if you want a job here.”

I fold my arms. “I don’t bribe my way into things.”

“You’re not. You’re demonstrating your intelligence and social awareness. It’s part of the game. Play it.”

I groan. “I didn’t bring cocktail wear.”

He flashes a grin. “Luckily, Rodeo Drive’s still open.”

He’s worse than Irina.

Two hours later, I’m staring at myself in the mirror inside the penthouse suite. I can’t believe I let him buy the damn dress. Deep emerald green, off-shoulder, cinched at the waist and flowing over my hips like silk poured over skin. It makes my hazel eyes look like polished stone. Gold flickers catch in the light when I turn my head.

I add nude heels, a gold clutch, soft makeup, and a twist in my hair. A small voice in my head whispers, You look like you belong. I’m not sure where I belong. I quickly shake off the negative thoughts.

I step into the hallway at the same time Konstantin exits his room and I freeze.

Holy God.

Konstantin in a tuxedo is... devastating. There’s no other word. The black silk lapels frame broad shoulders. Crisp white shirt. Bow tie. His hair swept back. He looks like the villain in a spy movie—the one every woman wants to kiss before she dies.

His eyes sweep over me and his mouth curves into something dangerous. “Absolutely stunning.”

My throat goes dry. I need a drink. Except—fuck. I can’t drink.

It’s going to be a long night.

We arrive at the venue just after eight. The Dean greets us like old friends, but I notice it—he’s more excited to see Konstantin. That name. That wealth. I can’t blame him. Still, he makes a point to introduce me to several of the faculty, including

someone from the physics department. “Rising star,” he calls me. I should feel flattered. Instead, I feel exposed.

The ballroom is gilded elegance, every table decked in florals and glassware, crystal chandeliers reflecting golden light across the polished floors. I find a spot on the edge of the room with my club soda, feeling like a fraud in a world built for royalty.

I glance at a nearby server. Champagne sparkles on his tray.

Just one sip.

I raise my hand.

“No,” a voice rumbles close to my ear.

I jump, nearly dropping my glass.

Konstantin’s behind me, a little too close, his breath warm against my neck.

“I’ll find some apple juice for you.”

I laugh. “Grinch!”

“You’ve been eyeing the champagne like it insulted your mother.” He extends a hand as a waltz begins. “Dance with me.”

“I’m warning you,” I say, placing my hand in his. “I’m terrible.”

“I’ll make you float.”

He’s not lying.

The second he wraps his arm around me, I melt into his frame. He leads with confidence, his movements fluid, easy, like the music is coming from his body instead of the orchestra.

I forget how to breathe.

“I thought you said you couldn’t dance,” he murmurs into my ear.

“It must be you,” I whisper. “You’re a very good leader.”

“Are you flattering me, Miss Craft?”

My eyes meet his and everything else fades. Just us. Heat. Breath.

“I’m telling it like it is,” I say, my voice barely audible.

He leans in.

Then he spins me.

The moment shatters.

When he pulls me back, his voice is rough. “What do you say we get out of here and head for that night we were originally going to check out?”

“I’d rather go back to the hotel,” I lie. “I’m tired.”

He doesn’t argue.

In the penthouse, he watches me.

“Would you like me to order something to eat? You didn’t eat much at the function.”

“I’m not hungry,” I say.

For food, anyway.

“I think I’m going to shower, then sleep.”

Konstantin nods, and I don’t look at him. I’m afraid that if I do, I’m going to embarrass myself as I jump his bones. Jesus, Tara. What the fuck is wrong with you?

I’m halfway down the hall when I slip.

The floor skims out from under me. Panic hits like a gunshot. I’m falling. My hands grab air. My heart spikes as my brain screams—the baby.



Then, arms wrap around me. Konstantin catches me before I hit the ground.

I grip his waist, burying my face into his chest, trying to breathe.

“Hey,” he says. “You’re shaking.”

“If I’d hit the floor...” My voice is thin, broken. “I could’ve lost the baby.”

Silence.

His body tenses.

I look up. His eyes blaze.

“But I didn’t,” I whisper. “I didn’t hit the floor because you caught me.”

“I will always catch you, Tara. No matter what,” he says, his voice hoarse.

Then he kisses me.

It’s not soft. It’s not sweet.

It’s everything I’ve held back crashing into one hot, consuming kiss. My hands grip his jacket. His mouth moves over mine with a hunger that sets my blood on fire.

We stumble toward his room, clothes falling in our wake—his jacket first, then my wrap, his bow tie, our shoes. At the bedroom door, he starts to undo the back of my dress and stops. His eyes are dark pools of desire.

He rests his forehead on mine. “We can’t do this, Tara.” His voice is a tortured whisper. “If things were different...”

“Is it because I’m pregnant?”

“Oh God, no.” He tells me there is nothing more beautiful than a woman carrying a

baby in her belly.

“Are you married?” I ask

“No.” He shakes his head.

“This is about your boss isn’t it?”

“There is so much you don’t know and so much I can’t tell you,” Konstantin whispers.

“Would you just hold me then?” I ask.

Konstantin bends and scoops me up, then lays me down on the bed like I’m a precious gem. He lays next to me and I snuggle against him with his arm around me and my head on his chest.

“This sounds like a weird question after we’ve been texting like crazy people the past week,” he snorts. “What about you?” Any broken hearts, unrequited love?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah!” He smiles. “What is your most recent heartbreak?”

“I’m not sure if I’d call it heartbreak.” I tell him truthfully.

“A passionate encounter with a stranger who drove away on his Harley into the sunset.”

Tara laughs. “You should write romance books.”

“Well what was it then?”

“He changed me. In one night.” I look at him. “I know that sounds ridiculous.”

“Life’s ridiculous.”

I stare at the ceiling. “It was just one spontaneous, impulsive night. You know the story. Girl gets stood up at an elegant bar, then in walks the handsome stranger who nearly knocked her over in the middle of the road that afternoon.”

“Mm,” Konstantin plays with my fingers. “I think I’ve seen this movie.”

I give a soft laugh and sigh. “It was just one night. It had been a really weird day. I’d just found the puzzle box, and then Gavriil and Irina asked me to...” Fuck! I nearly blurted it out. “Let’s just say it was a weird day. Then I’m rushing to get to the storage unit for my mother and nearly become a hood ornament to one of the most gorgeous men I’ve ever seen...” I squeeze my eye shut. “Fuck. Sorry.” I turn toward him. “It was a one-night stand complete with me sneaking out of his room at the crack of dawn. My first walk of shame.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“That’s the last time you heard from or saw him?”

“Yup. He flew away to whence he came!” I sigh. “And he got stuck in my head.”

“He’s a dick,” Konstantin mutters and something flashes in his eyes but it’s gone too soon for me to decipher it. “Trust me, you’re much better off without him. In fact, if he ever crosses your path again, run!” That time, he didn’t disguise the malice in his voice.

“Are you jealous?” I tease and run my hand down his chest. I feel the muscles ripple and my lips itch to kiss and taste him.

Konstantin sucks in a breath as I let my fingers trail down his torso. “Tara!” He groans, grabbing my hand. “I can’t do this.” His voice sounds like it’s laced with pain as he drags my hand away. “We can’t do this.”

He gently rolls me onto my back and leans over me. His eyes are dark pools of desire.

“This is because of your boss!” My eyes search his.

“There is so much you don’t know.” He kisses my forehead and rests his against mine, our breaths mingling. “My boss isn’t such a bad guy. You just have to get past his rough exterior.”

It dawns on me then. “You mean this wasn’t part of your assignment from the Dark Lord you work for?”

“Tara...” Konstantin breathes and rolls over, lying on his back and pulling me into him.

I rest my head on his chest. I know I should get up and leave, but I don’t want to. I’m warm, and even though this is the weirdest night I’ve spent with a man, I don’t want to go.

“It’s okay,” I assure him. “I’m well aware I was an assignment to you.”

“Was...” Konstantin says. “Well... I have to make it appear as if it still is.”

“I understand,” I say, stifling a yawn. “You don’t want your boss to kill you for sleeping with your assignment.”

“It’s not my life I’m worried about,” Konstantin tells me. “Ruslan is not a bad guy. He’s... just...”

“A Dark Lord on a mission to ensure I don’t come between his sister and her husband,” I say, my eyes starting to feel heavy.

“That was before...” Konstantin stops what he was about to say. “I think it’s become a bit more, though.”

“Like?” I start to snuggle closer to his warmth, and his other arm wraps around me, holding me, and I don’t hear his answer as I drift off to sleep.

I wake to his phone vibrating. The early rays of the morning sun are pushing in through the heavy drapes.

He slips from the bed to take the call.

A few minutes later, he returns, eyes dark.

“You have to go.” His voice has an urgency to it.

“What?”

“I’ve booked a car for you and I’ve arranged for my jet to take you back to Vegas.”

“Why? What’s happening?” I sit up and blink in confusion.

“Ruslan Dragunov is coming. He’ll be in L.A. soon.”

My breath catches.

He helps me dress and packs my bag with steady hands.

“I know you were sent to watch me,” I say.

He looks at me. Then nods.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“It stopped being about that a while ago. I care about you. More than I should.”  
Konstantin repeats what he said the night before.

“Why is he coming?” I ask. “Is he after my baby now because Irina hasn’t produced an heir?”

I see his eyes widen in surprise, and I tell him, “Yes, I know about that.”

“He does want Gavriil’s baby.” Konstantin confirms. “But he wants more than that.”  
His voice is tight as his eyes meet mine. “You have to disappear for a few days while he’s in town. When he doesn’t find you here, he’s going to go to Vegas.”

“What more does he want?” My brow furrows while my brain is still stuck on that part of the conversation.

Konstantin’s jaw clamps and the muscle on the side ticks. “He wants you, Tara.”

My heart drops. “Why me? I’ve never met the man.”

“Yes, you have,” Konstantin’s voice lowers. “Now, please, Tara. Do you have someone you can go to and lay low until I can get him back to Russia?”

I nod. “I know someone.”

“Good. I’ll need your phone.”

I don’t even ask why; I just give it to him, as my brain is trying to work out when I



met Ruslan Dragunov and why he wants me as well as the baby.

Konstantin hides the phone under the pillow and then ushers me to the elevator. At the elevator, he kisses me like it's goodbye.

“You were an assignment. But you became something else. So much, much more. That's the truth, no matter what happens next.”

I nod, stunned by his words, and my head is spinning.

As the doors close, Konstantin turns and pulls off his shirt.

My heart stops.

A dragon coils around his torso. I've seen a dragon like that before. It's the same as Damien's.

What am I missing? I feel like the answer is right in front of my eyes, but my brain is refusing to acknowledge it. As soon as I'm in the lobby, I'm ushered to an SUV waiting outside. As I slide into the backseat, the door closes. The SUV starts to pull off, and another pulls up.

The SUV turns to head down the drive and a man steps out of the newly arrived vehicle.

Tall. Dark-haired. Dangerous... gorgeous... My breathing becomes shallow. My eyes widen.

Damien.

My mind whirls. What is he doing here? Was it even Damien? My mind feels like it's

been stuffed too full of information, information it doesn't want to process. I know there is something I'm forgetting. My mind whirls back to that night at the bar.

I see Damien introduce himself, I'm Damien Romanov!

Romanov! My eyes fly open. The tattoos!

Later, on the jet, as the pilot hands me my shiny new burner phone, I ask him, "Does Konstantin have a brother named Damien?"

"No. But his cousin uses that alias."

My blood runs cold. "Alias?"

The pilot nods.

I stare out the window as the plane takes off.

"Apple juice, Miss Craft?" The air stewardess makes me jump. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“No, I was miles away,” I tell her, taking the glass of apple juice.

“I’m getting some breakfast ready for you.” She hands me a rolled-up magazine. “I thought you might like to do some light reading while you wait for breakfast.”

There is something in her eyes. Like they say, Take the magazine. I smile and take it. “Thank you.”

She smiles warmly and walks away.

For a while, I also thought Konstantin wasn’t a bad person. Now I’m conflicted. Yes, I know I was an assignment. Yes, I know I instigated the texting. Yes, I know what I was walking into. Well, part of it. My brow furrows. But at least I know he really is Konstantin Romanov. What I want to know is who the fuck Damien Romanov really is. I had a one-night stand with a man who didn’t even give me his real name.

I drop the magazine as I’m so deep in thought wondering who the fuck Damine Romanov is, that I forget it’s in my hand. I bend to scoop it up and freeze. It’s a Russian magazine with the headline: Moscow Number One Law Firm, Dragunov Law...”

The rest of the headline fades away as my eyes fall on the picture of Ruslan Dragunov, and my breath catches in my throat. My fingers feel stiff, and my body goes cold, and the book roars in my ears as I find the answer to my question—Damien is Ruslan Dragunov!

RUSLAN

The second I step into the Romanov Hotel, the air shifts.

Whispers trail behind me. Heads turn. Staff straighten like I've just marched into a damn inspection. While they may snap to my attention. I know that it is the Romanov domain. Even though Konstantin is my second-in-command, here he is the boss, which means one of his staff members is already about to give him a heads up that I just walked in the door.

Pavel follows behind, silent and stone-faced. He knows better than to speak right now. I'm holding back the storm—but just barely.

“Boss!”

I glance to the side. Alexi rushes toward me from the shadows of the lobby, his shirt half-tucked, hair still wild from sleep. He looks like hell.

“Where is he?” I ask, not slowing.

“Upstairs.” Alexi straightens his hair with his hands. “He has not come down or one of the men on shift would've alerted me.”

I nod but don't break stride.

The porter who mans the private penthouse elevator immediately opens it for me. I climb in, followed by Pavel and Alexi, and press the penthouse button. The elevator ride feels like it's taking a lot longer than normal. I clench my fists, jaw locked, while my blood thrums like a war drum under my skin.

I'm not sure if I'm here for answers or vengeance. Both feel the same right now.

It was my instruction—get close to Tara, do whatever it takes to get her away from Gavriil. But every day Konstantin has been getting closer to Tara has been torture. The more I tried to ignore it, to push it away, the more it seemed to stick. Like one of those thorn trees that gets a hook in you, and before you know it, you're tangled in it.

My obsession with the woman I shared one night with has both strengthened my cause and broken down a lifelong friendship. The elevator dings.

The penthouse is too quiet when I walk in. Tense silence. Like the walls are hiding something. I walk through the open space, straight to the hallway leading to the bedrooms. My boots hit the polished floor with deliberate weight. No one meets me. No one stops me.

I don't knock.

I slam open the door to Konstantin's room.

He jolts upright on the bed, bare chest heaving, hand already diving for the Glock on his nightstand. He's halfway up, gun pointed, eyes wild with sleep-hazed reflexes.

"Jesus," he hisses. "Ruslan!"

"You were expecting someone else?" My voice snaps like a whip.

"I wasn't expecting anyone," he groans and lowers the weapon, dragging a hand through his hair. "I could've shot you."

"Where is she?" My voice is low and level.

He frowns, confused for a moment. "Who?"

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

I give him a look that could melt steel.

Realization hits. I see it in the twitch of his jaw, the way his eyes flick toward the door.

He's out of bed in a second, wearing nothing but loose pajama pants. He crosses the hall and knocks gently on the bedroom door facing his.

"Tara?" His voice is soft. Too soft.

No answer.

He hesitates, then opens the door.

The bed's rumpled, but it's empty. I walk in and open the closet. It's empty. There's nothing on the dresser or in the drawers—she's gone.

Konstantin finds a folded note sitting on the nightstand.

He reads it, jaw ticking, then passes it to me.

Konstantin,

Thank you for helping me. I have to get back to Vegas.

Let me know when you're back, and we'll get a burger. My treat.

It's the least I can do after you helped me get to L.A. and for taking me to my interview.

Hugs,

Tara.

I read it twice. My pulse hammers in my ears.

"Did you know I was coming?" I ask, eyes locked on him.

"Did you send me a message?" Konstantin asks. "I don't remember seeing one?"

"No," I answer. "I thought I'd surprise you."

"That explains you barging into my room." His eyes flash with something for a second. "Why are you back in the States?"

"Get dressed," I order. "I've got breakfast on the way and we'll talk then."

Twenty minutes later, I sit at the penthouse dining table, steam rising from a fresh pot of coffee. I pour myself a cup, forcing calm into every motion. Across from me, Konstantin appears, showered, dressed, and collected.

He serves himself like this is any normal debrief.

It isn't.

"Any developments?" I ask.

"Nothing new," he says. "Did you find anything on Lidiya Zorin's mother?"

“No.” I shake my head, tapping my fingers against the mug. “The Morozovs have their records sealed up tighter than the Kremlin vaults.”

Konstantin nods slowly. “You think we’re veering too far from the mission? Tara’s not with Gavriil anymore. She’s got her UCLA job. She’s moving here. Maybe we should focus on rebuilding Drako Kremlin, and the plans to reclaim Dragunov Territory are on track.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I glare at him. “She’s pregnant with a Mirochin heir. You said it yourself.”

“And you’re comfortable using that?” His eyes search mine. “Leveraging a baby?”



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

His words are ice. I stare at him, and something cracks behind my ribs.

I blink—and the past flashes in red.

A child's cry. A tiny hand, limp and bloody, in mine. That feeling of utter helplessness, panic, and fear coursing through my veins.

I swallow hard.

“That’s why Tara is coming with me. I’m not leveraging the child,” I say through my teeth. “I’m helping a single mom create a stable environment for a child whose biological father has no interest in it.”

“You mean you’re going to prey on a vulnerable single mother who will warm your bed as an added bonus,” he scoffs and shakes his head. “Tara is intelligent and has her life mapped out. Do you even care about that?”

“Tara can have the same career anywhere in the world, including Russia,” I point out. “As you say, she’s intelligent and I’m sure she’ll pick up Russian quickly.”

“She already speaks Russian and very well,” Konstantin tells me.

“Then she will have no problems pursuing a career in Russia.” I shrug.

“And you’ll afford her that opportunity,” Konstantin says in disbelief. “Somehow I doubt it.”

“Tara planned to raise the baby alone,” I go on, ignoring his scathing remarks. “I’m giving her something better. A stable life and a father for her child— Gavriil doesn’t want it. I do.”

His brow twitches. “So what’s the plan? Keep her locked up like a princess in a tower? Make her your mistress?”

“No,” I say. “My wife.”

His coffee cup freezes midway to his lips. He sets it down slowly.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“All she and the child she is carrying mean to you is power and control,” Konstantin says, and I can see he is holding onto the threads of anger. “What will General Morozov think of your plans for his granddaughter?”

“Who do you think suggested it?” I watch the surprise register on his face.

“Does the general know Tara is pregnant with Gavriil Mirochin’s heir?” Konstantin asks.

“I made him aware,” I reply. “After which, he was even more on board with my plan to take Tara as my wife to protect her.”

“I told you, Gavriil is no longer in her life,” Konstantin growls. “I will make sure it stays that way.”

“How gallant of you to offer to be her watchdog,” I mock. “But it’s not just the Mirochins she needs protection from.” I lean back in the chair. “Tara and Gavriil’s search for information on Lidiya Zorin has alerted the RMSAD, and they have hired someone far more dangerous than the Mirochins,” I inform him. “Fuck, even I shuddered upon hearing the news.”

“There’s a bigger monster than you, my friend?” Konstantin looks at me challengingly.

“I would say you,” I hit back. “But the mere fact that this person has never been seen and has proven time and time again they can get to anyone, anywhere, at any time...”

“Fuck no!” Konstantin pieces it together. “What did Leonid Zorin do to warrant the RMSAD to send the Black Widow after Tara?”

I see the fear make him turn pale.

“He took something from them, and they want it back.”

“Does it have to do with why you asked me what was in the puzzle box?” Konstantin asks me.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“No. It has to do with the RMSAD's Jewel Initiative project.”

“What the fuck did Leonid Zorin take from there?” Konstantin’s brows knit.

“Subject number eleven—the New Jewel of Russia,” I tell him, and his eyes widen.

“We know her as Tara Craft!”

His body stills. He blanches. “No fucking way.”

I nod. “She’s the Jewel.”

Konstantin leans back like I’ve slapped him. He runs a hand through his hair, exhaling slowly.

“And now she’s pregnant...”

“Second generation from one of their test subjects,” I finish for him. “Do you get it now? She’s more than an asset. She’s a legacy.”

He stares at the table, speechless.

“And I’m taking her as my wife.”

He looks at me like I’ve lost my goddamn mind. “You do realize what that means? The RMSAD will come for her. For you. For the baby. They won’t hesitate. Not to mention they have their top fucking assassin on Tara’s trail.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“Then you’ve grown too overconfident, Ruslan.” He shakes his head. “We’re not ready. Our men are not ready.”

“We are now,” I say. “DS-Security is more than just a front. It’s the resurrected Dragunov Guard. And we’ve got the best general in the business training them.”

He’s quiet.

So I go for the jugular.

“Have you compromised the mission?”

His jaw tightens. “No.”

“What about your allegiance? I need to know where those are.”

“My allegiance has always been to you, Ruslan, and that has not changed,” Konstantin assures me, and I believe him.

He checks his watch and stands. “We need to get moving.”

I stand too.

“Did you fuck her?” I ask.

His shoulders go rigid and his fists clench.

“No.”

He looks me in the eye when he says it, and I believe him. But there is still something he is holding onto. I can feel it. He's coiled like a spring.

I goad him. "Pity." I shrug. "She sucks cock like she was born for it."

The punch lands clean on my jaw.

Pain explodes through my cheekbone as I stagger back. Before I can react, he grabs my collar and slams me against the wall.

"You think that is fucking funny?" he snarls. "I've done every damn thing you've asked. Even when it kills me."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

His breath is hot on my face. His eyes burn like fire.

“I’ll deliver Tara to you. I’ll step aside and let you have your power wedding. If she wants you, I can’t stop that.” Konstantin’s lip curls angrily. “But know this, if you ever talk about her like that again, or if you hurt her—” His eyes bore into mine, his warning clear. “You and I will have a problem.”

Pavel bursts in. Alexi behind him. They grab Konstantin, pulling him off me.

I stand, breathing hard, chest heaving—not from the hit, but from what I saw in his eyes. And I know our friendship will never be the same. I know that he will still stand by, loyal and serve our cause, but the trust between us is now strained, and his message was clear: if it came down to it, Tara would be the one he chose.

Konstantin has fallen for her. And he is not a man to fall for a woman lightly.

“What do we do with him?” Pavel asks, gripping Konstantin’s arm.

“Let him cool off,” I mutter.

Konstantin glares at me like he wants to rip my throat out.

I step close, brushing off my collar. “You’ll stay here. Get your head right. Sleep with a few hookers. Whatever you need to erase this mess in your chest. But if I catch you near Tara again?—”

I lean in.

“I’ll fucking end you. That’s where I stand on this.”

He doesn’t reply. Doesn’t need to. The fury in his eyes says it all.

I turn, walking away.

But I pause at the door.

“Let’s not let a woman we’ve only known a few short months ruin a lifelong friendship,” I say coldly.

I leave him there, fists clenched, surrounded by my men. And for the first time in years, I feel something gnawing in my chest that’s not just rage.

Sorrow, for a lifelong friendship torn apart by the most lethal weapon there is—love.

18

RUSLAN

The air in Vegas hums with heat and false promises. Glitter and shadows. I’ve walked into war zones with less tension than what knots in my gut right now. The building where Tara lives looks unassuming, a typical beige shell with too many secrets behind each door. I raise my fist, rap twice. Wait.

The door swings open. A woman—mid-twenties, maybe—leans against the frame like it’s her personal stage. Dark hair tucked behind one ear, brown eyes scanning me slowly like I’m a piece of meat she’s debating whether to taste. Her tank top clings to curves she’s clearly proud of.

A sultry smile lifts the corner of her lips. “Well, hello.”



I give her a polite smile, the one that usually makes people step aside. “I’m looking for Tara. Is she home?”

For a second, her brows flick up like I just asked her something unexpected. “Wow. Okay. I wasn’t expecting that. I was sure you were going to ask for Sabrina.”

My patience thins by the second. “Is Tara here?”

She crosses her arms, chest pushing out slightly. Still playing. “No. Sorry, she’s not. And she’s not expected back for four weeks.”

I shift my stance, jaw tightening. “Is Sabrina here?”

“Nope. She’s gone away for a week with her friend Leigh. That’s why I’m here. Apartment-sitting.” She leans in slightly, voice dropping a pitch. “You could always join me for a drink?”

“I appreciate the offer,” I say tightly, “but I’m in a hurry. Where did Tara go?”

She shrugs. “She didn’t leave an itinerary. But she mentioned she’s got offers from a bunch of universities across the States. Said she was flying out for interviews.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

I nod once, cool and controlled. “Thanks.”

“If you change your mind...” Her voice trails like a tease, but I’m already turning, mind racing.

As I head back to the elevator, my gut twists. The timing. The silence. The vanishing act. All of it tastes off. For a flickering moment, I wonder if Konstantin’s pulling strings behind my back. But that doesn’t make sense—he’s being watched too closely. I had eyes on him since I left L.A.

The elevator dings. I step in, press the button for the lobby, and exhale slowly.

No, this is something else.

Back at the Diamond Hotel, I swipe the key to my suite and step inside. The moment the door clicks shut behind me, my phone buzzes. Pavel’s name flashes across the screen.

“Da.”

“She’s here,” Pavel says.

“Bring her up.”

I end the call, toss my jacket onto the armchair, and head for the bar. My fingers wrap around the neck of the vodka bottle. I pour two fingers, swallow it in one long drag, and then grip the edge of the marble counter, breathing through the throb building

behind my eyes.

What the fuck am I doing?

Ever since the night I spent with Tara Craft, my life's been peeling apart like the skin from a wound. One night. One fucking night, and she embedded herself under my skin like a splinter I can't rip out. I'd touched her once and couldn't stop wanting more. She left before sunrise, and it took everything in me not to stop her. Not to chase her.

Since then, everything I was supposed to focus on—rebuilding the Dragunov name, reclaiming what's ours—got drowned under her. She wasn't just a siren in silk sheets. She was part of the fucking puzzle. She went from a seduction, to a liability, to the burning obsession that won't leave me the fuck alone.

A knock. I drain the second glass and call out, "Enter."

Pavel steps in, one hand guiding my sister into the room. Irina walks with her chin up, eyes sharp.

"Where's your usual henchman?" she snaps.

Pavel looks at me for instructions. I nod.

"That's all, Pavel. Close the door behind you."

Irina stands like a statue near the edge of the rug. She won't sit. Not yet.

My phone rings again. Konstantin.

I consider ignoring it, but Pavel opens the door again, just his head poking through.

“Ruslan, take the call. Trust me, you're going to want to hear what he has to say.”

“I have to take this,” I tell Irina. “Sit.”

I step into the bedroom and shut the door behind me, hitting the answer button.

“You better not fucking tell me you’re in Vegas,” I growl.

“I’m in lockdown in my penthouse at my hotel in Los Angeles. How the fuck would I get to Vegas?” Konstantin’s voice comes through the receiver, cool and calm. “I asked my contact at Doctor Pollock's office to let me know if there were any updates to Irina’s medical records.”

“Doctor Pollock?” I frown. “Which one was he?”

“Fertility specialist,” Konstantin reminds me. “You might want to visit Doctor Pollock while you’re there and have a word with him.”

“Why?”

“There were records missing the first time I checked. They just surfaced. And you’re going to want to see them.”

“Send them to me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“I can’t. My contact didn’t have time to download them, that’s why I told you to go see the fucker,” Konstantin tells me.

“What was in the records?”

A pause.

“Irina and Gavriil have opted for surrogacy.”

“What?” The floor tilts beneath me. “Who is the surrogate?”

His voice cracks. “Tara Craft.”

I grip the dresser edge, my nails biting into wood. “What else is in there that you want me to pay a visit to her doctor?”

“My contact, who is also a nurse, said there were odd notes marked on Tara’s file,” Konstantin tells me. “They were written on the chart the day she went for the physical and scans.”

“Is she okay?” A spark of alarm zaps through him.

“Under the transvaginal ultrasound, that’s a... ah... a..”

“I know what that is,” I tell him.

“Of course.” There is relief in his voice. “Plus fourteen days to pregnancy.”

“That could mean anything.” My brow furrows. “What did your nurse contact say?”

“She wasn't sure as she's never seen it on any of Doctor Pollock's charts before,” Konstantin tells me. “Oh... and another thing. After the ultrasound, the doctor wanted to see Irina and Tara in his office. Tara went to the bathroom and was locked in there.”

“Okay...” I'm not sure why that's significant.

“Your sister locked her in there, and she went to speak to Doctor Pollock on her own,” Konstantin adds. “After that, all of Tara's tests came to Doctor Pollock, so that she only saw him for all her follow-up appointments during her pregnancy.” A pause. “Tara never got to talk to the doctor that day. And on their chart, it has a note that Tara must be accompanied by either Gavriil or Irina for all her pregnancy check-ups.”

“I guess if it's there, baby, they want to be there through it all.” I'm wondering where Konstantin is going with this. “Nothing strange in that.”

“They hadn't had the egg implantation, but Irina had already booked all Tara's checkups!” Konstantin says. “Now I know you have to book these doctors in advance... But they hadn't even had the egg implantation yet.”

“Just planning ahead,” I suggest.

“Maybe,” Konstantin says. “Or maybe Tara isn't pregnant at all.”

“What are you saying?”

“It just sounds a little suspicious,” Konstantin says.

“Or, you're just bored and looking for something to do,” I point out. “But check into

it.”

“I will,” Konstantin says, and I’m guessing he’s already started.

My brow knits a little tighter. “When was the egg implantation?”

He gives me a date. And I know that date well and before he reminds me what night it was.

“The night I saw Tara and Gavriil together at the Diamond Hotel.”

Fuck. I knew that night didn’t add up. Photos looked off, too perfect, like staged snapshots. But I told myself it was jealousy. She was with him two weeks after being with me, and it made me want to burn the world down.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying it’s possible that Irina and Gavriil set the whole thing up. They knew I was watching. They needed you to think Tara was with Gavriil.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“To ensure I thought the baby was Gavriil’s and Tara’s. So the baby would be meaningless.” My voice turns steel. “It has to be a firstborn-blood heir.”

“Exactly.” Konstantin agrees. “They were sure I would show you the pictures of Gavriil and Tara. You’d have her discreetly leave town...”

“And with Tara gone and out of sight...” My sister is a fucking sneaky little bitch. “She gives birth.”

“Gavriil and Irina adopt the baby,” I finish for him. My jaw clenches until pain shoots up my temple. “Irina carries on stalling or hiding another pregnancy, ensuring she and Gavriil never have the firstborn Mirochin-Dragunov heir.”

“I don’t get my leverage to get Russia back from them,” I finish for him.

“Let me know if you go see Doctor Pollock,” Konstantin says.

“I will. Konstantin—where is Tara now?”

“In Vegas?” Worry explodes in his voice. “Is she not in Vegas?”

“Apparently, she’d been courted by a series of universities all over the country,” I explain.

“I only know about UCLA courting her. But other offers? She didn’t tell me anything about them. Do you want me to find her?”



“No. I’ll try another way.”

I hang up and return to the living room. Irina is lounging now, but her eyes track me.

“What do you want, Ruslan? Whatever I did, it’s a lie,” she says like she always does in situations she thinks she’s being accused of something. “Or have I already been judged and banished to Dragunov Village too?”

“That depends on how this conversation goes.” I lift a brow and test the waters. “You asked where Konstantin was.”

She shrugs. “I don’t really care. It was more of an observation.”

“You used to have a giant crush on Konstantin,” I remind her.

“First, he’s my cousin,” Irina points out.

“Distant cousin,” I remind her.

“If I admired him in a crushing type of way, it was back before you and he became cyborgs and lost all of your humanity,” Irina tells me with a smug smile.

I ignore her. “He was with Doctor Pollock.”

That lands on the mark. Irina’s eyes flicker, and I see it—the moment the mask slips.

I didn’t want to believe it. That my sister was still scheming. Which means her allegiances have changed, and I can no longer trust or count on her. But I can not let her know that I no longer do. I walk to the bar, pour two drinks, and set one down in front of her.

“Is there anything you want to tell me, little sister?”

“That depends. What do you think you know?” Irina is careful to say.

We stare at each other across the room like loaded guns. I lift my glass.

“Let’s start with that sobbing phone call you made, the one where you hinted Gavriil was cheating. Then Nadia ‘accidentally’ talks about you and Gavriil wanting to adopt. You wanted me here, and you knew that would make me come here.”

“Calling my brother when I’m upset is a crime now?” Irina says, looking hurt.

“It’s clever,” I admit, holding the crystal glass in front of me as I lean against the bar.  
“Fuck. I even fell for it.”

Something flashes in Irina’s eyes—a smug look before it’s gone.

“You know how much I hate infidelity,” I continue. “You know how much I hate the Mirochins. You also know that I wanted to look for something to bring Gavriil down with.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“That’s a lot of hate you carry around with you, brother,” Irina says softly. And this time, the sadness that darkens her eyes is real.

“Well, it’s a sad day when your family conspires against you,” I point out.

“I never conspired against you,” Irina denies.

“No?” I take a sip of vodka. “Let me continue. While I was worried about you and Gavriil adopting, the two of you were seeing your fertility doctor, getting ready to have a baby.”

The color drains from her face. I see it. She knows she’s been caught.

“So while I was worried about Gavriil's mistress stressing you out and coming between the two of you, you got Tara to be your surrogate.” I watch her. “Just to ensure, in case you were being followed, the day of the egg implantation, you set the stage to look like Tara and Gavriil were spending the night together.”

Irina’s eyes just narrow, and she doesn’t say anything. “You don’t drink vodka anymore?” I look at her untouched drink.

“I don’t drink alcohol anymore. It ages you.” Irina doesn't even look at the glass.

“Very well then. Let me get to the best part of the story,” I say. “You needed Tara out of sight before her stomach started to show, and you needed her to leave in a way that wouldn’t raise suspicion.” My eyes hold hers, and she doesn’t flinch. “What better way than to get your brother to drive her out of town. Then, when she gave birth, you

arranged to look like you had adopted an unwanted pregnancy.” I salute her. “You adopt your own flesh and blood. Flesh and blood that, as an adopted Mirochin, had no obligations to them or our family. Being adopted, it would not inherit the Russian and European side of the Mirochin Bratva.” I salute her with my vodka. “Tell me, what were you going to tell the child when it found its adoption papers?”

“That its father was a lout. Arrogant and...” She closes her eyes and swallows before looking at me. “Yes. Fine. I did it. But you left me no choice.” She rises. “You’re obsessed with the Dragunov-Mirochin heir like it’s some fucking Holy Grail. And you’ll rip it from anyone’s hands to get it.”

“I am trying to get us back what’s rightfully ours!”

“And using a baby. An innocent baby.” Irina laughs bitterly. “You sound just like Boris Mirochin.”

“Don’t you dare?—”

“Oh, I dare. Someone has to say it without fear of landing up in the Dragunov version of Siberia.” Her eyes heat with anger, and she throws another jab at me for exiling Nadia to the village. “You’re becoming the very man you loathed.”

“I’m nothing like that evil man.” I seethe.

“No, you’re worse,” Irina throws at me. “At least Boris Mirochin owned who he was. You wrap it up in the guise of this big noble cause to raise the Dragunov Legacy from the ashes.” Her lip curls in disgust. “But it’s nothing more than a cover for your hatred and revenge against the Mirochins.”

“It’s retribution,” I hiss.

“Always the attorney,” Irina accuses. “Cloak the truth with a noble bow and ride it all the way to justice on your high horse.” Her fists clench. “One man’s truth is another man’s lies. Isn’t that what grandfather always said?”

“Grandfather was weak. He thought things could be done in peace and with a handshake,” I sneer. “The Mirochins don’t know the meaning of peace.”

“That’s not true,” Irina’s voice drops. “You want revenge so badly, you’re willing to destroy lives. Even if you get your heir, then what? Moscow? Europe? What do you do with them?”

“I rebuild what they stole. Dragunov Territory, and rebuild the legacy so our people can once again prosper without the constant threat of Mirochin retaliation. Or getting caught up in another brutal Mirochin family feud.”

“That generation of Mirochins is gone,” Irina points out. “It was not Oleksi or Gavriil that killed our father or...” She swallows. Her voice lowers. “Or Alisa and Eva.” The names slice through me even after nearly thirteen years. “There are better ways,” she says. “But blood is all you know.”

My eyes bore into her. She stands looking at me like she has all the answers. But she doesn't, and I think it's time for some hard, cold truths. Irina wants to play this game. I've shielded her from the truth for too long now.

“Why do you think Gavriil was the Mirochin who married you?” I ask, my voice neutral.

“He volunteered for the marriage for the sake of the Mirochin and Dragunov alliance,” Irina answers.

“Oh, little sister, you think you’re the only one who can manipulate?”

Irina blinks. “Gavriil volunteered,” she insists.

“No. I chose him.” I feel the lick of the searing burn flicker as I unlock the door to one of the most painful days of my life. “Because he was the one who killed Alisa. And Eva.”

She staggers like I slapped her.

“You’re lying.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Do you know why I wasn’t there when the raid happened in the early hours of the morning?”

“Alisa said you had gone out early on business,” Irina answers.

“No. I wasn’t there because the night before, I discovered who Alisa really was.”

“I don’t understand?” Irina looks at me, confused.

“The night before our daughter's first birthday. My wife of two years told me she was sent by Boris to get close to me, our family, the villagers, and manipulate me anyway he wanted her to.” I give a harsh, mocking laugh. “But she claimed to have fallen in love with me. She wouldn’t say, but she begged me to take her and Eva and leave that night. Just run away, she said. Away from the pressure of the village, my job as an attorney and the Mirochins.”

“Alisa was a spy?” Irina’s voice cracks as she looks at me, stunned.

I nod slowly and take a breath. “I left the village that night enraged, hurt, betrayed by the woman I loved. I got in my car and just drove.”

“I’m sorry, Rus.” Her voice is soft and wobbles with emotions while her eyes fill with tears.

“When I got back to the village, there was chaos.”

Tears slide down Irina’s cheeks. I’ve never seen her like this.

“I was running, calling for Alisa, for you and our siblings.” I swirl the liquid and stare into the glass, and it’s like I can see the images playing in its depth. “She came out of nowhere. Screaming, he’s going to kill us, he knows I know. I wasn’t sure what she meant. The place was chaotic. But as I turned, I saw Gavriil. He was aiming in our direction. The gunshot rang out. Alisa lurched forward, pushing me out of the way, and the bullet went through her and into Eva. I held them both as they died in my arms. When I looked again, Gavriil was gone, and no one believed me that he’d killed my wife and my one-year-old baby girl.”

Irina covers her mouth. “Oh my God.” She walks to me slowly, hesitates, then throws her arms around me. Her shoulders shake with sobs. I hold her.

“I’m sorry, Rus. I knew you were there with them when they died. I was the one who eventually got you to let go of them.” She takes a shaky breath. “But I didn’t know the rest of it.” She squares her shoulders and steps back. “I’ll help you and stick to our plan.”

We talk for twenty minutes more before Irina leaves. When she walks out the door, I know my sister loves me, but I also feel that even after my confession, her loyalties still lean to her murdering husband.

The phone rings again. The screen says: The General.

I answer. But the voice is female. Russian and ice-cold.

“Mr. Dragunov.”

“Who is this? Where is the general?”

“The general is busy. I borrowed his phone.” She tells me.



“What the fuck do you want?”

“The same thing you do,” she says. “Tara Craft.”

My blood chills. “Why?”

“Why do you want Tara Craft, Mr. Dragunov?” she counters.

“I want to protect her, and as you’re not calling on your phone or giving me your name yet, I presume you’re the opposite of my goal.”

“On the contrary, I have no intention of causing her harm. In fact, I’m the one who has ensured she remains hidden all these years. I’m sure you can’t say the same. You’ve known her for almost two months already, you’ve unraveled twenty-four years of work.”

I tense. “Who the hell are you?”

“Someone who has had to stoop to asking you for help.” She pauses. “Someone in your team or close to you wants you dead and they’re framing me for it.”

19

RUSLAN

“There is always someone trying to kill me,” I tell her. “But I’m pretty sure all the people in my inner circle are loyal to me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“You don’t believe me now, but you will.”

“If you’re who I think you are,” I say, pacing to the window, my grip tightening around the phone, “we are not on the same side.”

“I am not at all who you think I am,” she replies, with a slight pause, like she’s letting the implication hang between us. “The world is full of smoke and mirrors. Rarely is something what you think it is on the surface.” A slight pause. “For instance, I know roughly three people in your life who are lying to you, and it’s not just to you.”

“If you’re talking about my sister, I already know that,” I assure her. “If you want to get my attention, you’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Let’s see how good your memory is and if you understand what I’m sending you.”

A notification pings. It’s an encrypted message. I open it and scan the attachment—it’s a black-and-white photo. I frown. Is this? I hold it. My eyes fall to the writing at the bottom of the picture.

“Is this what I think it is?” I ask, my eyes falling on the date.

“The breadcrumb that will lead you to the proof that you and Tara are being lied to by people close to you,” she says. “Everyone has their own agenda.”

“Including you,” I point out.

“My only agenda is the safety of those I treasure most in the world,” she replies.

“Your agenda is similar.”

“How do I know you’re not leading me into a trap?”

“You don’t,” she says frankly. “I’ll give you two hours to go find the proof, and I’ll call you in two hours.” She pauses. “Oh, and I’m going to need you to switch out a file for me and hang on to the one in the filing cabinet.”

“You want me to steal personal files?” I hiss.

“Really?” She scoffs. “You’ll steal weapons and drugs from the Mirochins, but you draw the line at files?”

“They are personal,” I reply.

“So is the mother who holds her dead child in her arms from the guns or drugs you’ve let be distributed on the street,” she points out.

“It’s business,” I defend our business. “Don’t you kill people for a living?”

“Would you rather I did it for fun?” she quips. “Now, will you swap the records?”

“Why not?” I drawl. “Let’s add theft of personal files to my B&E charge.”

“Great. Wait on the corner near the building. A courier will walk past and hand you an envelope. Swap the documents. I will call you back in two hours.”

The line goes dead, and I stare at it for a moment.

I look at the photo again and know exactly where I’m going. I wait outside the target building and watch as the employees pile out as the day ends. Finally, the last person

locks up, and I break in. I go straight for the records, and within a few minutes, I've found the two files I'm looking for. I go through the first one, snapping pages.

I get close to the end and freeze. What the fuck! I snap as many shots of the last few pages in the thicker file. Then I turn to the second, smaller one, flip through, and by the time I'm done I must look like I'm catching flies with my fucking mouth. I swap the contents of the file, flip through, and get the horrible feeling that I'm not going to like the plan the woman on the phone is concocting.

I snap all the pages, put the files back in place, then leave as if I've never been there.

Forty minutes later, I'm sitting in a corner coffee shop nursing a cold cup of coffee and staring at the reports in awe. I think I know what this means. I'm not sure how I feel about it right now. What I do know is the frost queen is right—I'm being played. And the thing is, I'm not sure she isn't one of the players.

The phone rings. This time it's an unknown number.

"Da," I answer.

"Now, do you realize what I'm talking about? You've been manipulated and lied to," she tells me.

"All this cloak and dagger for what?" I hiss.

"The oldest three motives in the book are power, greed, and love."

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“If I help you, how do I know you won’t cross me?”

“You don’t,” the woman says. “That’s what trust is about. Right now, you don’t seem to have a lot of people you trust.”

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

“Do what you do best,” she says. “You’re going to be the biggest dick on the planet. It’s time to scare out the cockroaches. The first thing you’re going to do is warn Tara,” she says.

I listen to her plan wondering if I’m mad to do this but the more I listen to her the more I realize she’s right.

“When this is over,” she promises, “we’ll get the Dragunov territory back.”

“Wait!” My eyes shoot up. “You’re from Dragunov Territory?”

“Born and raised,” she tells me. “I’ll be in touch.”

The line goes dead, and I sit looking at the phone as it goes to magically conjure her name. But obviously it doesn’t. I take a deep breath. “Time to go be a dick.”

TARA

The burner phone stares up at me from the kitchen counter like it’s taunting me. One week. That’s how long it’s been since Konstantin gave it to me, and it’s also how

long I've gone without hearing from him. I keep telling myself I don't care. That I'm mad. That I want nothing to do with him or the mess he pulled me into. But my hand still twitches every time it buzzes.

Nothing. Again.

I wrap my fingers around a dotty ceramic mug and flick the kettle on. Tea. That's what I need. Something warm. Something soothing. Something that isn't this swirl of confusion and fury and... longing. God, I hate that I miss him. I knew what I was getting into. He never pretended to be a nice guy. But still. He had this way of making me feel like I wasn't just a means to an end even though we both knew I was.

Steam curls up from the spout, fogging the window. I pull the tea bag through the water and stare out at the tree line behind the cabin. The late afternoon sun makes everything look a little too golden, a little too peaceful. Like nature's mocking me for how fucked up everything's become.

I press the mug to my lips just as a blur of motion flashes past the window.

My heart drops into my stomach. I jump back from the sink and grip the counter, breath frozen in my chest. Then I see him. Stocky, blond, square-jawed—Clyde. I press a hand to my chest and try to calm the thundering in my ribs.

He raps twice on the back door. I unlock it and swing it open.

"Clyde," I breathe. "What are you doing here?"

He gives me that easy, good-ol'-boy smile. "Just came to check in. Thought you might want to go for a walk. Clear your head."

I glance out. The wind's picking up and the air smells like a storm is building.

“Not right now,” I tell him. “I was just making tea. Want to come in for a cup?”

He shakes his head. “I’m in a walkin’ mood. Another time.”

I nod slowly, trying to keep the tension out of my voice. “Sure. Another time.”

He gives me a nod and strolls off down the path.

I close the door and bolt it, leaning against the frame for a beat. What the hell am I doing out here? How did I go from finishing my PhD to hiding out in some no-name town with burner phones and secret watchmen?

I grab my tea and head into the living room, still dunking the teabag out of habit. I have a destination in mind. The comfortable, warm couch. I walk, head down, staring into the swirling liquid like it holds answers I can’t find anywhere else.

“Don’t freak out.”

The voice punches through the silence like a gunshot.

I scream and launch my mug in the direction of the sound. Hot liquid splashes through the air, and the cup clatters against something solid.

“Fuck—Tara!” he groans.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Konstantin?” My eyes go wide. I stand, still trembling, my knees feel like jelly. “What the hell—are you insane?!”

“I caught it,” he says, holding the still-dripping mug. “Mostly.”

I blink at him. He’s standing in the middle of my living room like he didn’t just break every unspoken rule of cabin exile. And how the fuck did he find me?

“How—why are you here?”

He shrugs. “I have my connections.”

“Clearly.” My voice sharpens. “What do you want?”

His expression tightens. “We need to talk.”

I cross my arms and scan the space behind him. “Where’s your boss? Damien Romanov? Or should I say Ruslan Dragunov?”

Konstantin winces. “You know.”

“Of course I fucking know. That’s part of why I’m hiding out here, remember? Your Bratva boss had a one-night stand with me and then sent you to be my shadow and ensure I don’t go near his brother-in-law.”

“That’s not—Tara, please. Can I get a towel?”



“No,” I snap. “You can get out.”

He lets out a slow breath, chest rising and falling under the damp shirt. “I know you're angry. You have every right. But you can be mad at me later. Right now, you and your baby are in danger.”

I laugh—sharp and bitter. “Isn't that why I'm here in paradise? To avoid being dragged back into your boss's twisted chess game?”

Konstantin steps closer. “This isn't about Ruslan anymore. When you and Gavriil started digging into Lidiya Zorin, you caught the attention of the RMSAD. They've dispatched someone. Someone... dangerous.”

I narrow my eyes. “I'm not Lidiya Zorin. There's no proof.”

“There is,” he says quietly, pulling a packet from his jacket and handing it to me.

The pages rustle in my hands. It's mostly redacted, but what I can see it's some kind of genetic program. Then my eyes land on a page titled: Test Subject #11. I see the photo. My photo. Except it's not. I've never seen this photo before. The child in it has the same face. Same eyes. Same scar above the brow. My heart slams against my ribs.

There's a blue mark under her arm.

“That's not me,” I whisper.

“Why not?”

I lift my shirt sleeve. “No diamond mark.”

He reaches out and brushes his fingers against a red spot on my skin. “What’s this?”

“I had a mole removed. I remember. Even at three, I remember it hurting like fucking hell.”

“It could have been a tattoo,” he says, voice low.

A third voice cuts in. “It was.”

I spin around.

“Sam?” My eyes lock on him. “What do you mean? Who tattoos a toddler and then removes it?”

“It had to be done, sweetheart.”

My stomach twists.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“Great. So I’m not just a walking incubator—I’m a genetically modified tomato that got tattooed long before I could walk, let alone drink alcohol or smoke.”

Konstantin actually chokes on a laugh, but catches himself. “You’re not a lab rat or a tomato. But we don’t have time to unpack this here. You need to come with me. Now.”

Sam nods. “Clyde’s going too. You’ll be okay.”

My voice comes out flat. “Sure. Just your average Tuesday—mad Russian dragon lords, hitmen, and a secret Russian genetics project. Let’s go.”

They take me to another cabin—this one older, deeper in the hills. Creepy as hell. My skin crawls as we pull up.

“I’ve seen this movie,” I mutter. “It ends with me screaming and running barefoot through the woods. With an axe murderer chasing me, and his face is covered with a distorted mask.”

Clyde stays in the car. Konstantin leans over me to open the door and places a hand on my back. I yank away.

“Touch me again and I’ll bite you.”

He raises both hands. “Fair.”

He opens the door. I step in—and freeze.

“Hello, Tara. It’s good to finally see you again.”

20

TARA

Damien... no it’s Ruslan.

My body reacts before my brain catches up. Rage. Hurt. Lust. Everything flares to life at once, and it’s almost too much.

I whirl. “Nope. I was hoping for a little old grandmother in a bed, or even some porridge on the table. But I don’t feel like facing the big bad fucking wolf today.”

Konstantin blocks the door. “Please. Just listen.”

“You don’t want me to lose control,” I warn. “You think I’m scary angry now? Try adding pregnancy hormones. You’ve read my genetic profile—explosive temper escalating quickly to rage and strength. I become the fucking She Hulk.”

“I won’t bite, I promise,” Ruslan says. “Konstantin, you can leave us.”

“No, but I might!” I turn and fold my arms across my chest as his eyes travel over me like he’s caressing me. Fuck.

Konstantin hesitates. I glare at him. “You leave me here, and I swear, I will haunt you.”

“I’m sorry, Tara,” he says softly. “This is between you and him.”

“You traitor.”

He closes the door behind him. I stand in the silence, heart pounding.

“Come in, Tara, and please sit.” Ruslan gestures to the sofa.

“No, I’m good standing, over here by the door,” I respond.

He watches me, eyes dark, intense. “You look... beautiful.”

“Don’t.”

“Fine.” He nods. “Let’s talk.”

“No, let’s not. Let’s pretend you talked, but don’t really. You go your way. I’ll go mine.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

“I can’t do that.” His voice lowers. “Not while you and the baby are in danger.”

The words suck all the air from the room. I stare at him.

“Of course you know about the baby,” I mutter. “That’s what this is about. Trying to take my baby.”

He hands me a file. I snatch it and flip it open. Medical records. Mine.

“You stole my records?”

“I had to know the truth.”

“And now you do,” I snap, shutting the file and shoving back at him. “You wanted to steal my records so I couldn’t go back to Doctor Pollock as he no longer had me on file.”

“At least I finally got the truth of what my sister might be up to,” he says. “Tara, Gavriil and Irina are using you to get back at me. You’re not pregnant. The egg was never implanted. They went to the clinic to start IVF.”

“Are you saying they set everything up?” I flip through the file. “But I had a sonogram in Moscow and it was there...”

“Did Gavriil organize it perhaps?” he asks me.

“Yes,” I nod, my brow knitting. “No, that’s not right. I peed on a stick. There were

two lines.”

“The real blood tests are in there from the day the doctor phoned to give you your results,” Ruslan tells me, and I flip back to the blood tests. Negative.

I feel like I’ve been punched in the chest. My fingers shake as I flip through the file. Everything is there. Egg implantation. Follow-up notes. Irina’s additional IVF cycle. My stomach turns—None of it is mine, it’s all the procedures Irina’s had around the same time I was supposed to be having egg implantation.

“They were using me as a decoy to throw you off what they were really doing?” My eyes search his.

He nods.

The tears come fast, hot, uncontrollable. “I trusted them.”

Ruslan drops to his knees in front of me. His hands cradle mine.

“I didn’t know,” he says. “But now that I do... I’ll protect you. Always.”

My breath hitches.

“I... I don’t need protection if I’m not pregnant.” I sniff.

“Tara... you still do,” Ruslan says to me. “The RMSAD and the Black Widow are after you, regardless of whether you’re pregnant or not.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “That is on me.”

“How could it possibly be on you?” My brow furrows. “I’m the one who went rushing off to Moscow and dug around. I’m the one who alerted you.”

He's quiet, and his eyes search mine. "Whose idea was it to go to Moscow?" His voice is low.

My eyes widen. No, fuck. This is too much. "Irina's." My brow furrowed. "I can't believe they would do this to me."

His forehead presses to mine.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers. "This is all my fault. I pushed my sister to do this, and now you're all tangled up in this." He closes his eyes. "Fuck. When I saw you again, this is not how I expected it to go."

"Did you expect a cup of tea hurled at you perhaps?" I laugh.

"Is that what happened to Konstantin's shirt?" He laughs, and my heart lurches. Other parts of my body heat.

Our laughter sobers, and our eyes lock. I feel myself being pulled into the depths of his blue eyes.

His voice is a low growl, a promise that slithers down my spine like a serpent coiling around its prey. "Tara," he whispers, and my name on his lips is a sin, a prayer, a curse all at once. His eyes—those fucking eyes—darken like a storm rolling in, and I can feel the heat of his gaze searing through me, branding me as his.



*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

I don't move. I can't. My body is a traitor, every nerve ending alive and screaming for him. My nipples harden under the thin fabric of my T-shirt, aching for his touch, his mouth, his teeth. My pussy throbs, wet and desperate, and I hate myself for how much I want him.

"There has not been one minute of a day since we've been apart that I wasn't thinking about you," he says, and his voice is rough, raw, like he's been choking on my name for months.

I swallow hard, my throat dry, my pulse racing. I try to speak but no words come out. I'm mesmerized by his gaze. I'm trembling.

He moves closer, and the air between us crackles with electricity. I can smell him—spice and leather and something darker, something primal that makes my knees weak. His hand reaches out, and I flinch, but he doesn't touch me. Not yet. He just hovers there, his fingers inches from my cheek, and I can feel the heat of his skin like a brand.

"You think I'm lying?" he murmurs, and his lips curve into a slow smile that's equal parts dangerous and delicious. He stands and pulls me up with him. "You think I didn't dream about this? About you? About how you taste, how you feel, how you fucking scream when I'm inside you?"

My breath hitches, and I can feel the slickness between my thighs, my body betraying me with every fucking word. "Oh, God," I whisper. I don't want him to stop. I want him to fucking ruin me.

He laughs, low and dark, and finally, finally, he touches me. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip, and I can't help but part my lips, my tongue darting out to taste him. He groans, deep and guttural, and then his mouth is on mine, claiming me with a kiss that's all teeth and tongue and desperation.

I moan into his mouth, my hands fisting in his shirt, pulling him closer. His body is hard against mine, every muscle taut with restraint, and I can feel the thick length of his cock pressing against my stomach. Fuck. I want him. I want him so bad it hurts.

He breaks the kiss, his breath ragged, his eyes burning into mine. "Tell me you missed me," he demands, his voice rough with need.

I shake my head, but my body is screaming yes, yes, yes. "I didn't," I lie, but my voice is shaky, weak.

He chuckles again, and then his hand is sliding down my body, over my breast, my waist, my hip, until he's cupping my ass, pulling me against him. "Liar," he growls, and then his mouth is on my neck, his teeth sinking into my skin, marking me as his.

My breath hitches, sharp and ragged, as his hand fists in my hair, yanking my head back so hard I feel the sting of tears prick at the corners of my eyes. His other hand—rough, calloused, fucking brutal—slides down my spine, nails digging into the soft flesh of my ass. I arch into him, my body betraying me, craving the heat of his touch like a goddamn addict.

"Fuck," I whisper, the word trembling on my lips, barely audible over the sound of my own heartbeat thundering in my ears. It's not just a word—it's a plea, a prayer, a fucking surrender to the man who owns me, body and soul and this is only the second time we've met.

His lips crash into mine, bruising, possessive, and I moan into his mouth, my tongue

tangling with his in a dance that leaves me dizzy. He tastes like vodka and sin, and I can't get enough. His cock presses against me, hard and unyielding, and I grind against him shamelessly, desperate for the friction, for the way he makes me feel alive and ruined all at once.

"You're mine," he growls against my lips, his voice low and dangerous, sending shivers down my spine. His fingers work the buttons of my jeans, and before I know it, they are sliding down my legs. His hand moves from my ass to my thigh, hiking my leg up around his hip as he pins me against the wall. The cold brick bites into my back, but I don't care—all I can think about is the way his body feels against mine, the way his cock throbs against my soaked panties.

"Say it," he demands, his breath hot against my neck as he nips at the sensitive skin there. "Say you're mine."

"I'm yours," I gasp, my voice breaking as his fingers slide under the lace of my panties, teasing the slick heat between my thighs. "Fuck, I'm yours."

He doesn't wait, doesn't hesitate. He tears my panties off with a single, brutal motion, and I cry out as his fingers plunge into me, thick and unrelenting. He fucks me with his hand, his thumb circling my clit in tight, punishing circles that have me trembling, my nails digging into his shoulders as I cling to him for dear life.

"You like that don't you beautiful Tara," he murmurs, his voice dark and satisfied as he watches me fall apart.

I'm close, so fucking close, but he pulls his fingers out of me suddenly, leaving me empty and aching. I whimper, my hips bucking against nothing, but he silences me with another kiss, deep and filthy.

"Not yet," he says, his voice a low growl that makes my pussy clench with need. "I'm

not done with you.”

He spins me around, pressing my chest against the wall, and I hear the sound of his belt unbuckling, the rustle of fabric as he frees his cock. I bite my lip, anticipation coiling tight in my stomach as he presses the thick head of his cock against my entrance.

“Tell me what you want” he commands, his voice rough and demanding.

“Please,” I whimper, my voice trembling with need. “Please, fuck me.”

He slams into me in one brutal thrust, and I scream, the sound echoing off the walls as he fills me completely. He doesn’t give me time to adjust, doesn’t give me a moment to breathe. He fucks me hard and fast, his hips slamming into mine with a force that has me seeing stars.

“You feel so fucking good,” he growls, his hands gripping my hips so tightly I know I’ll have bruises tomorrow. “Tight little pussy wrapped around my cock.”

I moan, my body trembling as he pounds into me, each thrust hitting that sweet spot deep inside me that has me teetering on the edge of oblivion. His hand tangles in my hair again, yanking my head back as he leans down to whisper in my ear.

“Come for me,” he commands, his voice dark and dangerous. “Come on my cock. I want to feel the walls of your pussy clamp and squeeze me.”

I shatter, my body convulsing around him as I scream his name, my orgasm crashing over me like a fucking tidal wave. He fucksme through it, his cock pounding into me relentlessly until he finally spills inside me with a low groan, his hips jerking as he fills me with his cum.

He collapses against me, his chest heaving as he presses a kiss to the back of my neck. “God, you have no idea how much I’ve wanted to be buried deep inside you again” he murmurs, his voice possessive and final. His cock is still buried inside as his hands reach around and fondle my breasts. He leans into my ear and whispers. “Playtime is over Tara. You’re mine now. And I’ll kill anyone who tries to touch you or take you away from me again.” His voice dips and sends a shiver down my spine. “Including Konstantin.”

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

He pulls out of me, spins me around and I drag breath into my lungs. Gone is the charming Damien persona and in its place is the dangerous Ruslan Dragunov. And now I see why his sisters are so scared of him that the one even faked me being pregnant to distract him.

His hand twists in my hair and he pulls it back. "Say it, Tara." His eyes burn into mine. "Say you're mine and you understand what that means."

I swallow as my eyes dance with his and I'm teetering between a state of fear and arousal. While I admit to being slightly petrified at seeing who he really is, I know it's true. I'm his, body and soul, and there's no going back.

21

RUSLAN

She's still shaking as I press her back against the cool wall, her chest heaving, lips swollen from my kiss, pupils blown wide with the high I just gave her. Her skin is flushed, damp with sweat, slick where our bodies met, and I want her again already. But I don't move. Not yet. I want this image of her to be burned into my mind.

Tara, wild and wrecked and mine.

I trail my fingers down her side, then cup her face, and kiss her slowly, tasting the echo of her moans still lingering in her throat. Her fingers curl against my shoulder, soft now, like she's too tired to resist.

But she's watching me.

And she sees it now. The mask is gone.

No Damien. No smiles. No charming flirtation.

Just me.

Ruslan Dragunov.

She doesn't flinch. She doesn't pull away.

I hook an arm under her thighs and lift her, carrying her into the bedroom. Her head drops against my shoulder. I can feel her pulse hammering at the base of her throat.

I lay her down gently on the bed. Her hair fans out across the pillow. For a moment, I just look at her—naked, still trembling, her legs falling open as I kneel between them.

She reaches for me, but I catch her wrists and press them down.

"You don't come until I say."

Her eyes widen, breath hitching. But she nods.

I grip her thighs, pull her to the edge of the bed, and spread her wider.

Her pussy glistens, dripping from how hard I just fucked her. She's flushed and swollen, twitching every time I breathe on her. I take my time. I drag my tongue over her inner thigh, slow and deliberate, and watch her writhe.

I don't let her come. Not yet.

I pull away just before she shatters, again and again. Her moans turn to whimpers, her fists clenching, her voice breaking. I make her beg. I make her burn. I make her feel every fucking second of this.

Because she needs to understand.

She belongs to me now.

And I will ruin her for anyone else.

When she's sobbing with need, pleading with her eyes, I finally give in. I pull her up, flip her over, and sink into her again from behind.

She cries out, her voice raw, desperate. I pin her arms behind her back, angle her hips just right, and drive into her until the bed rattles.

She comes so hard she screams. And this time it's my name—Ruslan—that rips from her throat.

This time, I don't pull out. I hold her in place, spill inside her, and stay there.



## Page 78

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

Her body collapses under mine. And I wrap my arms around her, drag her into the mess of blankets, and hold her against my chest.

She doesn't speak. She just breathes.

I run my fingers through her hair until her breath evens out, and she drifts off, finally, in the circle of my arms.

I pull the blanket over us and kiss her temple.

"There's nowhere for you to escape in the morning, my beautiful Tara."

She shifts slightly, barely awake.

"Tomorrow over breakfast, we'll talk about Moscow."

She doesn't reply.

I draw her closer, her back to my chest, and tuck her head beneath my chin.

I press my lips to her hair and whisper, just for her:

"Ya lyublyu tebya."

And I mean every word.

TARA

I stretch, limbs heavy and loose, the muscles in my thighs sore in the best way. My hand slides across the sheet, reaching for warmth, but the bed is empty. My eyes crack open. The room is dark. Not my cabin. The realization hits me like a slap. I didn't dream last night. I really did just fuck Ruslan Dragunov.

I sit up, hair a mess, body aching. My bladder makes its demand known, so I tiptoe to the bathroom, bare-ass naked, and do what I need to. After washing my hands, I head to the kitchen, thirst clawing at my throat. The house is quiet, too quiet. I frown. Where the hell is he?

As I pass through the lounge, a sliver of light seeps out from a slightly open door. Then I hear his voice. Low. Steady. Russian. I creep closer, drawn like a moth to the flame, heart thudding with some primal warning.

My name. He says my name.

"Yes, she fell for it," Ruslan says, cool and casual. "I told you. I always get what the fuck I want. Now that she doesn't believe she's pregnant, I don't pose a threat. The RMSAD won't be a problem. Their Jewel belongs to me now."

Ice runs through my veins. I freeze, breath caught in my throat.

"Yes. What do you think? I said we were in this together. I'm warning you, don't betray me. Everything is working just the way you planned. Let Irina think she's fooled us. We'll give her five months, see if the IVF takes. If not, we've got Plan B and C. Relax, the doctor's on my payroll now. He'll tell them what I want them to know."

The blood drains from my face.

"Of course I'm going to marry her. Not only is she the Jewel of Russia and the

RMSAD's most prized asset, she's a Morozov. Her grandmother is Anya Novikov. Do you know what that will do for us? Plus her grandfather controls the Dragunov Guard. We need them."

My knees tremble.

"Victoria? Oh hell no. She's an okay fuck. Good to relieve yourself with when the need arises. No, I must go. I told you—there's going to be a wedding at Dragunov Village."

My stomach flips.

"You're just upset I didn't ask you. Of course, I love you. But you better start behaving yourself."

He hangs up.

I can't move. My heart is a shattered mess beating against bone and betrayal. Everything he said—all the promises, all the heat, the way he held me—it was just another layer of lies. I'm a pawn. A fucking pawn.

Sabrina was right. These people are insane.

Then fury crashes in like a tidal wave. Red-hot, consuming. My head clears, and instinct kicks in. Quietly, I grab my clothes, pulling them on. My hands find his jacket. His wallet. His keys. Fucking rich people leave their shit lying around like it's nothing. I need a phone. Mine's gone—of course it is. He must've taken it.

I hear another creak.

Shit.

He's still on the phone. I slip out the door and into the night. I know these woods. My dad made damn sure I could navigate them blindfolded. Sam and Sabrina trained me, probably because deep down they knew I'd need it.

The Russians think they own me. Fuck them.

I pull the oversized jacket tight around me and head toward the road. There's a gas station about five miles from the cabin. I don't stop. My breath clouds in the cold and my legs burn. Adrenaline mixes with pregnancy hormones—I don't even know what's real anymore—and I push harder.

The lights of the gas station come into view. I stumble inside, legs shaking, and ask the clerk if I can use the phone. He hands it over.

I dial a number I've memorized since I was ten.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end answers.

"Uncle Nik. It's me. Tara."

"Sweetheart." There's a pause. His voice softens. "How are you?"

"I'm in trouble. The kind that needs your help."

Silence.

"Where are you?"

I give him the gas station address.

"I'll be there in ten. Do you remember Sol's training?"

"Yes."

Ten minutes later, a black Range Rover pulls into the back lot, out of camera range. I duck low as Nik walks inside.

He flirts with the young women at the counter, grabs a box of condoms, and tosses a charming grin their way.

"Thanks. Bit embarrassing, running out at my age."

They giggle. Of course they do.

He gets in the car, locks the doors, and pulls away.

"Condoms? Really?"

"Distraction," he says. "They'll be too busy giggling to remember I was here."

"You're pushing seventy."

"Watch it, cheeky monkey."

We drive in silence for a few minutes. Then he says, "Okay. Tell me what the fuck is

going on."

I spill everything. From Ruslan to the files, to the call I just overheard. By the time we pull into his estate, I'm exhausted. The guards at the gate salute him. He gives quick orders for extra vigilance.

"Is Galina here?" I ask.

"London, with her grandson."

I sigh in relief.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

"We're going to talk," he says. "Then I'm getting my doctor out here. We'll find out once and for all if you're pregnant."

I nod, too tired to argue.

"Your mom and sister know anything?"

"No. Please don't tell them."

"Your secret's safe with me. But I'll have to check on Sam and Clyde. If they let Romanov near the cabin, we've got a problem."

I want to defend them. But I don't. Because I don't know who to trust anymore. None of them are my friends. Not Gavriil. Not Irina. Not even Konstantin.

"Did you know about me?" I ask.

He's quiet, then he nods. "I did. But your parents made us promise not to tell you. It wasn't my place."

"I get it," I whisper. "Can you tell me now?"

He studies me. "Tomorrow. After you rest."

I hug him. "Thank you. At least I still have you."

"Always."

As I walk to the guest room, he calls out, "Remember the protocol."

"I do."

In the shower, I let the water wash away the tears. But it can't wash away the betrayal.

Ruslan Dragunov fooled me. Fucked me. Lied to me. Used me.

And I will never let it happen again.

22

TARA

I come awake to the sound of my name and the gentle shake of a strong hand.

"Honey, wake up. They're here."

Nik's voice cuts through the fog in my brain. My limbs feel like they're wrapped in wet sand. I can barely move.

"Who?" I mumble, my throat dry.

Nik scoops me out of bed like I weigh nothing. "Sorry, honey, but Bella needs to make the bed. You know these young bucks can be quite cocky and heated crashing into a room."

"You are so British, Uncle Nik." My foggy brain has a smile for the young bucks. Then I frown. Why the fuck is Bella making my bed? Blink up at him. "Are you kicking me out?"



"No. Never," he says, brow furrowed. "But your Russians are on their way."

My eyes snap open. I look at him, suspicion rising like bile. "That show at the gas station. That was intentional, wasn't it? You wanted them to see you."

"Me?" He arches a brow, innocence painted all over his face.

"Uncle Nik, you're getting too old for this shit."

He rolls his eyes. "The day a young prick gets the better of me is the day I book myself into a home."

## Page 81

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

He presses a button on his watch. A panel slides open in the wall. I stare.

“Oh no not that panic space.” I grumble.

“There are peanut butter cups in there.”

“Really?”

He nods

"In you go."

"Oh look. Telly," I mutter, snuggling into the fluffy blanket like I'm not seconds away from being hunted.

"Remember the drill."

I nod. I'm too damn tired to smile, let alone respond. I curl into the corner and fall asleep before I hear the panel click shut.

RUSLAN

My cabin is cold and quiet. I grab my phone and dial.

"Konstantin, I just got off the phone with Nadia. She's going to need your help back at Dragunov Village."

"What about Tara?"

"I'm here now," I say stiffly. A spark of jealousy flares in my chest. The eagerness in his voice grates.

I hang up and immediately call Nadia.

"Konstantin flies out tomorrow," I say. "Keep an eye on him."

"Of course, brother."

"Did you get the camera to Valeska after the break-in at Site 17?"

"I did. Everything's in place."

"Good. I have to go."

"Yeah, you've got a hot woman in your bed," Nadia teases.

"You're just jealous you don't have someone as hot in your bed." I smile. Unbeknownst to my other siblings, Nadia and I appear to disagree on everything. She is a headstrong rebel, and my favorite sibling.

"No, we've got her locked up at the facility."

"All for the cause, sweet sister. I'll call you soon."

"Love you, big brother."

"Ya tebya tozhe lyublyu."

I hang up, a smile curling on my lips. It's all falling into place. Tara—God, she was supposed to be a distraction. Now she's a complete obsession and, as it turns out, an invaluable treasure and a bonus addition to our plans.

But fuck. She drives me insane. I can't keep my my hands off her and that's a fucking problem. Tonight I gave her a taste of the real me, and instead of balking, she was more turned on than ever. Shit just thinking about her and my cock is rock hard wanting to sink into her hot tight warmth.

The moment she walked through that door, she was not leaving me again, ever. I toss back a splash of vodka and pad toward the bedroom. Sure, she's going to be livid when she finds out she's still pregnant. And my sister Irina is going to be even more furious when she finds out her plan to deceive has failed.

I'm about to walk past the sofa, but something feels... off. I turn and look at the long side table beside the front door. My eyes widen when I see that my wallet is open. I pick it up and go through the bills. Only ten dollars is missing.

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

I frown. That's strange. Did I use ten dollars? I rack my brains, but I can't remember spending any money earlier. The front door creaks and I walk toward it before freezing. It's open. Fuck, did someone come inside?

And stole ten dollars when there was a whole stack of much larger bills.

That doesn't make any fucking sense. I scan the table. My keys are gone. My head turns toward the coat rack. My jacket is gone. My heart jolts and a bad feeling creeps up my spine. I glance outside. My car is still there.

As I walk toward the bedroom, I notice Tara's clothes are no longer scattered on the floor. They're gone.

Fuck.

I run to the bedroom. Empty.

Bathroom. Empty.

"Fuck!"

I grab my phone. "Konstantin. Get here now. Tara's gone."

We meet and search everywhere. It's Konstantin who says it:

"If I were her, I'd head for the gas station."

That pisses me off more than it should.

We hit the station.

“Yeah, a woman came through about ninety minutes ago. Didn’t buy a ride. Just made a call.”

"Anyone else stop by?"

"Some old guy." The woman snorts. "He bought condoms."

My blood boils as I slap cash down. "Show me the footage."

We review the tapes. A Range Rover sits just out of camera range.

“She must’ve snuck into that Range Rover,” Konstantin observes.

“Who is that man?” I ask

“That’s Nikolas Vasilikis.” A young man comes in from the back. “He lives in a mansion on the outskirts of town.”

The trip to the estate takes too fucking long and by the time I get there, I’m already far too impatient. We get the estate’s location. The security is very tight. Anyone would think the fucking King lived here as guards with lethal weapons stop us.

"I need to see Nikolas Vasilikis," I snap. "He has something of mine and I’d like it back."

The guard takes his time, goes into the guardhouse, and ambles back.

"Mr. Vasilikis isn't thrilled," the guard says, but lets us through.

A butler meets us at the door, weapon at his hip. "Mr. Vasilikis will see you in his study."

"Fuck the study. I want to search this house. She's here."

"You search my house without my permission, you leave in a body bag," Nikolas's voice cuts in like a blade.

He appears out of nowhere. Still. Dangerous. Calm.

"Where the fuck is she?" I snap.

"Who?" he replies.

"Tara Craft."

"I think she's in Boston for an interview."

"Don't play dumb."

I grab his collar and slam him into the wall. Oleksi Mirochin walks in and sees the scene.

"Dragunov, I wouldn't..."

"Shut the fuck up, Mirochin. One more word and someone gets shot."

Nik moves like lightning. My own gun is in his hand, aimed at my men, and before I can blink he's changed our positions and has me pinned against the wall.

I see Oleksi fake flinch. "I tried to warn you." He yawns as he strolls past us. "If you don't need me Nik, I'm going to bed." He walks off as if one older man isn't holding three big hulking Russians hostage.

"You're in my house," Nikolas hisses.

Pavel moves. Nik adjusts the angle—he can still shoot them all.

"You touch one inch of this house again, and I'll bury you in the desert," he says.



Todd, his man, strolls over.

"Take our guests to check the house," Nikolas says, cold and clear. He lets me go and unloads my weapon. "They're under the illusion my GODDAUGHTER is here."

That word slams into me. Goddaughter.

I blink.

"You and I," Nikolas growls, keeping my gun and walking into his study, "are going to talk."

I know when to show respect. The man could've killed us all. I wonder if he wants a job? I glance around. I'm guessing he's not hurting for money. Uh... Fuck, I wonder if he owns Matriarch Corporation Vasilikis.

"I know you picked her up at the gas station."

"Which one?" he asks.

"The one you bought condoms at."

"Ah, those were for my guard's kid."

He narrows his eyes.

"Now tell me where Tara is."

I lie. Say we're in a long-distance thing. Say we fought and she ran.

Nik doesn't blink. "In all the years I've known her, I've never seen Tara have

hysterics."

I want to rip the walls down.

He shows us every room.

She's not there.

As we leave, Nikolas's voice cuts through the night.

## Page 84

*Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:41 am*

"Next time, bring a warrant. Or don't come at all. While you might be the Dragunov... I'm the Monarch."

The name hits like a gut punch. He is that Nikolas Vasilikis.

We drive off, defeated. On the way out, I see two teens sneaking out of the guest suite.

So the condom story was true.

Fuck.

She's not here. But she's out there.

And I will find her, especially as I also know she's carrying my child!