



# Arranged Marriage by the Bratva (Orlov Bratva #6)

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** I agreed to a fake marriage with an older guy to destroy my enemy

Before I know it he's taken my virginity and knocked me up.

As a Bratva King, Nikk Orlov, is ruthless, merciless and thrives on control

He wants me in his bed and I want him out of my head.

As the new Donna of the Sicilian mafia, I'm ready to grow our business.

For years there has been bloodshed between my familia and the Orlov Bratva.

Being fake married to a beast for one year is all I have to do to protect my familia.

I didn't know I needed protection from my husband's seductive touch

Our marriage might be fake but his touch is real.

He's a cold-hearted monster, I hate him for what he did to my familia.

But when he caresses my skin with his ruthless touch, I almost forget the past.

He's determined to make our marriage real because of the child, is this just another game to him or is it real?

Can I win him at his own game of hate, manipulation, lust and deception, or will he outwit me first?

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Elena

It can't get any darker than midnight, so the Sicilian saying goes, and aptly the heavens have poured out their tears in response to my father's passing. With a firm grip, I hold on to my pitch-black umbrella as the thrums of water cascade down over it. The sky is a sorrowful shade of deep charcoal, matching my funeral attire, and there's mournful weeping, but it's not coming from me.

Standing solemnly in front of the large concrete cross, my mouth gathers into a hard, grim line. So long, Father. Rest in power. I glance up briefly scanning the Sicilian cemetery, taking note of the number of crosses lined up in subsequent rows. We're surrounded by so many souls who've passed over to the other side, but I return my gaze to staring down at the engraved letters of my father's name.

Rocco Mancini—Don, and Godfather of the Mancini famiglia, was a helluva a man. I will myself to cry, but the tears don't come. Instead, I clasp my gloved hands together in front of my body, letting the sky cry instead. Ironically, he didn't pass from "the kiss of death" or any sinister dealings within the mob, but from the slow-eating disease of pancreatic cancer. He fought long and hard for years, but all the chemo and radiation treatments took their toll on him. I watched him week after week grow weaker and weaker, but he always told me the same thing every day.

He would hold on to my hand with a warm fire shining in his eyes. "You know, my sweet Elena, I feel like I'm getting stronger day by day."

And I would humor him, because I wanted to believe with all my heart that it was true too. "That's good, Dad. Strong. You're a Mancini, and the doctors are taking

good care of you. You're going to pull through. You always do."

"Yes. We Mancinis pull through. It's in our DNA."

I told him more times than I could count to lay off the sweets, and to get his sugar levels checked, but he never listened to me. I would argue the pressures of holding such a position contributed to his death also. Taking one last glance at my father's grave, I turn around to face the people. A sea of faces is waiting for my direction. We are the Mancinis—the Cosa Nostra, standing for centuries, strong of heart and will remain, even after the unfortunate death of my father.

I stare back at the small group of men who have been loyal associates of the Sicilian Mafia for years and never wavered. They bow their heads, signaling Catholic crosses across their chests, paying their respects, ready to receive my words. There are cousins, distant uncles, steadfast women and children, all who are relying on me now. The rain eases to a light drizzle, but thunder crackles in replacement as eventually I find enough purposeful words to speak and drive us forward.

Gulping down the hard lump in my throat, I exhale, expressing my sentiments. "Rocco Mancini was a dutiful and powerful Don. He propelled us forward as a famiglia, and he was an equally wonderful father who loved and groomed me to be successful in business. He loved you all too. Each and every one of you. He died with dignity last Thursday in his hospital bed after holding on for as long as he could."

"Oh, Rocco!" one of the women calls out. "How could you leave us?" She holds her palms together, tears falling as one of the others consoles her to not speak. I study her for a moment, her grief unrecognizable to me.

Taking a sharp inhale of breath, I bury my repressed emotions even deeper, delivering my message. "Now I understand why my father wanted me to be so heavily involved in the business, and I'm grateful. There's no time to mourn

anymore. Families and businesses have suffered too much. First, Uncle Carlo died at the hands of the Russians. Once the throne was passed to Uncle Nicolo, he faced the same fate and now my father—” I swallow down the bitter taste of regret, finding it hard to carry out my speech, but Matteo is close by, coaxing me to finish with the lightest touch in the middle of my back.

“We stand to lose everything the forefathers have built over decades and decades,” I announce passionately as the rain stops. I watch as the crowd nods solemnly. I’m getting through; yes, I’m getting through to them. “We have to move forward and restore what’s left of the Mancini legacy. This is my vision for the famiglia. “Are you with me?” I ask, my chin pointed defiantly, scanning my eyes over the crowd, resting on the remaining men of the Mancini clan. I might have a knot churning in my stomach when I announce it, but I’m challenging their power and position in the process. The truth is, though, I’m the best one to lead. I know the business; they do not.

Toto, a distant uncle from the heart of Sicily raises an eyebrow, nudging one of the other uncles. This starts a domino effect of voices whispering. Maybe they expected to take the position of the Don; it’s written on their faces.

One of them has the nerve to pitch his hollow challenge out loud. “We’ve never had a Donna before! This is unheard of!” Maria, the wife of the ignorant uncle slaps her purse against his chest.

“Shut up! She can do it. She’s Rocco’s daughter, you fool.”

“I can assure you, I’m well equipped. Before my father passed, we spoke on a number of incredibly lucrative business propositions, which are all sitting on the table. These ventures will allow the Mancini empire to expand into foreign waters and provide us with access to even greater power and leverage. I will honor the legacy of our famiglia, I can promise you that.”

It feels as if I'm talking outside myself, because this is not a position, I ever thought I would hold. I only wanted to stand proudly beside my father in business, and possibly run one of its branches, but all along, with him guiding the way. I also have a head for the coldhearted ruthlessness of business.

We were a fantastic one-two punch combination me and father, and I trusted him. We'd overcome so much together, and after two Russian takedowns, I thought we were on our way back to the top, but it wasn't to be.

I let the voices trail off but hold fast to my position. No one is going to take the position, except me. "I'm the best person for the job. I know the ins and outs of the Mancini business, and we need to hit the ground running if we're going to recoup the losses of the last few years. I have plans for us, and they all involve us thriving. If you want to challenge my position, now's not the time," I state firmly, staring down my distant uncle. He grumbles under his breath, but more and more head nods give me the hope and courage to stand my ground.

Matteo is the first one to encourage and embrace the idea fully. He claps loudly, nodding his head as I take down my umbrella, closing it. "Yes, Donna. And even if we've never had one before, we have one now. Bravo! Donna!" He sings my praises as a second pair of hands clap in the crowd. Then a third, until a small symphony of claps can be heard.

"Donna!"

"Donna!"

A small smile creeps over my mouth as I smooth my dark hair back over my shoulder, a sliver of sun peeking through the clouds to herald the passing of the baton. "I like the sound of that. Donna," I say quietly.

I'm the female version of the Don, and it feels good to be chosen, but as quickly as the euphoria hits that I'm now leading the famiglia, a sense of dread follows.

I can't fail my people. Not now. Not after we've already lost so much. This also isn't the time to get cocky. They've chosen me, and I've got huge Italian shoes to fill.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

Fast forward a couple of weeks...

The air always smells sweeter on the French Riviera, off the coast of Monaco, and it's about as sweet as all these bare perky asses on our mega yacht.

Whoever said you can't mix business and pleasure didn't have a fun-size pair of tits dangling in their face. It's a sultry evening on the Riviera, and the bass of the house music thumps through my chest, making me want to dance. The boat DJ is performing perfectly, and the intermittent lights lining the underside of the boat are a nice touch.

Carlotta, the beautiful bronze-skinned beauty on my lap is hot, much like all the other models, influencers, and thirsty opportunists sitting on my associates' laps, but they're all for entertainment purposes. By nightfall, I will have whet my sexual appetite with her two or three times over, offering her multiple orgasms, but nothing of the steel cavern that is my heart.

I rake a hand through my sandy hair, observing in amusement as she purses her botoxed lips together, sipping the wheat-colored liquid. "Enjoying your night, sweetheart?" I ask silkily, stroking her back. Her bright blue eyes stare back at me with a twinkle in them.

"I sure am." Often when I attend such meetings, I wear the same thing. A crisp white-collar shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, and sure, maybe a button or two undone for good measure.

“Good, good,” I reply as her manicured fingernail lands on my forearm. I flex it, wanting to show off a little for my lovely plaything. Common for me. Grinning, I keep flexing as she circles my tattoos.

“What’s this one for?” she whispers, pointing to the three skulls and the head of a cat.

Yegor, who overhears the question quirks an eyebrow, giving the young beauty a croaky grin.

“Good fucking question, Carlotta. What are those tattoos for?” Yegor, my right-hand man taunts. He knows exactly what they are for, the fucker.

“Since you asked so nicely, I’ll tell you later,” I reply, not wanting to disturb the harmony amongst my business associates for the evening. Both the tattoos are Bratva related, the cat for more cunning, stealthy nature. I’m always a step ahead of my enemies and competition. The other three skulls are for shooting a few bad men in the head execution style. Mind you, I didn’t have all the skulls on my forearm, there were a few more on my back, but those were hidden from public view.

She giggles, none the wiser as I smile in her face. “Oh,” she says, putting a hand to her mouth, “a secret. I like that. Yep, tell me later.”

Yegor laughs as I swirl the remaining contents of one of Russia’s premium luxury vodka brands. “Alan, what do you think of this one? We can match it. Apparently, it’s been filtered over real diamonds, but I think that’s a gimmick,” I scoff to my American business associate.

“Yep, it has. It’s in the top ten of luxury vodka brands in the world, and if we want to stand a chance in the market, we have to be able to compete.”

“Yah, yah, but what do you think of it?” I press, letting the smooth burn scorch my



throat.

“It’s smooth, but it’s still got an afterburn. The thing is we’ve got bigger problems than this afterburn.”

I turn my head a little more to look at him, side-eyeing him with curiosity. “What problem is that? Tell me, so I can eliminate it.”

“You and I both know we’re not going to be able to get this off the ground as long as those damn Mancinis are alive,” he grits through his teeth, his eyes darting around.

He’s right, but he’s wrong. The Mancinis do have a chokehold on part of the industry, but not all of it. “You mean because they control the lemon trade?”

Alan nods vehemently. “Fucking right. The lemon trade. If we want to branch out with new flavors and really expand and bring a different flavor into the mix, it’s going to impact us.”

I tap Yegor on the bicep, laughing at Alan’s fear. “Fuck that, Alan.” I turn my attention to the model on my lap who is listening to the ping-pong of conversation intently. “Sweetheart, cover your ears if you’re sensitive.”

Yegor roars in laughter as Carlotta stares back at me with a grin. “I’m not. I like danger.”

Winking at her, I respond to an exasperated Alan. “Their last don died. Before that we killed them both. The Mancini bloodline is about to disappear. This is precisely why it’s the perfect time to jump into the business. You see?” Holding my arms out wide, I’m confident and maybe a little too cocksure about the venture, but if you ask me, it’s a fucking no-brainer.

Casper who's sitting a stone's throw away and filling his face with hors d'oeuvres starts chuckling and shaking his head. "Nikk, I admire your balls, but the Mancinis are not going anywhere. No, no, no, not while Donna still lives."

And I chuckle right back, draining the last nip of vodka. Yegor taps my thigh with a sneer as he says the word "Donna." A fucking woman leading the Cosa Nostra. No fucking way in hell is that happening in the world of the Bratva.

"Well, no prima Donna is going to fuck up our operation, that's certain. What the hell is a Donna anyway? Who the fuck made this shit up? Stupid Sicilians." I hitch my shoulders in mock exasperation as Yegor's eyebrows knit together, and he tries to hold in his laughter. "The only thing a woman should be doing is taking orders from me."

"Yes, I agree. She should be a loyal, submissive wife if she wants in with the Bratva long term. No woman can withstand being in the Mafia. They're weak little lambs, and it's not the place for them. At all," Yegor explains, echoing my sentiments.

Casper stops chewing, sitting back on the soft, all-white sofa, nodding his head in the direction of the onboarding plank. "Speak of the devil. I told you so."

Turning my head to the direction of the entrance, I notice her legs first, because one of her shapely calves is visible from under her snow white, curve-hugging designer dress. Her physique is athletic, and there's plenty to admire. Holding those beautiful legs up are a pair of black stilettos.

Fuck me. I could watch her all night. Her hair is sleeked back in a long brunette ponytail, her warm brown eyes full of promise. I adjust myself in my seat. She's got my cock tingling in the best way.

There's a sexy split in her dress. It's not too high, but it's enough to keep her

audience of two wealthy businessmen captivated. Her smooth, deep olive tan sparkles as my eyes travel up to her round perky ass and carved out waist. I do nothing to hide my admiration and lust. I can feel Carlotta becoming miffed by my interest in her, but I don't give a fuck. She knows her place; she's only here for a good time in the first place.

Her mouth—oh that luscious mouth of hers—it could work wonders for my cock. Smirking, I watch her, enthralled by how intoxicated the men are with her. The snake charmers are hanging off her every word. Her dangling gold bracelet shimmers in the light of the moon as her French-manicured fingers tap the side of the champagne glass. One of them lightly touches her bare arm as they share a timed laugh together. My stomach clenches and I find myself wanting the man to keep his hands to himself.

Why the fuck should I care? I've no clue because I'm having such an intense reaction to the classic Italian beauty. I'm sure the stunning woman is the one Casper is referring to.

I turn back to him to confirm. "That her?"

"Yes. That's her. Don't be fooled by the pretty dress."

"Right." A smirk curves on my mouth as our whole group watches her. She's got our attention, and she must be picking up on our stares because she's giving us the honor of her steely glance, her ponytail swishing behind her.

She doesn't focus on the rest of the group, though. The Italian beauty only has hostile eyes for me. Boy, I'm a lucky guy. Fuck. I need that. Not this irrelevant woman perched on my rousing cock, taking up space on my lap. She can go. No. I need the Donna. The one daring to stare me down.

Doesn't she know who the fuck I am? I nod at Yegor. "Thinking what I am?" he

snorts, the two women on our laps, confused.

“I bet you I am. I think we should introduce ourselves, but given our track record, I’m sure the pretty Donna is already familiar with the Orlovs.”

Now, it’s about to be a real fucking party.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Elena

It's the perfect sultry night for a luxury yacht party on the French Riviera, and the perfect setting for doing business with Saro and Trent. Seeing Nikkita Orlov here, however, is leaving a bitter aftertaste to the champagne in my mouth. The man raises goose bumps on my arms. What the fuck is up to anyway?

Shaken, but not stirred, I return to my conversation with the two men in front of me. Besides, Matteo is standing right next to me, so I've got back up. The traitorous Orlovs are not a priority right now. Rebuilding and linking with the right business partners is what I'm focused on. It's going to be crucial to rebuilding the Mancini brand, and this meeting is a step in the right direction.

Sipping my champagne, I regard Saro with interest, doing my best to take the bullseye target off my back from Nikk, but Matteo's not helping by bringing it up.

"Did you see?" he hisses in my ear.

Clearing my throat, I smile at Saro who, thankfully, is soaking in the party vibes of the boat.

"Yes," I say to him out of the side of my mouth. "I can see who's here. Don't worry about those shady fuckers. I'm not going to be put off by them."

"I agree, Donna. It's okay," Matteo replies coolly as I tune the Orlovs out, contemplating how Saro may be able to help the Mancinis get back on track. Saro is an established businessman from Cairo and has a knack for sinking his money into

the right investments.

“So, Saro, I hear congratulations are in order because your last investment is proving to be quite profitable. Well done on the Capital Myers project,” I praise cordially, wanting to feed his ego just enough, but not to show too much enthusiasm so I’m taken seriously. Saro smiles broadly, raising his glass of Scotch, clinking it to mine. “I would say an extra thirty million dollars over the term of three years was a good enough project for me to sink my teeth in. And this is a good thing because I have more money to play with. That being said I’m keen to hear your thoughts on a location.”

Trent, the other potential business partner, is more well versed in the commercial real estate game and seems keen to steer me in his direction. At this point, I’m not easily swayed by either one of the men. I know the game, and I can tell from the lust in their eyes they don’t think I’m particularly worthy of being the Donna either.

“I guess that’s what we’re doing here.” I point to the sky, and the size of the boat. The luxury yacht charter could be an innovative nightclub idea. “Monaco is the home of multimillionaires and billionaires. In terms of exclusivity, it doesn’t get any more exclusive than this.”

Trent chuckles, dropping a hand in his pocket and eyeing my cleavage. Typical. “Yeah, you’re right about that. Monaco’s entry to the country is one million dollars. It’s a nice start, but I tell you what, New York or LA are where it’s at. You should come out and see what we’ve got to offer.”

Now it’s Saro’s turn to impress as he turns on the charm. “Oh no, I disagree wholeheartedly; Dubai is the new playground for the rich and famous. If it’s good enough for Beyoncé, then it’s good enough for an exclusive luxury nightclub. We can put you up in one of the best of the best resorts in Dubai.”

Trent nods, weakly attempting to counter Saro. “Oh, Dubai, is it? I thought Abu Dhabi is the new Dubai?”

I observe in mild amusement as the two men jostle to impress me. God, they are so easy. Both of them only want to bed me, and they’ll pull out all the stops to do so. I signal the waiter to take my glass, opting for a second, but I don’t plan on getting drunk. I just want enough of a buzz to get through the meeting and hear their stupid plans.

The truth is the hospitality and extended offers will expire once I reject them both, and I surely will. The heat I felt on my back has gone, and for whatever reason it makes me turn back to the yacht couches.

The Bratva men aren’t there anymore. Shit . Sighting Nikkita Orlov made me want to grit my teeth. I hate them all with a passion. New York was Mancini territory for decades and we ruled the Big Apple with an iron fist. We had our hands in illegal card gambling, casino rackets, drug trafficking, and smuggling contraband through Port Authority, but all that stopped when the Orlovs entered the picture and stole all our glory, with their arms dealership networks, bringing bloodshed and unrest. I mean it’s not as if we didn’t fight back. Mancinis are always going to do that, but we were the ones who lost the most. They literally kicked us out of our own city.

Silently seething over seeing him, the faint hint of tobacco, vodka, and leather pervades my nostrils. Red-hot body radiation doesn’t help matters either. My head swivels, my ponytail swishing onto the chest of Nikk, and his known associate Yegor.

“Hi, Saro, nice to see you again. I didn’t want to be a snob and not come over to say hello. How are you, old friend?” Nikk remarks smoothly, flashing me a dirty smile, his cold eyes boring into me.

“Saro, do you know Nikkita? It’s such a shame,” I quip, grinding down on my teeth,

throwing the same dagger back at Nikk.

“Why is it a shame?” Saro asks, but he must know the Orlovs and the Mancinis mix like oil and water.

“You’re a man of such high class and dignity, I just find it a little unnerving that you would have a friendship with a man whose principles are built on the exact opposite.”

“Oh well—” Saro interjects as Trent chats with Yegor. My blood is thickening and coursing with red-hot fire. Who does this bitch think he is interrupting my meeting? Crossing my arms, I arch an eyebrow at him.

“What she means is she isn’t well equipped to deal with competition, are you Donna?” he spits out, barely able to hold his laugh in.

“You’re on thin ice,” I warn, touching my fingers to the outline of my gun inside my purse.

“Russians are very good on the ice. We have excellent ice hockey players in the game. Especially in New York,” Nikk banter, his teeth showing, but it’s not in a friendly way. It’s the baring of his teeth. Quickly, I note the skulls on his forearm, and I know there are many more he’s buried. I understand all too well what the Bratva tattoos stand to illustrate.

“Russian ice hockey players are everywhere. Same as Canadian hockey players, what are you getting at?” I ask dryly as Nikk chuckles and Saro enjoys what to him probably seems like banter, but every time a sentence comes out of Nikk’s mouth I must resist the urge to shove the muzzle of the gun down it.

“Oh, I’m merely talking about Russian’s being prevalent in New York. We’re doing well there,” he taunts as I catch his drift.



“Ah, Elena. My condolences to you about your father. Such an unfortunate passing,” he says smoothly, my eyes beginning to smart. “I heard you were close to your Uncle Nicolo too. Tsk tsk.” Yegor’s tight mouth evens out into a thin smile, his diabolical intent evident.

“Shut up. Shut up. Don’t talk about my uncle!” I yell as Saro’s mouth drapes open and Nikk grins, claiming his minor victory. Pressing my eyes shut, I will him to stop talking as I drop my purse down from my shoulder, my arm shaking.

“No, Elena, it’s good to talk about these things. You shouldn’t bottle them up,” he coaxes, his obsidian pupils cutting into mine.

“I didn’t mean to upset you honey,” he relays in a condescending tone. “I mean, it was awful what happened to him. I hated seeing him killed like that right in front of my eyes. Boom!” Yegor demonstrates a gun symbol with his hand, his low rumble of laughter, invoking a twitch to tug at the corner of my eye. “You must have been devastated when you heard the news,” Yegor continues, my chest heaving as if a knife has just been plunged into it.

“I thought I told you to shut up,” I grit out, Nikk and Yegor now with mirthful smirks on their smug faces.

“Umm, I think we should probably shelf this conversation for another time. I think it’s clear that Elena’s uncomfortable,” Trent adds politely, but it’s too late. My infamous Mancini temper is flaring into overload.

A volcano of anger erupts inside me, boiling over like hot lava, until I can’t stand it. If I don’t shoot my gun, I’m going to explode from the inside out. “You maiale grasso! I will snap your neck like a chicken bone!” Heat blooms on my cheeks as I scramble for my gun in my purse, point it at Yegor, and quickly pull the trigger.

A single gunshot fires through the air, the parabellum bullet grazing Yegor's arm as he grabs it, wincing in pain. Serves him right. "You are a fucking psycho bitch! You shot me," he wails as pandemonium rings out on the boat, people scattering in multiple directions. I square up to unleash my second round of bullets, raising my gun to eye level as both my potential business partners flee, leaving only Matteo and I to battle with the Orlovs.

I can't see anything else but a dead Orlov, and I'm out for blood. "You asshole!" I rasp. "How dare you talk about my uncle." Breathily heavily, I aim, not thinking straight, and Yegor raises his gun to eye level, pointing it at me shakily. The undeniable click of a safety being released sounds at the base of my skull from Nikk as my arms are wrenched behind my head, my gun skittering to the deck of the boat. Matteo has his gun trained at Nikk's head.

"Looks like we're all a little fucked now, Donna," Nikk points out, his vodka breath on my neck making my skin crawl.

My head's whooshing, a fresh burst of adrenaline rushing through it as I hold my breath, not knowing Nikk's next move. "I dare you to shoot me, Nikk," I state bravely, squirming as his anaconda-like grip holds me in place.

"Put the fucking gun down, Nikk," Matteo commands, "before I shoot you right between the eyes." The red and blue lights of the Monaco police flash in my peripheral, quickly followed by the harshness of wailing sirens from the street. Police boats approach a short distance away, and in a few minutes the boat is going to be swarming with cops.

Yegor groans in pain, blood trickling down the length of his arm as he folds just like the bitch he is, dropping his gun. Nikk has no choice. Even if he wants to take me out, now isn't the time. I doubt he has Monaco police connections.

“Grr! Fuck it. Yegor! Let’s go.” I feel the heat from the back of my neck dissipate as Nikk drops my arms, scampering off.

Expanding my lungs, I let myself catch what’s left of my breath. “Shit. That was a close call.” More so out loud than to Matteo, who slowly drops his gun.

“Are you okay, Bella?”

Doubling over I cough, trying to regain my breath. “Yep. I’m fine. I’m fine.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

So, the night didn't go as planned. In fact, it turned out to be even more exciting than I envisioned. No, I didn't get laid, but I did get a kick out of the Donna's healthy display of anger. Showered and calm, I open the curtains of my lavish suite near the Monaco waterfront, half expecting the cops to show up. I think about it some more, knowing the Mancinis want as little trouble as possible right now, especially after the death of Rocco.

Both of us have cops on payroll, but in our own territories, not necessarily Monaco. Each of us would be relying on our Monaco connections to keep us out of trouble. I doubt the little Mancini princess would have ratted me out, otherwise it would land both of us in hot water.

She has my cock hard, recalling her quick draw, the barrel of the gun eagerly pointed at Yegor. Silly fool. I scoff, dropping my cigars into my side pocket, ready to descend to the hotel lobby bar as if nothing happened, because it didn't. Yegor was shot, but it was stupid of him to tease her so openly in front of her associates. My phone pings. Good. I look down at the confirmation. Yegor's been sewn up. Grinning, I shrug into my leather jacket, heading downstairs. I barely notice the opulent décor. I'm used to it, and once you've seen one bougie hotel, you've seen them all. The doctor came fast enough it seems, and as far as I'm concerned, it's business as usual.

Striding purposefully into the dimly lit hotel bar, I nod at the bartender, scanning the room and tapping my waistband. Call it a force of occupational hazard. I never know when I'm going to have to pull the trigger. It's half empty, and there's stupid opera music playing, but I cut through to the velvet couches where a large bottle of vodka

and cigarette smoke cloud the booth.

Yegor's eyes are bloodshot, filled with vengeful rage, and his arm is housed in a sling. I can see the plaster underneath the sling. The fatalistic beauty did him damage. He's swearing in Russian, but the only thing I've got on my face is a smile.

"Are you good?" I ask as Dimitri, Casper, and Yakov look on unbothered by the scene. It's not as if they haven't seen it before. It's the side effect of the job. Too bad, too sad.

"Do I look fucking good? That Mancini whore shot me. I want to rip her eyes out of their sockets."

"Hmm," I chuckle, sitting down on the edge of the velvet chaise pouring myself a vodka neat. "What a cute little L'vitsa," I growl, letting the burn of the vodka scorch my throat. "Typical Mancini anger. I've always had a thing for wild animals," I murmur, noting Yegor's lack of amusement.

"I did warn you about the Donna," Casper gloats, shaking his head. Cricking my neck, I shoot him a warning glance, throwing back the rest of my vodka and lighting my cigar.

"Mmm, she's interesting to me," I reply in a low voice, letting my mind wander back to the evening's volatile events. Being that close to her long, elegant neck and inhaling the scent of her danger almost had me come undone. It snuck up on me, and it almost had me loosen the vise grip I had on her. God. Holding her arms above her head like that where she was pinned, helplessly against my body sent my heart into overdrive. That's a position I want her in again as soon as humanly possible.

"Elena Mancini isn't interesting. She's a problem, and it's one we should look at getting rid of as soon as possible," Yegor complains, but I'm not listening. I feel the

brewing of a plan coming together and I need to think.

A deep chuckle escapes my lips. “Ah, so the L’vitsa has a name. Elena Mancini. Elena, Elena, Elena,” I recite, getting used to her name rolling off my tongue. The dark-haired beauty’s actions have ignited a potent blend of attraction, and I’ve got a burning need to punish the woman.

Contemplating my options, I light up my cigar, the plume of smoke swirling in multiple directions. “That’s not her name,” Yegor grinds out. “Her name is cun—”

“Shh, shh, we have company,” I say, my hopes of evading police eroding. I spot a group of them questioning people at the bar. “Keep your cool, and don’t say a fucking word,” I add, continuing to smoke my cigar

“Fuck, if they come down here, we’re screwed. My arm’s in a sling for fuck’s sake, Nikk!” Yegor gripes, but I instantly dismiss him.

“I’ve already handled it. While you were getting sealed up, I rang my Monaco contact to get rid of the camera footage from the boat, so they’re operating blind. They have no evidence, even if they heard we were on the boat. Do you comprehend?” I spell out with blunt authority.

“Ah. Smart, smart,” Yegor says backpedaling as I watch the men pose questions to those sitting in the lobby.

More smoke joins together as my men begin to light their smokes in the restricted area. “They won’t come past the bar area. Watch. They’ll question those people and turn right around and go back out the door.”

The men in my camp watch on as my prediction plays out. And sure enough the police question men and women at the tables, turning right back around and walking

right back out the door. Yegor's constipated face relaxes as a slow smile stretches across mine.

"Nicely handled, Boss," Dimitri adds.

"Yes. Now—Casper, you seem to have more information than Yegor or I do on Elena. What was she doing on the boat in the first place?"

"I don't know, but it must be lucrative if she was talking to Saro. He's a big-time investor," Casper confirms.

"I would have to agree. If the Mancinis do have a chokehold on the lemon trade throughout Sicily, we take it," I tell everyone, reminding them of who we are.

"And how do you propose we do that?" Casper leans forward, pouring more vodka. For someone so small, she packs a punch. Even Yegor, who's killed so many, couldn't take her."

We all snicker in Yegor's direction, not letting him off the hook. "Shame on you. You didn't draw your gun quick enough," I chastise.

"Yeah, do we need to give you training wheels once more?" Dimitri jokes, nudging Yegor, whose face is flourishing a cheap shade of red. "Did you forget how to shoot?"

"Nikk." Yegor leans forward, his belly straining over his pants. Looks can be deceiving. He may not be as fit and agile as others, but Yegor is an excellent shot normally, and will do anything to preserve the Bratva. He's almost as ruthless and cunning as I am. It wasn't all his fault as I, too, didn't foresee the pretty one firing off so quickly.

“Yes?” I reply, my mind stuck on what her business on the yacht was, and ways in which to punish her. Saro could well be the link we need to make that a reality.

“Give me one chance. Just one chance to get my revenge. Let me erase this Donna. She’s the last Mancini to challenge the Russians.” He balls his hand into a solid fist, but he’s too hasty. There’s much more at stake here and I need to fulfill my craving of finding out what it is.

“That’s the spirit,” Dimitri encourages as the other men join in, thrilled by the notion of more Mancini blood spilling. “Don’t let them recover. She will be vulnerable after the death of her father. This is the perfect time to strike.” He punches his hand into his fist, turning it.

Puffing on my cigar, I let the smoke sail through the air, draining the last of my vodka. “You will not touch a hair on her head,” I reply sternly, surveying the baffled faces of my associates.

“What?” Casper questions as I tap the cigar ash in the glass bowl.

“When you face something wild, you can either kill it to protect yourself or you can tame it to gain from it,” I reason, my men slowing coming to, because I have serious plans for my L’vitsa. “Do you understand?”

Serious plans... I pull out my phone, calling Saro. I’m sure he’ll have the news I want to hear.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Elena

Bastards. Slugging down my water, I struggle to regulate my heart rate to normal rhythm. It's the only thing I can hear whooshing around inside my head. How dare he speak on my famiglia! I had no choice but to shoot him. If I wasn't so hot under the collar and my aim was straight, I would have made sure the bullet went directly through his arm, not just grazed it.

I can't see straight as the blur of Monaco whirs past. Matteo navigates the narrow, cobbled streets of Monte Carlo with relative ease, the water I've swallowed, only making me more annoyed as it churns like a washing machine in my stomach. I'm pissed. We pass the Monte Carlo casino, grooving in around the classically designed building that functions as the playground of entertainment for the rich and famous.

"What the hell were the Orlovs doing there, Matt? They always have to ruin things for me," I curse, fire coursing through my veins.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Donna. I didn't expect to see them either." Matteo's cool attitude to my fury is also irritating. He's known for being cool, calm, and collected, but right now I wish he was irate as I am.

I study his profile, his salt-and-pepper tapered sideburns in view. Matteo is the quintessential version of an Italian male if I ever saw one. He presses the gas as we hit a patch of open road. "Matt, I want every single one of their heads on a platter. I had those investors right where I wanted them. I wanted to sign off on the boat nightclub venture with Premiere Yachts, and to secure a New York nightclub deal. I already had the contract drawn up." I slap my hands on my thighs. It's a huge setback

and being questioned by the Monaco police was not high on my list of priorities for the last two hours.

Matteo smirks, casting me a sidelong glance. “Your temper is infamous, and righteous, Donna. I understand, but don’t let Orlovs deter you. This situation is a minor setback at best.”

“Urgh! I’m so frustrated, Matt. That fat Orlov bastard just had to ruin everything for me!” I reply, livid and wanting to smash something.

Matteo’s been the voice of reason to the famiglia for as long as I can remember. He’s been around since I was little, and I can’t imagine it any other way. I might be angered by his cool demeanor at present, but I’m also grateful for it. One of us has to keep a level head.

The good news is we’re drawing closer to Monte Carlo’s number one Michelin-star restaurant—Le Grande. As Matteo drives up to the curb, I reach in my purse retrieving my lipstick and smearing the bloodred stain over my lips. If I’m going into battle, then I want to make sure I’m primed to disarm. Reaching inside my glove compartment, I grimace, restocking the bullets in my pistol, Matteo’s eyebrow rising as he chuckles in my direction.

“Donna, you are funny.”

“What? If I see an Orlov, I won’t be so gracious. I will shoot to kill.”

Matteo shakes his head as we sit stationary. “You know, I’ve always wanted the best for the Cosa Nostra, and you’re the best. Everything is going to work out fine. I can assure you.”

I shift in my seat, smoothing my hand through my ponytail. “Can you?”

A persuasive smile curves on Matteo's mouth. "Yes, with you at the helm, the Mancinis are in good hands."

"Thanks."

"See you after the meeting, Donna. Any trouble... call."

"There won't be." My stiletto hits the ground as I open the door heading into the restaurant on high alert. Many eyes are on me, and it's probably not the best idea to enter the restaurant without protection, but I don't want my potential business partner getting any more negative ideas about the Mancini family than they already have.

The host escorts me to a secluded, roped-off section of the restaurant as we stroll past the back-lit bar, which emits neon blue lights. Each table I pass is filled, and the entire restaurant reeks of money. Sucking in a deep breath, I'm glad enough for the reset.

As the host drops me off at the table, I stop dead in my tracks, my heart thundering in my chest. Nikk Orlov is suited up with a devious smirk covering his face. Saro is sitting beside him, his face neutral.

How could he let him sit down and join us after what just happened on the boat? Or maybe Nikk threatened him.... I can't read his face, so I don't know, but it's clear the two of them already have a relationship. So many thoughts are racing through my brain it's hard to rein them in.

"Good evening, Elena. Have a seat, I have something to say," Nikk beckons, pointing to the gold-accented chair.

Every cell in my body tells me to walk back out and call Matteo, so I stand stuck for a moment, staring Saro down. "You're doing?" I ask him curtly, my blood boiling.

Saro clasps his fingers together, examining us both as he rolls his shoulders back, tensions running high. “It’s better we all get along, is it not, Elena?”

“You don’t know what—”

Nikk interrupts, wagging his finger. “Hear me out. I’m the one who set up the meeting. Cut Saro a break. I knew you wouldn’t come if I did it any other way,” he relays smoothly, his voice dotting tingles down my spine.

“How about you two settle the score of your affairs, and I’ll be at the bar.” Saro rises, buttoning himself up and excusing himself before I say anything.

Dammit. Duped again by an Orlov, but I have to admit my curiosity and my blood pressure are elevated. Nikk grins, my eyes boring into his. He stands next, causing me to flinch, and immediately I reach to open my purse. He holds out his hands, symbolic of a white flag.

“No, no. I promise this is a peaceful meeting. At least I intend it to be. Please. Sit.” He gestures to the chair as I sit down, regarding him with frigid caution.

“Okay. I’m seated. What do you want?” I feel like a pawn in a chess game, but this bitch doesn’t know I’m the queen.

Nikk’s jaw twitches, danger radiating from his aura. “Let’s start with a clean slate. I first want to apologize for Yegor. His comments were a little insensitive.”

I let the undercurrent of my internal volcano simmer, thinking of Matteo and all the carnage that’s already occurred. “Insensitive is an understatement,” I cut back at him, the waiter taking our drink order while Saro looks over to our table. Traitor, but it’s nothing in business and to be expected.

Nikk's silent for a beat, his hooded eyes boring into mine. I break the gaze first, sipping my water. "Yes, but let's move forward, you've done damage to him too."

"Good."

Nikk grins. "Hmm," he hums, my body responding in a way I'm not familiar with. I ignore it. "What were you doing on the yacht?"

"What were the Orlovs doing on the yacht?"

"Okay, I'll go first. We are looking to break into the alcohol industry."

I nod. "Interesting."

"Yes. We could use your help with the lemon trade side of things. Vodka."

"Ah, I see."

"I've shown you mine, now it's time for you to show me yours, Donna." His emphasis on calling me Donna isn't lost on me.

Oh, is this the game we're playing?

Sighing, I answer reluctantly. "I'm wanting to establish the Mancini footing in the nightclub trade. New York is a location we're looking at, and a few other international cities. Including possibly here." If he's going to put his cards on the table, at least I can do the same.

Nikk's mouth cracks into a smile. "See, we're getting somewhere now. How about we do a deal where we go in fifty-fifty? I help you buy into the New York nightclub scene. It is our turf. You're going to need our help, and you won't be able to do it

without us. You know that. Even if you do a deal with my friend, Saro here. You're going to have to come through me," he rasps, the snake in Nikk coming out.

Fuck. I'm trapped. But so is he....

"Alright, and let's just say I agree with this trade-off, what else does it entail to secure it? How are we going to guarantee a peace treaty and no double crossing?"

Nikk scratches his chin, moving the saltshaker around on the table as our entrée, which I didn't order, arrives. "Marriage," he blurts out.

Sucker punched and alarmed at his proposal, a small shoot of water spurts from my mouth. "Huh? Marriage?"

He nods again, not missing a beat as he slices into his swordfish. "Yes. Marriage. Our families have fought and fought for decades. We have both lost men, resources, and important deals on both sides. It's about time we put an end to it. We can help one another, and it would only be for a year."

A year of marriage to a traitorous Orlov. A flutter of excitement flourishes in my stomach as I consider the idea. "Only one year?"

"Yes. Enough time for us to establish the peace treaty and warm up to one another. Thereafter we can divorce and go our separate ways, keeping the peace treaty."

I slice through my fish, enjoying the buttery sauce it's swimming in. It's a smart idea, and if I do want to take back New York City slowly but surely, going through Nikk is the best way.

Placing my fork down gently, I offer him my hand. "Deal."

“Deal.” We eat in silence for a moment as I stare across at the face of a stone-cold killer and Russian thug. Can I pretend to love this man for a year?

This is going to be one hell of a personal challenge.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

I spread my hands out over the back of the leather couch in our private jet, a giant smile on my face a week later. My ingenious plan worked and now I've got the Mancini Donna eating out of the palm of my hand. And she's going to be doing it for the next year, but with what I have in mind, it's going to be longer than that.

I have plenty of suits in my closet, so picking out one for a sham wedding is no problem. You can never go wrong in an all-black tuxedo. Even if the marriage to the Donna is fake, I can't wait to see what she's going to look like walking down the aisle. Yegor, Dimitri, and Yakov are all suited up in Armani, and so far, it's been a smooth ride to Sicily. The least I can do is accommodate Elena with the wedding location. I'm still shell-shocked she folded so quickly, but nonetheless it's a win from the outside for her too. See, I know the minx thinks she's got a shot at taking back New York, but she's only going to get as far as I let her. If I have my way with her, she's going to be occupying my bed, and I'm going to find many other ways to keep her distracted.

I take a glance over at Yegor who is slamming down a shot, his face red and eyes bloodshot. I tap him on the chest. "Easy on the shots. I'm not a married man yet. There's nothing to celebrate," I scold, the other guys just as mute as he is. They don't know the ins and outs of the agreement, but I'm not a stupid man; I know what I'm doing.

"Fuck, I have to do something. Please rethink this, Boss. I cannot believe you're going to marry the Mancini Donna."



Scoffing, I shake my head, not moving from my position. “You think I’m marrying her for fucking lemons?”

Yegor’s face crumples in disgust. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing.”

“Trust me, I’m not. I told you a wild beast needs to be tamed, and that’s what I plan on doing. Once we’re married, I’m going to control her.” I eye off the shot of tequila Yegor just downed, wanting one for myself. I signal to the inhouse bartender. “As a matter of fact, we do have something to celebrate. The fact she agreed to be under my thumb. Line us up four shots.”

The bartender does just that bringing over the glasses, sitting in front of us with slices of lemons and a shaker of salt. “Fucking lemons,” Yegor grumbles, shaking his head.

Smacking him on the back, Dimitri laughs. “Well, it’s going to go well with all the vodka we’re about to sell. It’s a win.”

“Fuck that. You can’t control her.”

“Then I will end her,” I quip without hesitation, drizzling the salt onto the back of my hand. “Alright. Knock it back on three. Here’s to lemons and power.”

In unison, my associates repeat; “Here’s to lemons and power.” I knock back the burning alcohol and suck on the lemon, thinking of the downfall of the Mancinis. Oh, it’s going to be a steep decline into the barrels of Orlov hell for Elena.

“I am curious as to what your plan is. How do you plan on controlling her?” Yegor asks as I chase down the tequila with water.

“I plan on using her to control the Italians. She’s going to do everything I say, because if she becomes a problem for me or the Bratva, or she wants to try any tricks,

I'm going to kill her. She won't want to step out of line." Shrugging my shoulders, I adjust my black onyx ring which is housed in brass.

"Huh," Yegor grunts, offering a conciliatory nod as if coming around to the idea.

"See, you have to remember, Yegor, she has no direct relatives, and when I do kill her, the distant relatives will fight amongst themselves for the top-dog position. But those aren't the ones I'm interested in," I tell him with a glint in my eye, the alcohol rushing through my system. "No, I'm interested in the workers. The Italian men will want someone to lead them. The Mancinis have a strong workforce, and they will be useful to me. None of them will be able to deny the opportunities and money I offer them, and that's when I will pounce and crush them." I pound my fist into my hand, turning it.

Yegor chuckles, now understanding the inner workings of my plan. "I should have never doubted you. It's the long game," he retorts gruffly.

I stare at the gold clock on the wall, it's chime irritating me as much as the terms the Donna set. "Terms and clauses as she called them." Cringing, I think about the ones Elena put forward resisting the urge to rip them up, but I had to give away some concessions initially, even though in my head, those terms and special conditions aren't going to last long.

"You will not touch me without my consent, and the marriage is purely for show and is strictly business related ." Her pretty little mouth uttered the words on the screen a couple of days after the boat incident made me laugh. I want to do more than touch her, I want to conquer her, and have her screaming my name.

"Fine. I can live with it," is what I said at the time, but again, I've got plans for the dark-haired beauty and with that smug fuck Matteo sitting near her, I didn't have much of a choice. "Oh, and I will continue to work after marriage and build Italian

businesses in New York. We're not doing things the Bratva way. I won't be sitting at home."

"This is part of Bratva condition. Can you not do it for a couple of months?" I pushed, knowing she wouldn't go for it, but aching to see what she would say.

"No, I can't. I won't sign the contract if you don't agree. That wasn't what we discussed, Nikk." She issued a stern warning and all it did was make me want to punish her more. Ever since the conversation, I've been conjuring up several ways in which I can manipulate her to breaking her own clause.

If there's one thing I like, it's a challenge, and as far as a woman is concerned, I've been bored with the same old, same old, but I pretended to give her what she wanted. It will hold for the time being, but once she's in my space, and we're breathing in the same air day in, day out, eating together, talking, negotiating.... Oh yes, shortly after, we will be fucking, and I'm going to make her beg for more, and more. It's going to be easy getting her to hand over her workforce to me. I'm fantasizing about her doing it willingly.

"You drive a hard bargain, Elena, but I will comply with your wishes. I can start introducing you to my New York nightclub contacts once you settle into your new abode."

"Then that's perfect. And I will introduce you to the farmers in the region and explain the shipping arrangements and distribution. It's all there in the contract," she punched out, waiting for her to talk about more obvious arrangements between the two of us, but she didn't. Foolish of her.

"Excellent. I think it's going to be a fruitful partnership and a good year for both the Orlovs and the Mancinis, don't you think?" I added smoothly, Matteo playing it a little too close to her.

He wants her. I can tell. No man protects a woman that way without harboring some feelings.

“ Yes. It can be. And I’m fine with the wedding date. The quicker we set it, the quicker we can get this arrangement over with.”

It was at that point I wanted to taunt her, but I have an entire year to get under the cracks of her smooth olive skin I reason. The plane shakes a little, catapulting me back into the present as I study the clock on the wall once more.

One hour until touchdown, and one hour until my new plan to tame the L’vitsa springs into action. It’s about to be one wild ride.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Elena

“He takes me for a fucking fool,” I spit out as I stand in front of the floor-length antique mirror of my Sicilian manor, staring back at the wedded bride I’m about to be. Dappled light shines in through the arched window, the serene sound of birds chirping in the background as direct contrast. The light catches the ripe lemons, and soon our workers will be hauling them off in their trucks to pick and transfer to the picking and sorting warehouse. Ironically, the fruit we’ve borne is one of the reasons I’m trapped in this mess. There are olive trees on the sprawling Mancini estate grounds, but that’s not our main business.

It’s a shame it’s an arranged marriage. This is not how I want to show up as a bride. Hell, I’m twenty-two and marriage is the furthest thing from my mind. Avenging the deaths of those slain before my father is at the forefront, but I’m going to have to bide my time on such things. I flip my chocolate barrel curled locks over my shoulder; they’re yet to be pinned, but I could care less, because inside I’m silently fuming, and don’t exactly want to look as if I’m happy about the day.

If I didn’t hate the Orlovs so much, I might even call Nikkita handsome, but he’s the ruthless type of hot, and I can’t bring myself to consider him anything other than an enemy. I’m not sure I’ll be able to fake a sincere look of love with this Russian barbarian, but I’ll do my best. For the famiglia.

My wedding dress is simplistic, yet classy and elegant with its intricate embroidered and beaded details embellishing its heart-shaped bustier. The bottom half of the dress is slimline and in the color cream. Personally, I adore the way the folds descend into a waterfall of waves with a small train sticking out behind. If I had it my way, I would

walk down the aisle dressed in jet black or a clown costume because this charade is more like a funeral, or horrible prank, not a marriage.

Matteo is seated nearby on a plush stool with a face full of worry, but as I turn side on, I'm more concerned about spilling out of my dress. There is cleavage, and the dress is strapless. It's good I have enough tape to keep the girls in place.

"He does," Matteo interjects, his forehead rippled in concern, "but we both know you're not. The thing is—"

"Matt, does my dress look okay?" I ask, turning around to look at the back, which is half zipped. I'm waiting for the ladies of the estate to come back so they can finish my hair, but in the meantime it's Matt and I.

"Elena, I'm not worried about your damn dress." His terseness somehow is amusing to me, because whilst Nikk might take me for a fool, I'm in it for my own reasons.

I shift my hair fall out of my face, wide-eyed. "Why? What's up?"

Matt sighs heavily. "What's up is I don't think this is a good idea . At fucking all. What if he tries to kill you? Do you not think he will, Donna?" Of course he could, but the Mancinis are bringing too much to the table for him to execute, even if he wants to.

Smirking, I nod at Matt in the mirror. "Quit being dramatic. He's not going to kill me. There's too much at stake, and he wants something that only I can give him," I remind him, pressing my lips together. I've kept the lip color nude, glossy and natural, but I do have to admit, I'm every part the illuminated bride today.

"I bet there are many things he may want from you. How can I protect you if I'm not with you?" Matt expresses his fears out loud as I dip slightly, patting his hand.

“Nothing changes. I’m not about to be some traditional Brat bride. He can fuck off, plus that’s not what’s in the agreement. You’re still going to be with me, so you can stop worrying about that.”

“I am worried. I need to see what I can do about extra security detail for you. I want the Orlovs tailed,” he counters, his jaw tense. I do understand his concern, but for whatever reason, I’m not as filled with fear as I should be.

“It’s only for a year, Matt. I’m going to take back what’s ours. The Orlovs pushed us out of New York, and now it’s time for the Mancinis to make a comeback. His connections into the nightclub sector will be of great benefit and will make the transition easier. We can reign again!” I ball up my fist, understanding the risks, but more than willing to take them. Dad would be proud.

Matt rises to his seat upon my impassioned speech, his polka dot kerchief lopsided. He’s debonair in his navy-blue suit, slicked parted hair, olive-tanned skin, and polished shoes. “Elena...” He pauses for a beat, his mouth forming a grim line. “Yes, we may want to take back New York, but I don’t want it to cost you your life.”

I peer closer into the mirror, touching up my eyebrows, swiping a little more blush across my cheeks. “Yes?”

“We both know the Russians cannot be trusted. They are loyal to none but their kin. And we—the Mancinis—are not kin. I don’t think this is the best move for the Sicilian Mafia,” Matt remarks, his warm eyes centering on mine.

I grin broadly back at him, taking a moment to fix up his red and white kerchief, patting his chest when I’m done. “There, that’s better. I know how particular you are.”

“Elena! Take me seriously. This isn’t a good idea.”

“Listen, I will take New York back. I’m going to kick the Orlovs out one by one by the scruff of their necks, just like they kicked us out. Since when are Russians the kingpins of New York anyway? It doesn’t work!” I scoff, Matt unimpressed with my Mancini bravado. I’ll have to blame that character trait on my father.

A knock on the wooden door interrupts our conversation, and in reflex action, I whip up the length of my gown, my gun held tight in a holster and strapped strategically to my thigh. As our heads swivel in the direction of the door, my aunt Mary sticks her head around the door. She’s the one doing my hair. She holds up her comb.

“Bella! Are you ready?” Hastily, I drop my dress, relieved it’s her. It’s too early for a wedding shoot-out.

“No, Mary, not yet. I will call you. Almost done,” I tell her cheerily as she backs away from the door.

“Okay. You look beautiful.” As she retreats, Matt studies me, finally regarding my dress.

“Your zip is down at the back,” Matt murmurs, scanning me from head to toe as I feel his warmth when he zips me up. Our eyes lock in the mirror as I take a beat to appreciate him. If he hadn’t been in the famiglia for so long, maybe I would look at him in a different light. I smile sweetly at him, but quickly dissolve it.

“If Nikk, tries to touch you without your consent you should tell me,” Matt adds, his hot breath hitting my bare shoulder, sending a slight spiral of shivers down my back.

I smooth down the front of my dress, a hint of nervousness arising. I’m a Donna now and I don’t want the famiglia looking at me as if I’ve failed them by making this decision, but my head’s in the long-term game, not the short term. “He wouldn’t dare. I added the clause in our contract that he wouldn’t touch me.”



The warmth of Matt's hand seeps through my back as I hold his solemn gaze once more. This time there's a smile hugging the edges of his mouth. "That doesn't mean he wouldn't. You're so young, Elena, and you're all a man in this game could ask for. You've blossomed beautifully, Donna." Matt steps to the side, adjusting his tie, our eyes meeting in the mirror.

"Thank you," I tell him quietly as we both stand side by side. Matt's always been my rock, and I know he's going to be with me to ride it out through it all.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

One hour later in Palmero, Sicily...

“This Sicily place, it’s not half bad. I could get used to it. It’s going to be excellent taking a tour around the Mancini estate, and to take a hefty bite out of it,” I tell Yegor, whose eyes are shielded by sunglasses. It’s a mild summer’s day, but I’m already perspiring.

“Fuck the Mancini estate. We are about to burn in Mancini hell. Or in this stone church. And here we are about to walk in, a bunch of sinners,” Yegor denotes in a sour tone while I chuckle, thumping the middle of his chest.

“No, every man deserves redemption, and we are here to atone for our sins in the name of the heavenly father,” I tell him, but I don’t plan on doing anything of the sort. I plan to sin all over the place for the next twelve months and beyond. Preferably I hope to sin with the L’vitsa underneath me in our defiled marriage bed, but that may take some time.

“I don’t mind being a sinner, especially if I can take someone pretty with me,” Dimitri growls his sunglasses dropping to the bridge of his nose as one of the curvy Italian women eyeballs him, entering the church.

It’s a special day today. I inhale the Italian air knowing I’m going to be taking over the Cosa Nostra soon enough; it’s only a matter of time. I enter the Mon Palme Cathedral, armed to the teeth with my Bratva family, and a couple of outside parties who are arms dealers’ specialists, and proficient in breaking legs and arms as a

resume bonus.

The low thrum of God's music fills the iconic cathedral and the church full of hushed whispers, hostile glances and an underbelly of silent violence. I keep my eyes peeled, signaling the Catholic Cross on my chest, unmoved by the impressive gothic renaissance architecture. I look up at the stained-glass version of Jesus Christ, the irony not lost on me. Two Mafia families are about to join in union, under the guise of peace—when really at best, it's a silent takeover.

The wedding music switches as I stare into the eyes of the Mancinis, their mouths smiling, but their eyes harboring deep wells of resentment and mistrust. I shake hands as I move through, and notice my Bratva family doing the same, but there's no camaraderie behind it. This is purely for show. "Good luck today," Maxim chimes in as he sits on the Bratva side of the pew and I part, stepping in front of the priest.

Nodding at him, the whispers die down as the music amplifies and Elena walks gracefully down the aisle alone. I wonder what she feels inside, and if she would have wanted Rocco to walk beside her. I drop the thought, clearing my mind, mesmerized, just as everyone else is in the church.

She resembles a swan. Not the wild lioness I encountered on the luxury yacht, mildly baffled, I find myself not being able to drag my eyes away from her, until I return to my senses. Don't be fooled, Nikk. She is all that of a cunning lioness and more.

Her presence renders me breathless as she comes closer. Her exquisitely detailed dress is perfectly tailored to her petite, athletic body, her scent driving me wild. And it only gets worse because when the veil is lifted, she looks even more beautiful than I imagined.

The vows are quick and painless, lacking emotion, but I'm not immune to the last part of the vows. A flash card of claiming Elena's mouth rushes through my brain,

but I correct it.

“It’s time to kiss the bride,” the priest announces, the church eerily silent. There’s no chemistry between us yet, and I’m not planning on provoking the L’vitsa so soon. I dip to kiss her forehead instead, but there’s no doubt in my mind, I will have her. She doesn’t flinch, but her eyes hold contempt, so it appears my decision was the right one.

Standard wedding protocol continues, but the main part is the signing of the marriage contract afterwards. “It’s done now. Peace treaty intact, and we are now in bed together.”

“On paper we are, and that’s the only place we will be,” Elena corrects with fire in her eyes after the ink has dried and we’re ready to exit the cathedral together.

Grinning, I pretend to go along with her delusion. “Why, yes of course,” I reply, having the impulse to whisk her away and do naughty things to her. It’s to be our wedding night after all.

We take a bunch of perfunctory wedding photos outside, but it feels staged, and I doubt Elena, or I will keep the photos of the day, but we play the little stupid wedding game anyway. What I’m focused on is what’s going to happen later on tonight once we get home....

As we ride together in the luxury town car, I resist the urge to link my finger into hers. There’s something so enticing about her aura that it’s near impossible to hold back. But until I can get closer to her, I’m going to have to.

“Not so bad now we’ve ripped the Band-Aid off, am I right?” I probe as Elena turns her face away from me to look out the window.

“It was okay. I’m sure the reception will be better. Especially as you will get an introduction to Sicilian food.” She offers me a tight smile and I laugh.

“What pasta?”

“It’s more than pasta, you’ll see.”

We make it in good time to the reception, which is an old ancient Sicilian relic of a hall, but inside the entire place is decorated with opulence, the chairs wrapped in champagne silk with bows on the back, and the citrine fairy lights dim enough to create a feeling of romance. They shouldn’t have, but it might serve me well, providing me with the opportunity to get one step closer to Elena. Each long wooden table is christened with crisp white tablecloths, florals, and expensive silverware, except for our wedding table, where the tablecloth is black. Makes sense.

As we move through the night’s proceedings, I find myself having a good time. So far both families are cordial together. Eventually as the sun goes down, the music becomes a highlight of the night, and it’s the first dance for the bride and groom together.

“Shall we?” I rise, holding out my hand to a reluctant Elena, but eventually she puts her hand in mine, and we proceed to the dance floor.

“I guess we should, the music is playing.” Smirking, I draw her to the dance floor where all eyes are on us, my hand gliding over her waist. God, it feels good to touch her, to inhale her scent. A tendril of her hair skims over my forearm, sending sensations up my arm.

Sensing her stiffness as her hand sits in mine, I do my best to break the ice. “How are we feeling?” My eyebrow arches as I stare down at her pouting lips, wanting to taste test.

“I don’t know what I’m feeling if I’m being honest,” she says truthfully, and I nod.

“I have a feeling, we’ll settle into married life just fine, you and I. At least the families are getting along,” I whisper as other couples join us on the dance floor. I might have spoken too soon as out of my peripheral vision I see Matteo’s hand flying to Bogdan’s throat.

“You’ve been a Mancini bitch boy for so long. What, they didn’t want you as the Don? Couldn’t cut it, huh?” Bogdan taunts as I groan with Elena breaking away to approach the two men.

“Shut your fucking mouth. You don’t deserve to be here!”

“Fermare!” Elena calls out to Matteo whose eyes are bulging, and if I don’t get ahold of my drama-fueled cousin, guns could be drawn, even though a peace treaty has already been decided upon.

“L’ha iniziato lui!” Matteo fires back indicating he didn’t start the fight, and this time, he’s right. The crowd begins to mutter, and if we don’t break this up soon, it’s going to end in tears.

“Non mi interessa!” Elena gripes, pointing at Matteo, who pushes Bogdan back while he grins.

“Back off, Bogdan. Stop causing mayhem,” I bellow as he smirks, his eyes darkening.

“Sorry. Couldn’t help myself.”

“I bet,” I drone, snatching him further away from Matteo.

“Don’t fuck this up, otherwise I will stab you in the eye,” I warn him, but all he does is laugh. So much for a peaceful wedding. I find it interesting she spoke to her little sidekick Matteo in Italian. She didn’t want me to know what she’s saying, but little does she know I can speak basic Italian, and I know exactly what she said.

I keep the knowledge to myself for now.

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The suite room we’re staying together in is big enough for ten people to fit into if necessary, and the antique poster bed is a nice touch. I let the water run over my body wishing Elena could join me in it. Soon, soon, I reason as I step out of the shower toweling down. Elena’s already showered, and understandably it’s been a long day for her.

My cock stiffens as I think about walking out to find Elena snuggled under the covers in our marriage bed waiting for me. The thought of taking her from behind makes my mouth water, but for tonight, I can settle on spooning with her, even if it is torture. Sucking in a deep breath, I exit the steamed-up shower with no shirt, and only my boxers on.

Disappointment awaits as Elena bursts my fantasy bubble. She’s spread out on the floral chaise lounge in her robe, looking like a sleeping beauty. My cock slowly deflates as I pad over softly to get a closer look at the dark angel. I stand over her, enjoying the view. Does she not know how dangerous it is to marry your enemy? Oh, my sweet little L’vitsa. I could end her life tonight and finish the Italians in the other guest suites in a matter of minutes.

Tempting, but it’s not something I plan to do unless she acts up. After a couple of seconds of gawking, I realize Elena has me mesmerized. It surprises me. It’s not my usual reaction to women. Gingerly, I reach out, my finger trembling as I tuck a tendril

of her fallen locks behind her ear.

Elena stirs, her warm brown eyes fluttering open.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Elena

I felt the heat of his body as he inched closer towards me. I inhaled the refreshing scent of his body wash, and fortunately my eyes weren't completely closed. It had been a long arduous day, and my body wouldn't let my eyes stay open. It was bad enough I had to let him kiss me on the forehead in the church, let alone having to be holed up with Nikk in a honeymoon suite.

I thought he would realize I loathed him and his family and would leave me alone. Stick to the contract, but that was a grave misstep on my part. I knew he would emerge from the shower, and that possibly he would be looking for me, but only to say good night. The scent of his bodywash did nothing to settle my jangled nerves, and I hoped the racing beat of my heart would stop climbing, but with every footstep closer in my direction, the beat grew stronger and stronger.

Is he going to kill me or try to touch me? I couldn't guess, but my brain's neurons had already entered fight-or-flight engagement. I was fast working out the details of how quickly I could roll off the plush couch and reach for my gun to shoot him.

Apparently, I didn't spare enough time to stop him from reaching for a tendril of my hair, curving it behind my ear. His featherlight touch sends shivers down my spine, and it isn't because I'm scared of him. It's a feeling I can't put my finger on exactly.

My stomach clenches, knotting itself into a ball as my eyes fly open. Within a millisecond, I grab his wrist to stop him from proceeding any further. I might not have the strength that Nikk does, but I want him to realize I'm serious about not touching me without my consent.

“What are you doing?” I grit out, but it doesn’t come out with enough firepower. There’s a sleepy hoarseness in my tone, but it does give him pause.

“Nothing,” he replies silkily, standing rod straight in front of me. God, I can see everything through his boxers. My eyes widen at the bulge inside them, my breath hitching in my throat, and a flush of heat prickling my cheeks. A mischievous smile tugs at his mouth as he notices my fright. Fuck. Hide it. Pretend you didn’t see. I shelter my eyes from staring at his half-mast cock, letting my mind wonder as to what it would feel like.

No, Elena. You mustn’t think like this. He’s the enemy, and this is a sham marriage. Not a real one. “You were so peaceful lying there, so I came over,” he admits gruffly, giving no plausible explanation still as to why he touched me. I raise my head, drawing my parted robe at the thigh back together and allowing myself to sit up.

Thankfully, he doesn’t try to force himself on me, no, instead, to my surprise, Nikk steps back, raking a hand through his hair. “Right.” My eyes narrow in suspicion as I drink him in fully. God, he is a beautifully dangerous enemy. His hair is damp at the nape of his neck, and tiny beads of water sit on the hump of his well-carved-out shoulders. He must work out a lot. His eyes make him even more enigmatic, the color of green emeralds, reminding me of places I’ve seen on TV. I don’t want to delve too deeply into them for fear of being sucked in, but it seems I don’t have much of a choice.

Nikk tilts his head in question, my heart still not slowing its pace. “Why are you sleeping on the couch?”

“Because,” I say in a clipped tone, thinking it would be obvious to him, and not wanting to dive into the rabbit hole with him.

“Because?” he says, smirking, intense coils of heat rolling off his ripped body. I stare

blankly at his bare chest, his tattoos visible, studying the raised scar at the base of his abdomen. God. A Russian Adonis. This is all I need. A secondary ripple of heat blazes through my body as an unfamiliar ache takes root in my core. Fuck. Am I turned on by this guy? How can I be? Embarrassment sets in, but I don't let on.

"Because, I think it's better I sleep on the couch tonight," I mumble, casting my gaze elsewhere, but I fear it's too late. His victorious smile is giving him away. He knows I'm feeling nervous. I've taken it to second and third base with a guy, but never all the way, and Nikk is experienced. I know he is. I can tell by the way his eyes are gobbling me up.

"Will you be sleeping on the couch for the entire year? We will be living in the same room. The same house and working together. Are you aware of that?"

Snickering, and regaining my senses partially, I finally raise my eyes to level up with his in challenge. "Surely, we'll be able to stay in separate rooms. I know New York is known for its tiny spaces, but surely your house isn't that small, is it?"

Nikk's holds a deadpan expression, his deadly eyes peeling back my vulnerability. Okay. That didn't work out as I hoped. God, I wish he wouldn't look at me as if he wants to eat me alive. "There's no clauses in the contract about us not sleeping in the same bed," he explains drolly, his chest muscles flexing involuntarily. I sneak a look down further to his bulge. It's still there, and as my eyes scan further, I note the strength and stability of his legs, but I pretend to be stretching.

"It might not be in the contract, but I did say to you that you can't touch me unless I say so," I remind him.

Nikk chuckles, cracking his knuckles. "Donna, you will sleep in the same room as me, and that's final," he presses, his jaw hardening.

Crossing my legs, I let out a whisper of a breath. I could pretend I don't like his authority, but that would be a bold-faced lie. The slice of his words hit me in all the right places, but still, I'm not backing down to a filthy Orlov. "Why should it be final?" I challenge, fire in my eyes as Nikk shakes his head.

"You Mancinis. First you want to work and go against my tradition."

"It's part of the business arrangement we decided upon, yes."

"Part of the business deal is marriage, Elena. You will sleep in the same room as a mark of respect. You are my wife now. If the help in the house see you're sleeping in another room, they will think you're my mistress. Now, you don't want that, do you?"

Thinking about it for a quick second, I flip my hair over my shoulder. "No, I don't."

"Good, then it's settled. Besides, I caught you looking," he teases, a smirk holding laughter lines on his face.

"Caught me looking where?" I quip, my face reddening.

"At my cock, Elena," he blurts out brashly, my face close to bursting into flames as the pulse in my core grows.

"I wasn't doing that. You're showing off. You should put a shirt on."

"Why? You're my wife. Have you not seen a man before fresh out of the shower?"

Squirming in discomfort, I reach for the remote wanting to watch TV, but Nikk craftily slides in front of it, his eyes questioning as he switches it off.

“Elena, are you a virgin?” he asks, and I wish only for the ground to swallow me whole.

“Shut up! I didn’t need to sleep my way to the top. I’m already on top. I’ll save myself for my one true love. And there’s no way I want to share a bed with you,” I spit out, acid on the tip of my tongue.

“Oh, you say that now, but soon, Elena, you will be begging me to share a bed with you. You’re already telling me with your eyes, wife,” he taunts.

Dammit.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

Now is where the real games begin. The pretty little L'vitsa is on my turf. I swivel in my leather chair, tapping on my cherrywood desk, overlooking the skyscrapers of New York. It's only been two days, but Elena is all I can think about. She's become my favorite obsession and if I think hard enough, I find myself wanting to jack off to fantasies about her.

Wait. It's a tightrope game, Nikk. Soon you won't have too. It's going to be the ultimate conquest given she's a Mancini, and I got her to agree to marry me in the first place. She's going to sleep with me whether she knows it or not. I'm a hard man to resist.

Flicking on my computer, I take a sip of my coffee, standing up to shake my legs out. I don't mind being in the office, but more so I like to be out in the field working, and hunting, cutting deals and moving mountains. Today, though, because we took time out for the wedding, I'm playing catch-up.

She's a virgin too. A swirl of fire blazes through my veins, my cock swelling. So hot. It's going to be even better when I break her in. Smirking, I do my best to control myself. Not yet. She hasn't quite warmed up to me. As much as I want to "keep her in place," I want to see her in action as well.

By the time the dregs of my coffee is cold, the door opens to a leggy Elena with a face of determination. "Hi," I greet with a smile of appreciation, wanting to keep her onside for my purposes.

Elena offers me back a hint of a smile, her long chocolate hair bone straight, her pretty pouty lips smothered in gloss. Ever the elegant one, she's dressed head to toe in a form-fitting black jumpsuit and wedges. It's a good thing I'm sitting down, and she can't see the hard-on I'm hiding under the table.

"Morning."

"What brings you in?" I ask in amusement, keen to hear what she has to say.

She crosses her arms, her eyebrow hitched. "Work," she replies in a clipped tone.

"Work? What does that mean?"

"It means I'm ready to go back to work. I'm done being a wife."

Guffawing, I come out from behind the desk and post up on the edge of it, so I can see her better. She's sexy as fuck, and if she wasn't a Mancini, I would be proud to have her on my arm. It's not as if I'm not today, but it's more of a pride thing at this stage.

"Done being a wife," I repeat, rubbing at the nape of my neck. "You're funny, but you're also the Pakhan's wife. You're the Donna. You don't have to request anything, you do it."

I've got to be nice to her if I want to manipulate her in the future. She balks at how quickly I open the door, but the thing is, she doesn't know what's inside it. There's a flicker of hesitation in her eyes, and I get why.

She turns over her hands, exhaling a sigh. She might be the Donna in Sicily, but in America, it's another story altogether. She's a newbie with training wheels and she's going to need time to find her footing in the jungle of New York. She won't have the

same level of coverage she has in Sicily.

“Right.” She sits up straight, biting her bottom lip. Inwardly I’m groaning and resisting the impulse to take her on the office table, christening it. A couple of my work associates kill my dream by walking past. Elena is in full view, and I hadn’t bothered to close the Venetian blinds. I’m doing my best to make her feel comfortable. “I am.”

“So then....,” I tell her, moving back around the large hardwood desk to the filing cabinet and pulling out a thick manila record. “Why don’t you take over running Fresh Start the Bratva charity foundation for a while? It’s a housing not-for-profit charity for the underprivileged and particularly immigrants—like us. It would give you a head start.” Elena toys with the ends of her hair, studying me to see if I’m serious, but she says nothing, so I continue. “It will give you a chance to form valuable connections and learn the American way of life.” I hand over the folder to her so she can study it. “But....”

Elena’s head snaps up, her face puzzled. “But what?”

I return to stand in front of her, a serious expression clouding my face. Her shoulders tense, her guard rail rising. “No matter how many people you meet, and how many events you attend, you will still be my loyal and faithful wife. The day I hear about another man touching you, I will kill him.”

Elena flips through the details of the contract, shaking her head and ignoring my warning. “I don’t know why you would flip out about it anyway,” she mutters under her breath.

“What?”

Her mouth twitches up as the pages flip. “You heard me. It’s a contracted marriage



and it's not real, so why do you care so much?"

Her defiance is bringing the brewing volcano in me to the surface, so now I have to apply a little more pressure so the little L'vitsa really comprehends my savagery. I lean down close to her face, tilting her chin up to meet my eyes.

"As long as you're my wife, Elena, the contract remains. If you want a man, or if you are feeling the urge of horniness come over you, I'm more than willing to help you out with that, trust me," I whisper, my mouth inches from hers. Her breathing picks up, and satisfied with her visceral reaction, I step back, admiring my handiwork in the form of a crimson blush.

Oh yes. She's already breaking. She wants me as much as I want her. I can't wait....

A rap of knuckles on the door draws my attention to it. It's disappointing as I wanted Elena to respond. Another time. It's Yegor, and as soon as he realizes who is in the chair, his eyes practically cut Elena in half. His arm is still in a sling, and I know he's pissed about me marrying her, which is why he's perfect for the next assignment I'm about to give him. He pivots upon catching her eye about facing the door.

"Yegor, just the man I want to see; come on in," I beckon smoothly. "You're right on time."

"I am?" he grunts, moving to the far left of the office as a small smirk forms on Elena's mouth. Now it's her turn to be excited about her handiwork, even if it was a shit shot. "Right on time for what?" He gestures angrily, his gaze shifting to Elena.

"I'm appointing you to be Elena's assistant for the Fresh Start not-for-profit. Elena's going to be running it from now on," I tell him, Elena's mouth gapes open. She's as irritated, if not more so, by the announcement, judging from the spiteful glance she gifts me, but I don't care. What did she think I was going to do?

“Assistant?” Yegor clarifies, his forehead receding. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to help Elena settle into the Bratva order. You know, help guide her as she manages the day-to-day operations. It will be good for the both of you,” I reply succinctly, hoping Yegor understands what I’m hinting towards.

Elena says nothing, and I’m mildly surprised. I did expect some sort of outburst or protest from her, but none comes. Instead, she simply nods, offering Yegor a stiff smile. Elena rises to her feet, turning on her heel, departing in a huff. Exhaling, a smirk lines my face. She’s going to have to be okay with it, otherwise... I’m going to kill her.

Yegor’s eyes travel with her, the door clicking shut behind her. Immediately Yegor faces me, gesturing to me in disgust with his free hand.

“Why would you give her this type of power, Nikk? And why the hell are you appointing me?” His face flushes red with anger, but I’m a man with a master plan.

“There’s nothing for you to be worried about. It’s a special game I’m playing. I will let her have her power, but in between I will remind her that I’m the one who gave her the power in the first place, do you understand?”

Yegor slowly catches on. “I think so.”

“I’m going to mark my territory, if you can catch my drift.”

Yegor chuckles, finally understanding. “She is your wife, and she is part of the Bratva now. Marking is self-explanatory.”

“Right, and the reason I appointed you, is because I don’t trust her. I need you to stay by her side and keep an eye on her. And you report back to me if anything suspicious

is going on. Understood?” I explain sternly.

“Consider it done. I look forward to the assignment.”

“Good. Now get out. I’ve got work to do.”

Elena

Days later, I sit riding in the back of the town car past Times Square heading to the Fresh Start Gala Fundraising Event in collaboration with the Manhattan Hospital to raise funds and awareness for the underprivileged and homeless of the city. I try to keep my hands still in my lap as it's such a major event. Well, to me it is anyway, and it's my first. The city's officials, judges, celebrities, entrepreneurs and influential business owners have kindly agreed to attend and give me their time on such short notice. Even I'm surprised at the caliber of the guest list as I study it. Nikk's list of contacts, blowing out a low breath as I flip my long hair over my shoulder.

I hope I look the part. I've organized this event, and if it tanks, I'm screwed. Taking out my makeup mirror, I reapply my bronzed lipstick, which perfectly complements the slinky copper dress I'm wearing where part of my back is out. I notice the driver—Stan, sneaking a glance at me in the back seat as I do so. Typical, but given my understanding of Nikk's willingness to kill anyone who touches me, I'm okay that he's looking. I do look good. Twisting my gold bracelets around on my wrist, I practice my best gala smile, hoping I'm a good enough actress to pull off acting as if I'm happy to be Nikk Orlov's wife as we pass the bright lights of Times Square to The Beekman.

The venue is stunning and makes me homesick for Sicily. When I scouted out the venue, I immediately knew it was the best place to hold an event and make a lasting first impression. Its nineteenth century design took my breath away, and its opulent interior is just the place. Feeling hopeful and courageous about the Mancinis' entry back into New York, I walk in with the perpetual stain of Yegor at my side, but if it's going to placate Nikk to have him tagging along, then I hope he learns a thing or two.

Immediately I'm greeted by a lovely group of women. "Hi, I'm Sharon. It's nice to finally meet you! You look fantastic, and this is such a wonderful idea to run an event like this. Very impressive," she praises with a friendly smile. There's no fakeness behind it; in fact, there's no one from the list who's fake. Everyone I'm meeting and greeting is treating me like royalty. Almost if they're willing to kiss the ground I'm walking on.

I'm just thankful Yegor is staying a healthy distance back from me, slinking into the shadows until I can't feel him hawking over my shoulder. I circulate the room, enjoying the meet-and-greets, until it's time for me to speak.

"Hi, for those of you who don't know me, I'm Elena Orlov, a newlywed, and passionate about helping to support worthy causes, so I'm delighted to be welcomed into the Fresh Start family," I start, feeling a little rusty on my speeches, but I find my footing as the speech carries on.

As the champagne begins to flow, the conversations open up, and I find relief in the fact that I'm meeting the right business partners already.

"Velvet Lounge sounds like an excellent concept nightclub, and I'm keen to invest. I want to hear more about the details. Nikk is an associate of mine, and we've been doing business for years," Petrov advises rather enthusiastically, much to my surprise. "Let's set up a meeting so we can talk about when you want to launch. I've got a few other partners who probably would be interested in the vodka production side of things as well."

I regard him with a healthy dose of suspicion, finding myself unaware that the Orlov name held such weight in the community. I meet others who are willing to back the Mancini ventures as well, and it's as if I'm stepping into a surreal dream. Not a single one of them has turned down my suggestions for nightclub venues. No, in fact, all of them have been in support, practically throwing their business cards at me.

I smell a rat but keep my veiled thoughts to myself. Even Nikk has been acting as sweet as artificial sugar. It's a game, Elena. Never forget it's a game, but don't hate it, because you're playing one too. Except in the game I'm playing, I'm the only winner, and Nikk is the casualty.

By the time the event's in full swing, we raise a small fortune for Martin Place, a youth initiative for the underprivileged of New York. I take the microphone to express my gratitude.

"Thank you so much for opening your pockets today, and it's because of you all, we've been able to raise over sixty thousand dollars for the Fresh Start fund. This will help with our worker bee project in New Jersey to build new homes. Thank you so much!"

I kept the speech short but sweet. Sharon approaches clapping her hands together with pursed lips. "I like a woman who knows what she wants and goes after it. What an amazing start to your charity debut. It's only going to get better from here. That worker bee program has gained some real traction, and they've already built thirty new homes in that region."

Smiling, and encouraged by all the compliments, I'm happy to have met Sharon, she will be an excellent ally and friend to keep in contact with. "Thank you. I'm amazed how quickly everything came together, to be honest. It's been a dream event."

"Well, you're an Orlov now, dear. It's to be expected."

Hmm. People keep saying that. Looks like this sham of a marriage wasn't the worst decision I could have made after all. A waitress floats past, and I help myself to an hors d'oeuvre. A prickly heat travels up the nape of my neck as a warm hand lands on my waist. Flinching, my eyes widen when I see who's behind the hand.

His dark eyes meet mine with a public warning, housed in them, and for a second a sense of entrapment cloaks me as his textured mouth graces the side of the cheek. God, why does it feel so good for him to do that? And why does he look like a male model from a magazine?

“Hi, sorry I couldn’t get here earlier. From what I’ve heard upon entry, you’ve done an excellent job. Well done, wife,” he remarks smoothly with a wide smile, and a clear taunt in front of others.

Oh, you wish to play? Then two can play the game. Basking in his praise, I chuckle as he hands me a congratulatory champagne. “Thank you, husband. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Nikk hams it up for the attentive semicircle of associates in front of us. “Yet you did. I have every faith in you, Elena.”

“Ahh, you two remind me of me and my husband. Even twelve years later, I’m still in love with the guy,” one of the wives of a New York official remarks.

If only you knew, lady. This has nothing to do with love. At fucking all.

“How wonderful,” I say, sipping my champagne and circulating with Nikk, and by every handshake and fake smile between us, you wouldn’t know from the outside that we are enemies by blood. As the drinks flow, I loosen up, and so does Nikk.

I’m buzzed from the bubbles, and as Nikk and I stand at the table, his gaze travels down the length of my body, unnerving me. “I will take you home; you don’t have to take the town car. We should leave. Now.”

“Umm, okay,” I say meekly, which is not my usual smart-aleck response, but I don’t want to rock the boat, so it’s time to leave. “Let me say my goodbyes.”

“No problem.” Nikk and I say goodbye to everyone, the trip back silent, filled with noise from the radio. There’s an unexplainable tension hanging in the air that has me fidgeting in my seat. Nikk’s sneaky glances all the way home aren’t helping either, and by the time we reach home and enter the bedroom, I don’t exactly know how to handle it.

My first thought is to get a shower, and just pretend to watch TV in the living room so I can process this growing band of feelings, but Nikk’s close proximity to me is snatching all the oxygen out of the room.

As my head pounds with a blood rush, I lick my lips, his hands flexing in and out.

Danger. Danger. He’s hotter than ever, and the taboo attraction I have to him is growing on the daily.

He’s more experienced than you. He’s going to eat you alive. You’re in over your head. I hear the whirl of thoughts cascading through me, but I’m not sure what to do about them, so I stand rooted to the middle of the expansive bedroom, staring at him.

“Don’t do that,” he warns, his voice cracking, his cold eyes providing an evocative chill as goose bumps rise on my arms.

Baffled, I blink rapidly at him. “Do what?” I hate myself at the moment for the strangled distortion of my words, coming out like a scared little mouse, but this is the grip Nikk is slowly forming on me.

“You know what you’re doing,” he claims with a whisper, his towering presence bringing a fiery heat that cannot be denied towards me.

“No, I don’t, Nikk. What am I doing?”



His eyes descend to my bronzed cleavage as he inhales sharply, stealing my breath along the way. I don't want to lust after Nikk, but somehow, a spool of desire is gathering between my thighs, and it has me weak.

"You look stunning, and you're making things hard for me in more ways than one," he admits in a sexy growl, his face close enough to reach mine. A fast rush of heat blooms on my cheeks, my heart beating in syncopated rhythm. Flustered, my eyes dart around, my weakness for him completely and utterly exposed.

Taken aback, and inexperienced, I step back to give myself breathing room from his intensity, but instead I almost trip, my feet tangling themselves up. Nikk's reflexes kick in as his strong hands dig into my arm, catching me and reeling me in sharply to his hard chest.

"Shit, sorry," I rush out.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Could he be any more irresistible? Inertia holds me in place as my breath hitches, our eyes locking in mutual admiration while Nikk's eyes center on my glossy mouth.

"It's fine, Elena," he coaxes in a hoarse voice. "I wouldn't let you fall." I can barely hear his words as his grip loosens, his hands drifting to the curves of my tight waist. God. This is happening.

His head inches down as his roguish mouth finds my swollen lips. I'm surprised by the tender taste of his sinful lips grazing against mine. If melting into a puddle were an option that's where I would be, and that's scary enough to fathom. Powerless to stop my lust from overriding my common sense, the tip of his tongue eases into my parted mouth.

There's no way in hell I'm falling for an Orlov, but Nikk's mouth and manipulative

grip begs for deeper entry, his passion drawing out my cloaked desire. Yes. I want him to take me. Yes. Nikk. I want this man. Where is this coming from? My returned urgency only spurs him on, my hands snaking around the back of his neck, the blaze between us morphing into a small forest fire of heat.

I don't want him to draw back, but when he does, I find myself gasping for air, and so is he. I don't know how I end up on the bed, but I find myself on my back, weighted underneath him.

"Elena," he expresses, tortured desire riding over his face. His lips bruise mine once more, prizing my mouth open wider, and I groan, the thickness of his erection digging into my thigh.

I'm both thrilled and nervous, but there's no turning back now. I watch in awe, catching my breath as Nikk unbuttons his navy-blue collared shirt, his thick chiseled chest, full of violent history and stories staring back at me.

"Wow." Softly the words I willed to stay in my head seep out as Nikk pulls down the straps of my dress, revealing my bra. My chest heaves in and out as I anticipate his next move, excited by what he's about to do next.

"Elena. Fuck! You're so beautiful, I don't think I can hold myself back from you," he confesses, his wolfish hunger turning me on.

Choked up words exist in my throat, my body throbbing as his lips scorch the nape of my neck, traveling to my collarbone. His fingers reach, unsnapping my bra, my breasts springing free. His tongue teases a trail over my pebbled buds as I arch my back wanting more.

"Please be gentle, Nikk," I request as he lifts his head, his carnal desire etched on his face.

“I’ll try.” His tongue returns to my breast as he cups it greedily, his tongue flicking relentlessly back and forth, my pussy soaking wet. I can barely stand all the sensations as he claims my neglected breast. Squirming, I wriggle as he rips the dress down, grunting and turving it to the corner.

Without warning, my bottom half is bare, exposed to the air, and to Nikk. This isn’t supposed to be.... Does he think I’m okay? I can’t read his mind, but as his mouth salivates, I can guess.

“Fucking beautiful, Elena, and the perfect entry for my cock. Don’t tense, let me take you on a ride,” he offers.

“Nikk,” I sing out, my body humming as two digits slides inside me. It feels so wonderful—the stretch, I raise my hips to him, and he grins, reaching over to the drawer and pulling out a condom. I watch, mesmerized as he rolls it on his thickly engorged member.

My eyes widen at the girth, and Nikk skims his fingers over my belly. “It’s going to fit, trust me. Your pussy is going to stretch around me. You’re too wet for me. So delicious.” He slowly guides the tip to my entry, massaging, tingling sensations gathering as I feel a pop upon entry.

It doesn’t hurt as much as I thought it would, but it’s a funny feeling. Again and again, he probes me inside, guiding himself and back out. Thrusting, and tunneling himself deeper and deeper until I’m full of him.

His green eyes bore into mine, and it’s as if he can see my soul. I don’t want him to stop as I find my hips swirling in time with his. And he smells of this heady, musky spice. God, what is he doing to my body? A tight sensation swirls in my core as his thumb skims over my clit.

“Nikk!” I call out, bucking against him like a wild animal, heat pooling in my body.

“I want you to come for me. Do it! ” he commands, his hot authority, propelling me to a peak I’ve never experienced before. The bed squeaks under our weight as the friction increases, his cock swelling the more he thrusts.

“Nikk!” I gasp, sensory overload taking over as a crescendo of sweet orgasm washes over me in intense waves from the tip of my head to the bottom of my feet. Seeing stars, I feel myself breaking apart as the intensity of the sensation increases. “ Yes! Yes! Yes!” There’s no catching my breath as Nikk groans, grabbing a handful of my breast, his cock still deep inside me.

“You’re so tight, so tight, L’vitsa. Fucking tight!” he growls, his face contorting as I feel the thickness of his girth swell inside me. He grunts, releasing, the vibration of his heartbeat sounding in my ears. I hold on to the victory, smiling through the darkness, for the simple fact my pussy holds its own special brand of power.

Nikk withdraws falling in a heap beside me, both of us panting. I’ve crossed a dangerous line, because now I’m sleeping with the enemy and there’s blood on the sheets....

Nikk

I claimed the lioness and tamed her just like I said I would. I spread my hands behind my head cockily. No woman can resist me. Never has, and never will be able to. I'm a man of my word, and as the sun ushers in a brand-new day, I pat the bed next to me, wanting to start the morning off with my cock inside Elena again.

But as my hand pats the empty, cold spot beside me, I quickly realize she's up early. I rise, rubbing my hands over my face, watching her robed on the couch, a pout on her face.

"Good morning," I say, winking at Elena and flipping the covers back. Walking over to her, I'm in a damn good mood, but it appears my L'vitsa is not. There's a noticeable change in her demeanor.

Is she sulking? Judging from all her moaning and groaning last night, she thoroughly enjoyed herself. Unperturbed by her antics, I stretch, sliding on my boxers and walking closer to her. Her fiery caramel eyes are clearly begging for my death by dagger.

She recoils, and my fingers involuntarily hang in the air, wanting to stroke the same hair I enjoyed tugging last night, but I think better of it. At least for the time being. "Good morning." Her gaze remains fixated on the TV as she doesn't return my greeting.

"Are you ignoring me now?"

“Yes, I am,” she announces defiantly, crossing her arms, attempting to peer around my body.

“After last night, you don’t want to talk to me?” I push, forcing her to speak to me.

Now I’ve got her attention. Her eyes flash up to me as she shakes her head. “I was drinking, and you seduced me.”

Snorting, I step forward encroaching on her space, her eyes encouraging me to retreat, but I’ve already claimed her precious virginity. To me, the boundaries have been well and truly crossed.

“Are you sure? You had so many opportunities to stop yourself. I didn’t force you,” I remind her, a hint of arrogance in my tone.

“You practically did.”

“Tell me how? You kissed me back. You were practically screaming my name last night.”

Elena’s eyes hold irritation as she sighs. “You’re experienced, and you know how to seduce women; that’s why it happened,” she reasons, denying her own vital attraction to me.

“Are you sure, Elena?” I ask, bridging the gap, and cupping her chin in my hand, which she swiftly swats away, a flustered expression riding over her distinctive features.

“Yes, I am. It won’t happen ever again, I can assure you. It was a big mistake. One that I will never make again,” she reasons in an acerbic tone.

Dropping my hand from under her chin, I shift my gaze to her robe tie, the primal urge taking over to unrobe her and immediately unravel her shallow theory.

No woman can resist me, and I've already proven my point, orgasm after orgasm.

Elena scrambles, rising to her feet, attempting to take the same action she took last night, which was to give herself some breathing room from me. "I'm going to get some breakfast." She quickly moves towards our bedroom door.

Chuckling, I beat her to the door handle, flattening my hand against the door, startling Elena for a quick second, her ripe lips inviting me to possess them again. "What if I want you again?" I tease with a lopsided smile, placing my other hand on the other side of the door so she's blocked.

I think she has no escape, but she's small enough to duck under my arm, and before she can say anything, there's a knock at the door, giving her the time to sneak further away from me.

"Come in!" Elena calls out, frustrating me as I note the sheer relief in her voice. Margorie, my maid for over a decade, enters with a cleaning trolley and a cordial smile.

"Good morning," she greets as Elena smiles at her warmly.

"Good morning, Marjorie."

"Mrs. Orlov, you have a guest awaiting your arrival."

Elena nods. "Ah yes, invite him inside the house. I called him."

A shot of adrenaline shoots down my spine, my fists curling up. "What guest?" I

bark. “Who is he?”

Elena stares back at me, a smug smile on her pretty face as she storms out with me trailing fast behind her. Who the hell has she decided to let inside our home? Stalking after her as she heads to the staircase, I shake my head. I’m the wrong man to make jealous.

Anger is brewing to an all-time high as I fly down the stairs after her, the face of a man I loathe staring back at me. Matteo. Her fucking minder who I know wants to fuck her. I’m sure of it. He’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing; Elena just doesn’t realize it yet.

His clean-cut image and concern for her doesn’t fool me one bit. I stop once I reach the bottom of the stairs, steam flying out of my nostrils.

“Buongiorno, Matteo,” she greets as he kisses both her cheeks.

“Buongiorno, Elena. Stai bene?” Matteo asks. Of course she’s doing well, you prick. Go home and fuck right off back to Italy. This is my fucking house and the man is not even acknowledging me.

“Sto bene. Faccio del mio meglio.”

You’re more than okay, Elena. Especially last night when you were begging me for more.

“Hai fatto amicizia qui?” Matteo asks, his cheesy grin continuing to irritate me. I don’t know if Elena has had time to make American friends. She hasn’t mentioned anything to me, but I’d like to hear her answer.

“Un po’. Ma principalmente per lavoro,” she replies, a sadness underpinning her tone,



my jealousy spiking.

Yes. Your friends are for business, Elena. It's not fucking playtime. It's a business arrangement... now inclusive of benefits. Her eyes don't light up for me like they do for him, and it's pissing me off.

I cut in, undone by all the small talk, directing my temper towards Elena. "What's he doing here?"

"He's helping us, Nikk. Matteo's here in the US because he helped arrange the shipment of Sicilian lemons for the Bratva beverage business."

Fucking sure. He's here for more than that. Matteo sticks out his hand by way of greeting, but if I could crush every bone in his hand, I would. "Matteo. No need for the handshake."

"Oh, I'm just trying to be courteous. You have a nice home," he remarks dryly, but his body language doesn't match up. Crossing my arms, I stand beside Elena, letting him know that she's mine, not his.

"I do. How long are you going to be here?" I spit out, Matteo ignoring me completely and addressing Elena instead. There's something about him that doesn't sit well with me. He's too close to Elena, and technically he's not a Mancini.

"è sempre così stronzo?" Matteo asks, his thick eyebrows rising as Elena shrugs her petite shoulders, my soul burning. The man has the fucking nerve to call me an asshole in Italian. If I'm an asshole he is a sleazy wannabe Italian gangsta.

"Sì, lo sono. Fai attenzione," I interject smoothly, my mouth upturning into a smile. Elena and Matteo both turn to me in abject shock, their mouths dropping open.

“What? You didn’t know I spoke?” I question, feigning innocence. Elena’s face shines with embarrassment. She’s lucky I didn’t tell him I would shoot him in the face, but we do have a peace treaty between families, and if I execute him, it would bring about an all-out war. I’m not quite ready for that. Not until I get what I want—that is.

“Y-you never told me you know Italian,” she says slowly as I find her underestimation of me incredibly cute and naive—just as she has been all along.

“No. I guess it never came up in conversation. Matteo, you might want to display a little more courtesy and not call me an asshole in my own home. And Elena,” I advise coldly, “you might want to keep your complaints to a minimum with your girlfriends.”

Steam is virtually coming out of her ears, but I don’t care, observing them both carefully. Matteo takes the leap, clearing his throat. “I want to check on Elena’s well-being and make sure she’s okay as I’m sure you can understand. She’s far away from her loved ones.”

“Trust me. Elena is well taken care of here. She’s now the CEO of Fresh Start, our Bratva charity foundation, and she’s doing an excellent job,” I tell him, even though I’m not obliged to tell him anything, but a small twinge inside my cold heart doesn’t like the fact Elena thinks I’m an asshole.

Elena

It was so good to see Matteo, and he looked good, the mark of the Sicilian sun on his rugged face. He reminded me of my old life—the one I want back. The time when I was free and working alongside a man I could trust with my whole heart—my departed father, Rocco.

I miss you, Dad. Why did you have to leave so soon? Feeling sorry for myself, I exhale, because once again Nikk is one step ahead of me, and it's driving me insane. I didn't want him knowing my internal gripes about him, and the fact he can understand Italian doesn't sit well with me.

Although, I can't turn back the hands of time, I'm aware now and can make adjustments. I won't let it happen again, much like I won't let him ever put a hand on my body, even though every day I'm fighting the feeling of wanting him inside me again.

Carrying my laptop under my arm, I enter the assigned office the Bratva have given me here in Manhattan. It's a stone's throw from Nikk's office, but when I peek my head inside, he's not in, but Yegor is already seated in place, typing away at his keyboard.

"Morning, Yegor," I greet cordially with coffee in hand. I feel good being at the helm of the charity, and there're so many ideas I have brewing. Sharon is being helpful as well, and it's a good thing I have it to look forward to. I could never be a traditional Bratva wife sitting at home twiddling my thumbs. I wouldn't know what to do with myself.

Yegor looks up from his laptop, scorn etched on his face. “You’re late.”

Swanning into my seat, I roll my eyes at him. “Sorry, I haven’t been feeling so hot, so I dropped by the doctor’s clinic.”

Yegor gives me the once-over. “I see.”

I open my laptop and fire it up.

“Where’s mine?” he jokes, mocking me.

“If you were nicer to me, maybe I would have gotten you one—if you’re referring to the coffee that is.”

Yegor scoffs. “You might be right. Maybe I could be nicer to you, especially since you’ve been making the charity more money than we’ve ever seen,” he adds lightly, indirectly feeding me a compliment.

A demure smile lifts on my face as I give him a quick sideways glance. “Thanks. How much are we up with this quarter’s profits?”

“Twenty percent. It is very good for the charity, and your last event in Manhattan has brought us new business opportunities for the Bratva,” he continues, jutting out his bottom lip. I don’t expect him to say “well done,” but it’s as close to a compliment as Yegor will likely give me. He’s really not such a bad guy since I’ve gotten to know him. That doesn’t mean we’re going to be hanging out anytime soon.

Wistfully, I stare at the picture of my father that I have set up as a background setting. It’s a blown-up version of an old, sepia photograph of my father. We’re standing in front of his favorite lemon tree back home. He’s wearing a large, self-satisfied smile as he holds on to my hand. I was happy then. So very happy. I fear if I touch the

screen and Yegor sees me, he will take note, and personally, I don't want any more intimate moments ruined by the Bratva.

Father, I wish you were here with me still. You would sort this out.

And he would. In fact, I wouldn't be in this position if he were still alive. Rocco didn't die because he wasn't a capable Don. That's the irony of all of this. He led us well as a Costa Nostra, and our Sicilian lemon trade success is largely due to his early visionary efforts.

Sighing, I take a sip of my coffee, staring at the screen. Yegor didn't lie, there's an influx of emails for the charity, and as I skim, I can see many of them are congratulatory in nature for the good work I've already done. I sort them out into categories to make things easier, noticing a few large digital files. Yegor now has me interested in checking deeper into the financials for the charity.

Maybe I could really sink my teeth into this project and turn it around. Opening the financials for the prior year, I notice there's been events for the charity, but not to the extent to which I've run them. Sifting through the last two years records, my eyes latch on to a particular organization that keeps cropping up in the outgoings.

Be Happy Foundation. Frowning at the screen, I zoom in. Be Happy Foundation? They must be important; we've given them a lot of money. More than \$200,000 to be exact.

Tracing the organization, I try a simple Google Search first, naturally believing they're a normal company, but my stomach flips over when I don't find them. Quickly, I look over to Yegor who's busy on the phone. I have skills in many areas, and this includes hacking. Taking advantage of these, I weasle my way into the emails of the organization and trace back the name of the foundation, finding an email trail.

And everything in my body is telling me to dig deeper. There's something going on. There's an email address. [email protected] , and it doesn't exist, so I keep probing to find out whose sending the emails to Fresh Start, tracing the VPN back to a computer. When I do find out who owns the VPN, I'm floored. Bodgan Orlov is the owner of the "fake organization, and as I keep going, I see several cc'ed emails buried in the archived and deleted emails with his real email attached.

What a fucking dummy. Squirming in my seat, a small sense of vindication rushes over me. This means there's a family member embezzling money from their very own charity.

Double-checking to make sure I'm not imagining things, I gather more evidence. If I come out and accuse Bogdan, naturally I'm primed to have a bullseye on my back. Increasing my sleuthing efforts, I find out Bogdan didn't do this without help. A Mr. Brian Dempsey aided him.

Thank you for your wonderful contribution to the Be Happy Foundation. It's truly an honor and a blessing to be working with such a charitable organization. Your funds will give us the means to open a new youth center in the Brooklyn neighborhood.

Fuming on the inside, I read this crock of an email over and over again, taking note of Brian's response.

It's an honor, and our donation is truly in the best interest of New York City's underprivileged youth. Thank you for accepting this timely donation of thirty thousand dollars. We endeavour to support you in the near future and continue a long and healthy working relationship.

Finally, after coming to the glaringly obvious conclusion, I speak up. "Yegor."

"Yes?"

“Does the Bratva have a punishment for stealing from the family?” I keep the question as light and curious as possible, continuing to work, keeping my eyes on the screen.

Yegor grunts and does the same. “The punishment is harsh. Trust me. An inside mole is the biggest betrayal. Torture, and most likely death is their only way out,” he remarks casually, my stomach turning. He catches on to why I might be asking and stops typing, looking over at me with a deadpan expression. “Why? Did you find something suspicious?”

I want to blurt out what I’ve found, but something holds me back. What if he’s in on it and receiving a cut from Bogdan? I don’t completely trust him, regardless of how well we’re getting along.

Nikk. I have to tell Nikk, but with piles of evidence, otherwise he’s going to think I’m lying too.

Smiling politely at Yegor, I break out into a snicker, keeping up the charade. “No, maybe it was me planning on doing the stealing.”

Yegor shakes his head in amusement. “I wouldn’t, I warn you, unless you want the Russian brand of punishment. You’ll end up having to eat your own fingers for breakfast.”

“Eww!” I screw up my nose, but in truth it’s not as if I’m naive to the different tiers of violence.

“Exactly. You’ve made me want a coffee, so I’m going to take a break and get a snack. Want anything?”

“Yes. A cream cheese bagel if there’s any left.”

“Alright.” I keep digging, creating my own special folder and sending the information to myself. I need more.... I answer emails, my eyes glazing over, needing a break, and it leads me over to the blogs of New York celebrity news.

I balk a little when I see Nikk on the screen, a picture-perfect statesque blonde-model type gazing into his eyes like some captivated fawn.

Gawping, I shake my head, outraged at his hypocrisy. “What the fuck is this?” I ask out loud in an animated tone. “You tell me not to make a mockery of our marriage, but you can?”

The outline reads: Veronica’s rekindled spark with New York’s hottest eligible bachelor Nikkita Orlov. Is there a second-chance romance in the cards?

And it only gets worse in the fine print. Spotted out on the town together looking extremely cozy.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

Twice in a row with Veronica is bad enough, and the New York paparazzi are hungry beasts who will do anything to get a story. Loosening up my tie, I exhale, entering the front door, finding myself looking forward to seeing Elena.

Why is she getting under my skin so much? It's a business relationship, Nikk. Keep your head on straight. My thoughts regretfully return to Veronica. Beautiful arm candy on first sight, long blonde hair, incredible legs, bright blue eyes, pretty teeth, and tanned skin. Who wouldn't want to brag about having a model on their arm? It was a shame that when she speaks, nothing of substance comes out.

Ours was a physical arrangement, and it worked well for my needs, and hers. She got to go out to swanky New York restaurants and pose next to one of New York's most notorious Bratva men, but it had to end, and that was almost a year ago.

The woman is like a clingy cat. So fucking annoying. "So good to see you Nikk. We should get a photo together," she cooed, and there were too many people in my face at the time to refuse her.

"Maybe not, Veronica. We don't need a photo opp. Besides, don't you get enough of those?" I explained under my breath as coldly as possible, so she got the hint. But as the cameras flashed, the lights buzzed in my eyes, and she stole her moment, linking her arm through mine after the luncheon. I was there to entice new investors for the launch of a lemon spritzer range I wanted to try, but she put an irritating damper on things.

She's nothing like my L'vitsa; now that's a game cat I like dealing with. Confused by my constant thoughts of Elena, I refuse them, pushing them away. She's been on my mind constantly, and it can't be a good thing.

As the door creaks open, I find Elena in her favorite spot in front of the TV with her arms crossed, a glum look on her face.

Dropping my hands into my pants pockets, I stroll over towards her, but this time I'm not as amused by her anger. It's getting to me, and I'm damned if I don't know why.

"Evening. Are you watching anything interesting?" I quiz, a seething glare the first thing I'm met with. It's obvious she's pissed at me about something or other, and that could be any number of reasons. Maybe it's to do with that toad, Matteo, and just like I push the thoughts of Elena burrowing under my skin out of my mind, I do the same with him.

"I might not be watching something interesting, but I sure did read something interesting, didn't I?"

"Oh? What was that?" Curious, I study her features, unable to look away, finding a nook to sit down next to her in.

"I fucking saw you!" she accuses, kicking out her foot to shove me further down the couch, but I curl my hand around her ankle, daring her to try again.

"You saw me? Yes, you're seeing me now, L'vitsa. What are you talking about?"

"Don't play stupid, Nikk," she volleys in a condescending tone.

"No, no, you mistake me. I'm honestly curious as to where you saw me." Puzzled by her outburst, I wait for the finer details.

“You with that bimbo model,” she cuts back at me, and the slow crawl of a smile graces my face. Yet another sweet victory.

I turn my viselike grip on her ankle into a soothing caress, my hand tempted to wander up under her dress. “Ah, where did you see this? Are you spying on me, Elena?” I demand, a dark glint in my eye.

“No, I don’t need to spy on you; it’s splashed everywhere in the tabloids.”

“Ah, so you were spying?” God, I love the fire in her eyes. This is what I want. Veronica doesn’t compare to her.

“No. I don’t want to spy on you! You’re so arrogant! You don’t want me to see other people during our marriage, yet you’re out here making a fool out of me with another woman! You betray me with your disloyalty!” she yells, her voice straining as she kicks out at my thigh. I bite my lower lip with a chuckle knowing I should have kept my grip on her leg.

“That’s the last time you kick me like that, otherwise...,” I trail off with the swift warning as she glares at me, her hot Italian temper flaring as I join her face-to-face.

“Otherwise, what?” she asks with a snarl, our breaths of fury hitting each other’s face. “You can’t just do whatever—” Time stops and so does her speech. My passion overrides into carnal takeover as my mouth collapses onto hers, the scorching fire between us too unbearable to ignore. I prize her spicy mouth open, and she doesn’t resist as our tongues glide over one another.

I don’t let her up for air, no, she has to suffer like I have the whole day thinking about her and all the ways I want to make her moan. She pushes a hand into my chest with enough force for my eyes to fly open.

Scoffing, I touch my mouth, but grip her bicep, my cock full mast. The L'vitsa has my full attention. Confused, but excited, she swipes her mouth violently. "Why?"

I close the small gap she tried to create, grabbing her waist and slamming my hard-on into her thigh as she gasps, and I nip at her earlobe. "You were talking too much, and it's a good thing I know how to shut you up now."

"Fuck off," she orders as I take her mouth again, gripping a nice handful of her ass. She moans, leaning her head back as I lick her neck.

"Why do you pretend you don't want me as much as you do?" I question, removing her ribbed tee, pulling it over her head.

"You irritate me," she tosses back as I kiss her neck, drawing her down on top of me on the couch.

"And you turn me on," I growl. "Get on top this time. I'm going to teach you how to ride this cock," I growl again, her body shuddering, her eyes opening wide. She doesn't speak, mirroring my actions, deftly unbuttoning my shirt, her hands roaming everywhere.

"Shut up and drop your pants," she replies, issuing a command of her own and biting down on her lip.

Grinning, I slide her skirt down easily, changing the play of the game. "Why don't you take them off for me?"

She hesitates for a second at the challenge I've set for her but quickly catches on, dragging my pants down, along with my underwear, giggling along the way. She's opening parts of me that I've never experienced, and it's scary for a man like me to feel. I fear weakness, and that's the last thing I need to be with a Mancini.

But now I'm caught up, anticipating the taste of her sweet nectar, and it's too late. All I can think about is being buried deep inside her. My thick hard-on glistens while I watch her awestruck eyes travel to it, licking her lips. Soon, I will have her mouth fixed around it, but for now, it's time for Elena to learn new tricks.

"You're so big, I don't know how you fit," she remarks candidly, and I stop for a moment, captivated by her beauty.

"Your pussy is a perfect fit, don't worry. Take everything off so I can see just how perfect you are. I don't know how you get away with being so fucking sexy," I coax, a thickness coating my voice.

Elena's dark hair hangs over her breasts, and she looks like a goddess to me, and it's dangerous because she's more like a dormant siren, and I'm only making it worse for myself.

Elena smiles as if understanding more of her power, and I wish I could take it back. She straddles me without me telling her, dropping her body down on top of me, her French tipped nails splayed over my stomach.

She glides like water over my cock—she's already soaking wet, moaning as I help her by holding her hips in place. "Good?" she asks, her waterfall mane of mahogany locks hanging in front of her breasts. She's ripping me apart, and I swear she knows.

"Whatever you want, L'vitsa. And I'm yours. I don't want her. I'm with no one as long as we're married." I offer myself up to her as her motion increases, her flesh slapping against mine.

"Promise?" she asks, grinding harder as I speed her up, caressing her breasts as she arches in pleasure.

“I promise. You are too beautiful,” I croak, the combustible heat between us escalating, sweat sliding between her breasts. Fingering her clit, I circle it, her mouth dropping open. I work harder, bucking up against her, her breasts bouncing to the rhythm.

Elena in motion is a heady sight, and I know she’s close to the brink when she balls her fist up on my chest. “Oh my—”

“Come, Elena, yes, come! Fucking come,” I grit out as I feel her body cave in, her pussy clenching in around my cock, the sensation having a domino effect as our bodies collide.

“Feels too good!” she crows, releasing into orgasm, her explosion enough for the rush of climax to follow shortly after for me.

Elena falls forward as I pull out of her, and her hair lays flat like a sheet over my chest, my fingers dancing over her back. At first it was about claiming her, but now it’s become more than expected.

And the next day we wake up in our bed together, with Elena no longer sleeping on the couch. She’s even peaceful in her sleep. She’s one of the fiercest women I’ve met, but under my touch she caves, and I like it.

Distance is the key, Nikk. You can’t lose to a Mancini. No. Not after what you have planned.

Stroking her arm lightly, I peek under the covers, seeing her leg draped over mine. I like it there, and that, too, is a problem.

I reach over to the dresser table to check the time, and soon I have to go. I’m needed in LA for a business trip, and as I take one last look at the sleeping beauty, I wish she

could join me.

She herself is busy with her own meetings for nightclub openings, our schedules clashing. Fuck. I'm falling for her.

Carefully, I peel her leg off my body as drowsily Elena changes positions and I slip away, alone with newfound feelings I don't want.

Elena

Nikk left out early for LA, and I find myself feeling a little lost and confused as I head off to my own meetings. Wait a minute, am I missing the guy? Shaking off the awful notion, I regroup, entering Bellman's Bar and Grill from the town car in search of Matteo.

It's been a refreshing change having him in such close proximity to me, and I'm sad about him flying out to Sicily tomorrow as well. I sail through the busy restaurant knowing Matteo's booked us a table in the popular bustling restaurant. Scanning the restaurant, I look for the table where he's seated, but there's no need as he's standing in the middle waving in my direction.

Instantly a warm smile spreads over my face, and the tension melts in my shoulders. It's nice to see the man who's been my confidant, and trusted family ally for so long. He represents so much to the famiglia, and without him being the glue holding the old and the new together, the Mancinis would be lost.

Matteo's face lights up as he holds out his arms in greeting. "Ciao, Elena." He kisses both my cheeks as we sit down together. "I took the liberty of ordering us a nice white if you don't mind."

Smiling at him, I relax into my seat. "No, not at all. Good to see you. How are things?"

Matteo clasps his hands together in a pyramid, nodding his head in satisfaction. "I believe they're going well, Donna. I've organized all the necessary shipments for



delivery today and personally dropped off the last run of lemons to the warehouse myself,” Matteo relays with pride as I take a sip of water, eagerly wanting to get the information about Bogdan off my chest.

It was hard enough to keep my mouth shut when Nikk left out in the morning, let alone exchanging pleasantries with Matteo. Nodding my head, I reply.

“Good. Nikk will be pleased. At least I’m building trust with him.”

Matteo’s face tunes into a disgusted scoff. “There’s no such thing as building trust with an Orlov.” His dark eyes probe mine as I offer him a cheap smile back.

“Speaking of a loss of trust, I’ve got a juicy secret I can’t keep to myself,” I tell him in a hushed whisper, leaning forward. Matteo’s brow knits together, and he shuts the menu he has in hand.

“You do? Oh, this I want to hear.”

“Should we order some entrees first? I’m feeling a little peckish.”

“Sure, we can do that.” Matteo signals to the waiter. The sea of voices around us is loud enough to shield our private conversation, but I still perform my checks for hidden Orlov spies, and since I don’t see anyone, I open up after he finishes placing the order.

“I can’t hold this in any longer. Matteo, Bogdan is stealing from the Orlovs from the inside.” Holding his gaze, Matteo balks, slowly placing his glass back on the table.

“How do you know?”

“I was looking over the last two years of profit margins, and I kept seeing this one

organization cropping up and it was bugging me. You know me, I started digging.” I take a sip of my wine.

“Yes, that’s sounds like you.” He smirks.

“I traced the amounts back to Bogdan, he was in bed with the last CEO of the not-for-profit and they were working together, funneling the money out of the company,” I hiss, the layers of relief peeling off as I tell him more.

“Do you have substantial evidence to this effect?” Matteo is a by-the-book type of guy, and I could’ve predicted his extreme caution even before we sat down.

“Yes. I’ve got paper trails, his VPN, the emails going back and forth between him and the last CEO. It’s fucked!” I exclaim passionately, sliding a hand through my sleek ponytail.

Matteo sighs as the shared plate arrives. “Why is his name floating around in my memory? Bogdan, Bogdan. Mmm. I know it.” I let him take a minute to figure it out, his face dropping as he recalls. “He’s that asshole who tried to start a fight with me at the wedding.”

“Yes! Him, it’s him!” I exclaim, collecting a small taco from the shared plate and nibbling on it.

“It proves my point, Elena. The Orlovs are not to be trusted. Ever. But why have you not told Nikk about it?”

Stumbling over my words, a flash of Nikk’s hard chest enters my mind, making me blush right down to my toes. “He left for LA this morning on business, so I’ll wait for him to return. I planned on telling him last night—” I pause, feeling the bloom of heat flowering on my cheeks. Matteo lets out a disappointed sigh, casting his gaze into the

crowd of restaurant-goers, a sizzling steak enroute to its table.

“I see.”

“I don’t know, Matteo. I’ve had so much going on in my mind, it’s been hard for me to process. I’m struggling to believe I stumbled on it at all.”

Matteo recovers, returning his gaze to me. “Don’t worry about it. You need to relax. That’s all. It’s my last night in New York, so how about we get your favorite drink.” He smirks, waggling his eyebrows.

“Limoncello?”

“Of course, only we’re indulging in the alcoholic version tonight. I checked before we came that they have it.”

“No! They do?”

“Yes. They do. I slipped a shipment of lemons to them already. You’re aware this place is managed by the Orlovs?”

“Yes, briefly, I remember Nikk mentioning something about this place. Nice call.” I’m still coming to terms with the Orlovs’ tentacles into the underbelly of the city, and when the Orlovs’ manage a bar, it’s code for extortion.

“Alright.” Enthusiastically, Matteo flags down the waiter ordering rounds of the potent drink I love so much. It’s so tasty I barely notice the alcohol in it, throwing them back and reminiscing with Matteo over old times.

“Do you remember when Dad chased that dog through the village that stole his favorite shoe from the porch?” I giggle, feeling freer than ever, and my head light.

Blinking a few times, I notice the edges of Matteo softening. “Phew, I should have taken my time. I haven’t eaten much tonight.”

Matteo chuckles. “You’ll be fine. Let your hair down. You’re in safe hands,” he advises in a slick tone, smiling at me. “See. I’ll drink with you.” He slams back a Limoncello shot, making me laugh and hiccup simultaneously.

“That doesn’t work. No work,” I tell him in a floaty voice. “You’re not a flyweight drinker like me.” My pitch goes up, but I’m enjoying myself so much I have two more shots, unable to walk when Matteo calls it a night.

“Maybe we should call it a night after all.” I can hear Matteo’s voice, but it’s muffled.

Patting the air, I wrongly think it’s Matteo’s shoulder as he rounds the table, paying the bill and guiding us out. “Oh, sorry, I thought that was you,” I slur slightly, hoping the chill of the New York air will refresh me. It does a little, but I’m starting to regret drinking so much.

“Ooo, you did overdo it a little. That’s my fault. Sorry, Elena, I just wanted you to have a good time. You’ve been under a lot of pressure lately,” he sympathizes as I lean into him, his body like a pillar.

“No, no, it’s not your fault, Matteo,” I sling out, the air helping a little as I’m guided into the passenger seat.

“Here, let me get you some water,” he offers, handing me a bottle.

“Thanks.” I take a sip, placing the bottle back in the middle of the console, trying to regain my bearings.

“Don’t worry about anything, Elena. I’m going to take you home. Don’t worry about a thing,” he soothes, his voice drowning out like a nighttime lullaby. Did I drink that much?

Don’t worry, it’s Matteo. You’re going to be fine. He’ll take care of you.

I feel different, not tipsy, woozy, but it’s making my body feel heavy. Matteo helps me to my room, but I can’t get my head to work either. Things are blurring and don’t look right.

“Here we go. Come on, let’s get you in your room,” he whispers with a deep chuckle, and I let him take me. I can’t think straight, my head is fuzzy, and my tongue drier than sandpaper. Every step I take feels as if my legs are sinking into the ground like quicksand, and my face is slackened.

Blinking hard, I put it down to a few too many drinks, and maybe when I lie down in my room, I will be okay.

That’s all it is. You drank too much, silly girl. You know how much you love Limoncello.

I’m discombobulated as Matteo opens the door, taking me through to my room, and to the bed. It feels different—harder. The walls, oh the walls are a different color, and they feel as if they’re closing in on me. When did we paint them gray? No, we didn’t paint them gray, did we?

“Matteo,” I croak, “I need some water. Puh-please,” I beg, feeling as if razor blades are lodged in my throat. Looking around, a wash of horror descends on me. This isn’t my room.

No. No. No. This isn’t mine. I want to speak, but my arm is dead, and so is part of my

leg. What's happening to me? Shit! I feel as if I'm moving in slow motion, even my heart rate won't speed up. Inside, I'm freaking out, but it's not registering on the outside.

Matteo returns, but I don't know where he went in the first place. I can see his shoes and his face; it's deadpan, and he feels cold. Oh, so cold.

"I already gave you water, Elena. I've got something else," he replies smoothly, the glistening tip of a needle in his hand.

Panic bubbles up in my throat, but my limbs won't comply to get away from him. Why do I feel so weak? "Matteo," I rasp, my throat on fire. "What are you doing?"

"Just an add on to such a lovely night. A special dessert. Don't try to resist, otherwise I'm going to have to use it."

What? Confused with my head heavy, I watch the silhouette of Matteo cruising over to the curtains pulling them back and opening the window wide. Birds fly past the window, and the curtains move, but I can't feel the breeze.

And for me, my body's growing even heavier; I can barely move. I feel things being put around my wrist, but my arms are the first thing to go limp. God, why can't I move them? What has he done?

I let out a small whimper, hoping he'll stop whatever he's about to do, but I watch in terror, my eyes droopy as he unbuttons his shirt, flinging it off, and the sick realization of what he's about to do sets in.

Tears fall from my eyes, and I do my best to kick out my leg, but it flops aside, not working. I'm in his hotel room and he's trying to—but I can't move. Jerking my leg to the side, I force myself to roll off the bed, but it doesn't work as I whimper again,

words coming out in a slur.

“Matt-Matteo, please, why are you doing this?”

“Shut up, Elena. This is going to be worth it, and you’re going to like it.”

It’s too late because Matteo’s leaden body weight is on top of me, his scent, a mix of cologne, dirty sweat, and Limoncello. He grins at me, baring his teeth like a predatory wolf, but even with his face so close to mine, I can barely make out his finer features.

“Matt—” I slur, trying not to cry. “Matt—”

He slides his hand down the back of my cheek, blowing his breath on me. “Elena. God, I’ve wanted you for so long. I can have you now. This is what I deserve after all your years of refusal,” he confesses desperately. “Don’t deny how much you want me too.”

Shit. Please don’t hurt me, Matteo. Not you. It can’t be you. He unties the rope from my wrists as I find something inside that tells me to bite him. I go for his neck, but parts of my body are numb, even though inside my body is prepared to fight. I feel his hands hitting my body, but there’s only a numb feeling translating.

“That was the wrong thing to do, Elena,” he says, his eyes in a rabid frenzy. I fight him off as best I can, moving my head from side to side so his mouth can’t come anywhere near mine. It seems to be the only part of my body I still have power over.

“You left me no choice sweet, Elena.” Appalled, I feel the prick of tears in my eyes, my body partially paralyzed from the drug. I muster as much fight as I can, thrashing wildly in my mind, but in real time, I’m barely moving.

Bucking against his hands, I almost heave when I feel his hard cock pumping against

my thigh. His scratchy beard rubs against my face as I try to flip away from him, but his lips hit mine, kissing me roughly.

“Matteo, stop!” I screech, wanting it to come out loud, but it’s more a hoarse, distant whisper instead.

I have to get away. How do I get away?

A surge of internal strength and adrenaline gives me just enough fight to raise my knee and find his balls. I use everything I have, and Matteo yelps.

“Fuck! Elena,” he groans, and while he’s distracted by the pain, I stagger to the moving table. The injection. Give it to him. See how he feels.

Grabbing it, I pick it up, stabbing him with it. Soon enough, Matteo loses his senses and faints, dropping to the hotel floor. Crawling as best I can, I reach the door, looking up at the handle.

I have to move quick to escape him.



## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

She's acting differently since I've returned. Withdrawn, haunted even, and I've tried to speak to Elena, but she won't talk to me.

Yegor is sitting across from me, and today she's not in office. "What happened to Elena? Do you know, Yegor?" I ask, seeing what information I can gather.

Yegor stares at me blankly, shrugging. "Your guess is as good as mine. She didn't show up to work the last couple of days either."

"Oh, did she give you any indication why?"

"She said she wasn't feeling well. Maybe something is wrong." Yegor shrugs, and even with their rocky start, he seems to be concerned.

"Hmm, I'll have to talk to her," I reply evenly, his information marrying up to how sullen she's been since I've gotten back. Bogdan enters, waving his phone, but I ignore him at first. Bogdan can be irritating at the best sometimes.

"I told you, Boss, that the Italians can't be trusted!" he rages, Yegor regarding him with the same level of disinterest as I do.

"Bogdan, what are you going on about now?"

"I heard things.... Things about Elena having an affair. Forgive me, Boss, but I think Elena is involved in some sort of entanglement. I had somebody tail her."

Irate, I glare at him, bored with his constant disruption and stupidity. “Bogdan, what are talking about? You better not be lying,” I bark as Yegor chuckles.

“I’m not. Here. Look! ” Forcefully, Bogdan directs my gaze to his phone. Grabbing the phone from him, I pore over the photos, livid with what I see in them. Elena’s angled in the first photo in such a way that it appears as if she’s kissing Matteo on the mouth.

The next photo is the back of both of them walking into the hotel together, Elena’s arm clutching on to Matteo’s for dear life. Another of her smiling goofily at him, and the fucker smirking back at her. How dare she defy me in such a way? Did she not know what I could do to her?

Oh, L’vitsa, you are in so much danger, and you don’t even know it. Still, the instant urge to flee and make her pay runs through me. I want to make sure she pays for betraying me. I even bargained with her, vowing not to sleep with Elena.

See. This is why you should feel nothing for her. Nothing. She will ruin everything if you let her.

Seething, but not wanting to lose too much control in front of Yegor and Bogdan, I continue scouring through the photos, each one of them, more disturbing than the last.

“Fuck me, she’s having an affair with that son of a bitch, Matteo.”

Bogdan shrugs triumphantly. “See, Nikk, I didn’t want to have to think this way, but look my doubts have become true.”

“When were these pictures taken?” I ask.

“They were taken on the same day the bastard left New York. We can’t attack him in

Italy,” Bogdan replies succinctly.

Standing up, I pace a hole in my office floor, royally pissed off about the situation, but not sold by Bogdan’s timing.

“What made you suspect in the first place?” I grill him, wanting the truth, and it’s a tall order because the truth is not something Bogdan specializes in.

“I... ah, don’t know. It was a crazed hunch, something like that. What does it matter how? Look now!” Bogdan insistently points to his phone.

“Hmm, it doesn’t makes sense, Nikk. She’s made the charity more money than ever. She’s smarter than this.” I look at Yegor’s ashen face, but there’s a gut instinct I’ve always possessed, and it’s the reason I’m the head of the Bratva, not Yegor or Bogdan.

“I’m asking because, Bogdan you’re a troublemaker,” I yell, disbelieving the words flying out of my mouth. I’m defending a woman—no, an enemy who I wanted to conquer.

“I might be a troublemaker to you, but I would never betray the family in such a way,” he retorts with a defensive snort, looking pleased with himself for discovering the information.

Elena. Oh Elena. You’ve created a mess for yourself, haven’t you? I’m burning up inside, but it’s best I calm down so I can think clearly about the next moves, but the explosive volcano inside won’t let the landslide of hot lava stop.

Yegor nods with a mumble. “I wondered why Elena asked me a strange question when she was last here.” He taps the desk as if trying to rack his brain to recall.

Bogdan's face shifts, the energy changing in the room. I can't exactly pinpoint why, but it reeks of fear. I should know because I feed off the fear of other men. I'm a master of it, but now he wears its cloak.

"What strange question did she ask you?" I ask Yegor.

"She asked what the cost of betrayal in the family was, and I told her," he replies simply, but it doesn't appear as if he's siding with Bogdan, who is clearing his throat to speak.

"See! There's nothing else you need to find out, Nikk. She's a threat to the Bratva. You must kill her . "

"We do have a peace treaty," I say, playing devil's advocate, but there's so much evidence, it's inevitable she cheated. I have to end her.

"Fuck a peace treaty! She's having an affair, and it's going to implicate things. If she's in bed with Matteo, she's pillow talking, and that puts the entire Bratva at risk. Both of them are likely plotting together, working to take the Bratva down. You have to get rid of her, before she gets rid of all of us. I can do the cleanup," Bogdan grunts, and if nothing else—he's good at that task.

"No. You won't handle anything, but I will," I tell him. "But don't worry, there's going to be a cleanup, Bogdan, and you will have plenty to do." Smirking, I nod in Yegor's direction.

When life hands you sour Sicilian lemons, you squeeze what's left of life out of them....

Elena

Sobbing, I dab the tissue to my eyes in our suite. I can barely see out of them, but I'm distraught about everything that's happened. With the window open, I stare out of it. I've lost so much, and I don't know if I can handle losing anything else in my life. My father's not here to hold me. He would make everything all right.

Maybe this wouldn't have happened if he were here. I hold my knees up to my chest on the daybed. I can't bring myself to think about Matteo's motives in the hotel room. I haven't even had the time to process it all. I've been too lethargic to even deal with it as well. Fuck my life.

A sweet memory of Matteo clapping as I blew out the candles on my fifteenth birthday party appears, making the river of tears stream down my cheeks. I can't stop them.

How could you do this to me, Matteo? Tears continue piling up, and I let them flow, because I never want to cry over this again. Ever. This is the biggest betrayal in my life, and all because Matteo wanted to sleep with me. Why would he do this? Rocco would be turning over in his grave if he could see.

Sniffing, I think it through some more because Matteo wouldn't do that, even if he wanted me. He exercises restraint. I've seen him do it. He would be the one to coax my father down from the ledge of killing sprees, so it couldn't be that he wanted me so badly that he would threaten to rape and kill me.

And as the soft breeze through the curtains kisses my skin, a moment of clarity hits,

my pulse quickening. The hotel window. Matteo very deliberately opened it wide, and if he didn't want anyone to know I was in the room with him, why would he do this?

There must have been someone outside recording it. Why? Think Elena. Why would he have that done? Sniffing, I drop my knees down staring out at the Manhattan skyline, smog overrunning it.

Why? How could it be of benefit to film me having sex with him? I let it sink in, running through the possibilities, and the final piece of the puzzle kicks in.

Blackmail. He wanted Nikk to see, and for him to be jealous. Shit. I knock on the side of my head with my fist. Think more, Elena. How could this benefit him? What would he stand to gain?

There has to be a reason. It can't just be about sex. No. There's more. Has to be. I stand up, my legs tingling from sitting too long. As I work it out, the blood rushes straight from my head to my feet.

He would stand to take over the Sicilian Mafia. That's what he would stand to gain.

Fuck!

I have to get to him before Matteo does. Loud thumping in my head sounds off as I think about the quickest route. I grab my car keys and head down the stairs, but the sound of an engine stops me in my tracks.

"Fuck no, no, no!" I pant, the darkly surreal moment playing out as Nikk strolls towards the front door purposefully.

Scrambling, I rake a nervous hand through my long hair. Does he know already?

Maybe he doesn't and I've still got time to tell him the truth.

I knew I should have told him earlier....

The doorknob rattles as I struggle to open it, and it's as if my heart's about to pop out of my chest when I finally do. He's wearing an unusual expression on his face, and tiny beads of sweat line my forehead as I try to decipher it.

There's no cute amusement on his face like normal, no—this is a face I haven't been privy to before. This face is one of intensity, and if I touch him, I fear he'll combust into red-hot flames.

His face holds a graveness to it, and as his eyes burn a hole into mine, I travel back to his words. "I will kill you." And from the expression on his face, I know my destined fate.

"L'vitsa. You thought you could get away with it. Are you really that fucking dumb?" Nikk asks, his lip curling up into a rabid dog smile.

"Nikk! Please, I wanted to tell you what's going on. I've been waiting—" I plead, but within microseconds Nikk's large hand is closed around my windpipe, squeezing as I fear him choking me to death.

He walks me back to the closest wall as I struggle to gather enough air to breathe. Tapping on his hand desperately and flailing, I try to peel his fingers back, but he's too damn strong.

"Nikk!" I manage to squeal as he slams my back hard against the wall. It cracks in several places, but I have nothing else to think about other than how I'm going to survive this situation. He lets me go, his eyes scarily devoid of any emotion. He's gearing himself up to kill. Sobbing, I hold my neck—it's throbbing, but I have to get

my words out. “Nikk, it’s Bogdan. He-he’s,” I say breathily before he cuts me off, his nose connecting to mine.

“I’m going to do you the honor of killing you nice and slow. We can even make it multiple choice and you can pick what death you prefer.” His face is twisted, and this is another Nikk I’m speaking too. Not the one I’ve come to know.

This is the killer. The Bratva.

“Nikk, no you’ve got it wrong. Matteo set things up! He opened the window. They’re working together.”

“Shut the fuck up!” he bellows, pressing his eyes shut, slamming his palm against the wall beside me. I flinch, thinking he’s going to hit me, but he doesn’t. “I don’t want to hear your fucked-up lies. I will kill every one of your family members before I kill you. You’re giving me excuses.”

I’m saved temporarily by my phone ringing. I don’t dare move, afraid Nikk’s going to finish the job. “Answer the phone, Elena. Let’s see what you’ve been hiding. Shall we?”

I don’t have a choice but to answer it. Swallowing to clear the block in my throat, I croak out a hello.

“Hi, is this Elena Orlov?”

“Yes, yes, it is,” I reply, coughing profusely as Nikk glares at me.

“Ah excellent. This is Dr. Peterson from Tri Center Medical Clinic. I wanted to phone you with your test results. I think it’s quite important.”



“Sure. Sure. What are they?” Nikk’s huge bulk stands directly in front of me, and there’s nowhere to escape. It’s a miracle the call came through when it did, otherwise I fear, I would be dead.

“It’s great news,” the doctor relays enthusiastically, baffling me. “You’re actually seven weeks pregnant. And it would explain why you’ve been feeling tired and fatigued of late. Your iron is also low, so that’s also a telltale sign.”

My eyes grow wide, a brick dropping into the middle of my stomach . Pregnant? I’m pregnant. No. No. No. Nikk. He knocked me up. I look up to gauge Nikk’s reaction, his face registering the same degree of shock as me.

A baby is the last thing I need. Why wasn’t I strong enough to keep him away from me?

His anger is still palpable, but I can tell he’s got a rein on it. “Thank you for the information, Doctor,” I respond, choking up as he reels off dates and times for me to come to the clinic.

“Take time to enjoy the fantastic news. It’s going to be an exciting new chapter for you, Elena,” the doctor replies as tears threaten to well up in my eyes.

You’ve got it all wrong. There’s nothing exciting about being married and having a baby with a known rival. “Thanks again,” I croak, shutting down the call, my cell phone and my life falling to ground.

Nikk cranes his neck down, tilting my chin up to his face, so we’re at eye level. “That baby better be mine, Elena, or else this doesn’t change anything. I will kill you, baby and fucking all.”

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

A few days later, staring out into the packed parking lot, I wait in the hot Manhattan sun for Yegor to return. I'm possibly having a baby with a woman I'm falling for—a sworn enemy and it's ripping me apart.

Banging my head against the headrest, several times, I dial up the radio pretending to listen to 98.6 FM and tune out my death plots for the L'vitsa. I should have killed her when I had the chance, but now here I am waiting on Yegor as my fate hangs in the balance.

I've never loved any woman. Truly. I've used them for my pleasure, and for theirs. It's always been a mutual arrangement, and the women of New York, once they hear the rumblings about me, want a powerful man. That's why they come. They believe their pussies can tame me, but I'm Bratva through and through. I cannot and will not be tamed. The ice in my veins froze over like a Russian lake long ago, right from when I was a young boy. I watched in horror when my mother was beaten and left for dead when she couldn't pay her rent in the shitty Russian apartment.

My father Markum Orlov abandoned us at a young age, so I've never known the fucker, but I did know my own bloodline of uncles and other men of the community. Apparently, I have many of his features, but if I'm honest, I don't give two shits about the man I was born to. The brotherhood is my only family. Always has been, and always will be. I'd seen the pictures of him in my mother's bedroom, but turned them down sometimes as a boy, because to me, the man was a complete coward.

My own mother passed away long ago from disease, and maybe that drop of

compassion, that little bit of light left in my soul, stopped me from pummeling Elena to death. She is with child, and if it's mine, things are going to be done differently.

The fierce little Mancini is bringing up buried skeletons that I don't like being dug into . Ever. Mine was a cold upbringing, much like those of my brothers from the former Soviet Union. We stayed in and out of trouble, evading the law as much as possible. I've done prison stints, but that was before I grew in the ranks. I had to be put through my Bratva paces like any other and have the scars to prove it. I'm grateful. The Bratva carved me from the soft shell I resided in and created a new one. One where I could never be outmaneuvered or crushed. I was the crusher and so were my brothers.

We were street soldiers, proving ourselves back then, but Russia was not where I wanted to make my mark. I wanted America. When I saw New York on our scummy television, I knew it was the place for me and my brothers to go. "There. We will take over New York. We will be the Bratva Kings."

We agreed to get out any way we could, but I had to be smart, and it was done legally through my uncle who sponsored me in America, and then my way of life became that of a New Yorker, the insignia of the Bratva cleaning out the Sicilians until we took over. Slowly and steadily, we've been growing, and now I might be having a son borne of half of the enemy's blood.

Fuck me. Frowning, I swear under my breath growing impatient in Yegor's absence. It shouldn't take this long. He's taking too fucking long, and now the radio's music is spiking my annoyance.

I'm a man with ice in his veins, and for Elena to have melted even a sliver of it, is disheartening. Elena. Elena. Elena. It seems she got her initial wish in a roundabout way to sleep on her own and in a separate room.

“I can’t stand the sight of you. You can sleep in the guest bedroom, and don’t try anything because I’ve got cameras all over the house. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but will you listen to what I have to say?” she asked meekly, and even with the red hand marks I left around her neck, I wanted her next to me in my bed.

“No. You know what you did, and you had plenty of time to tell me whatever needed to be said. Don’t try to play a game with me, Elena. It won’t work.”

Needless to say, I slept terribly, tossing and turning without her beside me. Her sweet perfume, and the warmth of her body next to me is a craving I’ve been spoiled with since I won her over, but now I’m paying the price, and I won’t let pussy get in the way of the brotherhood we’ve built ever again. My eyes glaze over as a kaleidoscope of images shift through my brain. All of them involving Elena and Matteo in bed together. There was a recording of them together, but I opted out of seeing it. The photos were enough for me to make my decision. Besides, if I looked at the recording, I probably would have smashed Bogdan’s phone to smithereens.

Still lost in my own dark world of betrayal, I miss Yegor sliding into the seat beside me, but I’m jolted back to reality as he closes the car door. He promptly hands me a large plain white envelope.

“Here. The results are inside.” My jaw flickers as I stare at the envelope for too long, not wanting the answer, and knowing that whatever is inside will change my life forever. I’m already racing ahead thinking the worst. If I have to kill Elena and to take out her family it will involve many steps. Some of those will include firearms and inside parties going into Sicily. It can be done, but it would be a tedious task. On the other hand, if it is my kid I’m locked in bed with the Mancinis for life, and therefore, so are the Bratva.

Blood pumps around my body in nervous fury as Yegor jumps in. “Are you going to

open it? If you want to find out, you have to open it, Nikk.”

“I fucking know that, Yegor. This isn’t what I fucking need right now.” But there’s no point yelling at him because I shouldn’t have

“I don’t know about that. You should see what it says.”

“Alright, alright.”

As I open the envelope, I question Yegor. “Do you already know the results?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck.” Being a fearless leader is one of my strong suits, but today I have to control my shaking fingers as I read the results. Some of it being bullshit technical stuff, so I skip down to the answer, my heart pounding so hard the paper shakes even more.

The DNA is a match for Nikkita Orlov.

That’s all I need to see. Crumpling up the paper, Yegor takes it from me before I tear it up.

“Don’t do that. Keep it for record purposes. Looks like you’ve got a kid on the way.”

“Fucking obvious, Yegor. The question is, do I want one? And with Elena? She’s already fucked me over,” I tell him, bitterness laced in my tone.

How can Elena be carrying my child when she has no self-respect or honor to me as her husband. We both agreed to the terms, and she broke my trust. Sitting silently for too long, Yegor breaks into the rattling cage of my mind.

“What’s your plan about it?”

Sighing with a heavy heart, I shake my head. “The woman has no loyalty. What do you expect me to do, Yegor?”

Yegor clears his throat, adding in his own two cents. “You know initially I hated Elena, but after spending time with her, I’ve come to see how she’s valuable to us. She has a good head for business. More so than Bogdan. I’ve gotten to know her well in spending time with her.”

A child with Elena. A heir to our collective empires. I don’t have a clue how it’s going to work when our fake marriage contract is only supposed to be in place for a year.

“What are you saying exactly?”

“I’m saying, Boss, I think there’s more to this story. Who took those photos? You should find out.”

Anger simmers inside me. “No. It doesn’t matter who took the photos. There’s recordings too. I don’t need to see them. Hard evidence, Yegor. She has no excuse for cheating; it’s clear that’s what she was doing at that hotel with him.”

Yegor doesn’t have a comeback. Just as I thought, but Elena is a different story, and this is the first time where I’m not one step ahead.

Elena

I shift my hair over my shoulders, letting it fall over my back. Touching the base of my neck, I stare back at myself in the guest's bedroom mirror, examining the fading handprints of Nikk's wrath. Parts of my neck are still tender, and when I swallow it hurts. Shit. But his rough handling next to the downright dirty betrayal from Matteo pales in comparison. The physical wounds will heal, but the emotional damage Matteo has inflicted will not. Shaking at the echo of his name in my head, I scrape my hair together in a messy ponytail, willing myself not to fall to pieces.

He's the one whose head I want on a platter. I touch the underside of my puffy eyes, not recognizing the woman I'm becoming. "You will burn in hell. I'll make sure of it," I remark, Matteo's face popping up in my mind. I hate the fact Nikk thinks I'm lying to him, and the feelings I'm having for him are only adding to the swirl of confusion in my brain. I didn't double-cross him, at least not in the way he thinks I did. I planned to in the long run, but Matteo—the man I least suspected—fucked me over before I could.

What I hate even more is being stuck in the confines of the guest suite unable to go anywhere. Luckily, Dr. Peterson was gracious enough to make a house call and come to me. Afterwards, a second doctor arrived, checking my vitals and collecting multiple blood samples. Tears sting at the back of my eyes as I pat my face dry, recalling the conversation as I was curious as to why he was there.

"We need a blood sample as it's been requested by Nikkita for paternity test purposes." Disheartened by Nikk's lack of trust in me after getting along so well, I could barely engage in a reply.

“Oh. Well, I can tell you right now, the baby is his,” I seethed, but the doctor only gave me a see-through stare.

“Better safe than sorry,” he replied with the cutting tone of a surgeon, making me feel even more alone and like a caged animal than ever.

But even if he did let me live so he could check for paternity, Nikk was merciful. He didn’t restrict my calls and sent food in whenever I asked for it. There were a million ways he could have immediately punished me, but he didn’t. That’s something that is driving me crazy even more.

My father taught me this lesson long ago when I was young. I let the mirror in front of me fade away as the old memory seeps in, taking shape.

“ Why do I have to step to the top of the tree to get those lemons? Why can’t we just get those ones at the bottom?” I’d been pouting as we picked, but I did like spending time with my father those days. They were simple and carefree. I would give anything to return.

“Because, Elena, sometimes if you pick the low-hanging fruit, it’s full of rot even if it does look easier to pick. It’s there, and you think nothing of it. But then when you cut it open and look on the inside, you find the decay and the worms.”

I refocus my eyes, stepping back from the mirror.

When you look on the inside, you find the decay....

Matteo is that rotting decay. Of course. I’m kicking myself for not catching on sooner. He’s been in the famiglia for decades, patiently waiting for his turn. Respectful of the men who came to power, but now the fucker thinks I’m weak because I’m the first female Donna.



It can be the only reason. This is his only opening in the Cosa Nostra. He would never pull this stunt if my father were alive. Oh no, Rocco would have shot him between the eyes if he needed to. Yes, he would have cried tears into his grave afterwards, but in the moment, he would have ended Matteo's life to protect the Cosa Nostra.

Sucking in a deep breath, I can't believe I didn't see it coming. It's a shame.

Nikk and I have been slowly getting used to being around one another on the daily. Often both of us are busy with our own business plans, but we eat together most nights, and he's been showing his care in other ways.

"Can I get you anything on the way home? I'll be home in half hour. I'm just wrapping up a meeting on Long Island."

Sometimes I've even caught him with a funny faraway look on his face as he studies me, but when I've looked again, his face had changed. I've sensed there's more underneath the surface going on between us, and I didn't want it to happen either. I can't help the attraction I feel towards him. It's like a magnetic pull that's indescribable. It's usually late at night when I feel the hard length of his chiseled body under the covers spooning me from behind that I feel things between us are more than a business arrangement.

Often, I wake with his hand cupping my breast, or splayed over my stomach, and I like it. It's odd not to be lying next to him, I hate to admit. The last few months we've been growing closer and closer, and he's been feeling less and less like an enemy and more like an ally.

But now, we've taken three steps backwards. Maybe he'll never trust me again. Who knows.

Splashing water on my face, I try to wake up from the current nightmare I'm stuck in. I'm lucky Nikk spared me. He could have choked me to death on the spot, and that would have been the end of me, but for some reason he didn't. He let me live, and I have no clue as to why he showed mercy.

I let the water drip from my face, hating how terrible I feel, but such is the life of a Donna. I'm just happy the drugs Matteo gave me didn't affect my child. It's taken a couple of days to feel anything like myself, but even still, I'm not the same woman anymore.

Pressing my eyes shut, I exhale, gripping my hands on either side of the porcelain bowl, letting my hair hang forward. I'm having Nikk's baby. As the sinking realization sets in, I let my hands travel down the front of my pajamas to my flat stomach. There are changes in my body, mainly how tired and slightly nauseous I feel all the time, but I'm not showing yet, and I wonder what it's going to feel like as my belly grows fuller.

As my eyes flutter open, I shudder to think about the future of my child. What will be my child's fate?

Wouldn't it have been easier to kill me? Then he wouldn't have to deal with the baby? It's not as if he couldn't have another one with someone else. Chewing on my bottom lip, I think it through, trying to step into his shoes.

It's not just any child, Elena. It's a child born to two of the most powerful Mafia dons of their respective families combined. Likely the child could be used for leveraging purposes, and that's even worse.

Matteo, you dirty rotten bastard. You've screwed up everything we've worked for! If he would have been patient and stuck by me, I would have surely made him next in line to be Don. I would have done that for him. Burning tears of hate return as his

name swims in my mind.

Frenetic thoughts take up residence in my head, flipping back to my unpredictable husband.

What is Nikk going to do to me after I've had the child? Maybe he will still kill me, and even with the looming guillotine hanging over my head, it's not the main thing occupying space in my brain. It's Matteo's dirty backstabbing. If he thinks he can take the throne from me like this, then he needs to think again. It's not over.

Indignant, and filled with rage, I paced the room, plotting and scheming Matteo's death.

Should I use one of my soldiers? Or hire a professional from the outside he wouldn't suspect? No. It will be me holding the gun to his head, and he'll be on his knees begging for forgiveness and for me not to pull the trigger.

I need to get him. I dig my nails into the back of my palm as I shudder when I think of the traitor's name. Oh yes, Matteo, you're on my hit list now . Soffrire. You will pay dearly for what you've done.

Craving his downfall, I dig my fingers in deeper, fury brimming over as my body trembles. It feels so good to hate him. It's only when the pinch of my nails becomes too great do I look down to realize I've drawn blood.

Nikk

Hotel Windsor. A hop, skip, and a jump from the theater district, and a hotel I frequent for various activities with women I don't care to bring home.

Fuck Elena. She slept with Matteo, and we had an agreement. If she wants to break my trust, which I rarely give in the first place, then she doesn't get to complain about me sleeping with other women. Not that I'm going to tell her. It's none of her business. Not anymore.

I sit on the edge of the bed, drumming my fingers on the hard mattress, listening to the hustle and bustle of Manhattan below. The world is going on without us, but in seconds I'm about to have Veronica on her knees and her mouth full of me.

The shower water stops running as I wait patiently, studying the striped wallpaper décor around me. It's a nice boutique hotel, but most importantly, it's convenient enough to whet my sexual appetite. Elena's presence has only made it stronger. Some nights I have to stop myself from creeping down the hallway to her room, but then I remember the pictures Bogdan gave me, and it turns me around.

Veronica emerges with a smirk on her face, her body perfect in every imaginable way, yet she still doesn't do it for me. Not the way Elena does. Swallowing hard, I cast her out of my mind, focusing on Veronica. She wants me and has been hounding me, so now here I am. Her silk lavender robe falls off as she drapes it over the chair on the way over, revealing what she has in store underneath. Lace and lots of it.

Her surgically enhanced breasts sit full and perky, and she's wearing a purple G-

string with suspenders that match. I reach for her as she lifts her leg up on the bed. Stroking it, I unclip her suspenders, wanting to get right to it.

“Why so fast? Don’t you have a little time for me today?” she asks, pouting, and I know why she wants to prolong things. She still thinks we have a chance together, even if I’ve told her enough times that we’ll never be more than fuck buddies.

“No. I don’t have time, and nor do you, I suspect,” I explain coldly, only here to have my needs met. This isn’t the same as it is with Elena. No, with Elena I wanted to please her body. I wanted her to experience pleasure, especially given it was her first time.

“Hmm, something’s different about you now. You don’t seem relaxed,” Veronica mentions, her voice becoming more irritating by the second. Sliding my finger on the inside of her thigh, I fold back the edge of her underwear, aiming to shut her up by fingering her, but she breaks my concentration by asking more questions.

“Don’t you have a wife? Why aren’t you with her?”

Piercing Veronica’s blue eyes with mine, I snap at her, “Veronica. You know what this is. Just do what you’re supposed to do.”

“Oh my! There’s my bad boy. This is what I like. I thought you’d gone all soft on me for a minute there.” Veronica winks as I sink my fingers into her pussy to check the temperature.

“Good. Good. You’re wet, but first, I want you on your knees,” I command. Veronica’s eyes light up as I hand her a pillow to put under them. All bets are off; I can sleep with anyone else I want.

Yes, there’s been a couple, but no one can quench my thirst like Elena can. I couldn’t

climax with any of them, but they did, which infuriated me even more. It was them I called to satisfy my needs, not theirs. All I can think of is her. She must have put some sort of spell on me. What did she do to me?

Standing up, I try to focus on Veronica, wrenching my belt free from my pants and throwing it to the floor. I unzip, and Veronica yanks my pants and underwear down. Hard, and ready for her mouth, Veronica hums, ready to slide the fullness of my cock inside her mouth.

Guiding myself towards her, the shrill sound of my cell cuts through. I feel myself deflating as I pick up the phone. “Shit—wait. This call might be important,” I tell her as her cold hand wraps around the base of my shaft.

“Well, I can put you in my mouth while you’re on the phone,” she offers, but I shake my head knowing I’m going to have to start again.

“No! Wait,” I tell her as I answer the call without looking at the caller ID. “Nikk speaking.”

“Nikk, it’s Yegor. I need to talk—”

“Fucking Yegor,” I hiss under my breath, shaking my head.

“Who was it?” Veronica asks as I slide the phone back on the dresser.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s go back to the start.” Sighing, I cup Veronica’s breasts, pulling one out, thumbing her fake nipples hoping it will make me hard again as Veronica moans. Disgruntled by Yegor’s untimely call, I keep fondling, feeling nothing, but thinking to Elena—and now, and only now am I hard.

“Oh, I like your touch, Nikkita,” Veronica says, shivering in delight. “I’ve missed it.”

I ignore her, concentrating, and trying to keep Elena from borrowing inside my skull and taking over.

Elena's breasts aren't fake. They're supple, round, and very real. I like the way they feel, and the way she was so responsive and so giving to my touch. It's not like this bullshit performance Veronica is putting on. Why can't I feel anything after Elena?

Veronica reaches for the back of her bra unclasping it, but it's too late.

The phone rings again, the heat in my blood boiling over as I stop, my cock deflating. "Hang on. Let me fuck off this caller," I tell her, cutting the call again, and this time I do read the caller ID. It's Yegor again, but when I reach for Veronica again, I decide it's time to step things up. I pat the bed as she slides up to the top of it. I'm about to draw her on top of me so we can just get this thing over with, but my phone vibrates on my bed, and I know it's Yegor ringing again.

"Nikk! What is going on?" she whines.

"Fuck it, just get dressed and get out of here. We can do this another time. Get out. Quick. Move!" I order harshly, moving her on. Gobsnacked, she scrambles off the bed, but then stands at the end of it, staring for a second, but I don't give two shits. I watch out of the corner of my eye as she quickly grabs her bag, tossing on her clothes, and slamming the door shut after she walks out. It wasn't working anyway, and it was time for her to get out of my face.

I return my focus back to the call. "Yegor, this better be important."

"It is. It's very, very important. Hear me out. It's from the doctor who took the paternity test. The doctor found Rohypnol in Elena's blood. It's a date rape drug that paralyzes its victims. She was drugged, Nikkita," Yegor relays, and as the weight of what he's saying kicks in, I feel my head swirling.

“What the fuck?”

“Right. But that’s exactly what happened. I’ve got the results to prove it,” Yegor adds with conviction, but I trust him on it. “There were abnormal amounts of the drug in her system. It could have harmed the baby.”

Growing more furious by the minute, slowly, I draw the phone down from my ear, my head pounding with the thick rush of blood. Fuming with the knowledge, I put Yegor on speaker, desperately searching for my pants and underwear, pulling them on as fast as I can.

I didn’t give her the benefit of the doubt, but back at the beginning I felt like I couldn’t. She’s a Mancini, it would have been more believable to me if she were sleeping with him. That’s probably why the fucker drugged her. I swear I’m going to break every single bone in his body and have him watch the process.

He thought he could get away with it. He touched my fucking wife!

“Nikk? Are you there?”

A tight knot forms in my throat as I swallow it down. “I’m here. I’m on my way.”

The shocking revelation is hitting home, and I feel like a fool. She was trying to talk to me, but I wouldn’t listen. “Fuck. Is there anything else I should know? Is the baby, okay?” I ask, panicked and feeling helpless as to how I can help Elena. The only thing I can think to do is rip Matteo limb from limb.

“Yes, the doctor explained she’s having a very normal pregnancy, and her vitals are excellent. He has her on special vitamins, and Elena’s resting.”

Does she know what happened to her? She would have been knocked out and not



known about the photos. Puzzled with the rush of jagged details, some things aren't matching up, but the one thing that matters is—Matteo's grave is waiting for him.

“That's why the photos looked funny to me of her walking into the hotel with Matteo. It didn't look like she was holding his hand or anything, it looked like he was dragging her in, and she was clinging to him,” Yegor explains quickly, probably anticipating me hanging up on him again, but no. This is serious, and now my blood is really boiling.

Matteo took advantage of her. She wasn't sleeping with him at all. She probably didn't even think it was his hotel, given the effects of the drug.

She told me the truth.

Elena

What can I do? Wiping the blood from the back of my hand, I wash the blood down the sink. I don't care about it. I've gathered a collection of fading bruises on my wrists, courtesy of Matteo. I couldn't feel the rope at the time. He must have dug it in deeper than I thought he did. When I study my body and look at those covering my front and back, I don't remember how they got there. I didn't feel them at the time, but I do today. Wincing as I get dressed, I walk out of the bathroom.

No matter what I look like physically, I have to get back to Italy, and there's no time to waste, because it's likely Matteo's already brainwashing the rest of the Sicilian famiglia, attempting to poison them against me. Stopping to think for a moment, I ask myself what my father would do if he were in my position. He wouldn't give up that's for sure, and he wouldn't want me too either.

I have to get my revenge on him, and the only way to do that is to kill him. Think like a Donna, Elena. The throne is yours. What's your next move going to be?

Nikk has a guard outside my door, but he knows I'm pregnant. If I tell him I'm sick, it can work. If Nikk were going to kill me regarding the pregnancy, he would have already slit my throat or something.

Knocking on the door, I call out to the guard on the other side. "Hello? Hi, I need some help," I whine, putting on a performance.

"What do you need help with?" he asks flatly, no budging to open the door.

You need him to open the door, Elena. Make it dramatic.

“I’m having serious stomach pains. Please, I need your help. I might need to go to the hospital. Please,” I wheeze, dialing everything up so he opens the door.

I step back when I hear the knob turning and prepare myself mentally. This is where I’m going to put my judo training to good use. When he opens the door, and he sees that I’m standing upright, he reaches for his phone, not his weapon. Interesting tactic, and I’m guessing if I were male, he would have pulled his gun instead.

“You look okay to me?” he mumbles, but he’s too slow.

I let the opening guide my next steps as I size him up. He’s just over six feet tall, and a step slower than he should be for a guard. Sucks to be him. I’m a woman on a mission, and some guard is not going to get in the way of it.

In judo, the bulkier the person, the better it is, since there’s more body weight to leverage, and that’s what’s used, not sheer physical force. It’s why I always won in junior tournaments back home. There’s no room for bravado, only quick, smart movements to bring your opponent to ground.

Immediately, I jump on his back, startling him for a second. He tries to shake me off, but I angle my position, using what’s left of my strength and the anger I have inside for Matteo to fuel me. Closing down his windpipe, he battles, trying to swing me off his back, bouncing me into the walls, trying to scrape me off.

“Wha-what are you doing?”

He smashes me into the wall behind us one last time, and this gives me enough leverage to bring him down to the floor. Gritting my teeth, I wait until I hear the gurgling sound, putting him to sleep. Panting from exertion and exhaustion, I wait for

him to go offline, the hallway clear.

Sliding out from under him, I know he won't stay unconscious, but it buys me enough time to get my keys from our bedroom suite. There's no guarantees he doesn't have them on him, so to make sure, I take his keys and the phone in his pocket.

Jogging down the hallway, I check for any more guards, finding none. Sweeping into our bedroom, I scout around for my purse, time ticking quicker than I care for it to, and I can't spend another half hour trying to look for them.

Fuck. I'm going to have to take this guy's car. I check the keychain, notice the remote beeper, cut my losses, and run down the hall. Taking a glimpse back, I see the guy is still on the floor, but he's moaning, clutching at his throat.

Join the club, buddy . I'm going to have to work on my sleeper holds since he got out of that one so quickly. I reach the door, fumbling for a second as I stare at the cars in the dusty parking lot. Nikk has a separate section marked off for staff parking, and my instincts tell me that's where the guard's car is probably parked.

I press the car remote, scanning around the marked off area on grass, hoping none of the housekeeping staff are tipped off from the flashing light. I notice a shiny black Jeep's lights flashing, and run over to it, hoping it's the right one. The driver's seat door pops open, and I slide in as fast as possible. Cranking the engine, I reverse, adrenaline pumping through my veins as a plume of dust flies around the back of the Jeep.

I'm uncertain who to call to help me. It can't be Nikk; he won't listen to me, and if he knows I'm gone, he's going to come after me. I'm certain of it, but there's not a chance in hell, I'm going to let Matteo get away with duping the Cosa Nostra.

A thunder of beats ramp up my heart rate as I multitask, placing the phone up on the dash in the holder that's there. Gripping the steering wheel, I wrack my brain trying to figure out who would be the best person to help me out of this bind.

Think, Elena. You're a Donna. I repeat the sentiment a few times in my head, knowing that if I can just find someone who might be able to help me, then I can get out of the country successfully.

Sharon. She'll help you out for sure. Pressing a few buttons, the Orlov estate gate opens, and I drive as fast as I can with the navigation set to Manhattan, which is where she told me she lives.

All sorts of thoughts run through my head. What if she's not there? What if she has another place and I'm headed towards the wrong one?

The good news is my instincts have always served me well, and I've been right 99% of the time.

Reverting back to my original plan, I focus on the cell phone, pressing the button for Siri's help. "Siri, find Sharon Ashton's address, from Bravo Fire Networks please." A deep crease forms between my eyes as I push the Jeep to its limits, and probably I shouldn't because this isn't my country, and although Nikk has the police contacts, I don't. Not here. Back home, yes, but not in New York.

I'd seen the list of those on his payroll, and it was impressive. Some of them were people that nobody would suspect, but the Bratva had links that run as deep as the city's dank sewer system, but all of the links were woven in such intricate webs, it would hard for anyone to break it apart.

"Sharon's address is 850 Argyle Lane, Fifth Avenue, in the Parkour Building. Level 35. Directions?" Siri asks as I gulp down the thick knot taking up residence in my

throat.

“Yes, directions please, Siri.”

“At your request.” I watch as Siri tees up the coordinates to the swanky address, and I calculate what steps I have to take in order to deal with Matteo when I touch down.

I need a gun. Or do I have to do it? Can I have one of my cousins join me? A million ideas cascade through my brain as the suburbs of New York quickly morph into traffic. It’s a relief that’s quick moving, but this isn’t the way I wanted to experience my first time driving in New York.

I do the best I can, finding undercover parking, and by a stroke of luck, I find enough money in the center console to pay the man at the toll booth. He lets me through, and I park, my breathing quickening as I head over to the concierge. I’m sure I look like a bedraggled mess to her, but this is a matter of life and death.

The surly-faced security guard doesn’t look as if he’s going to help me, but I take my chances anyway.

“Excuse me. I know this isn’t probably the way you do things here, but can you please contact Sharon Ashton and tell her Elena Orlov is here to meet her?”

“Did you say Orlov?” he asks, his face changing as I watch him punching in details to his computer.

“Yes,” I confirm, my mouth dry.

“Let me call her. It shouldn’t be a problem, and then I’ll escort you to the elevator.” Oh, the Orlovs branding is all over New York City. “Yes. I’ve got a woman here by the name of Elena Orlov. Are you okay if I send her up? Uh-huh. Sure. Thanks.”

The man regards me for a second, and we stare in a stand-off. Please don't ask me for ID. Please, please, please. Right now, he's the gatekeeper standing in the way of me getting to Italy.

After a long beat, he sighs, signaling me over to the elevator of the fancy building. "Go on up."

"Thanks." I head over to the elevator, reaching Sharon's floor soon enough. Frantic, I bang on her door, desperate to get in and see if she can help me.

I'm running out of time. She opens it with a concerned look on her face. "Elena, come in, come in," she ushers. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

Immediately I burst into tears, covering my face. "No, I'm not okay. I'm in trouble, and I need help," I sob.

"Alright, let's work it out. Sit down. Let me get you some water." Through the tears, I see Sharon owns a very plush, decadent New York apartment, and the views are majestic, but there's no time to take them in.

She returns with water, and I gulp it down, enjoying the thirst-quenching liquid. "It's too long a story, but let me summarize. I found a mole in the charity from the Orlov's side, and I told a person who's been part of our famiglia for decades. He double-crossed me, and tried to rape me, and make it look like I was sleeping with him."

"Oh my God, Elena! What? Are you... are you okay?" she asks, her mouth dropping open.

"No... I mean yes. I can't think of it now," I tell her hysterically, the only thing on my mind being drawing Matteo's blood.

“I have to get to Italy to kill him. He wants to take my spot as the head of the Sicilian Mafia, which is why he had photographs taken so Nikk would get mad. I don’t know if I’m explaining this properly, but I need help.”

Sharon grows quiet, placing a hand on top of mine. “What do you need? I’ll help you. Did Nikk not believe you?”

Tears fall as I shake my head no. “I’m pregnant, carrying his child; he’s spared me, but, he’s going to come looking for me. I have to hurry.”

“Oh dear. What a mess. Let’s get you back home.”

“Yes. I need a passport, but I didn’t have time to get mine.”

Sharon waves her hand. “That’s easy work. I can have a fake passport for you in the next twenty-four hours.”

Thank God. She was the right person to contact. I’m a step closer to vindication.



Nikk

“You let her get away? I give you a huge paycheck, and you fell for the trick?” I’m sitting across from a sheepish Turan, who let Elena get away. I don’t need to figure out where she might be going. If I know anything about Elena, it’s that she’s a firecracker, and since she knows what Matteo did to her, she’s enroute to kill.

She’s carrying our baby, and I care about her safety and well-being. These feelings I have locked inside, Elena has the key too. So much has changed in a short time, and it’s thrown me off.

“I didn’t let her get away. She complained about stomach pains and the baby, so I wanted to make sure she was okay,” he explains as I piece through the situation with him.

“Okay. She is carrying my child, and it was right of you to ask first.” A deep remorse sets in my bones as I think back to slamming Elena against the wall. Now, I hope I didn’t hurt her or the baby too badly. If I would have listened to her protests the first time, she wouldn’t have tried to escape. And now I have to catch her before she leaves for Italy, and it becomes one of the deepest regrets of my life.

It’s the only place she can be running to. She’s going to seek revenge on Matteo, but there’s no need for her to, because I’m going to pull out all his teeth one by one, and rip him from limb to limb, Bratva style. This is the punishment he deserves.

Turan rubs the base of his neck. “She is strong, Nikk. Very strong. She knocked me out, and by the time I came to, she’d already taken my car and driven off.”

A dry smirk tugs at my mouth. “Serves you right. I put you there for a reason. You saw what she did to Yegor.”

“I did. I’m sorry I let you down, Boss.”

“Too late for that,” I tell him in a clipped tone.

“Yegor’s already looking for her, and as soon as I came to, I called him.”

“Okay good. You’re dismissed.” I don’t look up, but Turan hangs around to confirm what I mean.

“Dismissed? Boss, are you firing me? I promise you, she is trained in martial arts. And she put me to shame. I could learn from your wife. Honestly, my specialty is guns,” he pleads, but he’s being truthful, and if I weren’t so fired up by Matteo, and Elena’s disappearance, I probably would have laughed with him. I’m not worried about him and don’t plan on firing him. I only want Elena found and brought back home to safety where she belongs.

“Dismissed for today,” I sigh wearily, distracted by figuring out Elena’s whereabouts. “It’s fine, but next time it won’t be. I will fire you,” I tell him, surprising myself as any other time I would have fired security for less. Elena’s changing me, but the truth is if Turan hurt her and left any visible marks, I would’ve snapped his neck like a number two pencil, so after all, he did the right thing. Better Elena put him to sleep, than anything else.

Ah, my L’vitsa in action—that’s something I would have wanted to see, but right now, I’m too enraged to think about it.

Turan doesn’t bother to ask me about his vehicle because I don’t care. He’s going to have to wait until Elena returns it. If I lose her now and she goes to Italy without help,

I'm afraid of what's going to happen to her, and I'm about to lose my mind. Unable to sit for any longer, I get up as Turan leaves and I call Yegor.

He arrives, an anxious expression clouding his face. "Yegor, what's going on? You're looking for her?" I spit out, raking a hand through my hair. I need to get to her as quickly as possible, and if Yegor doesn't have a plan, I'm going to have to take matters into my own hands.

"Yes. She hasn't left New York yet, and I've tracked her to the heart of Manhattan. I don't know what she's doing, but Turan's vehicle is there. There's a trace on it."

"Good, make sure she doesn't leave. Find her."

"We will. Don't worry about that."

"She's going to leave for Italy, I'm sure of it. She's going after Matteo."

"I don't blame her, but I think we're better equipped to help her in this circumstance."

"Exactly right. We are, and she's carrying our child. I won't forgive myself if anything happens to her. Yegor, find her." I've said it out loud, but I don't give a damn. This changes everything. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I get ready to call my contacts at NYPD to have them bring her in just as one of my men brings in Bogdan.

Flummoxed with all the moving parts, I gesture to the men. "Why? What's he doing here?"

"It's not what you think it is," Bogdan grunts, wrestling with my two soldiers who have a solid grip on his arms on both sides.

“And what do I think it is? What the fuck is going on?” Bogdan’s face hangs down towards the floor as I push one of my men in the chest. “Speak up!” I command.

“We scanned Bogdan’s phone, and there’re multiple calls from him to Matteo Gallo over the past few days. He’s in bed with Matteo, and they were plotting together to kill Elena.”

Rage engulfs me as I roll up my sleeves, the icy cold part of me emerging. “Don’t, Nikk, we’re family.”

“Then you should act like it. Hold him.” I deliver a sharp gut punch, Bogdan doubling over as he attempts to wrestle free, but by the time he tries to breathe, I go in again, delivering blow after blow to his stomach. “You bitch! You had that son-of-a-bitch rape my wife. You deserve a fate worse than death. I’m going to end you,” I growl, saliva, dripping from my mouth as the carnal fight in me ascends.

“Nikk, she’s a Mancini,” he groans, sucking in air as I smash my fist into his face, busting his nose so it gushes blood all over the floor. By now, he’s hanging and barely able to stand, but my men, hoist him up as I draw back, swinging a weighty uppercut deep into his belly.

I can’t feel any pain in my hands. I’m fueled by pure rage, and with every pummel to his gut, I’m thinking of what Elena must have felt like with that pig Matteo heaving on top of her.

Bogdan is hanging on by a thread, and my chest is caving in with anger. “You let another man rape my wife! You prick! ” I yell out coarsely, Bogdan begging for his life as his head bobbles around.

“I didn’t think you cared. She’s not your wife!” Bogdan wails, his eye swelling up.

“She’s mine!” I pant, sweating profusely, hurting from the open wound of the betrayal. A tooth falls to the ground. He’s going to pay; besides I have to set the example for the rest of the Bratva to understand if you cross me, you’re likely to pay with your life.

A call interrupts and I pause, wheezing as I pull the cell phone from my pocket. It’s slippery from the blood on my hands, but I manage. “Yegor.”

“Boss, she’s on the move, and just like you said, she’s headed to JFK airport. We received word from NYPD. They’ve been tracking Turan’s license plate,” Yegor announces.

“Okay, get all the cars ready. We can’t let Elena leave New York. Once she’s gone to Italy, she’s going to be gone for good,” I remark, not wanting to even think what that would mean.

Elena

This is the next step of the plan, and now I'm one step closer to Sicily, and to slitting Matteo's throat. Being a newbie to New York, it's all new to me on how to navigate the traffic here. It's nothing like Italy. It's crazy maniacs on the road, and all these stops with bright lights, smelly sewer streets, and people trying to get everywhere. The thing is, I've come to love it, and I understand why Nikk would want it to be the city the Bratva runs. There's endless possibilities here. For me, I can't sleep at night knowing the fate of the Sicilian Mafia is hanging on by a thread. This is not what my father would have wanted.

I've already called ahead to my uncle on my father's side for a place to stay. When I see him, that's when I can work out a plan. The problem I'm having is I don't know who is connected to Matteo, and who else I'm going to have to get rid of.

Sharon is a lady of her word, and she came through with my passport in the eleventh hour. I look inside the purse she gave me, and it looks exactly like mine. I've got enough money to cover me as well, but when I get back home, there's a stash of cash available to me.

Shaking my head, I realize it's a stash that Matteo knows about as well, and he knows enough about me to think I would probably try to come and take it back. God. Why did he have to do what he did?

The pain is like a deep knife wound, and I don't want to think about how much I hate him right now, but all I'm imagining is his unmarked grave in the Palmero cemetery. He doesn't even deserve to be buried unless it's alive and screaming. As I switch

lanes, a glimpse of the faded bruises on my wrists from the rope he tied me up with send me into a deeper spiral of twisted hate.

I know it's only going to take me just over thirty minutes to get to the airport, and it gives me plenty of time to go through customs and wait in the boarding lounge. I have a long list of people to call, and there's going to be a meeting. Oh yes, Matteo is going to meet his downfall. If he thinks he can overthrow me as Donna without a fight he has another thing coming.

As I hit the Grand Central Parkway, I stay in the same lane, traffic thankfully moving at a reasonable speed. Adjusting my mirror, I feel a stab of pain hit my heart. I'm leaving Nikk behind, and I don't know what's going to happen to me when I get to Sicily.

"Why didn't you believe me?" I demand out loud, thumping the wheel, wishing he would have listened. I was trying to help him. Things were changing between us, and I'm carrying his baby. I think I'll be able to give it a better life in Sicily once I sort out this mess.

Readjusting my front rear mirror, I take note of a large black van moving erratically across lanes. My mental radar switches on, along with the hairs on the back of my neck.

Am I being followed? Keeping watching on the traffic in front, I conduct a subtle test by switching lanes, and as I do, the car switches with me.

One, two, three, four. The vehicle is a few cars back, and that's when I notice the others. There are more vehicles that look to be the same car brand. When I look again, the car has crept closer to me, and my heart sinks when I realize who it is.

"Fuck!" I curse, gripping on to the steering wheel, nervous butterflies fluttering in my

stomach. He knows New York like the back of his hand so to outrun him in a car chase is going to be difficult, but goddammit, I'm going to try.

Pressing my foot to the gas, I accelerate, swinging left into the left lane, prepared to hit the closest next exit and then get back on track if I need to. It's a smoggy New York day, so if I can evade him for long enough, I can fade in among the other cars.

But as I look at the bridge, I'm on, I can see it's the wrong move. There are no exits, because I'm stuck on Robert F. Kennedy Bridge—instead, I panic, continuing to swerve between vehicles, but the two cars Nikk and his team are occupying are gaining fast, and basically, I'm gridlocked now as the other vehicles on the bridge somehow have inched ahead, giving Nikk the opportunity to slide his vehicle in next to me.

Thumping the heel of my hand against the steering wheel, I grit my teeth, not looking over at the vehicles. If I see Nikk's face, I know he's going to distract me, and that's the last thing I need. So instead, I keep my eyes centered forward, my heart in my throat.

We're playing a game of cat and mouse, and it's getting harder to not get caught. Pushing forward, I manage to hold on and get over the bridge. Once we do, I cut off to a suburb called Astoria.

Beeping sounds off, and I feel myself wanting to vomit. How am I going to get away from them. There's too many, and the incessant honking is getting worse. Shit! I have to catch this flight. Get out of the fucking way, Nikk! Please. Don't try to stop me!

Losing my composure, I accidentally jump a curb, and have to quickly pull myself back into line so I don't hit the parked car in front of me. A man rolls down his window, giving me the middle finger.



I can't do this. Nikk's black sedan pulls up beside me and he waves his finger to an open parking lot where there is a dead end. No. No. No. This can't be the end. I have to get to Italy, but what's worse is I'm probably going to die once Nikk gets ahold of me.

Frightened more than I've ever been in my life, I pull over, but I've got one last shot at escaping. If Nikk didn't kill me over the baby, then that means he wants me to keep it. There's one more thing I can do.

Dropping the glove compartment down, I pull out the paring knife I saw earlier as Nikk jogs over to the car door, opening it. I can't tell the expression he's wearing, but it's not just him. It's Nikk and his team of three other men.

"Don't come near me! I will cut this baby right out of my stomach if you touch me! I have a plane to catch! I'm going back to Italy!" I scream, pointing the knife towards my belly as Nikk holds his hands up, backing away. Yegor, and the two other men stand behind him with grim masks on their faces.

"Elena. I know," Nikk adds with pain laced in his voice.

"What do you fucking know?" I ask him, my voice wobbly as I keep hold of the knife. I could never stab myself with it. It's the last resort, and I've taken it.

"I know everything. I know what Matteo did to you," he says, his face tortured with anguish. "I wish, Elena," he says, shaking as he walks towards me, his arms open. "I wish I was there to protect you," he whispers, thick emotion riding through the bass of his voice.

The knife slips from my hand as I stare at the ground, my bottom lip quivering. "Nikk," I blurt out, relieved that he realizes I didn't betray him.

“Elena. Come to me. I know the truth. I know what he did to you.” I see the guilt on his face, and I want to explain, but I’m too broken from the last few days. I fall forward into his arms about to collapse. As I raise my arms to hug him, he pulls up my sleeves, taking note of the bruises. I flinch because there are still tender spots on my body. Nikk frowns rolling up my sleeves to reveal more of the bruises that even I didn’t know I had. I was too out of it at the time.

“What the hell?” Nikk’s face hardens as he shakes his head. “This...,” he trails off, his rage palpable as I find the words to tell him everything.

“He didn’t get as far as he wanted to, Nikk,” I tell him bravely, looking up at him as he sweeps loose curls of hair out of my face. “I fought him off when he tried to have his way with me. He tried to inject me with something—I don’t know what it was, but I kicked him hard in the balls, and I managed to escape. I can’t remember everything. It’s foggy.” Shaking my head at Nikk, I see his face relax. “He didn’t do it, Nikk. I wouldn’t let him. I escaped.” There are no more words left inside me, and I’m tired to the bone. All I want to do is fall into a heap and never get up, but the flame burns inside me for Matteo’s scalp. I can’t lay down and die. There’s a price to be paid, and it hasn’t been.

Nikk says nothing, instead pulling me into the safety net of his arms and kissing the top of my head.

“Elena, I’m sorry I didn’t believe you when you were trying to tell me about it. Let’s go now. But don’t worry, Matteo is going to die one of the most painful deaths a man can.”

This isn’t the ending I’m hoping for; Nikk doesn’t understand what’s at stake, and if we wait too long Matteo might just get his wish to take over the Mancini empire.

Nikk

The mood is solemn in the car, and Elena doesn't speak much. When I do look over, I catch her chewing on her nails, staring forlornly out of the window. Her leg is bouncing in agitation, and I want to do something—anything to make her feel better about everything, but don't.

She needs time. We can talk at home. Ordinarily, I wouldn't care about a woman's feelings, but things have changed in the blink of an eye, and I do care about Elena's. I hold myself back from asking her what she's thinking. She has been through enough the last few days. I want to say so much to her, but many parts of me don't know where to begin.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I ruminate on how to end Matteo's life. He didn't get a chance to have his way with her like he wanted, but it doesn't stop me from calculating a plan to hunt him down and slaughter the man. As we draw closer to home, I break the ice, reaching for Elena's hand, clasping it in mine.

"Are you okay?"

"No." Her eyes glaze over as I sigh, knowing I'm going to have to send a team to Sicily. I know that look of death in her eyes. I'm accustomed to it.

"What can I do about it?" I ask softly, wanting to hear her suggestions.

She turns to look at me stiffly, making me frown. She's not with me, and it appears as if she's looking right through me. "Sicily. I have to get to Sicily," she remarks in an

eerie tone, her eyes glassy with tears.

Clasping her hand briefly, I clear my throat, angry all over again. I knew Matteo was a pig from the day I met him. He was too friendly with Elena, too close to her, and because of their family history, Elena couldn't pick up on it. "It's going to be alright. I promise you that," I soothe as we reach home in no time. Yegor and my two other men are quiet and respectful as I round to Elena's car door, walking beside her. Without thinking, I slide my hand into hers, opening the door for her and we walk in together.

"Boss, is there anything we need to do?" Yegor asks quietly as Elena walks down the hall to our bedroom. I wait behind talking to him. "Be on standby. We're going to be making a trip to Italy."

"I figured you might be. And for the record, I'm happy the slimy son of a bitch didn't get a chance to touch her. She's tough. I take back what I said about her on the yacht," Yegor praises, nodding his head in a mark of respect for Elena.

"Me too, Yegor. Me too." Elena is as fierce as I once thought she was, but I want to protect my lioness. I don't want to tame her anymore. "Get Turan's car key's back to him. I'll be in touch once I check with Elena."

"Okay, Boss." Yegor and the men depart as I catch up to Elena and we head to the sanctuary of our room.

"Elena." I wait as she turns in my direction, her pretty face marked by a suffocating darkness I've never seen before. There's an ache in my chest that I've never known, and I know it's because of her. Taking a step in her direction, I bring the seemingly fragile creature into my arms, cradling her, and her arms slowly wrap around my waist. She sobs into my chest, and I let her break down until she's all cried out.

Once she's done, she wipes at the wet spot on my shirt. "Your shirt is soaked." She snuffles, retreating to the couch and huddling into one section of it.

I follow her, bending down to kiss her temple and stroke the side of her arms. "I don't care about my shirt. Elena, what do you want to do?"

"I need to go to Sicily. Matteo wants power, and in order for him to be in power, he has to get rid of anyone who carries the Mancini name. I nod in acknowledgment, my thumb caressing the back of Elena's hand. I'm fully aware of what she means, because I had similar intentions when we got married. In fact, it was the main reason I married the Donna, aside from the fact I wanted to tame her in the process.

Elena's caramel-colored eyes stare into mine, and I know that plan is out the window now. She's put a spell on me, and I don't want it taken off. Things have changed between us, and I don't want power over her. I want to be powerful with her. "The jet can be ready to go in the next half hour. I promise you, Elena. We can go whenever you want."

"We can go?"

"Yes. We can go. I've already put Yegor on standby. Why don't you freshen up with a shower and then we can take off?"

Elena's mouth tugs into a tight grimace. "Of course. I will freshen up."

"Okay." Elena walks slowly to the shower, and as she reaches the bathroom door, she turns back to me. "What is it?"

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet; let's get to Italy first." I wink in an attempt to lighten the mood.

While Elena showers, I contact Yegor.

“Organize the private jet for Sicily.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now, and you’re on the flight with us. Be prepared, we’re going after Matteo.”

“I thought as much. Preparation?”

“Well, he is a rat, so I think we should give him the special treatment. Don’t you think?”

“Ahhhh, that special. I understand.” Yegor chuckles darkly.

“Good. Give us no less than an hour and we should be ready to go. Elena’s in the shower now.”

“Alright. Done. See you out front.”

“Perfect.” I click off the call, making my own preparations, including gathering my bulletproof vest, retaining the bullets for my handgun, and laying out my all-black outfit.

A few minutes later, I hear the water stop running, and when Elena quietly emerges in her robe with her hair hanging loosely around her shoulders, I feel a tug in my heart.

When she raises her arms to put her hair in a ponytail, I frown, and when I look closely at her I notice other bruises I didn’t see before, some of them around her neck. I stand up and walk over to her. That makes me feel guilty too, because I contributed

to them, even if it was before I knew about the baby being mine and that she didn't cheat.

Elena stops for a second as I grasp a coil of her hair. "Hey," she says softly as I gently take her hand and lift it up, taking a closer look.

"Nikk, let me get dressed; it's fine, it's fine," she says, her voice crackly, and her eyes puffy and red.

"Okay, I'm here, Elena," I tell her in a low tone as she moves to the closet, picking out a black outfit too. When she drops her robe, to put on her top, that's when I see the full extent of her injuries. There's angry red scratch marks on her back, and mottled bruises dotted around her back. "Are you serious, Elena? Have you seen your back?"

"Yes, I know," she replies, tears welling in her eyes as she pulls on black pants, bruises on her legs as well. "He took his frustration out on me. I didn't feel it at the time—I couldn't." Elena sniffles, tears spilling onto the floor as I move towards her.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I fucked up." Tormented by her injuries, I go to her, cradling her head in my hands and laying it on my chest. "He could have hurt the baby, and you."

"Yes, he could have," Elena replies in choked sobs. "But I'm still here. I live, and the bastard isn't going to take my famiglia away from me."

"No, he isn't. He has to pay." Elena wraps her hands around my waist, leaning into me, and it feels good to have her back in my arms again. It's where she belongs.

"I should have seen the signs," Elena adds, becoming more talkative, which I'm grateful for.

“What signs could you see, Elena? The guy’s a conceited prick,” I retort.

“No, there were signs. He’s liked me for a long time, and he told me so, and I remember my father joking when he was alive that Matteo asked for my hand in marriage, and he refused him.”

“Ah, ego and pride. And then for you to marry me of your own choosing. It would have eaten him alive.”

“Yes, it would have.”

“Too bad for him, because you’re Mrs. Orlov now.” Time stops as we stand in the middle of the bedroom, preparing to do battle.

“Yes, I’m Mrs. Orlov,” she repeats back proudly with a lukewarm smile, the sorrow in her eyes evident. Our eyes lock, and her tender expression, ignites a warm flicker of a flame in my heart like nobody else can. Bending down, I tilt her face up to me, dropping to kiss her mouth.

It’s been so long since we’ve touched it feels like, and in this moment, it’s clear as to why I couldn’t get it up for Veronica. My body’s rejecting all other women, making way for my L’vitsa. I’m falling hard for Elena, and it’s okay to admit to myself that it feels good, especially with her carrying my child.

I let myself dive into the kiss, doing my best to cover up the pain she’s feeling inside. Doing all I can to show her where my words fail me. Without warning, my hands are roaming through her hair, and both of us are lost in one another.

As my heart beats like a jackhammer, I have to restrain myself, pulling back with a loud sigh.



“Ah, Elena, what you do to me.” I smile, wanting to soak into her even more, but duty calls in Italy.

“You do the same to me,” she whispers, a small glimmer of hope coming back to life in her eyes.

“Mrs. Orlov, your jet awaits, and this time your husband will be right by your side.”

Elena

We land in Sicily secretly, a touch over ten hours later in Palermo. Daylight hasn't broken, and the air is still. I'm back on home turf, and as soon as my feet hit the tarmac on the private runway, a strength returns to me. This is my heartland, and I'm back in my comfort zone.

There's a confidence in my stride, and I'm not walking alone this time. I'm walking with my husband, and ally, ready for war. Yegor has joined us on this trip, and despite our earlier hiccup, we are in sync, and he has my back.

All I can think about is the layout of the family home, and where Matteo sleeps. I know every nook and cranny of the house. He will be fast asleep. Matteo likes to sleep in until after nine, and then enjoy a coffee on the back terrace.

Returning to the clean air of Italy is a treat, and there's a nostalgic feeling that washes over me as we head over to the private driver waiting for us on arrival. I reach inside my jacket, feeling around for my gun in its holster and touching a hand to my chest.

Normally I wouldn't wear a bulletproof vest, but Nikk encouraged me to wear one. "L'vitsa, I know how fierce you are, but you don't know how many Matteo has turned and are on his side. I want you safe. Please put this on. Oh, and try not to shoot Yegor again."

The lighthearted moment was what I needed. Nikk and I do make a good team, and if it wasn't such a serious situation and close to my heart, I would be having more fun with it. Not today, no—this is the day I defend the throne as I rightfully should.

“Please come through the back road of Via Imera,” I inform the driver as Nikk gives me the once-over.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

“Yes. You’ve seen the estate when we were here for the wedding. We will approach the gate as normal and take it from there. Nobody is expecting me, so that’s the only element of surprise that’s needed.”

“There’s nothing normal about this, Elena. We’re going to back you up,” Nikk proposes as I nod at him.

“I know you will.” As we travel the quiet country roads of Palmero, untapped memories of my father and the legacy he carried on, spring to mind, including Matteo. Oh, how the tables turn.

I take in the small townships as we pass, feeling a sense of peace, and it’s strange because it’s not what I should feel at all, but Sicily will always have a piece of my heart.

When we arrive at the gate of our sprawling family estate, I take note of the increase in guards. “More guards, this is going to be a problem,” Yegor states gruffly.

“Hold tight, Yegor. I am their Donna, and they’re going to let me in. This is my father’s house,” I say proudly, but I can sense the hostility in the air as the guards raises their guns.

“What’s your business here?” one of them asks, the muzzle of his gun, pointing inside the window of our vehicle.

“Our business is that I’m your Donna. I’m Elena Orlov.” The guard steps back, my

pulse quickens as he speaks with the other guard, talking in Italian.

“This isn’t going to go well,” Yegor mutters under his breath as the guard returns, peering into our vehicle. There are six of us, and given how many guards are on ground, it may not be enough.

When he comes back, he makes his position clear. “You can’t come in here. You are Bratva now. We can’t let you in.”

“You will let me in! This is my family home,” I hiss at the guard who shakes his head as two other guards flock to the vehicle.

“You should let us in before trouble starts,” Nikk advises, raising his gun back at the guard. “This is her home, and she is still part of the Mancini household.”

I realize how Matteo has turned people against me in such a short period of time, and it’s going to take some work to get everyone back on side. Meanwhile, we don’t have time to argue with silly guard staff at the door.

Boldly, I open the car door, getting out. I’m not fearful of the guards, and part of that has to do with Nikk and his men providing back up. The guards are shocked, but I know the pin code to enter the gates. “You will let me in. I’m your Donna, not the other way around.”

“Hey, Vaffanculo! You can’t go in! You’re no longer welcome here.”

Nikk puts his men in position shielding me as I walk forward punching in the code, listening to the groan of the old gate opening.

The driver zooms inside the gate as I do a quick scan of how many other men are on ground. I count three of the roaches, pulling my gun and shooting before they have a

chance to. There's a long driveway to reach the house itself with beautiful gardens on either side.

With my adrenaline peaking and a guard running in hot pursuit, I take aim, shooting at his foot to warn him off as Nikk catches up, jogging beside me. My main objective is to get inside the house. I have the key, and unless Matteo has changed the locks, I'm sure it's going to work.

"Are they gaining?" I pant, pushing forward as we run up a slight incline, getting closer to the house, slivers of light brightening the morning sky.

"No, my men are fighting with them, and it's a good cover." Yegor is out of shape, hanging at the back, but I know he's a sharpshooter and part of the team. Where Nikk goes, Yegor does too, and truth be told I've grown fond of him. "C'mon, Yegor. Pick up the pace," Nikk hisses as he sweats, but in no time we are on the porch.

"Shh," I tell them both as Nikk covers my back, his body turned in the opposite direction to see where the men are coming from. Concentrating, I shine the light from my cell phone on the door, fumbling the old key around in the keyhole. The heavy oak door pops open as I kick it back, watching it swing on its hinges.

Matteo has to know I'm coming for him. There's too much commotion from the guards, and all of it would have woken him up. Nikk shoves me behind him in one swoop.

"Let me cover you," he says succinctly as I raise my gun, grateful for the shield as Yegor covers me from behind. Creeping forward in the shadows, all I can hear is the in and out of my heavy breathing. I keep my ears open for even the slightest movement.

Our footsteps are light over the peach-colored tile that runs up the middle of the

house. To the first left is a study nook with a bay window, but we have more to contend with because I can hear the guards about to storm the estate.

A slick pool of sweat forms down my upper back, and now the bulletproof vest is itchy, but I keep my gun steady with a watchful eye. There're pillars inside the house as well. It's an old Italian's blend of timber and stone. For such a big guy, Nikk is surprisingly light on his feet, and seeing him in action is sexy as hell.

Using my instincts, I stop when I hear a crackle from the left. Nodding my head to Nikk, I've got a split second to make a decision as Yegor feathers out from behind me, I don't hesitate, knowing there's a body there. I saw the bottom of the rug ripple.

"Fucker!" I spot the gun from behind the grand piano before he does with my eagle eye. The shot's meant for him, probably so I have no back up from behind, but that's not going to work out well for the shooter.

With a hard shove, I push Yegor to the left out of the bullet's firing line, and sure enough it comes, whizzing right through the middle taking out a family heirloom vase instead, and it crashes to the ground. Reactively, I squeeze off a round, followed by Nikk, watching the shadow of a rat dodge the bullet and running in a crouched position through a passageway door at the back of the study into the next room.

"Was it him? I didn't get a good look," Nikk asks. "Nice work, L'vitsa," he praises with a wink.

"Is has to be," I whisper as we jog forward away from the front door where more trouble is on the way.

"Thanks, Elena, that makes up for you shooting me," Yegor jokes as I flash him a quick smile. The next part of the house is the open plan kitchen and dining room, and there's so many windows that if Matteo tries to hide, he won't be able to stay hidden.

There's too much light, and the sun is showing itself over the hillside of Palermo.

The crunch of footsteps behind us grabs Yegor's attention as he turns to shoot but stops when he realizes it's our men. "Are they all dead?"

"No, not all of them, but we had to shoot a few. Sorry, Donna," Turan, who I recognize, says, screwing up his face.

He called me Donna. Finally, Nikk's crew are beginning to respect me. "That's okay. If they wouldn't listen to you, then you did what you had to do," I reply. "Handle things on the ground floor," I tell him. "We're going after Matteo."

"Done. We got it," Turan replies as two others flank him, spreading out in opposite directions. I have to trust them to do their jobs. Nikk studies me for a quick second and I nod, flagging a finger to the left, where the dining room is. It's a large room, and behind it is the kitchen, where a door leads to the outside. All the bedrooms are upstairs, and once we have to ascend the stairs, it's going to be hard to find him.

Hearing his scampering feet, I get a better glimpse of him as he moves from behind the kitchen island. He's no match for Nikk whether it be as a shooter or as a fighter.

"Give up, Matteo. Come out. We're going to get to you," I warn him, hearing him heave as he scoots from behind the island. Nikk lunges to grab part of his shirt but misses by an inch, grabbing at the air instead. From behind, I step out from the marble bench, pointing my gun at him from the back. Nikk blocks off the other end. He has nowhere to go at this point.

Like a wild animal, he crouches, his mouth open, deciding his options. "You should listen to my wife. You have nowhere to run, and even if you do, I'm going to catch you."

Sweat pours off Matteo as he starts to laugh hysterically. He stands up, gun in hand.

“Go on,” he goads, globules of spit coming out of his mouth. “Do it. Kill me,” he taunts, but Nikk shakes his head.

“No. That would be too easy, my friend. I have something special for you.” And in the blink of an eye, the rest of Nikk’s men come to join us in the kitchen.

Matteo’s shoulder slumps, his chest heaving from running and sweat trickling down his brow as the sun rises in the kitchen. It’s a brand-new day, and as I look at him in his disheveled state, it’s vomit inducing, and the man I once looked up to is nothing but a shell of his former self.

“You are a disgrace to the Mancini clan. We gave you everything! You were one of us,” I tell him evenly, alarmed at my own composure.

Matteo hangs his head as I quickly lunge forward, snatching the gun out of his hand.

“Elena, you might want to leave for this next part. I don’t think you’re going to want to watch this,” Nikk says, his mouth breaking into a generous smile.

Tilting my head at him, I hear them speak in Russian as one of them jogs to the outside, while Yegor ties up Matteo in one of the dining chairs, placing him close to the window, near the sunlight.

“No, why wouldn’t I want to watch?”

“You’ll see.” He winks, but it can’t be that bad. I’ve seen my father break a man’s arm. Can’t be worse than that, can it?

But when the men arrive back with two steel buckets and the sound of screaming rats



inside them, my eyes open wide like saucers.

Puzzled, I don't know what they're going to do. I come to recognize Nikk's cruelty is beyond my imagination as Matteo wriggles in horror.

"No! Please just kill me. Don't do this."

Nikk's hollow laugh rings out as he grabs both sides of Matteo's face. "No. You're going to suffer, and after what you did to my wife, you deserve all the pain I'm about to bless you with. Death is your keeper now. Besides, a rat for a rat seems about right to me. What do you think, boys?"

They snicker, nodding their heads in agreement.

Matteo yelps as two of the men hold the bucket with gloves on, against his bare stomach, lighting a blowtorch against the bottom of the steel pail. I can see the depraved excitement in Nikk's eyes as the bucket grows hotter.

Clapping a hand over my mouth, I understand how it's going to end. The rats will have nowhere to run, instead they'll burrow into Matteo's stomach as a way to escape being burned to death.

Matteo's bloodcurdling screams ring out through the house, and my heart pounds, telling me I shouldn't be watching this, but my feet have other ideas, staying rooted to the spot.

They are going to tear him to shreds. Then Nikk is probably going to shoot him in the head.

Eventually, when I can get my feet to move, I head to the next room, but I hear the high-pitched screams from Matteo as they send him to his grave in the worst possible

way. True to his word, Nikk kept his promise.

A couple of hours later, there's no sound from the other room. Matteo has to be dead. And one by one, all the remaining guards and staff from the house come to gather around me in the lounge room, pledging they're allegiance to me as the Donna of the Mancini famiglia.

"This is an example of what happens when you defy me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, we understand," they all recite in unison, and today as the sun rises over the rugged hills of Sicily and with Nikk standing beside me, we are victorious. No more dirty rats in our camp.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am*

Nikk

Silence fills the space of the sprawling Sicilian estate mansion with a round driveway for guests. From the outside it looks like a holiday home fit for the rich and famous, but only hours before the silence chaos reigned.

Matteo died, and his body has been taken away. The floor has been scrubbed clean with no evidence of a man being tortured remaining. That's how I operate. I don't leave scraps. Elena and I sit in the old study surrounded by bookcases, and classic Italian furniture.

She looks worn out, but as the sunlight illuminates the side of her face, she's just as fierce and sexy as when I first laid eyes on her, but there're answers we both need. She's sitting comfortably in a rich, blue velour armchair, and I'm diagonally across from her on its matching couch.

"I guess this is it, then." Her voice is thin and flat, and there's a wistful sorrow hiding in her eyes that I don't understand. Is it for Matteo? Does she feel bad about his death?

"Yes. Matteo's dead, and he can't plot against you or hurt you ever you again."

"No, he can't. That's over, but so are we." Her sweet caramel eyes land on mine. "We might as well end it, because I can't pretend anymore," she says, choking up. My heart beats fast as I reach out to take her hand.

Firmly, I stand my ground. I didn't come all the way here to lose Elena. "No. We

aren't going to end anything, Elena."

Frustration rides over her pretty face, but she doesn't withdraw her hand. "Is it because I'm carrying your child? There's no peace treaty, and look!" She gestures flippantly. "It didn't work out anyway. It all fell to shit. You don't need me."

Shaking my head, I slowly bring her hand to my lips, kissing it and closing my eyes. I can't let her go. I look her in the eyes, wanting the truth. "Do you hate me, Elena?" I ask, clearing the croak in my throat. Her gaze softens, and she reminds me of a sweet gazelle, but there's a lioness in her too, and I love all of it about her.

She bows her head for a second, staring at her fingers. I wait patiently knowing she needs time, but all I want is to stay married to her, and not for a year. Forever. She sighs, shaking her head with a rueful smirk crossing her beautiful lips.

"I don't, that's the problem. I'm supposed to hate you, but I can't keep lying to myself. I'm not pretending, Nikk," she confesses, her heart calling out to mine. "I've fallen for you."

We are one and the same. She had the same motivations as me. "I wanted the same too," I tell her, laying my cards on the table. "I wanted to hate you too. I had my own plans, but that's not what I feel now," I explain, letting myself crumble, the burden of carrying around the feelings lifted from me. The release feels good.

"I know, Nikk," she says softly. "It's not as if I didn't. We were both playing a dangerous game."

"Yes." I smile, wanting to tell her everything I feel inside, but I don't know if I have the words. "I intended to use you and throw you away, but you grew on me, and I developed a soft spot for you."

Elena eyes glisten with tears. “Look at us. Nikkita, I’m in love with you,” she blurts out, crying, and I frown, standing her up to face me. Swiping the tears from her cheeks, I shake my head.

“You cry because you think I’m going to leave you out on a ledge all alone.” She nods with a watery smile. “No, Elena, this feeling here in my chest”—I bring her hand to it so she can feel my heartbeat, loud, steady and open to the only woman I’ve ever loved—“it’s love. I love you too, Elena Orlov.” I lean forward, cupping her face, letting my lips sink into hers. God, her lips are like a tranquilizing drug for me. Sucking on her top lip, I want to lift all the grief, exhaustion, and pain from her, replacing it with pleasure. Her hands ease around my back, her hips aligning with mine as she opens her mouth and willingly offers me the same passionate fervor I feed back to her.

Briefly, I disentangle from her, keeping my warm hands on her face. “Together we will build an unbreakable empire. We’re stronger together.”

“Yes, we are. Side by side. We don’t need to play games anymore.” Elena’s eyes light up, and my heart soars.

“Elena, I need you now.”

She smiles, and without a word, guides me to her bedroom upstairs. Her curtains are open slightly, letting sunlight flood the room. I study the items on her bedroom dresser, pieces of Elena everywhere, but all I can see is her. The mother of my child. My fierce L’vitsa.

“Elena.” I let her name slip from my lips, the light making her hair glossier than normal.

“Nikk.” Elena’s pitch intensifies, both of us standing in delayed lust as she lets her

hair down, the fall of it framing her face beautifully. Elena's fingers drum lightly against her thigh, her mouth parted. There are no more inhibitions between us, and it's a joy to watch her caramel eyes dancing in the light of the Sicilian daybreak.

Her hypnotizing sweetness tempers my flame, but still I'm scorched with ferocity for every inch of her tight flesh as I step forward guiding my hands to drag her black top over her head. Gently, I let the garment fall to the floor, kissing her collarbone tenderly. I want to take my time. To show her how much I cherish her.

Her breath hitches as I cup a handful of her growing breasts through her bra, holding the heavy weights in my palm. Her body is slowly changing to accommodate our baby, and I can see it. God knows I want to ravish her, but I apply all my self-restraint, listening and watching the cues she provides.

"Don't be afraid to touch me, Nikk," she growls bravely. "I want you." What she doesn't have in experience, she makes up for in passion. Electricity sizzles between us as I waste no time stripping her of her pants and her underwear. Sucking in a deep breath, I look over the patchwork of her fading bruises, but this time the anger subsides as she lays back and I kiss every single one of the bruises on her body from head to toe.

She's a beautiful goddess to me, no matter how Matteo marked her. I drink in her body, leaving a trail of hot fire with my tongue, letting it linger in different places as I find her hot spots. She's willing—I kiss her inner thigh, hearing her sweet whimper.

"You are so sexy, Elena." I drive my mouth to her moistness, and involuntarily Elena lifts her hips, ready and craving my touch. I give her what she wants, tunneling myself between her thighs, swimming in her nectar.

"Oh my God! Wow," she cries out, and I know it's a first for her. I'm proud I can be that man for her, and that no other will be able to touch her. Sliding my hands under

her ass, her pleasure is my pleasure.

Applying pressure, I explore pushing a little more between her silken folds, lost inside her until her body quivers, letting go.

“Nikk!” she cries out as I take the cue while she comes down, ripping the rest of my clothes off. The fire burns inside, fueled by the heat of the Sicilian sun on my back.

She watches intently as my cock bursts free, groaning at the sight, her wanton body wriggling beneath me.

“You are everything to me, Elena.” I slide up the middle of her body, dropping my weight on her, gently inserting my heavy shaft inside her, and testing. She lifts her legs, softly wrapping them around my back, her hands gliding over the tattoos of my sordid past.

I keep my eyes connected to hers, our souls merging. Gripping her leg, kneading, and pumping, I leave all of myself inside Elena, desperate for the same respite she craves as I take her on the journey. Her breathing grows heavy as the pace increases, her nails digging into my back.

“Nikk, you feel so good.” Lost in one another, my cock swells inside her, the fire between us causing us both to break into a pool of sweat. I can’t get enough of her, but this time our lovemaking is different. It’s as if this is our first time as husband and wife. United forever.

I burst free, emptying inside of her. “You’re mine, all mine,” I call out in jagged rasps, my heart beating hard against my rib cage. “You do something to my soul, Elena. You break it open,” I tell her.

“And you do the same to me, Nikk. Maybe, this all happened for a reason.” She gasps

as we collapse together, sated and content in each other's arms with the covers off, only the Sicilian sun shining on our naked bodies.

"Maybe it did, and for whatever reason, I'm happy about it. I love you, Elena," I say out loud, wanting to tell her over and over again.

"I love you too, Nikkita."



Elena

Eight months later...

New York's gloomy charcoal clouds are a stark contrast to the pristine, crisp blue skies of Sicily, but the Cosa Nostra will adjust. After all, New York used to be their playground many years ago, until the rug was ripped out from under them.

Smiling, I fiddle with my wedding ring, a huge grin on my face as I sit in a private boardroom perched in the middle of Manhattan, waiting for everyone to arrive. When I stare down at the sparkler on my hand, I understand it's the reason I've been able to achieve exactly what I set out to do, and that was to bring the Mancinis back into power and return them to their throne in New York.

No, it didn't unfold the way I thought it would. Nor Nikk. We never banked on falling in love. There wasn't any hostile takeover. It was more so good solid business and two powerful conglomerates joining in union. The way it should be. The Cosa Nostra, where possible, like to conduct handshake deals and keep things civil and professional. Drawing guns and engaging in wars between families ends up being bad for business on both sides. There are too many losses.

The large meeting room is set up in a U-shape with various representatives of each family present and I'm a little nervous because this is our first official meeting together—I'm leading it. Food is provided on the tables along the walls, and there's an array of drinks too. I know my famiglia—at every meeting the men want a cigar and or an alcoholic beverage to get started. This is the way of life for the Mancinis, and I didn't see why we couldn't bring that level of comfort to the meeting.

Security is planted in each corner in case anything gets out of hand. I'm not stupid; this meeting is a big deal. It's supposed to be peaceful, but we have to be ready. Given the showdown we had at the Mancini estate, I don't think anyone would have the heart or stupidity to do such a thing, but precautions are needed. There're a lot of powerful people in the room.

I look over to Nikk who is seated beside me, dressed in a light gray pin-striped suit, his hair a little longer now. He's slicked it back nicely, and thankfully, his spicy cologne no longer makes me want to puke. Morning sickness has been unkind to me, and I'm glad this weird plague of a thing has passed for the most part.

My heart thumps loudly as he throws me a wink of reassurance. Sometimes when I'm alone, I have to remind myself of the life I've built with him. I never thought such a thing could be possible. Tingles of heat spread over my body as I wink back at him. There's never a day lately, I don't want to jump his bones; he's more handsome than ever to me.

I'm reasonably comfortable in my black maternity dress wearing an open blazer over the top, my little basketball poking out from underneath. I thought I might have gained more weight during the pregnancy, but surprisingly, I've maintained my shape, except for a few added features such as my breasts getting bigger. Nikk is enjoying this bodily change immensely. Amused by the memory of his dirty talk last night, I smirk to myself.

Rubbing my belly, I feel the baby kick. I want to tell Nikk about it, but he's already standing to greet one of my Mancini uncles, but not before giving me a quick pep talk.

"Hey, you've got this. No need to worry," he whispers in my ear and kissing my cheek.

“Thanks, I’m feeling good about it.” I swallow down the doubt, rearranging the papers on the desk in front of me. I’ve gone over them several times this week in preparation. I’ve also driven Nikk insane as well in the process.

“You should be, Donna. You’re doing an amazing job,” Nikk praises, giving me an extra boost.

“Hey, what’s so serious that Maxim’s not here?” my uncle asks, but Nikk corrects him with a chuckle, the family now so integrated they know each other.

“He will be here any minute now. Trust me, he wouldn’t miss this meeting. Grab a drink and take a seat. The meeting’s going to be starting soon,” Nikk advises as everyone streams in, taking their seats. A sudden flush of panic rides over me, hoping that everyone will behave themselves.

Because, despite outward appearances, the room is filled with old money, violence, money stacked on money and the typical mob scandals that plague all mob outfits.

Maxim does arrive, greeting Nikk warmly, and many of the Mancini men I’ve selected make a beeline to me, congratulating me on my upcoming birth. I’ve been so irritated and edgy lately, and I’m wondering if that’s contributing to my mood as well.

I switch on and once everyone is seated, I realize, I needn’t have worried. The element of danger is relaxed enough for two mob families to be gathered in harmony in one spot.

Clearing my throat, I stand up to start the meeting once I tick off that all the thirty members are in attendance. In front of them are handouts of the year’s profit margins, and a breakdown quarter by quarter since the Mancinis and Orlovs have been in alliance together.

“Alright, everybody, I want to thank all of you for coming today. A special thank you to the Mancini representatives who have flown in for the meeting.” I smile glancing in their direction as they nod respectfully back at me. “Before we get started, I want to let you know what the meeting’s agenda will be.”

“Good, I’m looking forward to it, Elena,” one of the Orlov representatives echoes back, putting me at ease. It’s nice to have support from that side of the family, given what we’ve gone through.

“Thank you,” I reply, addressing the group. “You’ll find the numbers for the last year in front of you, and these are from the new ventures we’ve undertaken in collaboration. These include three new luxury nightclubs in Manhattan and two new bars in the Upper East Side for the Mancinis, and for the Orlovs, a new premium luxury range of vodkas, which are now stocked exclusively in each one of these venues. We are going to talk about our lemon distribution and if we’re on target this season as well. We have a lot to get through.”

“Yes, I’m very interested in the numbers for lemon distribution from Sicily. The weather and soil conditions in Sicily are set to hold for the rest of the crop season, but there is talk that the seasons will change in the future. How will we mitigate this risk if the lemon trees are not producing a solid yield?”

Nodding my head, I smile, having already looked into possible options. “Good question. We can discuss as we get started here, but in short, our distribution partners are buying so much of our stock that we are going to need to expand our Sicilian workforce,” I say proudly, hushed and impressed whispers bouncing around the room.

Smirking, I watch the men stare in amazement as I run through the profit margins for the year. We are up forty percent. Who would have thought all the fruits of our labor were spawned by a chance meeting between Nikk and me on a luxury yacht in

Monaco, further strengthened by our union.

“This is astounding what we’ve been able to do, but how are we going to keep up with the demand, I ask again?” my uncle says. I specifically requested him at the meeting as he is in charge of the lemon farm and the olives.

“That’s where you come in. I want you to find new land for future production, and yes, I know it’s risky, but we aren’t just looking at New York alone. Because of our connections, we’ve been contacted by bars in Boston to supply their nightclubs.”

“Hmm. I can do that, Elena, but I’m going to need someone to assist me with scouting out the land. I’m time-strapped as it is,” my uncle remarks. One of the Orlov men jumps in.

“I’ve got someone who can help you with this. We can talk after the meeting about it.”

“Excellent,” my uncle replies. The meeting is starting to have robust discussions as we knuckle down into the prospects and pitfalls of such rapid expansion, mapping out ventures and plans for the following year and quarter.

I’m feeling tired and weary, my stomach heavy. It’s been hard in the last stages of the pregnancy, but we’re close to finishing the meeting.

“I do want to address a few things before we leave out of the meeting today, and that’s the late shipments of lemons that have been going out of late. You have to understand we need to ship the lemons over to the distillery, and if we are late, it forces production back.”

“How far does it force it back?” someone calls out. I answer quickly, wanting to get the information out before we finish.

“From now on I will be ringing in for all the manifests and cross-checking them with the warehouse so we can stay on track with our production numbers for the rest of the year. If we continue to be late, I will have to start considering new hires for your roles,” I say strictly. I’m very good at picking up where the potholes are in business. It’s one of the reasons I worked side by side with my father. He trusted my instincts.

“Fuck me, it must be the hormones. We’ve only been a day behind,” one of the Orlovs mutters under their breath.

“That’s one day behind your resignation. What Elena says goes,” Nikk announces sternly, covering me. “And if you don’t like that, I’m more than happy to rearrange your face or leave you with one less finger.”

The mood shifts as Nikk places fear in the hearts of every man in the room. He backs it up by glaring at every face. God, it’s a turn-on when he asserts his authority. Especially if it’s to back me up.

“Thank you.” I smile at him. “That’s all that I have listed on the agenda, but I think this has been a successful meeting, and I look forward to the next one. If you have any questions, I’d be happy to answer them.”

A few people approach afterwards as Nikk, and I discuss everything. I can tell he’s a little on edge as he watches every one walk out and keeps an eye on security all the while. After he sent Bogdan back into exile in Russia, he’s been extra protective over me.

I do receive a little pushback from one of my uncles, but it’s quickly nipped in the bud. “I need to process this. It’s a little too sudden for my liking.”

I sigh, grumpy and hot with the baby kicking too much. I just want it to come out, so I can meet it. Picking at my manicure, I arch my eyebrow at the resigned famiglia

member. “Take as much time as you need to wrap your head around things and email me your concerns. I’m the acting CEO along with Nikkita, and the profits don’t lie. I’m the one that deals with every single transaction from each one of you. Me. I’m the one.”

Nikk holds a proud smile at the startled Mancini member. “I’m aware of that,” he says, adding, “Did you have to kill Matteo?” That startles me, and the tension ramps up as Nikk stares him down.

“You would do well not to bring that up again. Matteo is dead because he crossed the line. Are you planning on doing the same?” Nikk demands, deadly warning in his tone, and the Mancini family backs down quickly.

“No—I just, he was with us so long. I’m sorry, Elena. I heard about what was done. So unfortunate. Sorry again. I’m not wanting to cause trouble,” he whines, but I make a mental note to keep watch on him.

“Then don’t,” I conclude, bidding him goodbye, thankful to be exiting the roomful of men. Once we reach the New York sidewalk, I breathe a sigh of relief as the car arrives right on time. I slide in, feeling clammy and weird.

“That went well, don’t you think?” I ask Nikk and he nods.

“Yes, it went well. Are you okay, though? You do seem to be a little grumpier than normal these days.”

Glaring at Nikk, I rub my belly. “Nikk, I’m having a baby; what do you expect?” I snap, and he smiles at me, sliding a tendril of my hair behind my ear.

“Hey now, I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m always going to back you up no matter what, but you have been a little grumpy. Maybe you need more vitamins. More rest?”

The driver pulls off, navigating the thick Manhattan traffic as I sigh, feeling a little woozy.

“Nikk, I think something is wrong.”

Immediately Nikk places all his attention on me. “What is it? What can I do?” he asks in exasperation as a wet, sticky fluid flows from between my legs.

Gasping at the sudden release, I glance up at him. “Nikk, my water just broke. Get me to the hospital.”

Nikk smiles, freaking out. “Shit! We’re having a baby.”



Nikk

I'm a father . Me. A cunning monster from the pits of Russia. Raised by and forged in the fire of Bratva tradition. Me. Nikkita Orlov. I'm a father. Responsible for the life of another. I don't know how I got here, and if I'm going to be any good at it, but there's no place I'd rather be.

I don't cry. The last time I cried was when I was a small boy, and that's not a memory I ever dig up. Today, as I rock my newborn in Mount Sinai Hospital, I can feel the prick of heat behind my eyes.

Elena is resting peacefully, exhausted, but a happy mother with a dopey smile on her face. I bend down, kissing her forehead. "You did good, so good. Look what we made," I say to her excitedly, kissing her temple.

"I know," she says proudly. "I'm so happy it's a girl."

"Me too. She has your nose, and those cute little lips of yours. I can see it already," I tell her as my daughter opens her eyes, her tiny little fingers wrapping around my index finger.

"How can you tell already?" Elena questions, chuckling. The midwife returns, checking Elena's temperature as I rock my baby back and forth.

"I just can," I tell her. This has to be one of the happiest days of my life. Now my job is even greater. I have my own family to protect, and it's something I've always wanted, but never knew when I would have it.

Part of my soul is restored when I look down at this tiny being, knowing I made her. The absence of my own father makes me want to be a better one. “I’m your father. I’m always going to be here for you. Always. I will protect you for the rest of my life. My daughter.”

The midwife jumps in. “First child?” she asks, smiling affectionately as we both answer simultaneously.

“Yes.” This causes the midwife to laugh. “She’s a beauty. What’s her name going to be?”

While Elena was in labor, we tossed around a few names and settled on if it was a boy and if it was a girl. Elena didn’t want to know the sex of the baby, and neither did I. As long as it’s healthy and we’re together, what does it matter?

“Sophia,” I proudly announce to the midwife.

“Sophia—that’s such a pretty name. Wonderful. I’m happy for you both. Elena, I will be back a little later, and we can work on breastfeeding together.”

“No problem.”

When the midwife leaves, I’m even more in love with Elena than before, and I didn’t know that was possible. “Our little Sophia. Can you believe it?”

Elena smiles as I stroke her hair. “No, I can’t.” I hand Sophia back to Elena overwhelmed by it all. Elena cradles Sophia to her chest, kissing her head as Sophia’s eyes open looking around.

“You’re going to be a great kid. Your mother and your father love you so much already. Welcome to the world, Sophia.”

I vow to do my best to shield her from the world we operate in. I want Sophia to have as normal a life as possible.

Elena

Sniffing Sophia's nappy, I wave a hand in front of my nose. "So much stink for a small little being." Sophia's emerald eyes stare back at me, big and bright as she giggles and gurgles with not a care in the world. I position her on the makeshift changing table we have set up in our bedroom, removing the stinky nappy and replacing it with a clean one. I've become an expert nappy changer these past few months. That, along with breastfeeding, and even if I'm out of sorts and not feeling like myself, my heart swells every time I look at her face.

She already has a head full of blonde ringlets, and I wonder if she'll have a head of them like Nikk did when he was a kid. His hair is a sandy blond, but even when I was a kid, my hair was lighter. Maybe Sophia's hair will end up bone straight in time like mine or turn a different shade as she gets older. Sophia coos at me as I tap her little bottom in the nappy.

"All done now. No more stinky poos," I tell her, rubbing her tiny nose against mine. Her tiny features are becoming more and more prominent every day, and it's incredible to watch them blossom.

Once Sophia is all cleaned up, I feed her on the couch, the TV playing softly in the background as we wait for Nikkita. I've only just gotten her into a routine of sleeping, and if I feed her before bed and burp her, I can get her down and get at least another three or four hours of sleep. I'm lucky to have a baby who likes her sleep, just like their mother.

Nikk enters a little while later from the office, right on time after I've finished

feeding and she's in her cot. The cot is set up in our room for now. I'm a little paranoid about her being in her own room. I know we have the baby monitor and plenty of security, but still, I want my baby in the room with us, just until I decide to go back to work. Then I'll put her in her own room.

"How are my two best girls today?" Nikk asks, going over to look at Sophia in her cot before turning the lights out and rolling into bed beside me. Checking the time on my cell phone, I notice it's after ten thirty.

"Your girls are good," I relay with a tired sigh, then yawning loudly.

"Good. Mm, you sound tired. Can I get you anything? He kisses my lips as I hesitate to tell him what I want, snuggling down under the covers.

"No." I squirm a little as I have something important to discuss with him, and given his strong Bratva traditions, I'm not sure he's going to like it. He wraps his arms around me, spooning me from behind.

"You seem restless. What is it?"

Sighing, I flip on the bedside lamp and sit up. "I want to call Rina from Sicily," I inform him, studying his reactions in the lamplight.

"Who is Rina?"

"She's the nanny I grew up with in Sicily. She's very good, and I think she would be more than willing to be Sophia's nanny."

"Why the hell would you want her babysitting our daughter. You're still breastfeeding!"

“I might be still breastfeeding, but I won’t be soon. Besides, I pump the milk and Rina can feed her.”

“Why?” Nikk screws his face up as he sits up straight in the bed.

“Because I want to get back to work. You’re coming in after ten thirty at night, and I’m the Donna. You know I want to go back to work,” I explain, raising my voice and prompting Nikk to put a finger to his mouth.

Knocking it down, I glare at him as he laughs. “Shh, you just put her down; you’re going to wake the baby.”

“Shut up, Nikk, I’m the one who put her down.” Crossing my arms over my chest in a huff, Nikk tries to stroke my shoulders.

“No. I won’t allow it. You should take care of the daughter you made yourself. Sure, you might need some help, but why would I want some foreign woman taking care of our child?” he asks, the vein in his neck thickening.

“Don’t tell me how to parent,” I fight back. “You have no idea. I’m cooped up in here and I want to get out and be working. Even in our contract marriage you agreed I could work, and I wouldn’t be confined! You promised,” I hiss, pointing my finger into his chest. He grabs it, holding on to it for a second, his emerald eyes glowing through the dark.

“Watch it, Elena. I’ve had a long day. Don’t do that,” he threatens, the warning heating me up from the inside out. “And how do I not know how to parent. There’s not one of you. We’re in this together. I’m making sure everything is taken care of for you.”

“Oh yeah? What are you going to do about it if I poke you again, huh?” I’m fully

aware that he's a parent along with me, but I don't care. I haven't had enough sleep, and I'm cranky about not being able to work like him. It's also irritating that I'm horny at the same time and want him to take me. Still, I let the annoyed feelings spill over, wanting to see what he will do if I push his buttons. I push my finger into his chest again. This time he doesn't catch it; he simply smirks at me.

"You want a fight, don't you, my L'vitsa?" The vibration of his voice makes my panties wet, but I pout instead, not giving him the satisfaction of knowing it.

"No," I reply with extra sassiness. "I want you to be reasonable. I can go back to work if I want. I am a Mancini, not some well-kept Bratva wife. I'm your Donna."

Nikk's pupils change as I poke him one more time for good measure in the chest, feeling the heat radiating off me. He catches it, bringing my finger up to his mouth and sucking on it.

My mouth drops open in awe, watching him draw my finger in and out. We still bicker like we did at the start, but in the end we both win most times.

"Mmm. See? I've got a better idea for this finger." I feel my heartrate speed up as Nikk's saliva glides over my finger, the sensation melting me and prompting my mouth to fall open. He watches with intention, his penetrating, bedroom eyes doing me in.

"Maybe that is a better idea," I say slowly as he grabs my waist and pulls me onto his lap.

"Sweety, I know you want me, and that's why you like to start fights. It's written all over your face, Elena. It's more expressive than you think it is. I don't mind because you know how it ends. Don't you?"

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t. Show me how it ends,” I beg seductively grinding on the bulge inside his boxer briefs, teasing him.

He groans, closing his eyes. “Elena, if you don’t stop, I’m going to have to punish you. You’re the reason for my insanity some days.”

Rising to the challenge, I egg him on, grinding even more as I flick my tongue out at him, holding on to the headboard. “Good, I hope to drive you wild for the rest of your life.”

Nikk tugs my hair, exposing my neck and licking from the base up to my ear, then biting it. I yelp in delight as his thick, capable hands reach for me in the shadows. He slides the shoestring straps of my tank top down the sides of my arms, and I shiver.

Yes. This is what I want.

He removes my sky-blue lace bra, my round mounds spilling over the edges. Breastfeeding and the pregnancy has changed them. Nikk gets to work flicking his mouth over my hardened nipples as I relax in his arms. We’ve gotten used to one another, but Nikk is still teaching me bedroom tricks that drive me wild. I watch, enamored, as he repeats the process.

“Ah yes,” I whisper, my hair falling forward as Nikk dips his fingers inside my pajama shorts, circling a finger around my soaking wet clit.

“Can you hurry up, I want that. I want you inside of me,” I confess, being the needy one.

He grins. “Ah my little L’vitsa is horny, is she? I better give her what she wants.”

“Yes, you better,” I tease.



“I like you hungry, wanting it. Wanting me,” Nikk growls as he rolls me off him for a second, slipping down his boxers. “I have plenty to offer,” he promises, his hard cock glistening in the dark. He smacks my ass hard as I re-straddle him, drawing down on his cock, riding in easy flow. I let out my pent-up frustration and he does the same, the headboard banging furiously.

“Yes, give me more.” Fire rips through my veins as Nikk moves my hips, thrusting upwards quenching both our thirsts.

I hold on as long as I can as Nikk’s fingers circle my swollen nub, but the pressure grows too great. I can’t take it anymore.

“Come for me, Elena. Come. All over this cock. Do it,” he grits out, slamming himself into me.

“Come with me too,” I demand. As his hot breath hits my shoulder, a powerful orgasm washes over me, my internal walls contracting as the waves of orgasm, drown me, and I cry out. It must be something about us fighting first that makes the sex better. Nikk lets out a guttural moan, his cock expanding inside me as he climaxes in time with me.

As we catch our breaths we lay on our backs, studying the ceiling. Coming down from the high, I find myself still wanting my way with going back to work. Only now we can talk about it without so much heat involved.

“Elena, I love you,” he starts, his heavy arm draping over my body.

“I love you too,” I tell him. “I still want to come back to work. My feelings haven’t changed.”

“You can call the nanny. I can agree to it, but she can only take care of Sophia when

you're busy, and that's the only time."

Leaning into Nikk, I kiss his chest. "Don't think I don't want to look after my baby; I do. I just want to get back to work so I feel like myself," I admit. "I hope you can understand," I say softly, circling a finger on his chest.

He waits for a beat before answering, cracking a smile. "Yes, I understand it. I wouldn't expect you to stay at home the entire time. It isn't you."

"Thank you. Where I'm patient with you, you're going to have to be patient with me," I say, offering my lips to Nikk, admiring the ridge of his hard jaw, his gaze softening.

"Yes. I can do that. We're learning together, and this isn't a contract anymore. We set the terms and change them as we see fit. Let's go to bed for real this time. It's been a long day."

"Yes, it has. I untangle from Nikk, slipping under the cool of the covers, his arms wrapping around me. As he reaches over and clicks the lamp off, I realize everything I ever wanted and more is what I've received. Old life is making way for new life, and such is the cycle, and I know with Nikk by my side, the ride is going to be all that much sweeter.

Nikk

“You are so lucky to have all these ringlets, Sophia. I have to use a curling wand to get mine so pretty,” Elena says to our four-year-old as she paddle brushes her hair to get ready for the party.

“I like your hair. I like your hair, Mommy!” Sophia repeats, jumping up and down. She’s a full ball of energy, and given what firecrackers her parents are, I would expect nothing less. She pats my knees as Elena laughs with her, letting her go after a few brushstrokes.

“I won’t be able to hold her for long anyway,” Elena tells me, and even if she doesn’t have curls like Sophia, she is radiant and glowing. A second pregnancy with twins might have something to do with it. This time her stomach is bigger than last time. My cousins are standing beside me, along with my brothers, and it’s a family affair. “She’ll squirm like a worm to get away, and there’s no point chasing her,” Elena adds as I look at the blossoming beauty my daughter has become.

“Yes, she will. Where do you think she gets it from?” I tease Elena, bopping her on the nose.

“She gets it from you. Not me. I’m the calm, peaceful one. I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replies, batting her eyes as I chuckle, and Sophia comes over to hug my leg. I run my fingers through her hair, and every day she grows bigger, I want her to want for nothing.

My cousins and brothers laugh at Elena, and Yegor clears his throat, pointing to his

arm.

Elena laughs gleefully. “Okay, okay, I got a little hot under the collar on that day. You should not have aggravated a Mancini.”

Yegor grins, holding his chest in jest. “Don’t be like that, Elena. You’re family now.” My cousins and my brothers start laughing, everybody in good spirits.

I shake my head at the scene unfolding in front of me. I never knew this part of life was possible and would open up for me. I’ve gone from practically no family—at least not blood as a kid, to three children in a short span of time. This is better than the adrenaline high of any contract killing or business deal, that’s for sure.

Rubbing Sophia’s back, I shout out her happy day. “Happy birthday, Sophia. How old are you today?” I ask, scooping her up into my arms, and it’s lucky that I still can, she’s getting bigger every day, I swear.

She’s beautiful, with pale rosy cheeks, blonde locks, and emerald eyes. I wonder if she knows she’s a heartbreaker already? I’m going to have my work cut out for me to keep the boys off her in high school. I already anticipate wanting to kill them all. Once they find out who her father is I’m hoping that should steer them clear enough. Until such time, I will guard her honor with my life.

Sophia holds up four fingers. “Daddy, I’m four. Four years old. That’s how old I am. Where’s my cake? Is it coming?” she asks with an urgency. We’re all gathered in the living room, but Sophia’s cake and other surprises are being prepared in another room as we speak.

“Yes, it is. In fact, it’s already ready. Let’s go into the playroom and we can get a piece.”

“Yay! I get to eat my cake.” Sophia has a few friends from daycare coming to join

her for her special day, but I'm not too keen on outsiders coming by if they're not from inside the family.

Elena has changed me on a lot of things, and that's one of them.

"She needs normal friends her own age. If not, then your cousins and family need to have babies too, so they can play together." I recall our conversation in bed from the other night, where we so often hold our family meetings. I folded a little, beefing up security and only letting her friends come to play for a few hours.

Sharon and Rina are with us, and that's nice for Elena. I want her to have friends and to be happy in life and our family. It's a fantastic family day. All my cousins are in town, and with the weather holding, Sophia should be able to get outside and play with her new present.

These days, I find it hard to keep a secret from Elena, so when I hold on to the secret smile on my face, her eyebrows arch.

"What are you up to, Nikkita Orlov?"

I bend to kiss her mouth with a big grin. "You'll have to wait this one out. It's a surprise you're going to enjoy." I wink at her, and she puts a hand on her hip.

"Will I?" she quizzes as I wait for one of my brothers to sneak the present in through the side door and into the playroom. My phone pings as she stands in front of me, her suspicions growing. Checking the text, it's all clear for us to head into the playroom.

"Up to no good, you!" She points a finger, but she's laughing. "I'm going to get the rest of the salads and bowls from the kitchen. The kids are going to be here in the next twenty minutes. Maybe some of them will arrive early," Elena explains as Sharon and Rina tag along beside her.

“I’ll help you. You can’t carry all those things by yourself,” Sharon tells her as they start talking and totter off to the kitchen.

The Orlov estate is full of love, family, and the imminent promise of chaos, especially with other kids arriving, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. We have plenty of room for them to run around, jump, play, and be silly. It’s something I need to get used to anyway, especially when the twins arrive.

“Where’s my friend, Aidan? I want to play !” Sophia shouts out, bouncing around in the cutest of dresses, that Elena picked, flapping her arms about. She has Elena’s outgoing personality, but I can see my features mixed in. And it’s such a beautiful blend. She truly is a miracle in my life.

“Aidan is on his way,” I tell her. She’s already wriggled free of my grip, and I’m sure it’s going to be the same when she gets older. I wait for Elena to come back out with the food, and follow her to the playroom, excited to see her reaction when she finds out what’s in store for her.

We all make it to the spare room that I decided to turn into Sophia’s playroom. There’s a cute rainbow on one wall with all her favorite stuffed toys in one corner, and a small table for her arts and crafts on another. The playroom faces outside to the front yard, which is perfect.

Elena sets the food down on the table with the other food and the special birthday cake in the middle with a large number four candle waiting to be blown out.

“Oh my gosh! It’s my cake. Mommy; it’s so pretty. It’s got stars on it.”

“Yes, it does, but let’s wait for all your friends to get here, and then we can share it with them, okay?” Elena crouches to our daughter’s height, hugging her tight. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Mommy.” I can’t have my heart melt any more than it is, but it does.

“Daddy? What’s that noise coming from the basket. That wasn’t here before!” she points at the bassinet off the side of the table, catching on.

“Wow. No, it wasn’t, huh? You should check out what’s inside it. Maybe there’s something inside it.”

Sophia turns around and puts her hands on her hips. “Daddy, did you put something in the basket? You’re naughty.” The room breaks into laughter, and Sophia’s the star of the show. A louder yelp sounds as she opens one side of the wicker basket and a russet brown puppy with floppy ears pokes its head out of it.

Sophia’s mouth flies open as she points to it, dancing around. “There’s a dog in there! That’s a dog! No way. Is this my birthday present? Is it?”

Nodding my head, Elena claps her hand over her mouth. “That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. Nikk thank you!”

Seeing both my girls happy makes my heart soar. “You’re welcome. Sophia, happy birthday darling.” She’s already in love and has figured out how to get the puppy out of the basket. She pets it with a large smile on her face as Rina takes a photo.

“Pictures for the album,” she says, and I smile.

“Yes, it is, and there will be many more.”

The front doorbell rings, signaling the approaching chaos, and Yegor calls out, “I’ll get it!”

“Be gentle with the puppy. She’s going to be your friend for life,” Elena points out.

“This is my friend.” The dog licks her happily as Sophia giggles.

“ Eww, puppy slobber! Haha. I have to name him. What can I name him, Mommy?”

“Whatever you want.” Content, I watch as Sophia lets the puppy down on the floor, crouching to kiss its cheek.

Three children timidly enter the room, joined by their parents, and to the outsiders we’re just a normal family, celebrating the birthday of their daughter, because we are... just sometimes, we have to engage in warfare.

After introducing herself to all the parents, Elena sidles up beside me, beaming and hugging my waist. “I can’t believe you bought us a puppy! That’s so sweet of you.”

Everybody is busy chattering in the playroom, and the kids are occupied with the dog.

“Elena, I would go to the ends of the earth to get what you want. That’s how much I love you. We’ve got more on the way, and I can’t wait to spend a lifetime building a family with you.”

Elena’s radiant eyes glisten with tears. “Nikkita Orlov, when did you become so romantic?”

“Since I met you. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The Bratva family is expanding, and the ice is melting around my heart. It’s not such a scary thing after all.

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THE END